

## CORAM BOY – SPRING 2020 – MITRE AND TRINITY COLLABORATION

*Coram Boy* by Helen Edmundsen, adapted from Jamila Gavin's novel that takes place in the mid-1700s. The plot follows three threads. The first is of "The Coram Man," and his son Meshak, who murder and traffic illegitimate children under the guise of shepherding them to the Coram Hospital. The second is of Alexander, the son of a wealthy family who would rather become a musician than inherit the family estate. The last is of a mysterious, illegitimate boy called Aaron and his friend Toby who are brought up at Coram hospital.

1742 England, Otis Gardiner and his son, Meshak, peddle their products throughout the villages. When Captain Thomas Coram opens a foundling hospital in London, Otis sees an opportunity to take advantage of the mothers of illegitimate children. Otis begins charging mothers a substantial amount to take their children to Coram Foundling Hospital. This occupation earns him the name "The Coram Man."

Otis, however, has no intention of holding up his end of the bargain. Instead, he traffics the older children, selling them into slavery or the military. He forces his son to bury the infants alive.

Another narrative in the book is that of the Ashbrook family. Alexander Ashbrook, is a 14 year old talented musician who sings and plays the harpsichord. The story finds him on a scholarship as a chorister at a Cathedral in Gloucester. There, he becomes good friends with a boy named Thomas Ledbury. Alexander has dreams of being a composer, but his father is adamant that he should concentrate on matters of the family estate.

Meanwhile, the governess' daughter, Melissa Milcote, catches his eye. The two fall in love. When Alexander returns from the cathedral to find that his father has taken all of his music paraphernalia, he decides to run away. His father disowns him. In his absence, Melissa discovers she is pregnant with his baby. Unbeknownst to the pair, Meshak has also fallen in love with Melissa. He secretly refers to her as his "angel."

A woman named Mrs. Lynch is working for the Ashbrooks and is privy to Otis' business dealings. She tells him that Melissa is expecting. Feeling that she has no other options, Melissa's mother Mrs. Milcote, arranges for Otis to take the baby to the Coram Hospital. She tells Melissa that the baby was stillborn.

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Otis assumes that since his son is “simple-minded,” he does not have an emotional reaction to the crimes he’s asked to commit. In reality, the cries of his infant victims torment him at night so that he’s unable to sleep. When Otis orders Meshak to drown the baby, Meshak instead saves the boy and takes him to Coram Hospital. He thinks of the child as his angel’s baby.

Otis’ operation is soon discovered and shut down. Otis is thought to have been hanged for his crimes.

### **ACT TWO**

The narrative next finds the boy Meshak saved, Aaron, at age eight. He’s a gifted musician, like his father, and is close friends with a black child named Toby. A man named Mish regularly visits Aaron and calls him “my angel.”

Toby is apprenticed to a man named Philip Gaddarn who employs him to attend parties so that his friends can pet him. He later discovers that Gaddarn is selling children into slavery on different continents.

Eventually, Handel, the composer recognizes Aaron’s talent and sends him to be trained by a Mr. Brook, his protege. When the Coram hospital boys choir visits the Ashbrook estate, Lord Ashbrook is moved by the music and the young boy Aaron’s singing and asks for Alexander to come back home.

Melissa comments that Alexander and Aaron resemble each other, and Mrs. Lynch is forced to come clean what happened the night of Aaron’s birth, before warning Gaddarn that their crimes are catching up with them. Gaddarn tries to ship 6 young girls into slavery but Toby and Aaron intervene and Alexander and Thomas intercept Gaddarn at the quayside. Aaron and Toby are rescued, but Mish is not, and drowns saving them. Alexander’s childhood friend, Thomas, is injured during the rescue effort.

As the story closes, we learn that Mish is actually Meshak and Philip Gaddarn is Otis Gardiner. Melissa and Alexander are finally able to reunite with their son, Aaron.