



The Maul and the Pear Tree

P.D. James, T.A. Critchley

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During a dark night in December 1811, in London's East End, a tradesman, his young wife, sleeping baby, and a shop boy were battered to death in their home. Days later, a pub owner, his wife, and a servant were similarly killed. No motive was found.

P.D. James, collaborating with a former colleague, police historian T.A. Critchley, re-creates this infamous crime. Containing all the complex characters and outstanding detective work we've come to associate with James's novels - as well as a London so real we are immersed in its rich textures and menacing shadows - *The Maul and the Pear Tree* is an irresistible tale of suspense. As James and Critchley scour old records for clues overlooked by the city police force, they prove the wrong man was arrested. Then they name the killer who went free.

The Maul and the Pear Tree Details

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Author : P.D. James , T.A. Critchley

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From Reader Review The Maul and the Pear Tree for online ebook

Deanne says

In 1811 two episodes of multiple murder took place in London within a short space of time. At that instant there was no organised police force, and what there was in the way of night watchmen were fairly ineffectual. However people were rounded up and questioned, though usually held on flimsy evidence. James gives a balanced look at the story, including questioning the ultimate result of the hunt for the killer/s.

Tria says

Excellent and intensively-researched casfile on a case handled only rarely by modern writers. The historical sources available with respect to these crimes are minimal, but the authors have here drawn on as many as are known to exist to create a very thoughtful analysis of the case, with the context of its time and its subsequent influence on the English judicial system, and a fascinating and involving book withal.

Robert says

This could perhaps be called an historical mystery. Reading it reminded me of one of the last episodes in the Morse series on PBS. It is a reworking of the evidence in an actual 19th century British murder case.

Lobstergirl says

(Contains spoilers, but no more than appear on the book flap.)

Mystery writer P.D. James and police historian and Home Office member T.A. Critchley co-wrote this true-crime account of London's Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811, in which seven people, including an infant, were brutally bludgeoned in two separate events over a two-week period. Crime-fighting was organized by parish, and constables were volunteer. They were supplemented by watchmen and beadle who were susceptible to bribes. It wasn't until 1829 that a Metropolitan Police force was created. For all sorts of reasons - carelessness, incompetence, lack of crime investigation infrastructure - the investigation culminated in the jailing of the wrong person, James and Critchley argue. Some eyewitness accounts were given credence, others weren't. A thorough examination of the murder weapon wasn't done. Exculpatory evidence was ignored. It was unlikely that one person could have acted alone in committing the two groups of killings.

John Williams, the man arrested for the crimes, was found hanged in his prison cell before he could stand trial. The authors argue it was an unlikely suicide and call Williams "the eighth victim." Nonetheless, as if he had been condemned to die and executed, the authorities ignominiously paraded his corpse on a cart through the streets and buried him at a crossroads (in a grave too small, so that he would not be able to lie in peace).

This is no *Helter Skelter*. It's extremely dry, with long, wendy passages lifted directly from contemporaneous newspaper accounts and Home Office papers. Only 234 pages, it feels like more.

Lee Battersby says

Absolutely stunning treatise on a pair of murders that are at the heart of the creation of the British policing system as it is today, and which remain an historical mystery of the highest water. Co-authors James and Critchley draw on a multitude of contemporary sources to follow both the social and policing trails through Wapping and surrounding areas, and the picture painted is vibrant, well-rounded and utterly believable. gaps in the historical record are clearly identified, judgements drawn by the authors are both precise and logically justified, and the book displays both James' narrative excellence and Critchley's extensive knowledge as a police historian. Gripping from first to last, and utterly compelling to read, this is a true crime book as it should be written, and remains, after over 40 years, an example of the very highest standard.

Anwen says

I found this a surprising little book. First of all, a disclaimer. I do not like P.D. James's crime novels. Imagine my surprise when I found her name amongst factual books on London. This was the main reason I picked this book up - after all, the title conveyed nothing to me (other than the thought the book had been miscatalogued). Then the subtitle caught my eye - Ratcliffe Highway Murders. I have been fascinated by these murders since the first time I read about them. So I bought the book - and I was pleasantly surprised. The style that jars on me in fiction I found eminently suitable for an impersonal reconstruction of an ancient crime. I found the research and summary more than believable and, Ripperologists take note, it was refreshing to see the admission that, even after all the work that was put in by the authors, we shall probably never know what really did happen more than two hundred years ago. A lovely little book that wears its knowledge lightly, and a fantastic introduction to one of London's most notorious murders - and the rough justice meted out to suicides and murderers at the time (the Crossroads Burial was far from unique though it was, I believe, one of the last instances in London). In a word - recommended!

Cleo Bannister says

Why are murders committed in the East End of London in 1811 still of interest over 200 years later? Well the brutal murders of two entire households are in part, at least, responsible for the birth of the Police Service that we have today.

One December night in 1811 an intruder entered the Marrs Draper store and murdered all the occupants including Timothy Marr the owner's baby son. The only member of the household to survive was the servant Margaret Jewell who had been running an errand for oysters at just before midnight. Ratcliffe Highway was in the East End which led to the intersection between two other main roads. The area was watched by the night watchmen but he missed the entry of the intruder and help was only called when Margaret, having returned empty-handed, was locked out of her home.

This murder alone caused enough consternation between the locals, particularly as anyone with stained or torn clothes were arrested and seemingly just as quickly released by the complicated separate three police forces that had responsibility for the area. When another household were slain action and more importantly reform was called for.

The authors wrote this book in 1971 when interestingly T.A. Critchley, a Police Historian, name preceded that of the now much loved writer P.D. James. This book isn't of the ilk of *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, the writing coming across as much more scholarly in the more traditional format of the known facts being presented with the alternative solution to the murderer being presented in the latter part of the book. Despite extensive research it appears that not a lot of the facts survive although there are plenty of contemporary accounts as the murders fed the imagination of the population well outside the East End of London. In addition there were no detectives and those charged with enforcing the police were by all accounts open to bribes or pressure from those far more powerful than them. In order to proceed to the conclusion the reader needs to wade through quite a dense prose which isn't written with the lightest of touches. There was a feeling that some points were overly emphasised in order to persuade the reader of their truth and to be honest I don't believe there are enough facts to accurately surmise what happened that night.

What makes this book worthwhile is the social history that accompanies the dreadful facts. The authors do a fantastic job of describing this area of Wapping with its shipyards and shadowy streets where the shops and public houses opened well into the night. The boarding houses that were temporary homes for the sailors when they were on shore and the petty rivalries and jealousies that breed in such situations. The women who when making statements were perhaps carrying out their husband's bidding were carrying out their pre-ordained roles, the fact that those who should have been depended upon in such an event were perhaps sleeping (or worse) while earning their pittance of a wage all played a part on those December nights.

So what did I make of the author's conclusion? It seemed plausible based on the little known facts and I concur that the murderer probably wasn't the man who was blamed for the crimes. But of course the lasting legacy was the recognition that England needed something a bit more substantial and accountable than those currently policing the country.

I'm glad I know more about this oft referenced crime, I now understand why it is still mentioned so frequently and as a bonus I finally have an idea where The Ratcliffe Highway is, why the maul was important, and what a maul is!!

Alice says

This is the second time I have read a crime writer's account of an unsolved historical crime. It is wonderful to see that life is stranger than fiction and no less interesting. James does a fabulous job weaving the factual historical account into a captivating story! BRAVO!

Katherine Addison says

The Maul and the Pear Tree is about two horrific crimes in 1811: two houses invaded, the inhabitants beaten to death with a maul or a ripping chisel, and then their throats cut, and all for no apparent reason (one of the victims was a three-month-old baby, so it's hard to imagine a pressing motive). James and Critchley (on the book's original publication in 1971, it was Critchley and James, but that was another country, and besides the wench is dead) doubt the guilt of the man arrested for the crimes, John Williams, and edge toward conspiracy theory in their suggestion that his suicide in his cell, before he could be brought to trial, was actually murder. They don't go to the elaborate lengths of the crazier Ripperologists, since their suggestion is

that the true murderer bribed a turnkey to get into Williams' cell, and then the investigation was dropped because the magistrates (a.) pounced on a dead scapegoat and then (b.) couldn't afford any retrograde motion. They needed to be seen to have solved the case.

I remain somewhat unconvinced. I'm not convinced of Williams' guilt, mind you, but James and Critchley just don't persuade me that their alternate theory is the truth. I'm not sure if it's due to the fact that, having been written for a popular audience in 1971, the book has no endnotes and the rigor of the inquiry has been carefully muffled, or if it's that I found the writing curiously flat. So I agree that the investigation should not have stopped after Williams' death, but beyond that I'm not willing to go.

On the other hand, the book was worth the price for the description of the procession of Williams' corpse through the streets of Wapping and its burial, with a stake through its heart, at the crossroads of New Cannon Street and Cable Street.

ETA (02/14/16): having reread *The Maul & the Pear Tree* for what I think is at least the third time, I can offer a better explanation of why I don't believe James & Critchley. When you read carefully and attentively, it becomes painfully clear how much of their theory about the murders is based on pure, airy speculation. Their argument is full of scaffolding: "probably," "there is little doubt," "there is no reason to suppose," "may well have been," "it is virtually certain." They present many of their hypotheses as rhetorical questions, which--by assuming the reader's answer--make it easier for the hypothesis to pass as fact. And they treat a number of their speculations as if they are, in fact, proved rather than merely proffered.

When you clear away all the rhetoric, their theory (William Ablass and a confederate who was possibly Cornelius Hart) isn't really any more plausible than the theory that Williams was the sole killer. (Saying that your chosen murderer is a "psychopath" only pushes the problem of motive one tier back: if he's a "psychopath," by which you mean a person who kills indiscriminately and without motive, why are these the only two brutal butchering murders he's committed?)

Crime solving, like criminological historiography (i.e., true crime writing), and like both prosecution and defense in the American judicial system, is trying to find a story--a narrative linked together by cause and effect and strong enough to hold up when inspected by both common sense and fault-finding scrutiny--that will fit the facts. The more facts you can incorporate, the stronger your story will be. The Ratcliffe Highway murders resist narrative--the only way to make a story out of them is to follow De Quincey and assume that Williams was a sort of Iago-like villain, doing evil simply because he could. (Or follow James & Critchley and assume Ablass as our Iago.) And even that isn't really satisfactory.

Stripped down, the problems of the Ratcliffe Highway murders go like this:

1. The evidence available at this remove is spotty at best, so any theory you present is going to be tentative and full of hypotheticals:
 - (a.) Our forensic evidence is based on the observations made and recorded by untrained observers (not necessarily even doctors) in December 1811. QED.
 - (b.) The rest of the evidence is eyewitness testimony and hearsay. James & Critchley were writing before the UTTER USELESSNESS of eyewitness testimony had been demonstrated, but as a reader in 2016, I have to admit that most of what we've got is either inadmissible or would be torn to shreds by any defense attorney whose law degree was worth the paper it was written on.

2. The murderer or murderers butchered the entire Marr household (Timothy Marr, his wife Celia, his apprentice James Gowan, and the 3 month old Timothy, Jr.--sparing the servant Margaret Jewell because she

had been sent to buy oysters) on the night of December 7 and John Williamson (yes, the alleged murderer is John Williams, and one of his victims is John Williamson--real life gets to be confusing like that), his wife Elizabeth, and their servant Bridget Harrington (sparing the Williamsonsons' granddaughter Kitty Stillwell and their lodger John Turner, who were lucky enough to be in their bedrooms abovestairs) on the night of December 19. Nobody before and nobody after. Why the Marrs? why the Williamsonsons? There is evidence that strongly suggests both households were reconnoitered before the attack (in the Marrs' case, if Hart was in on the job, possibly for as much as a week), so they're not just random crimes of opportunity. James & Critchley try to show why Ablass might have had a grudge against *Williams*, and they try a little *sub rosa* substitutive rhetoric to make it look like the grudge against Williams could be translated to a grudge against Marr, but they can't suggest a motive for murdering the Williamsonsons. So if the murderer was "sane," what motive did he have, not just for the murders, but for the overkill involved--literally in the case of the Marrs' baby? And if he was ".insane," a "psychopath," why are these the only two killing sprees he went on?

3. Some of the evidence against Williams was clearly manufactured by the grudge-holding John Harrison (the entire story of the French knife is as full of holes as a chain-link fence), but that only means that some of our evidence is beyond untrustworthy into outright falsity--but we don't know *which* evidence. Some of Harrison's testimony? *All* of Harrison's testimony? How about the other lodgers? What about the terrified and equivocating landlady, Mrs. Vermillio? At what remove from Harrison can we start trusting that our witnesses are doing their best to tell the truth?

4. Real life murders can never be made into a clean narrative. There are always inconsistencies, gaps in the timeline, demonstrable facts that make no sense. I find that I can't judge, in this case, which facts have to be incorporated into the narrative and which facts can be dismissed as bogeys, sundogs, and (to quote my favorite *X-Files* episode) the planet Venus. Because *all* of the facts look crazy.

To my knowledge, nobody has written about the Ratcliffe Highway murders since James & Critchley. If I were a true crime writer, I would take that challenge.

Linda Hardy says

In 1811 two families were murdered along the Ratcliffe Highway in east London, who was the murderer? Police and local Watchmen had their suspicions but before a man could be charged with the murders he committed suicide, but was he really the killer? Interesting story about a time in London's history I knew little of, but found the story a bit longwinded, could of been condensed a bit.

Windy says

Interesting reconstruction of a crime investigation from 1811 which demonstrates how difficult such investigations were without a police force and how much depended on people's opinions and heresay

Nancy Oakes says

The Ratcliffe Highway Murders of 1811 are beyond famous -- not just for the murders themselves, but for the ensuing panic that spread throughout much of London at the time which was written about by Thomas de

Quincey in his *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*. It was also this case that spurred the reading of crime in the newspapers as sensation among the general public. This book uses primary documents (some of which are printed in full) and other materials to not only recount these events, but also to examine the history of crime detection and policing to that point in time as well as the huge muddle that was the investigation into the murders.

Anyone at all interested in the history of London, the history and politics of policing in Britain, and historical true crime needs to read this book -- it's eye opening, to say the very least.

<http://www.nonfictionrealstuff.com/20...>

scarlettraces says

it's about the ratcliffe highway murders of 1811, which form part of the moore/sinclair/ackroyd london mythos and which i knew very little about. it's pretty much a model for this sort of thing - a narrative of events combined with a precise evocation of the social and physical context (there's a lot of lovely description of the wapping docks area in a bleak december at the beginning of the 19th century, presumably contributed by James) with some modern commentary about the evidence and the handling of the case. probably what i found most interesting, after a century of moors murderers and the wests and dahmer and his disgusting ilk, and even massacres in little beachside towns in my own quiet country, is how shocked and gripped the country at the time was by it.

the 1971 postscript was also interesting in that it points up the pace of change. it was still possible to imaginatively identify the locales back then, 160 years later, even though houses had disappeared under new building and bombsites. although the road lay-out is probably the same, i bet it's more difficult today, 40 years after that.

(5 stars for sheer competence and readability)

Chris says

It took three tries over five years to actually finish this book. And I like P.D. James. It is interesting, a bit, eventually, but the tone is rather dull. What is mostly interesting is the look at English Anti-Irish feeling at the time.

Quirkyreader says

This was a true crime from the year 1811. Way before the Peelers and Bobbies. But there were the Bow Street Runners. In this one we see the way how the citizens of London weren't too keen on a police force, even though a series of grizzly murders had just happened.

For me, the story of the murder was secondary. I was more fascinated with the distrust of the police force and how people would tramp all over crime scenes wrecking any form of evidence.

If one enjoys the history of crime detection, I would say that this book is a winner. Thanks to the late P.D. James and T.A. Critchley for giving us this one.
