



# The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching in 1830s London

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**A thrilling history of England's great metropolis at a point of great change, told through the story of a young vagrant murdered by "resurrection men"**

Before his murder in 1831, the "Italian boy" was one of thousands of orphans on the streets of London, moving among the livestock, hawkers, and con men, begging for pennies. When his body was sold to a London medical college, the suppliers were arrested for murder. Their high-profile trial would unveil London's furtive trade in human corpses carried out by body-snatchers-or "resurrection men"-who killed to satisfy the first rule of the cadaver market: the fresher the body, the higher the price.

Historian Sarah Wise reconstructs not only the boy's murder but the chaos and squalor of London that swallowed the fourteen-year-old vagrant long before his corpse appeared on the slab. In 1831, the city's poor were desperate and the wealthy were petrified, the population swelling so fast that old class borders could not possibly hold. All the while, early humanitarians were pushing legislation to protect the disenfranchised, the courts were establishing norms of punishment and execution, and doctors were pioneering the science of human anatomy.

As vivid and intricate as a novel by Charles Dickens, *The Italian Boy* restores to history the lives of the very poorest Londoners and offers an unparalleled account of the sights, sounds, and smells of a city at the brink of a major transformation.

## The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching in 1830s London Details

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## From Reader Review The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching in 1830s London for online ebook

### Marti says

If you are interested in crime and lowlife, you will find this saga of a group of London grave robbers compelling for the most part. Apparently, the "The Italian Boy" murder case was quite a cause celebre in London of the 1830s. It touched on a primal fear people had of ending up in a medical school dissecting class. It was so famous, there were many contemporary pop culture references to it (like in the novel *Middlemarch*, written later, but set in 1832, which contained an obscure reference to "Italians and white mice;" which must have puzzled me when I read it though I cannot recall it).

Of course there is not all that much, other than official court testimony, to go on as far as recreating the murders, so the author provides a lot of general information on the horrible lives of the working classes in the East End neighborhood of Shoreditch, formerly a site of reasonably prosperous textile workers until cheap foreign imports reduced the fortunes of the inhabitants.

I enjoyed the descriptions and drawings of the "famous" street beggars of the type that made their living in West End if they had a particularly memorable *schtick* (also why in the future, the film *Basketcase* will serve as an important social document of Times Square). Apparently the "Italian Boy," referred not only to an individual, but to a stock type, imported to London by a Fagin-like Padron. These tended to elicit more sympathy from the public than the typical London street urchin because they lacked the latter's insolence and were considered exotic.

But if you are used to watching American courtroom drama, the proceedings in British courtrooms of that era seem strange, and a complete shambles. Eyewitnesses could not even be certain who the victim really was [all Italians look alike]. Many changed their stories over time and disagreed with one another, while defendants were allowed to interrupt the prosecutors and witnesses, calling them liars.

The only part where I started getting bogged down was in descriptions of the politics of various medical schools, and how they competed with each other for prestige, students and corpses. Needless to say, medicine was not very advanced, and though doctors claimed they could determine cause of death by noticing things like an empty heart chamber, they really didn't have a clue. Plus, the story got a bit confusing and disjointed because of all the different conflicting/erroneous perspectives presented.

After the defendants are found incredibly guilty and executed, an epilogue continues the story of the neighborhood where the murderers lived. Enterprising people were able to make money by conducting tours of the house of horrors; while still later the area declined further. That is until a wealthy philanthropist moved a literal mountain of excrement and replaced it with a model tenement which survived until the 1950s.

When Googling for a map of the area, I learned that Shoreditch is now London's answer to ultra-gentrified Williamsburg, Brooklyn (and the Bird Cage Pub, the then-200-year-old, establishment where the killers met and drank, is now a craft cocktail lounge). Maybe the author wrote this specifically to make all those hipsters gag. If so, I approve this message.

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## Lisa says

I think the title of this book is somewhat misleading. At the very least, it should be renamed something along the lines of, "The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching, the study of Anatomy and the Acquisition of Bodies by Surgeons, the Workings of the Justice System, the Living Conditions of the Poor, and the Social Injustices in 1830s London, and much, much more."

Author Sarah Wise attempts to cover all these subjects. She does not limit herself to the murder. Rather she attempts to place the murder in the context of the social milieu of its time. This is a worthy goal, but rather far-reaching. Although the book was interesting, at times I felt frustrated that she left the murder investigation hanging while she devoted chapter after chapter to the living conditions of the poor of London. All that aside, her excellent writing kept me reading until the very end. I especially appreciated her informative footnotes.

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## Meaghan says

This book is a sensational piece of history which acts as a window into the 1800s, and the often dismal lives of the London underclass. It's a perfect blend of details from the lives of the body-snatchers, and a broad overview of corpse-snatching in general. I highly recommend.

(UPDATE: My good friend the Headsman wrote an excellent blog entry about this case, including an interview with *The Italian Boy's* author.)

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## Katherine Addison says

This book is amazing. It sets out to do several things, and it does all of them elegantly and in meticulous detail, which is not a common combination.

The central focus of the book is the trial of John Bishop, Thomas Williams (aka Thomas Head and a whole host of other names), and James May for "burking" a vagrant boy. "Burking," from William Burke, means to murder someone for the value of their corpse, specifically in order to sell them to an anatomy school for use in the teaching of dissection. The boy they murdered and hawked around the London medical schools may or may not have been Carlo Ferrari aka Charles Ferrier, an Italian street vagrant in his early teens. Carlo was one of an unknown number of Italian boys who--proving that Dickens' imagination wasn't as good as modern readers might like to think--were brought to England by *padroni* (for which read Fagin) and sent out into the streets to beg or play instruments or exhibit animals (Carlo was known to have two white mice he kept in a cage strapped to his chest and/or a tortoise) or pick pockets. All proceeds returned to the *padroni*; the boys were destitute vagrants. And they were only a subset of the vagrant child and adolescent population of London. Bishop and Williams both claimed the boy they were tried for murdering was a drover's boy they found in Smithfield.

So in recounting the course of the trial, Wise is also examining the resurrection trade in London in the 1820s and '30s, examining adolescent vagrancy, and examining the (almost entirely undocumented) lives of the destitute urban poor. Plus the workings of justice. And she's watching London watch itself, as it tries to figure out how to be a city in the brave new world of the Industrial Revolution. Her endnotes are full of the history of the buildings and streets of London, noting which are still there and which were demolished and

when and *where they were*.

This is a fascinating book, beautifully written and lively and full of sympathy for the desperate lives the urban poor were struggling through. She analyses carefully, pulling back to assess the convicted murderers' stories, the various witnesses' stories, the muddle made of the case's forensics, the hypocrisy, visible also in the case of Burke and Hare, where nobody goes on trial or gets put in jail for *buying* corpses, even if they've bought a corpse they should clearly have been able to tell had never been buried. (In this way, the resurrection trade is much like prostitution.)

If you're interested in nineteenth century London in any capacity, I highly recommend this book.

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## **Mara says**

Don't get me wrong, I liked this book (I'm trying to combat grade inflation in my rating system)- it was the literary equivalent of Law & Order: 1830s London. I studied the history of science and medicine quite a bit in school, so that theme was of great interest to me. Same goes for the birth of criminology and forensic science- though if you're going to read just one narrative non-fiction with that in mind then I'd go for The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science. As for the "body-snatching" trade, there was quite a bit I already knew from reading Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers a few years back but this book certainly lends a more "human" face to the bodies themselves (if that makes any sense). All in all, an interesting, fast read that makes me want to go pick up some Charles Dickens.

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## **Ann says**

Fascinating history of one of the famous murder cases in 1830's London which lead to changes in the laws with regard to "body snatching". In the era of Charles Dicken's, London was teeming with poverty, with real life child slavery gangs run by "Fagin" type characters. Under the new Vagrancy Act, poverty was literally a crime. Constables were often in the pay of the wealthy who didn't want to be confronted with small children and impoverished people begging on the street. The workhouses and Marshalsea debtors prison were overflowing with the poor. The new London police force had only just been established. Scotland Yard did not exist yet. And the idea of a police detective was only something found in a novel recently published in Paris. Most crimes went unpunished. There was no such thing as forensic science, so convictions occurred in the few cases where eyewitnesses were available.

While the book is classified as a history book it reads more like a detective novel. The story is of one police lieutenant who very tenaciously investigates the case never giving up. In a unique, first used police tactic, he runs an advertisement in the newspaper asking for eyewitnesses and for the public to come forward with any information they may have regarding the case. This is now a standard part of modern police procedures. Much to his shock and dismay when he runs a second article asking people if they would come forward and identified the body of "An Italian Boy" of about age 14, he finds himself inundated with so many people who's children have disappeared off the streets of London that he is shocked at the sheer number of unsolved missing persons cases.

Body snatching had become such a lucrative line of work and "resurrectionist" could make more money in a week than most workers at the time made in year. While the practice of body snatching was illegal, it also largely went unpunished. However, when the very fresh body of a young boy of Italian descent is offered for

sale to one of the hospitals studying anatomy some questions arose. The doctors are initially amazed at how "fresh" the body appears, lacking signs of decomposition usually found in exhumed corpses. At this time in the history of the medical profession, the doctors needed bodies for the study of anatomy and where the bodies came from was not something the hospitals or doctors involved themselves with. However in this case, upon dissection the physicians came to the conclusion that the boy was likely murdered and notified the police.

The remainder of the book deals with the investigation into the identification of body, the gathering of witnesses and evidence. During the investigation, additional murders committed for the sale of bodies or body parts are uncovered. The investigation fascinates and horrifies the London public who follow the story in the newspapers of the time.

The book is glimpse into the reality of London in the early 1800's. The author takes the reader into the streets of London and examines how this one case would eventually lead to sweeping changes in the laws of medical schools, police investigations, civil rights for children and the treatment of poverty.

Because it reads like a detective story it is an easier read than most history books which cover the culture and times of London in the 1800's.

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

A wonderfully atmospheric look at the body-snatching "resurrection" trade in early Victorian London with a sensational crime of the time at the center. Wise's fascinating narrative also offers a vivid look at poverty and the criminal underground in 1830s London, Victorian attitudes toward morality, the intricacies of the justice system, and great changes occurring in law enforcement, crime detection, and medicine at the time.

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### **Connie Scott says**

This a very intense and hart breaking read. The abuses and injustices that occurred are so sad. Wise really pulls you into that moment in history and lays it out for the cold, hard truth that it was. Excellent piece of work.

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### **Margaret says**

An interesting book about 'burking' in London.

Well written and interesting, but it did drag out a little. I think the author was attempting to get maximum millage our of minimum material.

3.5 stars rounded up to 4 .

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### **MAP says**

Unfortunately, what this book most reminded me of was Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*, which I gave one star because it was 20% about what it claimed to be about and 80% about everything else. This book has a similar ratio -- 20% murder mystery, 80% 1830s London bla bla bla.

Look, I understand that when you write a book like this, you need to give some historical background to get a sense of the zeitgeist in which the event happened. But there comes a point where zeitgeist overtakes the real plot. I mean, there's even an entire chapter titled "Interlude-Meat" which has NOTHING at all to the murder in even the most tangential sense; it honestly feels like its only reason to be there is to be as unpleasant to read as possible. And even in chapters like "how many?" that ostensibly discuss how many murders the defendants committed ends up spending PAGES wandering off into the private and professional difficulties of some Anglican priest. Why? WHY?

Two stars instead of the one I gave Krakauer's book because the few parts that were about the murder were basically interesting. However, I did quickly get lost in the chronology of the grand jury vs. detective work vs. witnesses vs. trial etc.

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### **Tomi says**

Thoroughly enjoyed this book! It is more than just the story of the mysterious death of a young Italian street boy in London in the 1830s. It is also a great look at the resurrection trade, the underworld of London, and the attempts by the British government to improve city conditions. The illustrations helped me see London in that time. It read like fiction; the only complaint I have was that the chapters after the trial were slightly confusing.

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### **Jo says**

Wise explores 19th century London through the 1831 case of the 'London Burkers', two men who supplemented their grave robbing income by creating their own corpses. With the case of the Italian boy at the core of the book, we are introduced to various characters in the world of the Resurrectionists and the surgeons they supply the bodies too. Expertly told and interesting enough to hold one's attention right to the end.

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### **Dianne says**

A fascinating insight into the lives of the Victorian 'under-class', the courts, and the Medical Establishment of London in 1830-31, as the newly formed police investigate the crimes at Number 3, Nova Scotia Gardens in East London. The notorious Burke and Hare body snatching cases in Edinburgh had introduced new words into the English vocabulary, to Burke, burking and Burkers. The London body snatchers turned to burking (murder) in the search for fresh corpses for the anatomy departments of the London medical establishment. Child trafficking was common and poor Italian peasants sold their children to masters who imported them into London to work as beggars. I have always wondered about the allusions to white mice by Wilkie Collins and George Eliot (*Daniel Deronda*), and am interested to find that the Italian beggars used them as props.

### Alice says

Great topic but my interest wasn't held all the way through and it did drag a bit.

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### Lynne says

GRUESOME! I skipped a whole chapter on rotting meat.

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### Rachel says

I enjoyed the depth and detail of this book, particularly with respect to the lives of the desparately poor. However; I was somewhat unsatisfied with the discussion of the motives of criminals as well as Wise's constant digression in the details of other murders, possible participants, speculative identities, the workings of the meatmarkets, wealthy doctors, the differences between public and private medical schools, etc. Because Wise cuts such a large swath through early nineteenth century London, one never really gets to know any particular aspect of the story in detail.

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### Bob Schnell says

Even in the criminal underground of 19th century London, grave-robbers were shunned and despised, but tolerated if they were buying the drinks. Apparently, many "resurrectionists" were heavy drinkers. But when grave-robbing turns to murder, even the tipplers couldn't turn a blind eye.

"The Italian Boy" by Sarah Wise covers a criminal case from the 1830's in which a team of body sellers were accused of killing a homeless waif and trying to sell his corpse to the various anatomists who were their regular customers. Thanks to plenty of newspaper articles and court transcripts about the case, we get to see the story from the perspective of the resurrectionists, their families and friends, the police, the surgeons, the cemetery staffs and other denizens of one of the lower neighborhoods of London, Smithfield. It is a gruesome tale, full of cadavers, criminals and creeps. The narrative gets a bit bogged down when the author presents the same scenes from multiple views, but in some cases this is necessary to illustrate how difficult it could be to solve a crime and prosecute it. Due to aliases and nicknames it can be hard to keep the players straight and sometimes the reader just wants to put the book down due to the "ick" factor. Overall, though, it helps us to realize that Dickens really wasn't exaggerating and London at that time was not a good place to be unless you were upper class. Unfortunately, the poor and needy had nowhere else to go.

Recommended for students of history, criminology and the depths of human depravity.

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### Jan C says

Very informative.

All about the resurrection men. And three who got caught. They were burkers (given a new name for resurrection men from one who got caught in Scotland). Very detail-oriented.

Last night I was looking at some of the footnotes I hadn't bothered with while I was reading and they are very informative. For the most part, they are not the type where they are just giving a book citation but actually filling out the text with extra information that really didn't belong in a text. Just the thing footnotes should be for.

The normal practice was for resurrection men to dig up a dead body. Bishop and Williams decided out to cut out a step in the process. They'd apparently done several in like manner when they took the Italian boy. A little street urchin who folks had seen around wearing a cage with two little mice in them. The trouble was that folks had seen him around and then they didn't see him anymore.

So the lesson is, if you're gonna burke someone, make sure it is someone no one has noticed.

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### **Susanne says**

The beginning of this book establishes what an Italian boy beggar meant to the citizens of London at this time, which is good because it's not what one might expect. Impoverished Italian boys were seen as beautiful, cherubic innocents - almost a class apart from regular, English boy beggars. Which is one reason why this murder was so heavily covered by the press. The other reason is why the boy was murdered to begin with - to obtain his body for selling to medical schools.

Following the lives and times of these London Burkers (who followed in the footsteps of Burke and Hare of Edinburgh by murdering to get school dissection corpses) makes for gruesome reading. You might want to skip some bits (I did).

All is not cut and dried, either. I was well pleased by the twists at the end. If you like historical true-crime, you'll like this.

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### **Kirsten says**

A fascinating tale from the brutal Victorian age. We may think of steampunk and coming out balls, but for the average person it was dirty and brutal. A day before sewers, health and safety regulations, and food preservation. It was at the very cusp of what we would call a police force, and it was still going through its growing pains. There were no appeals courts and children were sent out to help earn a living for their family.

THE ITALIAN BOY is set at this time and tells the tale of two London "burkers" or "resurrection men". This was at a time when anatomy colleges would pay for corpses with no or few questions asked. It was a very lucrative trade at a time when being a beggar or a vagrant was a criminal act. It was only a matter of time before the "resurrection men" would decide to cut out the digging into a grave to get the recently deceased and just kill people and save themselves a whole lot of trouble. Even better, they would get a better price since the corpse was fresh. Some anatomist would also pay extra for a woman or child.

The criminals of this story are not the most famous "burkers". They were beat out by Burke & Hare from

Edinburgh. But that does not make this tale any less fascinating. This book is part true crime, part history, and part social commentary. Good reading!

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