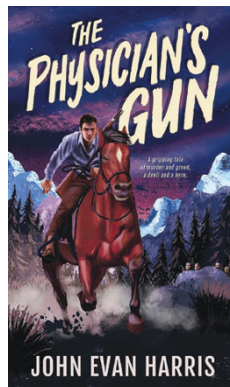


### The Physician's Gun (2022)

John Evan Harris, Roiall Emerald, 302pp. 978 0 473 55513 9 \$32.99Pb

In the 19th century, 'dime novels' and 'penny dreadfuls' shared the disapproval of parents, teachers, librarians and moralists on their respective sides of the Atlantic Ocean. However, these blood-thirsty stories also encouraged generations of young boys to find pleasure in reading, thus justifying their existence as readable yarns. John Evan Harris has been inspired by Ned Buntline's stories glorifying the heroes of the Wild West to create his own version of a dime novel, a rip-roaring account of goldfield bandits operating in 1860's New Zealand. Henry Appleton (15) and his widowed mother are having difficulty keeping their Nelson farm going, so he is genuinely tempted when he is offered a chance to join a band of freebooting robbers, led by Richard Burgess. Henry is assured by Burgess that this is his chance to become free, *Master of your own destiny. Beholden to nobody. Freedom.* The unscrupulous Burgess even uses a shocking family secret to pressure Henry into joining them. Fortunately, Henry manages to resist joining the Burgess gang, although his interaction with them means he is a witness to both the Maungatapu murders and their legal aftermath. Henry has always had a guilty enthusiasm for the heroic adventures of frontiersmen written by Johnny Slick. Now he has the disillusioning experience of meeting the author in person, Slick turns out to be a whisky-sodden hack,



so desperate for source material that he is visiting New Zealand. He even decides that Henry's adventures could qualify him as his next dime-novel hero. *'Well,' drawled the American, 'ya bin kidnapped and shot, broke ya leg, rescued ya womenfolk, and helped track down a bunch o' vermin. Sure sounds like a hero to me.* The violent events Henry witnesses, force him to reconsider many of his youthful attitudes. His idealistic concept of a hero takes a hammering as he observes both crime and punishment, and we can see how his life will develop as an adult. John Evan Harris wrote this story because he is a history enthusiast. He has backed up his fictional retelling with a solid collection of factual historical material about the Maungatapu murders along with photographs of historic Nelson, the Burgess gang and other people mentioned in the story. There are minor flaws. A map would have been helpful. Henry and Victoria never seem to do any actual farming. Rama is a potentially interesting character whose backstory and motivation are never properly developed.

On the positive side, this is a fast-paced story with plenty of surprising moments and unexpected twists. The personalities of the murderers come through strongly. The author's sense of humour is also at play, especially in his biographical notes for Johnny Slick.

Charles Cumming has captured the mood of Henry's tale in his black-and-white illustrations, especially the frontispiece showing Henry in his imagined role of Western gunman.

**The Physician's Gun** is a lively yarn, with plenty of jeopardies and hair's-breadth escapes, which will appeal strongly to young males. Readers will have to look hard to find a female role model in this story, but there is one, craftily concealed.

Trevor Agnew, Christchurch