



The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer

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Early in the morning of Monday 8 July 1895, thirteen-year-old Robert Coombes and his twelve-year-old brother Nattie set out from their small, yellow-brick terraced house in East London to watch a cricket match at Lord's. Their father had gone to sea the previous Friday, the boys told their neighbours, and their mother was visiting her family in Liverpool. Over the next ten days Robert and Nattie spent extravagantly, pawning their parents' valuables to fund trips to the theatre and the seaside. But as the sun beat down on the Coombes house, a strange smell began to emanate from the building. When the police were finally called to investigate, the discovery they made sent the press into a frenzy of horror and alarm, and Robert and Nattie were swept up in a criminal trial that echoed the outrageous plots of the 'penny dreadful' novels that Robert loved to read. In *The Wicked Boy*, Kate Summerscale has uncovered a fascinating true story of murder and morality - it is not just a meticulous examination of a shocking Victorian case, but also a compelling account of its aftermath, and of man's capacity to overcome the past.

The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer Details

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From Reader Review The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer for online ebook

Petra says

This story chronicles the life of Robert Coombes from his 13th year and his involvement in the murder of his mother. It's well researched, interesting to read and touches on some interesting concepts of psychology and behavior that were just beginning to be documented/researched in the 1890s. It all comes together for an engaging read.

However, I never got to really know these characters and the concepts touched upon were just that....touched upon. The connection between the concept and this particular case is often nebulous. I came away without a clear reason for this child to kill his mother. There are a couple of hints at what may have been the cause but they didn't seem drastic enough to cause a killing and never do we hear Robert's words on the matter. It may be that he never spoke them but that makes the case more curious yet.

The asylum was interesting. It was like a well-run hotel. Surprising.

An interesting read and one I'm glad I picked up yet not one of true connectivity.

Note of interest:

1. In 1895, the "penny dreadfuls" were considered as dangerous to a young minds as violent video games are for young minds today. Both have the ability to turn young people into killers because they cannot distinguish between real life killings and book/game killings. (things don't change much over the generations, it seems)
 2. James Joyce was born in the same year as Robert Coombes, also read penny dreadfuls & enjoyed liked them.....at least he wrote a story (An Encounter) stating so.
-

MaryannC.Book Fiend says

A totally fascinating read about a young Victorian child Robert Coombes, who brutally stabbed his mother one day in July, 1895. While the book goes into specific details of the crime and all it's gore, it also gives us a look into the everyday conditions of London's society which was often times brutal itself if you happened to be among the poor working classes. What I enjoyed about the book was that the author chronicled the life of Robert after he was sentenced and serving his time at Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum to eventually redeeming his life to go onto becoming a distinguished serviceman during the Great War and overall, caring human being. Instead of just sensationalizing the story itself, Kate Summerscale gave us a compassionate look into why perhaps a young child could commit such a horrific crime and come out a better person in the end. Recommended for those who love History and stories related to crime.

Ken says

A fascinating true account of thirteen year old Robert Coombes who murdered he's mother in the summer of 1895.

The book follows he's trial subsequent life after these events.

I practically liked how Summerscale transports the reader to that period in history, as for 10 days prior to the

discovery of the body Robert and younger brother Nattie went on a spending spree. Everything from the pre-decimal currency to the boys trip to Lords for the cricket is well explained.

I felt like I'd learnt a lot about the Victorian justice system too.

♥ Sandi 🍷 says

3.75 stars

Based on the life of Robert Coombes, a child in the slums of London in 1895. His infamous claim to fame is the murder of his mother at age 13. The book follows his life as a youngster, his trial, his years in an insane asylum, his release, his years in the war and his stoic life once he settles down as a man.

There are parts of this book that I really enjoyed reading. Then there are parts that I felt were almost 100% repetition. The book gives a lot of back story - which I enjoyed - and also speaks of criminal cases similar to Roberts. It speaks to a lot of family background and a lot of societal problems, which were rampant at the time. The story takes us from when Robert was a very young boy - aged 13 - to manhood and his death in 1949 and then a bit thereafter. My problem with the book was that I felt that the author repeated certain parts of the story too often. I understand that she was starting in a new thought direction, but I did not feel it was necessary to repeat total parts of the story, for me to understand her change in course. The book was entertaining and the research and story plot were very good, but with all the repetition I believe the page count was probably a quarter again what it needed to be. I am sure this was a big project - as witnessed by the Notes and Bibliography - but believe that her editing staff could have made this a much better book.

Amy says

"You are a bad, wicked boy," she told Robert. "You knew your Ma was dead in the room and you ought to have told me."

"Auntie," he replied. "Come to me and I will tell you the truth and tell you all about it."

At 13, Robert Coombes was convicted of killing his mother. Her body was kept locked up in the upstairs bedroom for 10 days before the death was discovered.

Kate Summerscale's straightforward narrative non-fiction account is an interesting peek into Victorian London and follows Robert through to his death. While the story of the murder is equal parts fascinating and horrifying, it is only part of what the book has to offer. We the readers get to experience turn of the century England, its judicial system, working environs, asylums, the Great War and a redeeming third act in the life of Robert Coombes.

Recommended for true crime fans that enjoy coming to their own conclusions on a case.

Leah says

Boys will be boys...

For ten days in the summer of July 1895, two boys spent their time roaming round coffee shops and attending cricket matches, and telling anyone who asked that their mother had gone to visit relatives in Liverpool. They slept downstairs in the back parlour of their house, with a family friend who had come at their request to look after them. Meantime, an unpleasant smell was beginning to seep from the house, becoming so bad eventually that the neighbours complained to the boys' aunt. When she forced her way into the house, she discovered the badly decomposed body of the boys' mother, and immediately young Robert Coombes admitted to having stabbed her to death.

This is a chilling but fascinating true crime story from the end of the Victorian era. Robert Coombes was thirteen at the time of the murder and his brother Nattie was twelve. The idea of the matricide itself horrified contemporary society enough, but it was the cool behaviour of the boys over the following ten days that made the crime seem even more shocking. Evidence showed that the murder was planned – Robert had bought the knife specially a few days earlier, and he later claimed that he and Nattie had arranged a signal for when the deed should be done.

The first part of the book concentrates on the crime and the trial procedures and Summerscale covers these with her usual excellent attention to detail. Because they felt that their case against Robert would be stronger if his brother gave evidence, the prosecution were keen to have the charges against Nattie dropped, since at that time defendants were not allowed to tell their story in court. In the early proceedings, Robert had no lawyer or other representation and was expected to cross-examine witnesses by himself. The boys' father was a steward on board a transatlantic cattle vessel, and wasn't even aware of the murder till after the first hearings had taken place.

Although this all sounds horrific to our modern ideas of justice, especially for children, there seems little doubt that Robert was indeed guilty, and some of the court officers did their best to make the process as easy for him as they could within the system. The boys were held in an adult jail during the trial process, but had individual cells – a luxury they would be unlikely to get today. The boys' extended family did show up for the hearings, so Nattie at least had some adult support.

The defence quickly decided to try for an insanity ruling, which meant that they actually preferred for there not to be a rational motive, while the prosecution felt Robert's guilt was so obvious they didn't need one. The result of this is that no-one ever really asked why Robert did it, and so the motivation remains unclear. Summerscale suggests on the basis of some fairly circumstantial evidence that the mother may have been cruel to the boys in her husband's absence – there is a suggestion that she too suffered from “excitability” and extreme mood swings, and may have beaten the boys badly, but this is largely speculation.

In this first section, Summerscale also widens her discussion out to look at the society and living conditions of the time. Robert's family was working class, but not grindingly poor – his father had a decent income, and the boys got a good education. However, at that time, there was much debate as to whether educating the poor was a good thing, especially since the ability to read allowed boys access to the “penny dreadfuls” of the time, which many considered to have a bad influence on impressionable young minds. Robert had a collection of such pamphlets, and the press made much of this. The crime took place in Plaistow in Essex, an

industrial area within the range of the heavily polluted atmosphere of London. There was also much debate at that time about the general poor health of the urban poor, while the acceptance of the theory of evolution brought with it a belief in the possibility of its opposite, degeneration. It all reminded me of the “bad boy” culture that Andrew Levy discussed so thoroughly in his book about Twain's young hero, Huck Finn's America.

The second half of the book tells the story of what happened to Robert after his conviction. Summerscale is asking, and answering, the question of whether someone who has done such a dreadful thing can go on to lead a normal, even worthwhile life. Robert spent several years in Broadmoor, the hospital for the criminally insane, where again because of his youth he was in fact treated more kindly than we might expect. This whole section is fascinating in what it tells us about the treatment of those judged criminally insane. In fact, from time to time there were complaints that the treatment was too kind – that people were faking insanity to avoid the much harder regime in normal prisons.

This is not the end of Robert's story, though. Following his eventual release from Broadmoor, Summerscale follows his trail through the rest of his life, uncovering some interesting and unexpected details about how he turned out. So often true crime stories from the Victorian era end with a conviction and capital punishment. This one, being somewhat later and also because it concerned a child, is intriguing because we are able to see the aftermath. At the point of conviction Robert would undoubtedly have been seen as some kind of monster, but Summerscale lets us see whether the rest of his life confirmed that or allowed him to find some kind of redemption. Immaculately researched, well written and presented, this is easily the equal of Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, and personally, having worked with boys of that age with troubled and often criminal histories, I found this one even more interesting. Highly recommended.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Penguin Group.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Carolyn says

In 1895 Robert Coombes (aged 13) stabbed his mother to death and calmly went on living in the house with his brother Nathaniel (12) having days out at the cricket and living on money stolen from his mother. His father was away at sea and Robert told nosy neighbours that his mother had gone to Liverpool to visit a sick relative. Eventually, some 10 days later a nasty smell led a suspicious aunt to discover the body and Robert freely confessed to the murder.

This little gem of a book is not so much about the trial and scandal that followed in the Victorian press but more about the young murderer at the centre of the story. The author has carried out meticulous research about the life and times of Robert and his family as well as the trial that ensued. Although we never really find out why Robert killed his mother, her beatings of his younger brother and Robert's love of reading 'penny dreadfuls' (comics full of stories of adventure and daring deeds) were heavily implicated. Luckily for Robert he was judged to be insane and sentenced to Broadmoor where he spent the next 17 years being a model patient, joining the cricket team, playing chess by correspondence, learning to play the cornet, piano and violin and joining the brass band. He also worked in the tailor's shop where he learnt to make clothing for the inmates. Again there is meticulous research and details about the nature of Broadmoor, the various Superintendents and other inmates in Robert's section and the treatment of mental illness at the time.

For me as an Australian, one of the unexpected delights of this book was the account of what happened next to Robert, the so called 'wicked boy'. After some time at a Salvation Army Farm, Robert travelled to Australia, where he later volunteered to serve with the Australian Army and was one of only 7000 men to serve for the whole of WWI. He won medals for his bravery and service as a stretcher bearer at Gallipoli and later as a hygiene officer at the Somme. After the war, he settled on the NSW coast near Coffs Harbour, where the author travelled to meet people who had known him and uncovered yet another remarkable story about this man who started off life so badly as a boy. This was a fascinating account not only of the treatment of a child murderer in Victorian times, but the capacity of such a child to be rehabilitated and go on to lead a worthy life.

With thanks to Netgalley and the publisher Bloomsbury Publishing for an e-copy of the book to read and review

Orion says

Thought it would be in the same vein as *In Cold Blood* or *Compulsion*. But it was more of an historical and judicial essay. Too much cold facts and dates and too little emotional implication.

Caroline says

In East London in the summer of 1895 13-year-old Robert Coombes murdered his mother. His guilt was never in question, and he never denied the charges when the death was eventually discovered. For ten days after the murder, his mother's body lay rotting in the summer heat in an upstairs bedroom, whilst Robert, his younger brother Nattie and a simple-minded colleague of his father's whom Robert conned into taking care of the boys in their mother's 'absence', went to watch cricket at Lord's, to the seaside, coffee shops and the park, played cards and other games. Family members soon grew suspicious, and the crime was eventually uncovered. To say more of the events that took place would spoil readers' enjoyment, no doubt, so I will refrain, and simply say that only the first half of this book concerns the murder and Robert's trial.

Child murderers are always of interest - the dichotomy between such an abhorrent act and the perceived 'innocence' of childhood, no doubt - and a young boy who kills his mother and then acts with such cool unconcern in the aftermath all the more so. Yet I found this book disappointing, for all that. I've read and thoroughly enjoyed both of Kate Summerscale's previous books, *'The Suspicions of Mr Whicher'* and *'Mrs Robinson's Disgrace'*, but this one seems to lack depth in comparison. It felt very cursory, degenerating on many pages to little more than a 'he said/they said/he said' recitation of the trial records. At no point did I ever feel enthralled in the tale and none of the personalities involved ever felt more than potted characters on the page.

Perhaps that was because there was no 'whodunnit' aspect to the case; perhaps because the trial lawyers never sought to determine Robert's motive; perhaps because there is no extant record of Robert's thoughts, impulses or feelings after the trial or throughout his subsequent life - whatever the reason, Robert himself remained very much a cipher in these pages, impossible to understand or empathise with. As I said, at no point reading this book did I ever feel that there was any depth to the words on the page - it read as very much a 'this happened and then that happened and then he said this and she said that', and quite frankly I got bored. It took me less than a day to read this book, not because I was unable to put it down, but because it

was such a light, cursory read it took no time at all to rattle through. I can only hope Kate Summerscale's next book reflects 'The Suspicions of Mr Whicher' or 'Mrs Robinson's Disgrace', and not this one.

Carlos says

Nice little nonfiction book. It's main point deals with the sentencing of a boy of 13 for the murder of his mother , this is a real case. The first half of the book deals with all intricacies of the case, the before, the middle and the trial. The other half of the book deals with the after for both of the brothers (the main characters are 2 brothers, only one is sentenced) and how their lives affected everyone around them. The reason I gave the book 3 stars is because while this book is well researched and nicely written, it lacks purpose , I thought originally this would be a book that advocated for children's rights and their being abused during Victorian times , this was not the case, then I thought this could be a book where psychopathy was discussed or at least criminal intent, this was also not the case. This book isolates the case it discussed and doesn't seem to want to do more than that. There is a bit amount of overload of information and meticulous research into the background of each of every minor character introduced as the trial goes on, in a book without purpose these biographies seem to be just filling . This book aspires to nothing but just to be about the case it presents, and judging from that singular perspective it succeeds.

Fran says

Summer 1895. In the working-class East End of London, Robert Coombes has stabbed his mother. Robert, 14 years old, claims that his mother Emily beat his younger brother Mattie for stealing food.

Emily has been stabbed to death in her upstairs bedroom but Robert creates a web of lies and deceptions to account for Emily's absence. Robert's seafaring father, away for long periods of time, is unaware of the crime. With the help of a dim witted guardian, the boys manage to live the good life visiting cricket matches and the theater by pawning family items while Emily's body is decomposing.

After 10 days, Emily's sister no longer believes she is visiting family in Liverpool and demands access to the Coombes residence. Greeted by a putrefying stench, Emily's maggot eaten corpse is discovered.

A trial at the Old Bailey ensues and Robert is found guilty of matricide. Neither the prosecution nor defense can determine a motive for the murder. Robert appears to be insane and is sent to the Broadmoor asylum. The humane treatment he receives there enables him to learn tailoring, gardening, and above all, human kindness which changes the trajectory of his life.

Kudos to Kate Summerscale for enlightening us about Victorian forensics and the diagnoses of insanity in late Victorian-era London. Could reading "penny dreadfuls" have caused the crime? Since Emily Coomes had outbursts of excitability would her progeny be even more mentally unbalanced? Summerscale thoroughly researched this true crime Victorian mystery. A masterful book I absolutely recommend!

Notes

Thank you Penguin Press and Net Galley for the opportunity to read and review "The Wicked Boy".

Ariel says

I'd like to thank the Penguin Group, The Penguin Press, and NetGalley for the opportunity to read this ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Early one morning in the summer of 1865, a thirteen year old Robert Coombes lays beside his mother in bed. The heat of the day is already building towards its suffocating presence and Robert's mother, in her chemise and drawers rather than a nightdress, punches out at the boy beside her as he kicks about in bed. Minutes later Robert makes his way to a second bedroom that he shares with his younger brother, Nattie, and tells him that he has done 'it' - he has killed their mother. His younger brother responding with disbelief, Robert leads him to their mother and father's bed where Nattie sees blood and hears a faint moan. Both boys go back to sleep, Robert back in the bed next to a dead or dying woman and Nattie back to their shared room.

Emily Coombes was stabbed twice in the chest by a knife her son had bought weeks before and bludgeoned at the temple with a truncheon. Her sons, with the aide of money from her purse and the dress she had slipped off hours before, proceeded to pay the weekly rent through a neighbor, attend a cricket match, see a show, and eat out at local coffeehouses. They pawned off two watches and Robert's mandolin with the help of a family friend named John Fox, whom they enlisted into their escapades of the following ten days by inviting him to stay in their home to watch over them while their mother was away. Fox, described as simple-minded and trustworthy in the court case to come, was apparently oblivious to the growing stench of the house's fourth tenant or the oddity of the situation at hand. He pawned the possessions given to him, wore a suit Robert gave him, and slept and played cards with the boys in a downstairs backroom of the boys' home - not realizing how derailed his life was to become very shortly when the suspicions of the boys' aunt began to grow and the decomposing body of their mother was finally found.

What followed was a newspaper-selling court case that rocked the surrounding area. Everything from what the boys' read (the penny bloods that had become such a contentious topic as of late) to what the boys wore at each appearance was fodder for the tell-all. In all the chaos, pity, and disturbance thrown up by the murder no one seemed to be able to get to the bottom of *why*. Were the boys insane, guilty, or both? Who was responsible for the murder, was Nattie culpable or just Robert? As the court proceeded, the boys were separated with Nattie becoming a witness rather than the accused. While Robert was eventually found guilty yet insane and shipped off to Broadmoor, the why of the crime lingered.

This is the premise of Summerscale's *Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*. In an atmospheric chronicle of the boys' home life, trial, and the path Robert's life took afterwards, Summerscale attempts to reconcile the why of a child murderer and his crime with the man that would eventually emerge from Broadmoor.

Summerscale does a very good job at introducing the reader to the time period and the details of the Coombes case. It is a satisfyingly well researched effort that offers up a great view of those involved in the case, the boys as they were portrayed in the papers and witnessed in court, their educational and family backgrounds, as well as what the medical perspective on insanity and culpability was at the time. Though Summerscale poses a few personal theories as to the reasons behind the murder, the looming why remains.

While society in general has a much larger awareness of psychology and mental illness today- those that could provide any real answers about motive have passed on. While chaos and stressors in the home were alluded to in both the provided testimony in court and in Summerscale's account, only presumptions can be made at this point.

Presumptions aside, the details of Robert's life are certainly enthralling. As are the details of the time period that have been gathered and woven through this book so adeptly. It is this weaving of details that offers up such a great opportunity for comparison in so many areas. I think that Summerscale does a good job of observing the varying threads of her project's time and place while respecting those involved.

The Wicked Boy is a very interesting read that poses a great amount of reflection on the volatility of the Victorian period, the changes that we've seen in the fairly recent past, and on the psychology of murder in general and matricide in specific.

Beverly says

Not as good as her earlier true-life Victorian murder mystery, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, but quite compelling.

Susan says

I really enjoyed Kate Summerscale's previous books, so I was pleased to get the chance to review her latest, "The Wicked Boy." Subtitled, "The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer," much of the book took place in Plaistow (coincidentally, the place I lived as a child) and so this book resonated even more with me as I knew all the places mentioned.

This begins on a hot July day in 1895. Two brothers, Robert Coombes (13) and his brother, Nathaniel 'Nattie' (12) are home with their mother. Their father, a ship steward, is on his way across the Atlantic going to New York. It appears to neighbours, and relatives, that things are not well at the family home. Robert and Nattie seem to be spending a lot of money and there is no sign of their mother, Emily. The boys involve a friend of their fathers, John Fox, to pawn some items in the house but, eventually, a terrible smell leads to investigation and the body of their mother is discovered, murdered, in her bedroom.

Gradually, we discover what happened before this gruesome discovery and then the trial as it unfolds. Robert is the 'Wicked Boy' of the title and much of the blame for his crime is, initially, blamed on the 'Penny Dreadfuls' he loved to read. These trashy, cheap adventure stories were the computer games of their day – blamed for all sorts of delinquent behaviour. What was interesting to me, though, was how progressively Robert was actually treated once he had been tried. Although there was no real way of separating child criminals from adults, it was obvious that once he was in the system, there were attempts to rehabilitate and care for him.

This is also an account of Robert Coombe's life after the murder and of what happened to him. It is an interesting read and also – despite the subject matter – an uplifting one. The author scatters the book with fascinating glimpses of other crimes and criminals, that occurred at around the same time and tells the story of psychiatry and how those with mental illness were treated. If you enjoyed Summerscale's earlier books, or enjoy historical true crime, then you will probably also find this a good read. Lastly, I received a copy of the book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

Sarah says

Three and a half stars.

Victorian London is transfixed with a new court case. Thirteen year old Robert Coombes and his twelve year old brother, Nattie, stand in the dock and the public are hooked on the sensation.

Kate Summerscale's writing is matter of fact at times, but I can appreciate her reasons for this. Her explicit writing detailing the crime mirrors the Penny Dreadful novels attributed by some to playing a part in the case. The court account is engrossing and thoughtfully written. Summerscale highlights Victorian social, moral and psychological beliefs and her research regarding the prison system, including the regime and treatment of inmates, is comprehensive and detailed.

A shocking crime which delves into Victorian life and its sensibilities.
