



# Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China

*Paul French*

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## **Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China** Paul French

Peking in 1937 is a heady mix of privilege and scandal, opulence and opium dens, rumors and superstition. The Japanese are encircling the city, and the discovery of Pamela Werner's body sends a shiver through already nervous Peking. Is it the work of a madman? One of the ruthless Japanese soldiers now surrounding the city? Or perhaps the dreaded fox spirits? With the suspect list growing and clues sparse, two detectives—one British and one Chinese—race against the clock to solve the crime before the Japanese invade and Peking as they know it is gone forever. Can they find the killer in time, before the Japanese invade?

Historian and China expert Paul French at last uncovers the truth behind this notorious murder, and offers a rare glimpse of the last days of colonial Peking.

**Winner of the both the Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime and the CWA Non-Fiction Dagger**

## **Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China Details**

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# **From Reader Review *Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China* for online ebook**

## **Ally says**

Amazing! - Paul French is an excellent writer and with *Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China* has made an already very interesting story truly fascinating.

The descriptions of life in Peking in the 1930s & 40s create a rich backdrop to this 'murder mystery' and I loved the way French slowly opened our eyes to the connections and interconnections between people of every class layer in this very small world. I also loved how the evidence was presented to us loosely as it was presented to the police at the time enabling us to experience the rollercoaster of breadcrumb trails and dead ends.

Werner himself was perhaps the most fascinating person in the book and in the end it was with him that my sympathies lay. He was tenacious in his pursuit of the truth and in his attempts to present new evidence and have the case re-opened. It is a real indictment of the British colonial machinery of State that such overwhelming evidence was swept under the carpet...and it's only small mitigation that the political situation of the time intervened to draw attention away from the seedy underbelly of the 'old boys' network'.

It's appalling to think that a young woman lost her life in these circumstances and that the perpetrators got away with it. That last chapter that explored 'what happened next' for each of the key players didn't give me enough assurance that they truly suffered for what they had done but it was a start.

I urge everyone to read this book. Wow!

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## **Rebecca Martin says**

I put this book in my "Global detective fiction" shelf, though let me say right away that it is not fiction. I enjoyed every minute of this book and it ended all too soon.

The time is 1937 and the place is the area in and around the Foreign Legation quarters in old Peking. Politics all over the world are in turmoil with events leading to WWII taking place in Europe, and in China the brutal Japanese are invading and the already feeble nationalist government is on the ropes.

A nearly-19 year old Englishwoman, Pamela Werner, is killed, her body mutilated and dumped at the base of the Fox Tower just outside the Legation. The details of the joint Chinese and English investigation, its constraints and its flaws is fascinating in and of itself. When the investigation is unable to point to a culprit, Pamela's father spends the rest of his years in Peking doing the investigation that the police should have done. But his findings fall on deaf ears. Are the British afraid to lose face? Is that why the British powers ignore the findings and call their representative on the team home to Tientsin? Was the original investigation, which seemed fairly competent for the time and place, in fact, undercut by restraints and subterfuge on the Chinese side? Peking soon falls to the Japanese...is it just that everyone has more important things to think

about than a dead girl who was a bit of a handful while she was alive and perhaps no better than she should have been?

Historian Paul French has reconstructed the entire case, from the events leading up to the fatal night, to the actions and investigations of all of the parties involved. He quite literally found by fortunate accident a folder of records stored in the British archives that traced the case, including ETC Werner's many letters filled with his additional investigations and pleading for more action on the case. From these records and his other investigations, French puts together a quite believable chain of events and points the finger at one man in particular. This case was unsolved from 1937 to 2011 and quite forgotten, but it is now resolved and there can be little doubt that French's version is valid.

Ok, THAT is the story. It's well-told and reads like an exciting murder mystery. For me, the bonus was the very detailed portrait of Peking during this period and the foreign presence in China's coastal cities such as Shanghai and Tientsin. I can't say enough about the lively realistic (and unsavory) picture that emerges of the Legation area of Peking. I spent half the time I was supposedly reading the book looking for maps online so I could follow the action. It turns out that many of the places and streets that feature prominently in the story are still there (remarkable, considering the construction in Beijing over the last few decades).

If you are interested in that aspect of the story, start with the Wikipedia entry on "Beijing Legation Quarter" and follow links to maps. There is also this Paul French link: <http://us.midnightinpeking.com/pdf/a-...>

Breaking news, Midnight in Peking Walking Tour! <http://www.cnngo.com/shanghai/play/ha...>

When can I go???

I could go on and on because I found this book utterly fascinating. The murder mystery was only one part of its appeal, for this reader.

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## **Chris says**

Crossposted at Booklikes

Sometimes you read a book and wonder why the hell it won all the acclaim listed on the cover.

This is not one of those books.

French's work details the investigation of a murder of a young English in Peking just before the onslaught of the Japanese. To say that the book is engrossing would be an understatement, and to say that the whole book is engrossing would also be wrong.

It does start off very slow but picks up around page 40.

French keeps the reader's attention because he plays with the ideas of guilt and innocence. In many ways, the reader is like a third investigator in the case or perhaps the jury while French is the advocate.

Either way it is a thrilling ride.

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## **Nancy Oakes says**

If you've picked this book up expecting yet another true-crime novel filled with the titillating and tantalizing details that normally make these books sell well, forget it -- you've got the wrong book. By the very nature of the title, it should be very clear that there's going to be some historical component to this book, so don't be surprised.

Part history, part cold-case mystery, *Midnight in Peking* began literally as a footnote the author happened to read in a biography of Edgar Snow, an American journalist and author who may likely have been the first western journalist to interview Mao Zedong. As the author notes in his "The Writing of *Midnight in Peking*," a brief piece added to the book after the main story, mention was made of Snow's wife Helen, who was nervous due to the discovery of the body of young Pamela Werner not too far from where the Snows lived. The footnote also indicated that Pamela's father was a former British consul in China, and that the murder of Pamela had remained unsolved. With only these few facts to go on, and an inability to stop thinking about Pamela Webster, French started tracking down the long-forgotten story. By chance, one day at the National Archives at Kew, French came across an uncatalogued file in one of several boxes of "random correspondence sent from Peking during the years 1941-45," where he realized that he'd discovered details of the private investigation made by Pamela's father, E.T.C. Werner, who'd tried to solve the case on his own after authorities failed to do so. As it turns out, Werner's inquiries would provide a key that would unlock what may have really happened that fateful night back in January of 1937. While the mystery of who may have killed Pamela Werner unfolds in this book, the author also unravels Peking's social and political history, which helps to place into context the events surrounding and following her untimely death.

On January 8, 1937, Pamela Werner's body was discovered near the city's Fox Tower. Although there was little blood at the scene, Pamela had been severely beaten & cut, and her internal organs had been removed. The night before, Pamela had failed to return home, and her father had been out looking for her into the wee hours of the morning. After going home to get some rest, Werner was back out again on the streets looking for her as the day dawned. He started at the edge of the Legation Quarter, followed the Tatar Wall toward the Fox Tower, and seeing a crowd gathering, went to see what was happening. It was then he discovered that everyone was standing around a corpse, who as fate would have it, turned out to be his missing daughter.

It is very obvious that French has done an immense amount of research, doggedly pursuing police reports, newspaper articles and correspondence to reconstruct this brief episode. He writes that he "rechecked every false scent and misguided trail, every officious injunction from the British authorities" in putting together this book about Pamela's death, in the hopes that "some sort of justice, however, belated, be awarded her." At the same time, it is no dry history that has to be slogged through -- his writing brings old Peking alive and gives life to a murder case that began as a mere footnote. And while the book may not actually read like a fast-paced thriller as some have noted, the mystery of who killed Pamela Werner, and especially her father's dogged determination to find her killer are enough to keep anyone from setting it down for any length of

time. This book goes well beyond the usual "true-crime" sort of novel to become a compelling read in terms of a crime, a city, and the devotion of a father to his daughter.

Highly recommended.

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## **Ms.pegasus says**

As implied in the title, the central character of this book is Peking itself. Rather than the political and cultural center it is today, pre-war Peking was a depressed second tier city, particularly for the beached ex-patriot community of some three thousand residents. Tientsin, approximately 70 miles to the south, and far off Shanghai, over 600 miles south, were both more prosperous with their long history as commercial hubs and treaty ports. Peking, on the other hand, had been overrun by competing warlords since the fall of the Qing dynasty. Chiang Kai-shek's government had fled south, establishing their new capital in Nanking. The Japanese were firmly entrenched in Manchuria, and it would only be a matter of time before they turned their full attention to the rest of northern China, including Peking.

The ex-patriot community was concentrated in the two square acres known as the Legation Quarter. However, it was comprised of a wide range of disparate elements: The clubby diplomat corp., academics, journalists, businessmen, White Russian refugees fleeing the communists, drug dealers, pimps, and prostitutes. Despite their physical proximity, these elements did not intermingle, so that an invisible sub-class with its own secrets teemed just below the surface. Like so many other cities, Peking had its own equivalent of a "red light district," the Badlands. French describes it as a no-man's-land of vice, but also as a lure for curious foreigners. The authorities turned a blind eye to the district, their blinkers affixed firmly in place by bribery. *"The 'better' class of foreigners thought the Badlands typified Chinese depravity; the Chinese thought it symbolic of barbarian foreign ways. Both mostly pretended it didn't exist. They were fooling themselves."*

On the morning of January 8, 1937 the mutilated body of Pamela Werner, 17 year old daughter of former British consul and Sinologist Edward Werner, was discovered beneath a site known as the "Fox Tower" just beyond the boundary of the Legation Quarter. The perpetrators were never uncovered by the official investigation. Author Paul French found himself intrigued by this high profile cold case, and meticulously sifts through not only the records of the investigation but the political interference that impeded the case. His dedication reads: *"For the innocent. For Pamela."* Yet, it is just as much a book dedicated to a bereaved father who conducted a tireless private investigation in a futile effort to obtain justice for his daughter.

As French describes Pamela, the reader feels a genuine sense of loss. She was spirited. She had gotten expelled from several schools and had been attending a strict boarding school in Tientsin. She was fluent in Mandarin, independent minded, and familiar with both her city and its everyday inhabitants. She was scheduled to return to England in a few weeks. She was just discovering her womanhood, and had her whole life ahead of her. It's difficult to believe the crime occurred only some 75 years ago. Our own parents or grandparents would have been of her generation. Yet, so much has happened in the world, she seems of a shadow-era represented by faded sepia photographs. That sense is heightened by French's summation of Werner's life. In 1951 Werner finally left China and returned to an England he had not seen since 1917. He died at age 89 in 1954. *"He had lived eighty-nine years. He had seen China as a dynasty with an emperor, as a republic with a generalissimo, and finally as a people's republic with a dictator."*

French's reconstruction of the crime and its co-conspirators is riveting. However, of equal interest are the

many hindrances that stalled the case. Because the victim was British, the Chinese lead investigator, Col. Han, would be paired with a British Legation observer. Former Scotland Yard inspector Richard Dennis who was posted in Tientsin was loaned out for the role. However, Dennis had been instructed by British consul John Affleck to confine his own inquiries to the Legation Quarter. This was on orders of the British Foreign Office. When Dennis requested permission for a house-to-house search in the Legation Quarter, Consul Fitzmaurice refused. Col. Han had leaflets distributed requesting information and mentioning a hefty reward. However, the leaflets were printed only in English, not Chinese. The police were unable to locate two male friends of Pamela for questioning. Evidence collected from the crime scene was improperly handled. The Legation Quarter police failed to disclose its own information to Dennis voluntarily. Consul Fitzmaurice refused Col. Han's request to arrest the suspicious Canadian Pinfold. Finally, Consul Fitzmaurice forbade Dennis from further contact with the grieving Werner. A similar request had already been issued to the Chinese police. Later, Dennis requested permission to arrest another person of interest, Wentworth Prentice, a friend of Pinfold's. Again, Fitzmaurice refused permission. The entire situation with its emphasis on discretion, preservation of appearances, and secrecy condoned a web of half-truths that were never penetrated by the official investigation.

Still worse, however, was the official response to Werner's own private inquiries. The investigators he hired finally penetrated the screen of half-truths. Repeatedly, Werner's letters and newly uncovered evidence were ignored by the Foreign Office. Then, the Japanese invaded, and Werner, along with the remaining British ex-patriots were placed in a Japanese prison camp.

French concludes his story in the chapter "Invitation to a Party." Using the information Werner uncovered, he reconstructs the events that probably occurred on the day and evening of January 7 which led to Pamela Werner's death.

French has done more than solved a murder in this book. He resurrects a time and place in history when even a prominent British girl's murder took a back-seat to prejudice, bureaucratic obstruction, and the intent to keep secret a part of foreign ex-patriot life in China that no one wanted exposed.

NOTE: I discovered a handy website: <http://www.distance.to/Shanghai/Peking>

It can be used to calculate distances between two cities, for example, between Shanghai and Peking, or Tientsin and Peking. The site is useful since the book does not include maps.

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## **Roberto says**

### **Non lasciarmi sola**

Mi piacciono moltissimo i libri che, partendo da avvenimenti veri, riescono a intrigare, avvincere e a restituire una realtà storica poco conosciuta.

Questo libro di Paul French è uno di questi. L'ambiente, quello della Cina della fine anni trenta, viene descritto nei suoi minimi dettagli, con la sua povertà, il suo oppio, i suoi bordelli, i suoi stranieri colonialisti che, vivendo nel lusso, facevano impunemente il bello e il cattivo tempo riuscendo sempre a mettere a tacere eventuali scandali.

French ci scaraventa addosso la storia piena di misteri della ventenne Pamela Werner, orrendamente uccisa e

mutilata e ritrovata davanti ad una delle più antiche torri di vedetta della città di Pechino, la Torre della Volpe.

E davanti a questo efferato delitto, tanti indizi, tante supposizioni, tante congetture, nessuna delle quali però incredibilmente riesce a concretizzarsi.

Fondamentalmente a nessuno importa nulla di scoprire la verità; non alla polizia cinese, non agli stranieri che abitano a Pechino, non ai giapponesi che invadono la Cina, non ai Britannici.

Toccherà a French, forse per fare giustizia tardiva, raccogliere metodicamente articoli, atti giudiziari e documenti e mettere tutto insieme in questo libro angosciante in cui la verità, peraltro mai confermata, viene svelata lentamente, lasciandoci alla fine attoniti.

Un libro di grandissimo impatto, una narrazione dettagliatissima, una fotografia della Cina prima della seconda guerra mondiale, un padre che, curandosi pochissimo della figlia, la costringe a condurre una vita solitaria e senza guida. E un padre che, resosi conto delle sue gravissime responsabilità, spende tutto sé stesso e tutti i suoi averi per trovare i responsabili della sua morte.

La tristezza, guardando questo padre che decide di esserci quando ormai non serve più e che si rende conto delle sue mancanze, è massima.

Un libro che parte lento, ma che cattura e lascia, ahimé, tanta, tantissima rabbia dentro.

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## **Rosalba says**

**Tuttavia si tratta solo di un'illusione, poiché in realtà tutto è cambiato e nulla rimane come prima.**

Ottimo libro. Qualcuno lo ha già detto e descritto meglio di quanto possa fare io. Si tratta di una storia vera: l'efferato omicidio di una ragazza bianca in Cina, sul finire degli anni trenta. L'indagine è accompagnata da un excursus storico- culturale molto interessante e approfondito riguardante la Cina, in particolare Pechino e dintorni, dall' inizio del XX secolo alla seconda guerra mondiale ed anche ciò che accadde ai personaggi coinvolti nell'incresciosa vicenda.

*Vuole la mitologia cinese che, quando uno spirito volpe lascia questo mondo, prima di dissolversi la sua immagine tremi in un breve baluginò. L'influenza dello spirito diventa allora benigna e il mondo dei mortali può finalmente iniziare il processo di guarigione. Le cicatrici sbiadiscono fino a sparire, macchie e difetti a poco a poco sfumano senza lasciare traccia e la vita può tornare alla normalità.*

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## **Roberta says**

Pamela Werner lived in the storied Chinese city of Peking, on a street called Armour Factory Alley, with her father E.T. C. Werner, a retired consul and noted expert on Chinese language, history, and culture. In 1911, Werner had married Gladys Nina Ravenshaw, “a girl of the British Empire.” She was 22; he was 45.

In 1919, they adopted Pamela. Gladys lived a mere three years longer, dying at age 35 and leaving her three-year-old daughter in the care of her husband and various servants of the household.



Paul French sets the stage for a tragedy by describing the strange and exotic world of prewar Peking, a place where men in traditional garb strolled the ancient avenues displaying their song birds in cages. Above the streets there loomed a sinister building known as the Fox Tower, a remnant of the walls that once encircled the city. The Chinese shunned this edifice, believing it to be inhabited by malign spirits. At night, it was populated by bats and wild dogs. It was here, in the early morning hours of January 8, 1937, in the vicinity of the Tower, that Pamela Werner's body was first discovered:

When daylight broke on another freezing day, the tower was deserted once more. The colony of bats circled one last time before the creeping sun sent them back to their eaves. But in the icy wasteland between the road and the tower, the wild dogs—the *huang gou*—were prowling curiously, sniffing at something alongside a ditch.

It was the body of a young woman, lying at an odd angle and covered by a layer of frost.

Paul French describes a murder scene that is acutely horrific. In terms of sheer savagery, it put me in mind of the victims of Jack the Ripper and also of the so-called Black Dahlia murder. I wasn't prepared for that, and it nearly put me off the book altogether. But as often happens in such situations, there were sufficiently compelling reasons to read on, and so I did.

At the age of 19, Pamela Werner was still in school, yet at the same time she was on the brink of womanhood. A fluent speaker of Mandarin, she came and went from various venues in the city on her bicycle. She loved to go ice skating with her friends; in fact, this was the activity she was engaged in on the last night of her life. On that cold, dark evening, as Pamela prepared to cycle back home, one of those friends asked if she was scared to be making the trip all by herself. She responded:

'I've been alone all my life....I am afraid of nothing—nothing! And besides, Peking is the safest city in the world.'

That last statement of course proved to be tragically wrong – at least it was, for Pamela Werner. But what of the first comment, about being alone all her life? At the time of her death, Pamela was just shy of twenty years of age. Her father was in his early seventies. Since the age of three, she'd had no mother.

My initial impression of E.T.C. Werner was that of a fusty old scholar only minimally concerned in the life of his sole offspring. And indeed, he may have enacted that part from time to time. But as *Midnight in Peking* ultimately reveals, there was a whole other side to the man. In the course of the investigation into Pamela's murder, the seamy underbelly of expatriate life in the Chinese city had been exposed to considerably scrutiny. As a result, several possible suspects were identified, but there was never sufficient evidence to tie any of them definitively to the crime. Then, as the tides of history engulfed China, the murder of the young Englishwoman was relegated to the status of one of history's footnotes. The case went cold. Everyone concerned seemed to give up on it, to be ready to forget about it. Everyone, that is, except her father, E.T.C. Werner.

The *Guardian* review of *Midnight in Peking* calls French's account of the investigation 'spellbinding.' I agree completely. The whole book was spellbinding. Once I started it – and overcame my initial revulsion at the description of the crime scene – I could scarcely put it down.

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## **Jeanette says**

This is a REALLY hard book to review. There is just so much meat there.

It might be beyond my ability to actually convey the gist of this. It's that complex. It's not only a particular and very complicated (terrible, horrific- put 10 other grizzly adjectives here) murder case at all. It is an intricately researched and described window into the reality of 1937 Peking. Not only in the demographics, the politico, the varying class economics- but also and at the prime center is the Legislation Quarter- which holds many foreign nationals' home places. But also "the Badlands" and other areas of East Peking during this changing and Japanese dictating period, when this was essentially Chinese government under Japanese colonization.

Many of the principals are White Russian emigres. Or Italian, or Canadian, or numerous other U.K. passport holders. And the society that connects all of those. Not just the highest moneyed class but others of every level.

I'm reading 3 books in China or Korea at this exact time- the late 1930's. It's so complex, the powers that are meeting and stirring. Or killing. And the mores so varied. In this particular book, these Quarter people could go watch the 20 or 30 addicts or opium runners taken to shooting executions not that many blocks away. Per day. And the two policemen working on this murder case come from nearly opposite form and/or nominal authorities.

And like the non-Asian people from the West living in Singapore during this period, they have their own society. And norms, or mannerly habit. For instance one official gets blackballed back to England, loses his job too- because he marries a widow. Marrying a widow not allowed? All kinds of strictures. And living high on the hog in wide spaced and modern housing on pensions- so many of these people were retired and could have gone home to their various countries. And been far "poorer".

This murder case left me totally perplexed. At page 159, I didn't know who could have possibly committed this act. I thought for sure, Pamela was killed because they thought she was Edgar Snow's wife, Helen. Politics was that rough- cutting out people's hearts tough.

This was an enlightening book. The photos and the structural copy in pictures for the places as they appear today were also excellent.

This one truly gives you a window into that edgy, edgy time. The "afterwards" conclusions to the reality of their life paths (for all of maybe 20 participating principals in this murder case) are not pleasant reading. Things certainly did NOT get better. But I am so glad I read this one, even with some of its sordid particulars. Politico societies/connections- some of it was over my head but I learned immense nuance for this period in Peking. During the beginning I had to look up some facts about Gordon, the Boxer Rebellion and other former wars.

All had a legacy.

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## **Sam Quixote says**

Peking, January, 1937, and the body of white teenager Pamela Werner is discovered in the early hours of the morning. Her body has been viciously mutilated, her face damaged nearly beyond recognition, and her heart cut out. The murder caused an enormous scandal across the Empire – who killed Pamela?

I suppose “spoilers” - even though it’s recorded history!

In *Midnight in Peking*, Paul French revisits this long-forgotten crime in an attempt to find answers to the unsolved cold case. The story of Pamela’s murder reveals a colourful and dramatic background of this time, and, though a somewhat laboured read in places, the book is on the whole quite interesting – but how convincing are French’s conclusions? Very one-sided, so, very convincing, but by no means conclusive or necessarily factual.

In French’s version of the killing, we learn about Pamela’s complex hidden life. Adopted as the baby of an unknown White Russian (one of many displaced by the revolution), she was the only child of ETC Werner and Gladys Nina Ravenshaw. Her mother died young of a suspected intentional drug overdose and it’s heavily implied that she and her father, who was much older than her, in his 70s at the time of her death, did not get along.

Werner himself is written as a fusty old man, an intellectual but anti-social loner who could not get along with the majority of people. He even beat some people he disliked, like one of Pamela’s suitors, smashing his face with his cane! Pamela herself had a temper and was kicked out of numerous schools – the last one because her headmaster allegedly came onto her!

The Western population of Peking at this time is written as this close-knit society with many secrets. Going by French’s book, just about everyone was a sexual deviant, drug addict, or violent criminal! Pamela, an independent young woman, mixed in, garnering many admirers, but was unfortunately ensnared by a covert gang of rapists, some of them upstanding members of society like a dentist and a doctor, who didn’t take no as an answer and went too far when she put up a fight.

French’s examination of the case is interesting but at times a bit exhausting. Every aspect of the time is expanded upon – the historical background, the careers of numerous people, Chinese mythology, and so on. It can be a bit of a slog to wade through all the detail. Also, the repeated mentions of “fox spirits”, particularly in the novelistic interludes, were a silly inclusion for a supposedly serious historical work of nonfiction.

What ultimately makes this book unconvincing is the elaborate mystery French reveals. After the official investigation into Pamela’s murder, jointly conducted by the Chinese and British Legation police, nobody is arrested – to this day, Pamela’s murderer (or murderers) got away with it. Then Pamela’s father, ETC Werner, decides to conduct his own investigation, hiring private detectives and does a better job of crime-solving than the police did.

Werner compiles a huge dossier of “evidence” gathered from disreputable sources – pimps and prostitutes chasing cash rewards – and it’s this information that French uses for much of the second half of the book. And it sounds a little paranoid! According to Werner, the Chinese and British police fudged the investigation on purpose while British diplomats hushed up the scandal. They were protecting an American dentist called Prentice, an Italian doctor, and a couple of drug addicts/criminals. These were Pamela’s supposed killers, men from different backgrounds brought together by their love of hunting and vice who had a history of luring girls into the back room of a brothel and raping them. Pamela was the latest victim who fought back and so they had to kill her.

Why would the British police and diplomats cover for these non-British undesirables over one of their own (Werner was an ex-consul)? Sure, Werner wasn't well liked, but that wouldn't mean British officials would be willing to stick their necks out to protect the image of some Americans or Italians! Are we to believe the American dentist was bribing everyone? He wasn't rich! And sure it was a horrific crime and Pamela was a white girl in China (implying that as a British subject, she was better than ordinary Chinese, making her murder more deplorable), but even so, she wasn't that important a person – would there really be so many people involved?

Couple that with the way Werner has been written up to this point as a cranky old man given to delusion – when Pamela died he was in his mid-70s and it's hinted that dementia was encroaching upon him. Suddenly he's the heroic father, fighting the Establishment for the truth? And then later when the Japanese invade and send the Westerners to a concentration camp, Werner and Prentice are kept in the same camp, and Werner publicly accuses Prentice of murdering his daughter. And then accuses several other random strangers of the same. This guy is the bedrock upon which French is basing his suppositions?!

French's conclusions of Prentice and his gang of rapists committing the deed are Werner's conclusions. French's narrative history is compelling and hangs together nicely like a well-plotted story does – but I don't think a wide range of sources were used to put this picture together. Everything's just a bit too pat when real life is anything but.

Midnight in Peking is a somewhat entertaining read though, and that's what I think it was going for more than anything. A true crime mystery story, with the emphasis on story. French's writing style is a bit awkward at times – he seems to be battling against the restraints of a historian and the flourishes afforded a novelist so that some parts read more smoothly than others. But he does capture a lost era well and the people involved in the case are a compelling bunch to learn about.

If you enjoy true crime, you might like *Midnight in Peking* but I'd take French's look at Pamela Werner's murder with a hefty pinch of salt rather than accept it at face value.

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## **Jill Hutchinson says**

This sounds like an Agatha Christie novel but it is, in actuality, the true story of the particularly horrific murder of a young English woman in Peking. Things were changing in China in 1937.....Chiang Kai-shek was holding power in part of the country, the Communists were fighting for primacy, and the Japanese were already on the ground taking town after town. The huge country was in turmoil and many of the non-Chinese, feeling safe in their Legations in the Port Treaty cities were feeling safe and continuing life as usual. Then the young daughter of a noted British professor who had spent the majority of his life teaching in China, is found mutilated and nobody knows anything. Who is responsible for investigating?....the British or the Chinese police? One problem piles upon another as everyone is lying, the police work is shoddy, and the girl's father is beside himself. As the Japanese take over, the father flees to England and spends the rest of his life investigating his daughter's murder, to no avail. The murder case is closed and never solved.

The author, using the Professor's voluminous notes and diaries and what Chinese sources he could find, puts forward a solution which makes some sense and may well be the answer. It seems somewhat far-fetched but life in Peking during the 1930s was unlike any other place in the world. You read it and decide. An fascinating story.

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## Diane says

Very interesting book. Paul French has written a reconstruction of the investigation into Pamela Werner's murder in Peking, 1937. He based it on medical reports, Peking police reports, press reports, letters from Scotland Yard, E.T.C. Werner's personal investigation notes, and much more. It was a brutal murder, a tragedy, and it broke her father's heart. French ably weaves the murder case with the turbulent times Peking was experiencing. Speaking of Pamela's father he says, "He had lived eighty-nine years. He had seen China as a dynasty with an emperor, a republic with a generalissimo, a nation at war for its very survival, and finally as a people's republic with a dictator."

If you like historical true crime, and learning a bit about Peking's history, you'll probably enjoy this book.

3 Stars = I **liked** the book. I enjoyed it. I'm glad I read it.

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## Bettie? says

BOTW

Dongbianmen (Tung Pien Men) Fox Tower - circa 1910 - photograph taken from the Tartar Wall.

How it looks today. This is the site of the body. I have walked there!

Pamela Werner at Tientsin Grammar School, 1936.

By Paul French.

Read by Crawford Logan.

*BBC Blurberoonies: On a frozen night in January 1937, in the dying days of colonial Peking, the body of a young woman was found in the shadows of a haunted watchtower. It was Pamela Werner, the daughter of the city's former British consul Edward Werner.*

*A horrified world followed the hunt for Pamela's killer but the police investigation drew a blank and the case was forgotten amid the carnage of the Japanese invasion. Only Pamela's father carried on, employing a network of private investigators to follow the murder trail into Peking's notorious Badlands and back to the gilded hotels of the colonial Quarter.*

*Seventy-five years later, deep in the Scotland Yard archives, British historian Paul French accidentally came across the lost case file prepared by Edward Werner and, through his fresh eyes, uncovered the killer's identity.*

*An evocative account of the end of an era, the book spent seven weeks in the South China Morning Post's Top 10 bestsellers list.*

Abridged by Robin Brooks.

Produced by Kirsteen Cameron.

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## **Richard says**

Chinese New Year will never be the same as author Paul French takes us back to Peking 1937. This is a true crime story about the shocking murder of a British teenager and the determined pursuit for justice that her Father failed to find in his lifetime.

It is written by an historian Paul French; this isn't a stuffy text book though but a loving retelling of crime that captured his imagination. He uses all his skills in research to bring old Peking to life and explain the various forces at work that prevented the truth being uncovered at the time.

The book made me feel at one with the Father;s search for truth and angry at the closed colonial thinking. I loved the detail and the way the material is handled. It reads like the best detective fiction and unravels a real mystery. The author remains uncritical and his balanced writing lifts this account into a story you can't put down and want to race to the end to find the answers.

It will rank up there with The Suspicions of Mr Whicher but its setting and opening up of a little known area of our history, is what makes it a compelling read in itself. But above all this it is the true story Paul French has revealed that will live long in the thoughts of anyone fortunate enough to read this book. Then like me, one will never forget the name of Pamela Werner.

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## **Hannah says**

Bloody brilliant true crime book. This Paul French fellow knows how to write an awesome non-fiction tale to satisfy my personal tastes.

Full review to come later.

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