

London 1849: A Victorian Murder Story

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A sensational story of murder, trial and public revenge influenced the great writers and commentators of the day. As much a book about London as the story of a murder books about London sell. Full of fascinating detail about mid-Victorian London in the vein of Peter Ackroyd social history at its best. Features a famous cast of characters that includes Dickens and Marx. Advertising in major review publications.

It is 1849 London and the city is filthy, plagued, full of crime and filling up with refugees from the Irish Famine and the revolutionary wars on the continent. But the city is also on the brink of reform as transit stations are built, rioters pardoned and the Great Exhibition planned. The heaving city is the backdrop for the most sensational crime and trial of the decade: the Manning murder case.

On August 9th Frederick and Maria Manning murder Patrick O'Connor, her lover, in the basement kitchen of their new terraced house in Bermondsey, South London. They bury the corpse under the flagstones, close up the house and flee in different directions: she to Scotland, he to the Channel Islands.

Throughout the sticky summer the people of London obsess over the fate of the dominant mysterious woman and her weak husband as the full detail of their slaughter unfolded. "London 1849" follows the murder, the trial and the execution, interweaving all the way the scene that was London: crime, noise, cholera, overpacked slums, prostitution, law and order, prisons.

Michael Alpert uses the story to reveal life on the docks where the victim worked, the neighborhood where the Mannings lived, sensational press coverage, marital and sexual behavior, medical progress against disease, the influx of immigrants, and public obsession with the killers. It is a grisly murder story set against the Victorian London, drawn in colorful and personal detail.

London 1849: A Victorian Murder Story Details

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Author : Michael Alpert

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BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Boo to whomever picked the title of this book! I obviously expected the story of a MURDER that TOOK PLACE in LONDON in 1849. I'm so silly. What I got was a couple of paragraphs at the beginning and a couple of paragraphs at the end about a murder, and the remainder of the book a sociological treatise of life in London during the 1840s-1860s. Not what I wanted. For all of that is was interesting I suppose, but not anything that couldn't have been learned in a thousand other more interesting books that don't repeat themselves.

Ann says

In 1849, Maria Manning and her husband Frederick murdered Patrick O'Connor, Maria's lover. O'Connor arrived for dinner with the Mannings and, as he washed his face in the kitchen, was shot in the head. Frederick Manning then beat the victim with a crowbar. The couple then buried him under the kitchen floor and went about their lives. The body was found when a girl who was hired to clean the kitchen, found the floor tiles loose and the grout still wet. The police were called and dug up the body. Maria had run to O'Connor's home the day of the murder and took away all of his cash and a supply of bonds. She then packed a large number of trunks and left town on the train. Frederick also tried to run but they were both arrested, tried and hung for their crime. Short story with a cut and dried ending but this book is a bit different. It looks at the city of London itself almost as another character in the story. The book is a very interesting look at Victorian London and how it lived. It looks at how the average person lived, how much they made, how their lives were changed from the "old days" before Queen Victoria. It is a very enlightening book.

Christiane says

Not so much the story of a murder, which anyway was pretty simple (wife and husband kill her lover for his money and are caught and executed) but the story of London in 1849---which is a fascinating story. Especially the accounts of what people wore and ate, how they kept house, and what they did for entertainment. Conditions in poor areas were unbelievable by modern standards: there were no bathrooms or sanitary facilities; often there was no access to water but a single neighborhood pump that might only be turned on for 2 hours a day! Not surprisingly, epidemics like cholera were frequent. I've never been so thankful for hot water and flush toilets!

Kim Dixon says

If you want a pure murder story, this isn't it. However, if you want a look into early Victorian era life for all classes, this is your book.

Meryl says

Living in London has meaning to me. I shall be visiting the streets so well described and visualising it back in 1849

Michele says

Not much about the murder itself but lots of interesting facts about London in 1849.

Katie Bee says

So, this book is very much about the title ("London 1849") and relatively little about the subtitle ("A Victorian Murder Story"). If you pick it up looking for a true crime history about a famous murder, you are probably going to be disappointed; there's a cursory overview of the facts of the crime in the first chapter, but the rest of the book is 95% London, 5% "murderers as framing device". (E.g., 'here's a chapter on food and kitchens in London, since Maria cooked a goose the day of the murder'.)

Now, a social history of London in 1849 is not a bad thing, and this one is pretty well done! But it does feel, hmm, a little falsely advertised. So know what you're getting, and what you're not, before you start this one.

Rose says

In August 1849, Frederick Manning and his Swiss wife, Maria, lured a middle-aged moneylender named Patrick O'Connor to their home in the Bermondsey section of London. O'Connor and Mrs. Manning had been lovers prior to her marriage, and probably for awhile afterward too. They shot and clubbed him to death, covered his body with quicklime, and then buried it under their kitchen floor. Maria hurried to O'Connor's rented room, where she stole money and railway share certificates. Then she and Frederick fled in opposite directions: she went to Edinburgh while he sailed to the Channel Islands. When a concerned friend reported O'Connor's disappearance, the police went to the Manning home and discovered the makeshift grave. After a nationwide manhunt, the murderous couple was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. They were hung at Horsemonger Lane Gaol in November 1849, in front of a raucous crowd.

Using the title alone as a point of reference, *"London 1849: a Victorian Murder Story"* appears to be about the Manning case. But it isn't. Michael Alpert has written a social history of London in the year 1849, when the O'Connor murder shocked the city. The first chapter is dedicated to the crime and the apprehension of Frederick and Maria Manning, and the concluding one uses their trial and execution to illustrate the workings of the British justice system. But the rest of the book is an admittedly fascinating look at the daily lives of mid-nineteenth century Londoners: what they ate, where they went for entertainment, how the class system worked, and the waning role of religion in their lives.

Whenever possible, Alpert frames his topic to suggest what the Mannings might have done in a given circumstance. For example, in the chapter about recreation, he proposes that Maria would not have been interested in the Frith paintings at the National Gallery, as she had been a lady's maid in wealthy homes prior

to her marriage and probably seen her fill of such masterpieces. When discussing the modes of public transportation available in 1849, Alpert presents a reasonably accurate re-enactment of Frederick Manning's flight from London to the Channel island of Jersey, where he was finally apprehended.

I love social history and true crime, so have absolutely no complaints about Michael Alpert's marriage of the two genres. But he runs the risk of disappointing true crime fans who pick up his book expecting to read a concise account of the 'Bermondsey horror'. These people will be better off tracking down a copy of Albert Borowitz's "The Woman Who Murdered Black Satin: The Bermondsey Horror".

Stephen says

A Great into Victorian Life in London

Though it's sub-titled "A Victorian Murder Mystery", there is little mystery to be found in this book; the details of the crime and its aftermath are clearly described in the book's first chapter. That said, London, 1849 provides an accessible view of Victorian England's filthy, plague and crime-ridden capital. Branching out from the murder of Patrick O'Connor by Frederick and Maria Manning, London 1849 goes on to detail such topics as health issues, prostitution, poverty, marital relationships, sexuality, class issues and crime and punishment in Victorian London. Very detailed (if not a touch dry in a few spots), London, 1849 is recommended to anyone with an interest in Victorian life or the history of London.

Julie says

The book was really a glimpse of London, and England, during this year. The "murder" was used as a vehicle to drive the discussion of life in London during this period. The murder itself was straightforward and would barely fill a chapter; a misleading title.

Mary says

The title and the description of the book on the book jacket are completely misleading. They imply that it is a victorian murder story, but the only real references to a murder story are contained in the first and last chapters. The remainder of the book is centered around the conditions and the time surrounding the murder.

While some of the chapters had some interesting information about the times, it was overall a fairly dry and somewhat disappointing read.

Guera25 says

Despite its provocative title, it's less about a lurid murder and more a social and cultural overview of a city and an era on the cusp of monumental social and technological changes. Once I got over my initial pique that I was not, in fact, getting a modern penny dreadful for my troubles, I found it an informative read that

offered a lush portrait of a city and its people. And if it's penny-dreadful grue you seek, Alpert helpfully provides such a title in the opening sentence of his book.

While I'm glad I didn't buy it, it was well worth the library visit.

Naomi says

An incredibly fascinating read and TOTALLY different than what I thought it was going to be. This book not only tells the story of a true murder case in 1849 London, but looks at London through a sociological study which would cause the murder to occur.

What bumped it from a 4 star to a 5 star was the author's reference of literature from that period of time reflecting on society and giving examples. I was simply enthralled with it and couldn't get enough

Diane says

An unusual book, but it grew on me and I ended up ordering a copy for my brother. Alpert tells the reader about London in the year around 1849 by using a murder to focus the information. I found that this device worked quite well. I have been in London a few times (in the 1960s and 1990s) and find the city fascinating. Also, I have read a lot of Victorian literature and much of what he describes and discusses gave me new perspectives. For example, I knew something about the incredible poverty and classism, but gained new insights. For example, he described how the poor did not have a place or means of cooking – no source of heat and no pots or cooking utensils. One of my favorite gems was his discussion of the different types of cabs – hansom, phaetons, broughams – and of the social changes brought by the growth of railroads. He quotes Dickens and Thackeray extensively and I enjoyed those reminders of some of my favorite books. I also liked the pictures selected to illustrate the book

But, this is not an easy book. It has some strange aspects that are hard to pin down. For example, the author tends to repeat an exact sentence in different parts of the book. And the movement from topic to topic can be jerky and sudden. However, if you have read a lot of Victorian lit, and if you have been to London, you will probably appreciate it.

Susanne says

This is actually a snapshot of London in the year 1849 using a true crime as its frame. If you are doing research about how Victorian people lived in London at mid-century, this is the book for you. It also makes me want to read more about the crime, so I'm going to look up the book the author recommends.
