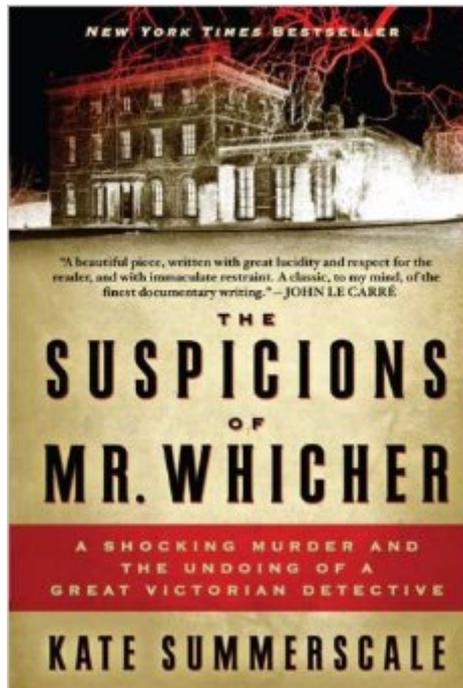


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The Suspicions Of Mr. Whicher: A Shocking Murder And The Undoing Of A Great Victorian Detective



Synopsis

In June of 1860 three-year-old Saville Kent was found at the bottom of an outdoor privy with his throat slit. The crime horrified all England and led to a national obsession with detection, ironically destroying, in the process, the career of perhaps the greatest detective in the land. At the time, the detective was a relatively new invention; there were only eight detectives in all of England and rarely were they called out of London, but this crime was so shocking, as Kate Summerscale relates in her scintillating new book, that Scotland Yard sent its best man to investigate, Inspector Jonathan Whicher. Whicher quickly believed the unbelievable—that someone within the family was responsible for the murder of young Saville Kent. Without sufficient evidence or a confession, though, his case was circumstantial and he returned to London a broken man. Though he would be vindicated five years later, the real legacy of Jonathan Whicher lives on in fiction: the tough, quirky, knowing, and all-seeing detective that we know and love today...from the cryptic Sgt. Cuff in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* to Dashiell Hammett's *Sam Spade*. *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* is a provocative work of nonfiction that reads like a Victorian thriller, and in it Kate Summerscale has fashioned a brilliant, multilayered narrative that is as cleverly constructed as it is beautifully written.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a wonderfully done true crime story of a murder in England in 1860. If that were all, we'd have an eminently enjoyable book. But this is also a social commentary and a history of the early detective story: you'll learn how and when the words "clueless" and "sleuth" entered the language,

for example. You have a horrible murder of a 3-year-old boy in a manor house in the country. The outside doors, windows, and gates are all locked--and also, unusual for us nowadays, many of the interior doors were locked as well--preventing access to the larder, cellar, drawing-room, etc. So suspicion perforce falls upon the family and servants. This is before the days of forensic science--so it isn't even clear whether the child was killed by stabbing, throat-cutting, suffocation, or drowning. The local constabulary in this west England area are inadequate to the task in what very quickly becomes a sensationalist case, and so a detective from London is called in to investigate. Detectives are new, only a couple of decades old, as are detective stories. Detective-Inspector Jonathan Whicher is Scotland Yard's best investigator (at the time, there weren't all that many). The child's family is not very well liked in the area, and the family itself has many unsavory secrets--including insanity. Summerscale relates Whicher's detective work and his growing fixation upon a 16-year-old sister. But what makes all of this particularly enjoyable is how Summerscale relates the sensationalism in the press, the plethora of theories as to the murder, the coming-forth of outsiders to confess, the initial belief in Whicher's abilities (followed by growing disbelief).

We always think of detectives and crime-solving as things that have gone on for centuries. In actual fact, Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story in 1841, and the next year the British set up their first detective police to solve crimes where the criminal wasn't immediately apparent. For much of the 19th century these individuals were essentially making it up as they went along, and dealing with a variety of public prejudices (bobbies originally had to wear their uniforms all the time, to avoid corruption and the possibility of them sneaking up on someone) and strange practices to invent, as they went along, the craft of crime-solving. In 1860, 18 years after the detective department was founded (they had offices in a square in downtown London known as Scotland Yard, hence the name) a young boy was killed in rural England. His throat was cut rather viciously, and he was thrown into a privy. The house in which he lived with his family was very large, and since the doors were locked, it seemed inevitable that the killer must be either a family member or a servant. After two weeks of inept investigation, which solved nothing, the local police petitioned London to send a Scotland Yard detective. The one they got was one of four Detective Inspectors, Jack Whicher, who according to the author was one of the original detectives who essentially invented his craft. His assistant, "Dolly" Williamson, went on to be superintendent of Scotland Yard during the '70s and '80s. Whicher settled pretty quickly on who he believed was the culprit, but he was unable to obtain a confession and had scant physical evidence. He made an arrest, but the family closed ranks, and ultimately there was no immediate conclusion to the killing. This destroyed Whicher's career.

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