



The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime

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In this fascinating exploration of murder in nineteenth century England, Judith Flanders examines some of the most gripping cases that captivated the Victorians and gave rise to the first detective fiction

Murder in the nineteenth century was rare. But murder as sensation and entertainment became ubiquitous, with cold-blooded killings transformed into novels, broadsides, ballads, opera, and melodrama—even into puppet shows and performing dog-acts. Detective fiction and the new police force developed in parallel, each imitating the other—the founders of Scotland Yard gave rise to Dickens's Inspector Bucket, the first fictional police detective, who in turn influenced Sherlock Holmes and, ultimately, even P.D. James and Patricia Cornwell.

In this meticulously researched and engrossing book, Judith Flanders retells the gruesome stories of many different types of murder, both famous and obscure: from Greenacre, who transported his dismembered fiancée around town by omnibus, to Burke and Hare's bodysnatching business in Edinburgh; from the crimes (and myths) of Sweeney Todd and Jack the Ripper, to the tragedy of the murdered Marr family in London's East End.

Through these stories of murder—from the brutal to the pathetic—Flanders builds a rich and multi-faceted portrait of Victorian society in Great Britain. With an irresistible cast of swindlers, forgers, and poisoners, the mad, the bad and the utterly dangerous, *The Invention of Murder* is both a mesmerizing tale of crime and punishment, and history at its most readable.

The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime Details

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Emma Sea says

The subtitle should be "how Victorians created modern sensationalist media," rather than crime.

Enjoyable, but to some extent a lot of the book was the same theme over and over again: accusations of crimes used to reinforce class and gender divisions. I felt sad most of the time, reading about women and men long executed, who had clearly committed no crime, but had the weight of the Victorian legal system against them.

This made it a slightly ponderous read. I think about half the length could have been sacrificed to make the book twice as enjoyable.

2.5 stars, rounded up.

Rose says

Although the title suggests otherwise, the Victorians did not invent murder. They were merely the first to make it profitable.

As the eighteenth century morphed into the nineteenth, public discussion of homicide in Great Britain shifted from the pulpits to the press, inspiring stage dramas and best-selling 'penny dreadfuls'. No one was immune to the allure: the nobility attended murder trials as faithfully as the working classes, executions were witnessed by stadium-sized crowds, and literary giants such as Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle let bloodshed inspire and infuse their stories. The *Examiner* had a dedicated column titled "Murders and Murderous Crimes", which probably did wonders for its circulation.

The Invention of Murder explains how violent death affected popular culture. Literature-wise, detective stories and 'sensation novels' were born, and the stage hosted blood-and-thunder melodramas. Racehorses and greyhounds were named after killers and their victims. Some slayings captured the public interest so strongly that the key players achieved icon status: the curious and the entrepreneurial eagerly bought items that once belonged to or were associated with an executed killer, and crime scenes turned into sightseeing destinations. You could even buy china figurines of famous murderers and their victims, as was the case with William Corder and Maria Marten of Red Barn fame.

Not all of the crimes described and analyzed in this volume are famous. The Ripper murders, Burke and Hare, and Constance Kent are familiar to modern readers, but Eugene Aram, Eliza Fenning, and John Thurtell are not. That doesn't make their stories less fascinating to revisit, especially since they inspired advancements in the police services and forensic science.

Judith Flanders has an innate understanding of what makes a society tick, and uses that insight to explain why some murderers, like Eugene Aram, claimed only one victim but spawned a legacy of creative works while serial killers like Christiana Edmunds were forgotten soon after their trials concluded. These analyses give *The Invention of Murder* an essay-like tone in parts, which may perturb some readers who prefer

content to be limited to the crimes themselves. It may not be light reading, but it's definitely enlightening.

lisa says

Very dry. I tried to read the first 30 pages and got bored. I tried to skim the next 50 pages and got even more bored. I was excited to read this book but it was big let-down. Other books that are similar (but better) are *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* by Daniel Stashower, and *The Suspicions of Mr. Which* by Kate Summerscale.

Bettie? says

"We are a trading community - a commercial people. Murder is, doubtless, a very shocking offence; nevertheless, as what is done is not to be undone, let us make our money out of it." Punch, 1842

blurb - *The Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811 were particularly dreadful: two separate sets of killings in which seven people lost their lives. It was a case that shocked the nation - this was half as many people as had been murdered in the entire previous year throughout England and Wales - and forced the establishment to rethink the policing of major cities.*

Read by Robert Glenister.

No shocks in terms of the well-trodden facts but it was fun to have it all plonked together in such an accessible fashion. This is along the Kate Summerscale line but not just one crime 'done to death' (hah). Yep, a good addition to the Victoriana shelf.

Karin says

Wow, what a book. Beginning with the brutal murder of the Marr family in 1811, this book takes us through crimes real and fictional, through the sentimentalization of Murder in the nineteenth century. Conviction by circumstantial evidence, a morbid fascination for hangings by the public, the rise of murder as a big subject in fiction, both on the stage and in novels. Many of these novels were based on real crimes or alluded to them. I had no idea that *Oliver Twist's* last name was an underworld slang term for hanging. We also see the development of more centralized police forces, early forensics and trial by newspaper. This book is riveting, I suppose, but macabre, so for me, 3 stars.

K. says

Trigger warnings: murder. Obviously. Also rape, gore and infanticide. Capital punishment. Dismemberment. It's like an episode of *Criminal Minds* up in here, but with Charles Dickens. IDEK what I'm saying any more.

I stumbled across this not-so-little gem in one of the many bookshops I visited in London a few months back. And given that crime novels and the Victorian era are my jam, I bought it instantly because obvs. And then I put off reading it for months.

Anywho. I've read it now. And it was long af, but pretty stinking great. It essentially works its way through the nineteenth century, discussing all the big cases. It covers everything you'd expect, from Burke and Hare to Jack the Ripper. And after detailing each particular case, Flanders discusses how the media reacted to the case, and then how authors and playwrights wrote those cases into fiction.

And really, it's FASCINATING to see the way that newspapers and serialised novels - often of the sensational variety - shaped the general public's perception of murder, taking it from "Goodness, isn't that terrible?" to "OH MY GOD DID YOU HEAR THE LATEST ATROCIOUS THING THAT HAPPENED??".

I loved seeing how both victims and perpetrators have ended up immortalised in some of the most well known stories of the nineteenth century, and how big a role Madame Tussaud's played in creating a fascination around murder and murderers.

So yes, it's long. And occasionally I got some of the names confused, simply because there are So Many Names. But it was a really interesting look at how public perception can be swayed by the media and popular culture.

Was that the lesson I was meant to take away from this book? IDK. But it's the lesson that I got.

Bill Kerwin says

J

udith Flanders, who demonstrates an extensive knowledge of 19th century English literature and popular culture, shows us how actual 19th Century murders, and their transmuted and distorted recreations in newspaper coverage, broadside ballads, working class drama and "penny-dreadful" fiction, helped both to reflect and to forge what today we think of as the necessary accoutrements of crime: the modern police force, the private detective, the forensic investigation. Further, she shows how these crimes and their popular representations in turn influenced the portrayal of murder in the "literary" fiction of Bulwer-Lytton, Braddon, Collins, Dickens, Stevenson, and others.

Flanders' accounts of the actual crimes--particularly the brutal, commonplace working class murders--are the least interesting parts of the book. Partly this is the fault of the crimes themselves, but it is also a defect of Flanders' narrative ability: she has difficulty in choosing the most telling details, and instead buries her story under a myriad of facts. On the other hand, when it comes to describing forms of popular entertainment--blood-and-thunder melodramas, dramatic readings of the "penny-bloods" for the illiterate, the festive atmosphere of a public hanging--Flanders' prose is evocative and impressive. (She is particularly good on murder by poison, and how such poisonings induced a "poison panic" in the 19th century mind out of proportion to the small numbers of proven crimes.)

I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in either the Victorian period or in murder, and strongly recommend it to anyone interested in both.

Kevin McAllister says

You'd think a book titled *The invention of Murder* couldn't be boring. Sadly, that wasn't the case with this book. The author discussed over 50 murders that took place during 19th century Great Britain. And while the

descriptions of the murders themselves were interesting, it was the repetitive way the author then went on to describe how these murders were covered by newspapers, and then turned into works of fiction or plays. We were given, again and again, brief summaries of numerous books and plays. Frankly, these endless plot summaries bored me senseless. I almost never stop reading a book before finishing it, this one really tempted me, but I finally made it to the end.

F.R. says

MRS FLANDERS' new book cat'logues the notorious rogues and vill'ans of the great VICTORIAN AGE. Recoil at such fiendish devil'ry as that committed by MESSRS BURKE & HARE, WAINWRIGHT and the remorseless poisoner PALMER. Witness again the lamentable and notorious crimes of the sin-ful women, MADELINE SMITH and ELIZA FENNING. Embark on a colour-ful and sensational tour of BRUTALITY and EVIL, culminating in the most cruel and vicious MURDERER of the AGE, the unspeakable JACK THE RIPPER!

(I do like those old Victorian adverts).

'The Invention of Murder' details the great crimes of the nineteenth century, particularly those which really caught the public's imagination. Each case builds on the last, showing how they fed into news, plays, print and even puppet shows – and led to the rise to the detective fiction (even as the most famous murderer of the day proved to be undetectable). It's probably a book to dip into rather than read in one sitting: as even if you have a penchant for gruesome stuff then A killing B, before C gets rid of D, and E really does do a number on F, does get a bit repetitive and tiresome after a while.

The point of it all is that the increasing frequency of murder led to its greater – and more sensational – representation in the media, which then fed into a desire for the police (and, in particular, the detective force) to become more organised and efficient. But is that really the case? The crimes depicted don't alter that much in terms of brutality (the murder which opens this book is pretty bloody vicious), and besides the nature of progress means that the representation of crime (and detection methods themselves) was always going to change. One does not necessarily feed directly into the other. If we look at the subsequent century, how much relation to real crime did Agatha Christie ever have?

Still this is an entertaining guide for those of a certain mindset. It's gory history, but just think – the brutal and vicious acts depicted within, really did quicken the pulse-rates of our great, great, great grandparents.

Victoria (Eve's Alexandria) says

This was a impulsive Audible download when it first came out, and I've been doggedly listening to it in the mornings getting ready for work. Doggedly gives you a clue as to how I feel about it. There were times when I was incredibly close to defeat. Not because the subject isn't interesting but because the telling was very formulaic.

First there is the outline plot of a seminal murder, followed by a discussion of how it impacted in popular media and culture. Quite often the latter becomes a monotonous list of plays, broadsides, stories. Very good for illustrating a point in a PhD thesis perhaps but difficult to get exercised about as a lay reader. The repetition was probably exacerbated by the way I read the book in short 20 minute chunks.

I also felt the core narrative or argument got lost amidst all case studies. In the end I was only slogging my way on until Jack the Ripper, knowing it would herald the end. The thing that kept me going was the excellent narrator.

K.J. Charles says

How much you enjoy this will depend entirely on your taste for Victorian murders and related social issues, Victorian pulp, and lit crit. These are some of my favourite things so I loved it. In particular the ineptitude and corruption of the entire judicial system is very well brought out, also the gross social misogyny and classism. Plus it directed me to Jerome K Jerome's hilarious Stage-Land. A nerd wallow.

Shauna says

This book is incredibly well-researched, which is both a positive and a negative. On one side, the amount of information made for lots of gory details, which certainly satisfied my curiosity. But on the other, the book was bogged down in detail. I don't need to know the plot of every single stage adaptation based on a murder, nor do I need to know what critics said about these adaptations.

There were a few times when the author teased us with something interesting, only to delve into another topic for a while. She mentions Jack the Ripper at the start of the last chapter--but then she decides that while she's on the topic, she may as well discuss the murder that preceded Jack's for nine pages. Which doesn't seem that long, but it certainly feels like it when you're expecting Jack the Ripper. Or, she would recount murders that supported a particular thesis or had a certain outcome in common and then, for no reason at all, would go, "And here's one that's not like the others!" and go into detail about that murder for a while. Why? So much of this could have been relegated to end notes if not cut out entirely, and I wish this book had had a stricter editor.

However, I did like the little flashes of Flanders' sense of humor, like when the police say they are taking "extra precautions" in light of a string of murders by responding any time they heard a cry of "Help," "Murder," or "Police," and she adds, "(What, one wonders, had their instructions been before?)". If this book had a little less detail and a little more of the author's sass, it would be perfect. As it stands, I'm glad I read this book--but I'm also glad to be done with it at last.

Chris says

This is one of those books that you read that gives you lists of more books to read.

Flanders' book is an analysis of how Victorian Society viewed murdered, as mostly seen in the literature (both high and low) of the time as well as in the media. She traces not only the rimes but the impact.

It's a pretty compelling read not only for the information it contains about the books of the time. Among other things she traces the development of infanticide as a crime, linking the change in law to the changing view of women. She raises some interesting points about class and gender as well as the purpose of confession.

It's the type of book where you keep taking notes.

Sally Kilpatrick says

Lots of great information here, but it was slow going at times. I think I would preferred more about the crimes and less about each and every book and stage adaptation.

Amy says

This book needs to go back to the editor. The chapters were too long and the thesis was lost or never quite articulated. I felt like I was reading a masters thesis and not a book for popular audience. The author used the same type of examples in many chapters. By the third or forth chapter, I could expect excerpts from newspapers that where widely in accurate, example of plays produced on the cases examine, and a look at the penny novels, broadsides, and ballads produced for the masses. The question in reading the book that was never answered is how did this invent murder and how was this different from the past or influence things today

Amanda says

Disappointing. This book demonstrates that a lack of organization, disipline and analysis can wreck a seemingly intersting topic. The chapter designations were completely irrelevant, as every chapter followed the same pattern: description of some murders and their trial transcripts and then a summary of how the murder played out in pop culture.

Long before Law and Order, entertainment was "ripped from the headlines."

?Laura says

I really enjoyed this book detailing various murders during the Victorian period and how they were reflected in the media of the day. It was interesting to read about the evolution of public attitudes towards violent crime and the concurrent changes in media, from the penny dreadfuls of the early 1800s through the emergence of true detective fiction. I would be interested to read an analogous work following the trends through the 20th century. One warning I will issue is that if you are planning to read any Victorian era mysteries such as The Woman in White, The Moonstone or many others, this book is rife with spoilers, so reader beware.

Lauren Albert says

The main problem with this book is its repetitiveness. Over and over again you get:

1. The murder. The main details as known
2. The hunt for the murderer(s) with all of the failures of those searching

3. The press/writers--the money made, the circulations increased, the story altered as desired.
4. The trial of the accused--miscarriages of justice (bias, failure to present counter evidence, defendant lacking defense attorney, etc.)
5. The result of trial
6. The public opinion regarding the trial and the accused

We get these things over and over. Her chapter subjects are relatively meaningless. The chapter on poison will discuss murder cases that involved no poison. The chapter on detective work will discuss cases in which she doesn't discuss detective work. Etc.

At one point, she mentions how many murders she's discussed and I thought, "that's all? I thought there were a thousand." She doesn't seem interested in learning why things happened as they did. When the public decided to support the defendant--or not--why did they? WHY was the public so willing to spend money and time obsessing over the cases. That is what I would have been interested in learning.

Matt says

I'm a true crime buff, though I hesitate to admit this. At best it makes me creepy, the kind of person you warily back away from at parties, lest you get stuck in a corner. At worst it makes me a cop in the media-driven exploitation machine, which turns the tragic into spectacle, and whips private pain into a public frenzy.

Of course, I'm not the only one. The media does not act in a vacuum. There wouldn't be a constant stream of sensationalized crime stories if there wasn't a large and avid audience waiting to consume them. Like it or not, a lot of people are drawn to crime stories. I imagine this has been true since Cain took Abel to a field and murdered him.

There's nothing quite like a shocking murder to grip the public attention. (Saying things like this is why people always back away from me at parties!). In 1914, with Europe steamrolling towards war, the French -- soon to be invaded and partially occupied -- were focused on the scandalous murder trial of Madame Caillaux. In the last summer of an epoch, before Americans every really thought of terrorism, this country was held rapt by the disappearance of a Congressional intern.

Crime sells because people have always been buying. And if I'm part of the problem, I'm not the only one. Just check out the local news, or the national news, or the cable stations devoted entirely to crime, or listen to *Serial*, or watch *The Jinx*.

Where does this dread fascination come from? It's a question I've often asked myself, after spending a hungover Saturday watching a *Dateline ID* marathon on TLC. According to Judith Flanders's *The Invention of Murder*, it's the Victorians! Her book, per the subtitle, is all about the ways the Victorians "reveled" in death and therefore "created modern crime."

Flanders doesn't mean her title in the literal sense, obviously. Murder existed long before and has existed long after the Victorians. There's a murder in Genesis, though the culprit was soon apprehended and marked for his crime. Rather, Flanders posits that the Victorian thirst for true crime tales "transformed" the 19th century and birthed the still-robust genre of true crime.

Right off the bat, I didn't think much of this thesis. It entirely ignores a primitive, psychological fascination

humans have always had with murder, and more specifically, with murderers. The notion that Victorians were the first to embrace this fascination also doesn't sway me much. Just off the top of my head, the murder of Helen Jewett in 1836 comes to mind. That set off a public frenzy the year before Victoria ascended the throne. In 1842, Edgar Allan Poe wrote *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, a novel based on a true crime event. Flanders even mentions, several times in her book, how detective "memoirs" were big in France.

Whether or not her argument holds up doesn't really matter in the end, chiefly because Flanders does not bother arguing it. Instead, *The Invention of Murder* only does one thing: it takes you on a tour of the infamous crimes of the Victorian era. I use the word "tour" loosely. It's really more of a list. The book is divided into chapters, but it needn't have been. The chapter titles are meaningless, and don't have anything to do with the content contained therein.

From beginning to end, everything repetition. It's a literary structure taken from the instructions on a bottle of shampoo. Only the names of the killers and the killed change. The pattern is as simple as it is tedious. Flanders introduces a crime: there is a murder; the killer is caught and tried and usually convicted. Then she lists all the ways that crime was publicized, whether it be in newspapers, poems, plays, or books. Most of this derivative media is stuff you've never heard of, so you're getting analysis on crappy contemporary art that is no longer part of the world.

Once Flanders has done that, she jumps right into the next murder. This continues until you have slogged your way 466 pages of text. By the end, it's all a sad, desperate blur, and even I found it pointless, which is saying something, since most of the things I most passionately engage in are pointless.

I think it's very important to note this format, because it will tell you right off whether you want to read this. If you are want a long litany of now-forgotten misdeeds, turned into long-forgotten books and plays, you might enjoy *The Invention of Murder*. If not – well, I warned you.

The Invention of Murder is not without its minor pleasures. Some of the related stories are suitably what-the-fork that they can't help but entertain in the morbid way that the best true crime stories do. Some tales are wonderfully off-the-wall, such as the trial of Abraham Thornton, who was initially cleared of the rape and murder of Mary Ashford:

Thornton might have thought that was the end of the matter, but William Ashford, Mary's brother, was pointed in the direction of an almost obsolete law, 'appeal of murder', which permitted a family member to appeal against a not-guilty verdict without double jeopardy being invoked. Thornton was arrested once more, but luckily for him, he had a very clever lawyer. When the appeal came to be heard, 'when called upon to answer, whether guilty or not guilty', Thornton read: 'Not guilty: and I am ready to defend the same with my body.' He took a pair of gauntlets, put one on, throwing the other on the floor in front of the bench for Ashford to take up, 'in pursuance of an old form'. The prosecution was unprepared: 'I must confess I am surprised...the trial by battle is an obsolete practice...it would appear to me extraordinary indeed, if the person who has murdered the sister would...be allowed to prove his innocence by murdering the brother also...' stuttered his lawyer. The judge who was probably equally uncertain, replied feebly: 'It is the law of England...we must not call it murder'. William Ashford did not care what it was called: he was only a boy, while Thornton was a vigorous, powerful man.

Several more hearing were needed to deal with this legal remnant of feudalism in a modernizing world. Eventually it was agreed that the boy, 'from his youth and want of bodily strength', was legally incompetent to accept the challenge, so as a formality Thornton was re-arraigned, his lawyer entered a plea that he had already been tried and acquitted, and he was

released a final time.

This was the type of stuff of which I wanted more. I wanted to know more about the English court system; about the transformation of law enforcement from local constables to a modern, professional police force dedicated to solving crimes; and about how famous writers, such as Dickens and Hardy, threaded real-life crime into their memorable fiction. All these topics are touched upon, but never at any length or depth. Flanders is so intent upon her purpose that she does not allow any of these peripheral subjects a chance to breathe.

This type of thorough single-mindedness can be laudable, in its way. Flanders had an approach and she stuck to it. Unfortunately, in a book this size, it can also be wearying and exhausting.

Rose says

Very detailed book about a fascinating period in England. I wish to read it again because it was so fascinating and the level of research and information presented takes diligence to absorb thoroughly.
