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## **Are all (Neo-)Victorians Murderers? Serials, Killers and Other Historicidal Maniacs**

### **Abstract**

What role do the acts of murder and dis(re)membering play in contemporary culture's use of the Victorian? This article makes a deliberately provocative intervention in questioning the way in which the genre of neo-Victorianism raises ethical issues about real lives, the reading and writing of "true crime" and the position of the critic/historian. Beginning with a factual twenty-first century murder case and the role of Victorian reading matter as a marker of suspicion, even a sign of guilt, in the public consciousness and press reporting of the case, the article moves on to explore the tensions in re-visioning reality as quasi-fiction in a case study of the work of Kate Summerscale, focussing on the slippage between the figures of the writer, the detective, and the historian in *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008) and *The Wicked Boy* (2016). In broadening the definition of 'neo-Victorianism' to include acts of genre-blurring across the lines between creative non-fiction and historical fiction, I argue that an approach to the past that destabilises genres and forms without sufficiently self-reflective or critically engaged perspectives on authorial motives presents a troublingly unresolved ethical dilemma in these works. Invoking the dangers of criminal reading and reading criminally, the article considers what rights the dead have to be redeemed or protected from our contemporary historicidal enquiry, which in its attempt to resurrect the past often itself kills off narratives of redemption and reform.

## Are all (Neo-)Victorians Murderers? Serials, Killers and Other Historicidal Maniacs

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things;

The honest thief, the tender murderer,

The superstitious atheist

- Robert Browning, 'Bishop Bloughram's Apology' ([1855]; 1991: 118)

Death fictionalizes everyone.

- Patricia Mayer Spacks (1985: 205)

[I am] a journalist playing historian, and then trying to convert what I've found into something that approximates a novel.

- Kate Summerscale (Allardice 2012)

On 17 December 2010 a 35-year-old landscape architect named Joanna Yeates, living in the city of Bristol in the south west of England, went missing. The disappearance alone provoked extensive and intensive media coverage, which grew more frenetic until the discovery of the woman's body, strangled, and abandoned in the winter snow on the edge of a quarry three miles from her home, on Christmas Day. Five days later, Yeates's landlord, the 65-year-old Christopher Jefferies, was arrested by police. He was detained on suspicion of murder. Over the period since the disappearance and in the days following the location of Yeates's body, Jefferies had made enigmatic appearances in front of the media waiting outside his home. Although he was released after three days of questioning, and another man was arrested a few weeks later, Jefferies remained a person of interest to the investigating team, a subject of lingering suspicion in the case, for many more weeks. Indeed, it was not until March 2011 that Jefferies's bail conditions imposed at the end of 2010 were lifted and confirmation provided that he was no longer a suspect for the crime. The man who had been arrested, Vincent Tabak, was subsequently convicted.

The narrative constructed around Jefferies's status as a suspect in the case was built on several features, including his own eccentric behaviour and physical appearance, but an aspect that drew particular attention were his cultural preferences, specifically his reading matter. Resurrecting stories from his previous career as a teacher, newspaper headlines referred melodramatically to "The strange Mr Jefferies" and by invoking Stevenson's strange case and the figure of Mr Hyde turned this real man into something of a Gothic fictional character. *The Sun*, which featured this headline, covered the story on the inside pages with four emboldened sub-headline words: "Weird" – he had a "strange talk, strange walk"; "Lewd" – during his life he was known to have "made sexual remarks"; "Creepy" – physically distinctive he was a "loner with blue rinse hair"; "Posh" – most damning of all, Jefferies "loved culture,

poetry". That final reference as a marker of suspicion is particularly intriguing. It was Jefferies's association with poetry especially which was seen to identify him out as a problematic character. *The Daily Mail* referred to the fact that "Jefferies idolised Christina Rossetti ... a mentally ill Romantic [sic] poet who often wrote about death and was prone to apocalyptic visions". *The Sun* picked up on the same motif a few days later by referring to Jefferies's obsession with death, evidenced by the fact that he had previously taught "the Victorian murder novel" *The Moonstone*. *The Sunday Mirror* pointed out that he had also taught Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" which it called "the story of a man hanged for cutting his wife's throat"; the *Mail on Sunday* highlighted that he had shown pupils *The Innocents*, the 1961 film starring Deborah Kerr, based on *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James. Evidently, and evidentially, Mr Jefferies was not only strange but guilty on the basis of his self-confessed eccentricity and the cultural evidence of his taste for the Victorian (for a summary of the extensive media coverage see Cathcart). In a series of media interviews following a successful challenge to the press that had hounded him as much for his reading matter as anything else, Jefferies has clarified that he never taught Rossetti and reflected on the reference to *The Moonstone* that "I don't suppose whoever wrote that has ever read Wilkie Collins. They just thought, 'Oh, [we need evidence of] decadence and depravity... That will do!'" (Cooke)

Reading the Victorians, then, seems to be grounds for suspicion, and given the role of murder in our perceptions of the period, perhaps this is no surprise. In "Decline of the English Murder" (1946), George Orwell imagined the conjunction of domesticity and its disruption one "Sunday afternoon" before the Second World War when a male reader, his "wife already asleep in the armchair ... the children sent out for a nice long walk" can finally relax:

You put your feet up on the sofa, settle your spectacles on your nose, and open the *News of the World*. Roast beef and Yorkshire, or roast pork and apple sauce, followed up by suet pudding and driven home, as it were, by a cup of mahogany-brown tea, have put you in just the right mood. Your pipe is drawing sweetly, the sofa cushions are soft underneath you, the fire is well alight, the air is warm and stagnant. In these blissful circumstances, what is it that you want to read about?

Naturally, about a murder. But what kind of murder? If one examines the murders which have given the greatest amount of pleasure to the British public, the murders whose story is known in its general outline to almost everyone and which have been made into novels and re-hashed over and over again by the Sunday papers, one finds a fairly strong family resemblance running through the greater number of them. Our great period in murder, our Elizabethan period, so to speak, seems to have been between roughly 1850 and 1925[.] (Orwell, 1946)

Orwell's assertion that the "great period in murder" was largely Victorian, and his situating of the obsessive reading of the details of the crime within the mass market of newspaper sensationalism, captures a dominant cultural trend that has extended well into the present. It may no longer be only in newspapers that we read of the acts taking place outside our domestic comfort zones but we welcome them into our homes via channels and websites dedicated exclusively to true crime and countless features on the modern-day equivalents – and the historical precedents - of Jack the Ripper or Dr Crippen.

Orwell's phrase the "greatest pleasure" raises questions about the ethics of reading murderously, and whether reading with such acts in mind is itself morally dubious. Does revisiting the crime to re-member the details of the murder for our own escapist delight constitute an act of criminal complicity? Taking Orwell's suggested "Elizabethan period" of the English murder, in this essay I will argue that contemporary acts of (re-)reading and (re)writing the life of the Victorian murderer veer towards, in Browning's phrase, the "dangerous edge of things". My concern is to explore the ethical questions surrounding neo-Victorianism's appropriation of not only 'real' historical figures but specifically those with a past that during their own lifetimes they sought to redeem, or adapt, to new narratives. In such circumstances, what is the role – and what is the ethical place – of the historian or critic in an act of historical recovery that impacts on those still living, and the memory of those who sought to author their own (alternative) histories and legacies? While neo-Victorianism as a genre does undertake revisionist and redemptive work on the nineteenth century (see Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2010, for examples), I want to provoke a larger debate on the issue of whether we should – like those reading the character of Christopher Jefferies – be more suspicious about the motives of our own interest, as writers, critics, readers and viewers when it comes to texts which claim, as Summerscale puts it in the epigraph above, to be "playing" with history, with genre or with memory. Using the Jefferies case as Exhibit A, I explore two central questions. First, are all (neo-)Victorians murderers by proxy if the very act of (re)reading and (re)writing constitutes a marker of suspicion? And secondly, what role does the act of dis(re)membering past crimes play in our commemoration and reinterpretation of the Victorian for the amusement of contemporary literature, culture and society?

The Jefferies example is a stark illustration of the reality of Orwell's satiric characterisation of the British as a nation at home – literally – with all the tabloid details of murder. The fact that the story of the hounding of this eccentric and his quasi-celebrity status in the media coverage itself became the subject of a double BAFTA winning television programme entitled, in an echo of Victorian melodrama, *The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies* (ITV 2014), highlights the porous nature of reality, truth, authenticity and fictional/factual presentation of lives in contemporary culture. Daniel Lea has written persuasively on how the "coincidence of murder and celebrity" (764-65) operates within the contemporary, commenting that one can "collocate[...] the celebrity with the multiple killer as if both routes to public attention are similarly freighted; murder becomes a statement of lasting presence in a cultural ethos of ephemerality and insubstantiality" (764). In line with this approach, one must also

consider what happens when the murderer is either misidentified or redeems a past life for a different narrative. It is here that the ethics of memory, celebrity, murder and the position of the “author” of neo-Victorian true crime comes into focus.

What interests me in the Jefferies case is the fact that Jefferies himself was not a murderer, yet – through media coverage, through *Lost Honour* and extensive public appearances and interviews at the time – was awarded much more status than the victim of the crime; he was named by *The Observer* newspaper as one of its “faces of 2011” (Cooke). Part of the reason for this may be that the very eccentricities of reading that acted as signifiers of Jefferies’s status as a person of interest in the case are only an exaggerated version of the fact highlighted by Orwell: that we are (still) as a culture obsessed by lurid tales of murder on the one hand, and by Victorian reading matter and its adaptation on the other. As Lea notes, the criminality and/or celebrity of the individual within the community is often grounded in the way they represent the same tastes as the majority taken to an extreme: “they could be us, but they are equally abjected, hyperreal versions of ourselves that have been fantastically projected into the objectified status of the alien Other.” (767) In the Jefferies incident, to put under suspicion a man who reads Victorian texts and adaptations of those texts is partly to identify or suspect the motivations of an entire culture of those who read and watch nineteenth-century BBC and ITV adaptations on Sunday night prime time TV. (It also places a dubious perspective on those of us neo-Victorians who class such activities as research.)

The fixation on the figure of the murderer or even the murder suspect as both ordinary and extraordinary is founded on a legacy from nineteenth-century periodical press exploitation of the details of crime and criminality: an obsession with Victorian murder which extends to critical work as well (for a summary of recent studies see Tromp, 2013). Commenting on the Yeates case, the criminologist David Wilson points out that “the British public loves a whodunit .... It's a particularly British thing. We were the first nation to use murder stories to sell newspapers and that culture is more ingrained here than elsewhere.” (Quoted in Morris) Our contemporary fascination is thus refracted through an undeniably Victorian magnifying glass as we search for clues, follow the trial of detection (with 24 hour live news we do not even need to wait for tomorrow’s newspaper coverage) and serve as readers, armchair sleuths, and often judge and jury in one.

This twenty-first century intensification is not restricted to contemporary cases. The resurrection of Victorian crimes for a modern audience and the bestseller status of such accounts provide the modern convenience of a distilled narrative, neatly condensed and devoid of the complications of nineteenth-century serialisation and yet do so through authentic, evidence-based, archivally-rich materials. Unlike the readers of the nineteenth century we do not have to digest these tales in daily instalments, nor do we have to wait for the extensive detective work to unfold over months with a further prolonging of suspense until the trial and verdict have taken place. Instead, we can have the Road Hill House murder and the conviction for the crime, which the Victorian public consumed over a five year period in thousands of columns of print, offered to us in fewer than 300 pages of reconstruction

and condensed gratification via Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008). As a result, we read real lives like a novel. But we also, and somewhat contradictorily, are able to extend the period of narrative closure when the contemporary writer takes forward the trails not available to the now dead detective of the original crime and time. In doing so, we can summon up the archival remains of the criminals and pursue them as readers far further into their post-detention lives than the justice (or mass readership) of the period required or felt was necessary. It is in these acts of extended reading – and writing – that our own motives become questionable. Are we reassembling the past or unpicking it? Are we seeking to reconstruct unknown stories from the fragments and parts of the historical record, or uncovering traces for our own contemporary needs rather than in relation to the real people behind the narratives we tell?

In Kathryn Hughes's recent *Victorians Undone: Tales of Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (2017) this issue is taken to an extreme at the same time as it is highlighted as specific to the genre *per se*. Focussing her book on a series of encounters with various body parts, such as George Eliot's hand and Charles Darwin's beard, Hughes concludes with a chapter on the origin of the slang term "Sweet Fanny Adams". Recounting the 1860s crime that saw the young girl, Fanny Adams, killed and her body dismembered to the point where various parts were strewn across a field, Hughes draws on the historical documents – particularly newspaper accounts – of the crime and the trial of the culprit, Frederick Baker. But she also enters the realm of melodrama and sensation fiction. This is not a dispassionate, factual account when it includes asides that invoke the present's superiority to the past ("As twenty-first century readers we can only wonder at the naivety ..."; 357) at the same time as engaging in a literary complicity with the position of the murderer, such as when we "twenty-first century readers" are brought close-up to Baker's awareness of "Fanny's eyes cooling and viscous in his pockets" (362). While Hughes rightly points out that no-one remembers the murderer's name but everyone knows the expression "Sweet Fanny Adams", this concluding chapter of her book is hardly redemption for the displacement of Fanny Adams's actual life in the historical narrative. Hughes comments that "Having been deprived of her bodily existence on the afternoon of 24 August, it seemed that Fanny had also lost her place in the narrative of her own life" (364). But where Hughes sees the continued echo-memory of Fanny Adams's name in the slang phrase "Sweet FA" as a kind of immortality through which the girl is "destined to rise again" (364), the act of the bringing back of the victim here, even in Hughes's account, is a perpetual disembodiment, a dis(re)membering for the titillation of "twenty-first century readers" as much as their precursors in 1867. (There is repeated focus in the chapter on the "parts" of Fanny, including the fact that her vagina, which had been removed, was never found.) Fanny Adams is therefore only ever constituted as a term that represents the exhaustive fragmentation of parts, and readers may therefore despair at the meaninglessness of an account that simultaneously claims to reassert Fanny Adams's identity while taking her story – and her body – apart. Hughes ends both her chapter and the book with a "Fuck All" (365), that reasserts the slang of the corpse-signifier, not the wholeness of an individual life.

Hughes's placing of the Fanny Adams story in a textual landscape of narrative documentation that draws on sensationalised fiction as much as factual account also serves to illustrate one of the central ways in which contemporary writers within neo-Victorian fiction seek to deal with their relationship to the nineteenth-century text. This is through allusion to Victorian writers, the development of character models based on nineteenth-century fictional texts, and the subversion of these allusive relationships within the contemporary narrative. In the account of a real-life murder displaced as neo-Victorian sensation fiction (Summerscale's text) that then becomes a drama on prime time television (2011; three further episodes in 2013 and 2014), we can see this dis(re)membering of both the exaltation of a nineteenth-century past that can be resurrected and one which replays the impossibility of "proof" for narrative conclusion. Thus while the genre of detective fiction serves as a useful paradigm for such methodologies as the searching for and re-reading of archival and textual traces, it often provides limited gratification to our desire to keep reading, to keep following the threads to the point of the next death. As has been noted by Louisa Hadley, many "neo-Victorian fictions adopt the analogy of the historian as a detective", often with detectives as characters so that the "analogy is also drawn between the detective and the historical novelist" (59). But this argument can be taken further. If Summerscale's work is about, in her words, the "ordinary made sinister", then we need to problematise the relationship between the ordinary/sinister in the writing/adapting and reading/consuming of neo-Victorianism. Recalling Peter Thoms's comment on detective fiction that "the investigator is the one character who usually profits from a crime" (141), I seek to question what kind of "profit" is accrued by the true crime writer and her readers in extending the period of investigation well beyond the actual criminal act and trial. Crucial to this is the slipperiness of genre and how in the composition and the dis(re)membering of the textual corpus (as writers, readers and critics) we ultimately become morally complicit.

Through exploring these issues, I am also seeking to extend the frame of reference beyond the neo-Victorian fictional to non-fiction. Both of the Summerscale texts explored here - *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* and *The Wicked Boy* (2016) - are unstable in terms of genre, a fact highlighted by reviewer comments and dust-jacket blurbs on the 2008 book in particular. A non-fictional account of a real-life murder, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* is written in a style that appears to destabilise genre conventions. While this is implicit within the text itself, Summerscale's epigram to this essay highlights the novelistic and creative non-fiction approach she seeks to emulate. Similarly, Susan Hill has commented on the genre crossing: the book is "as good and gripping as any fiction. A really terrific read in the Wilkie Collins tradition" (cited on the back cover, Summerscale 2008). Yet the book won the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction and has been described as being "as much about biography as detection" (Cline and Angier, 6). This classification makes it potentially part of what Cora Kaplan terms "biographilia ... our undiminished ... appetite for life histories" (Kaplan 8; see also 37-84), which is a marker of various neo-Victorian fictions that seek to ventriloquize or reanimate historical figures. The instability of Summerscale's texts underlines another troubling aspect about these books - are they fiction, fact,



biography, history, even as one critic has claimed a new form of realism (Redpath), or a hybrid between all categories as a form of creative non-fiction.

Alongside asking what kind of books they are, we need to probe the more fundamental question of the ethics of reading such narratives when they deliberately extend the tale itself beyond the original crime and its punishment. These books summon up the afterlife of the Victorian criminal in literal and troubling ways. To be clear: neither of Summerscale's books is actually about the uncovering of an unknown crime and the extensive material evidence she provides in each case of contemporary news coverage and indeed the prominence of something like the Road Hill House murder in cultural memory mean these are not books about the discovery or recovery of guilt. They do not right the historical record or provide substantially new evidence that corrects miscarriages of justice. The 'new' work is the recovery of the afterlife of the criminal and in some respects the excavation and uncovering of their non-criminal histories and post-incarceration lives. In exploring this dimension, I seek to insert the figure of the neo-Victorian critic into the debate. In the parallels drawn by Hadley and Kaplan, we seem all too willing to conflate the role of novelist with detective/historian without due self-reflection that the neo-Victorian critic is just as likely to be seeking clues and resolution through their interpretative power over the dual perspectives of the Victorian and the contemporary (see Felski, especially 85-116). As a critic my approach to neo-Victorian fiction and adaptation is to explore the interrelationship between the text – in any medium – and its self-consciousness about the act of re-writing and re-visioning the Victorian past. Frequently, this is about the perspective brought to bear in terms of the manipulation, creative licence and general disruptive or confirmatory choices made by imaginative engagements with the historical record. Such a critical role, however, is partly denied by Summerscale's work, given its saturation in the evidential materials of the murder cases she explores. What her work therefore presents is an opportunity to reflect on the ethics of historical non-fiction writing, the (dis)connections with the role of fiction, the authority of the writer and the legitimacy of attempting to read the past to its final end point at all. Ultimately, though, this is about control: of memory, history and narrative, and the form in which that is written and documented.

**“There was an uncanny control to the narrative” (Summerscale 2008: 256): *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher***

The hybrid genre of Summerscale's books poses questions about the neo-Victorian and its masquerade of fictional and factual performance. As a genre, “true crime” narratives can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and the work of William Roughead, an amateur criminologist and Scottish lawyer, who from 1889 attended and reported on all major murder cases tried in the Edinburgh High Court until 1949. Roughead's articles and accounts appeared in *The Juridical Review* but were also republished in books with titles like *The Evil that Men Do, Mainly Murder*,<sup>2</sup> and *Nothing But Murder* (Whittington-Egan). The increase in print media and court records throughout the Victorian period ran parallel to an increase in literacy and mass newspaper markets. The fusion of the first-hand journalistic report and

‘read all about it’ live updates soon transferred into the auto/biographic presentation of book-length works, such as Walter Dew’s *I Caught Crippen* (1938) in the UK and Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1965) in America. Capote’s book was explicitly billed as “a true account” and at the same time as “a non-fiction novel”, indicating that at this point elements of the conventions but also possibilities of the genre had been established. Writing in 1999, Joyce Carol Oates commented that “few writers of distinction have been drawn to” this genre, but since the mid-2000s there has been a flourishing of variations on the “non-fiction novel” format. Unlike the work of Dew or Capote these are not books by writers present at the scene, witnesses to the unfolding narrative contemporaneous to their writing. Instead, books have reached the bestseller lists under the authenticity conveyed by richly researched representations of nineteenth-century crimes: *Mr Brigg’s Hat: A Sensational Account of Britain’s First Railway Murder* (2011) and *Did She Kill Him? A Victorian Tale of Deception, Murder and Arsenic* (2014) both by Kate Colquhoun; *The Poisoner: The Life and Crimes of Victorian England’s Most Notorious Doctor* (2014) by Stephen Bates; and Judith Flanders’s *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Invented Modern Crime* (2011), and individual chapters on such approaches like the Hughes account of the murder of Fanny Adams in *Victorians Undone*, mentioned above.

Summerscale is undoubtedly one of the leading writers in the genre and *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* introduced a new approach to the question of Victorian true crime writing and its narrative subversions. This generic disturbance is present from the opening of the book, where Summerscale writes of the layering of cultural consequences of the murderous act that prompts her tale:

This is the story of a murder committed in an English country house in 1860, perhaps the most disturbing murder of its time. The search for the killer threatened the career of one of the first and greatest detectives, inspired a ‘detective-fever’ throughout England, and set the course of detective fiction. For the family of the victim, it was a murder of unusual horror, which threw suspicion on almost everyone within the house. For the country as a whole, the murder at Road Hill became a kind of myth — a dark fable about the Victorian family and the dangers of detection ... The ordinary was made sinister. (Summerscale, 2008: xi-xii)

The book has a deceptively simple outline. The story of a child murder within the domestic space of the Victorian family home with a limited number of protagonists and suspects (the Kent family and their servants); a mixture of potential motives (class, sibling rivalry, money, madness, revenge), and one of the key prototype detectives of the modern police force (Jack Whicher) sent to investigate it: the infamous case of the Road Hill House murder in Wiltshire in summer 1860 has long served as the model for fictional crime writing. Summerscale’s intention is to return us to the evidential and narratological and treat both with a sense of authenticity. As she notes in her “Introduction”: “This book is modelled on the country-house murder mystery, the form that the Road Hill case inspired, and uses some of the

devices of detective fiction. The content, though, aims to be factual.” (xiii) In self-consciously using a type of hindsight investigation and exploiting an awareness of the case’s subsequent, albeit very swift, representation by Victorian writers and readers as the prototype of sensation narrative that would become so popular in the 1860s (Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* was being serialised as the murder investigation took place), Summerscale seeks to project backwards a reader’s writerly desire borne of the detective fiction genre in the twentieth century into the reading of the ‘clues’ within the case itself.

The distinction drawn by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975 [1973]) is pertinent here in terms of the division between the readerly text (*texte lisible*), where pleasure is derived from a reading which does not impact on the reader’s subjectivity, and the writerly text (*texte scriptable*), where the pleasure is taken from being part of the writing process as it explodes conventions of genre and subjectivity (14). Both modes are important for detective fiction because we rely on the narrative to reveal the information to us in a way that does not implicate us in the murder and allows us to view it dispassionately on the one hand (the readerly), while at the same time we are indoctrinated into the scripting process (the writerly) as we slip into the consciousness and logic of the detective and, by proxy, the writer (for discussion, see Scaggs 45). In the case of the texts explored in this essay, there is a need to problematize this model of reading pleasure. In factually recreating the context and the documentation of the contemporary investigation and trial surrounding the murder of the 3-year-old boy Saville Kent and the conviction of his step-sister Constance Kent for the crime, Summerscale also extends the nature of the detective story from one that seeks resolution of the specifics of a single crime into historical writing itself as a form of detective-like endeavour. By seeking to expand the jurisdiction of the detective’s form of justice – which is to identify, apprehend and see conviction for the murder – Summerscale makes her readers part of an investigation which comes to dominate the full-life biography of the murderer even after retribution has been delivered. The kind of pleasure this offers, particularly in its blurring of the real/fictional modes, unsettles the ethics of reading and historical reconstruction in ways that Summerscale does not acknowledge.

Each of the three parts of Summerscale’s book carries epigraphs from Charles Dickens (*Bleak House*), Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*) and Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*), as a grounding device which exploits the idea of passive reading and writerly connectivity in the narrative: they place the factual, the historical and the researched into the context of the fictional, the narrativised and the imagined. Only one of these epigraphs, from Collins, however, is from an ‘authentic’ sensation novel that can both creatively and critically be read as an interpretation or text directly influenced by the Road Hill House case. Indeed, the Dickens novel predates the murders by seven years and, as Summerscale herself notes, James’s *Turn of the Screw* (1898) would be published almost forty years after the murder, and has its ostensible roots in a different kind of story (xi-xii). The slippage across periods here serves an interesting additional purpose: it makes the telling of the story, the narration of both crime and deductive process, and the interrelationship between fictional satisfaction and inconclusive reality, central to the drive of the text. In Summerscale’s three epigraphic citations, one can discern the mixture

between largely realist literary narrative (Dickens), sensation literature (Collins) and metafictional interpretation (James) as part of a history of Victorian literary development. While Phil Redpath suggests Summerscale “makes no pretensions towards the literary” and sees the epigraphs as with all the other quotations within the text as only “a form of literary interruption” (42), it is clear that she is actually claiming narrative and structural connection and literary alignment to Victorian quasi-legal (*Bleak House*), sensation (*The Moonstone*) and ironically ambiguous (*The Turn of the Screw*) forms of tale telling. Just as the detective methods and policing techniques Summerscale charts in the course of her contextualised discussion of the murder investigation grew more specific, precise, rational and conclusive during the course of the period, so the narratives which were constructed around such subjects became ever more elusive in the quest for narrative satisfaction, turning the reader into a textual detective and evidential interpreter.

The narratological element to detection holds relevance here. It is in relation to the nature of the “suspicions” in her book’s title that Summerscale makes a pertinent point concerning the structure of detective fiction as “uncanny ... narrative”. Summerscale argues that in a detective story, and in the Road Hill case, “Everyone seems guilty because everyone has something to hide. For most of them, though, the secret is not murder. This is the trick on which detective fiction turns.” (75) The inability to sustain narrative drive if there is one victim, one clear culprit and no mystery is thus a preventative not only of detective ability but also the fulfilment of narrative desire. It is too easy. While the readerly instinct we often assign the Victorians resides in novels constructed with a firm sense of beginnings, middles and endings, in actual fact the deferment of conclusion and the postponement of resolution is vital to reading communities, and is the instinctive function that detective fiction so often serves. But the neo-Victorian detective story denies this negation of possibilities. In concluding comments which again merge the fictive and factual in an assertion of dual purpose within the parameters of story, Summerscale suggests that

Perhaps this is the purpose of detective investigations, real and fictional — to transform sensation, horror and grief into a puzzle, and then to solve the puzzle, to make it go away ... A storybook detective starts by confronting us with a murder and ends by absolving us of it. He clears us of guilt. He relieves us of uncertainty. He removes us from the presence of death. (304)

This attempt to resolve the role of the detective then and the historian-critic now, however, is far from clear cut, and the extension of the role of the detective beyond the absolution of guilt for the murder into a realm of post-punishment historical reconstruction is something less easy to resolve.

Throughout her text Summerscale makes allusion to the American writer Edgar Allan Poe and his detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Underlining the ways in which the Road Hill House murder provided a test case for the kind of theoretical and ratiocinated methods of this fictional French detective and

literary export from across the Atlantic, Summerscale has Jack Whicher turn into an English version of his (inter)continental counterpart. Haunted in the popular press by the success of a fictional double in Dupin, Whicher's investigations, as Summerscale charts, culminated in the destruction of his reputation, partly because he both read and wrote the detective story too well. Whicher's suspicions were proved correct from "his first surviving report" (299), but rather than the comfort and assurance of unnameable otherness (classed, exotic) as the criminal perpetrator, Whicher's resolution that the murderous instinct lies within the domestic sphere posed a threat to the middle-class morality that ironically and unforgivingly provided the primary market for his reading of the case (Summerscale 2008: 168-70; 173-6; 276). Whicher's failure to convince others of his reading of the evidence was thus partly determined by those followers of the case – many of them readers of the newspaper updates – who did not want to know the truth because it was too close to home. This inadequacy in reading and interpretation is then projected on to the detective (in many ways the quasi-author of the case, gathering accounts, making written reports and speculations) rather than readers themselves. (In the US, *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* carried a different subtitle to the UK edition placing the emphasis firmly on the figure of the detective and his failure by declaiming *A Shocking Murder and the Undoing of a Great Victorian Detective*.)

This ambiguous relationship between narrative excitement, reader curiosity and desire, and the conclusion provided by evidence and facts defines the dilemma facing the neo-Victorian engagement with Victorian crime. Thus, while Redpath suggests that the book represents a form of "neo-modernist ... experimentation" (35), his stance on Summerscale's position as an "omniscient narrator" is problematic. In Redpath's view,

[i]f the text had been narrated from Whicher's or Constance's perspective it would have been fictive, like a novel ... Because Whicher's and Constance's stories are filtered through an omniscient narrator who has done her research, but who still intrudes, like an impresario, into the text – 'Four months after this book was published, a reader wrote to tell me that she had come across a photograph of Jonathan Whicher' (p. 307) – we read it as a work of historical record. Yet the narrator never reaches a conclusive 'truth'; her omniscience within the text is circumscribed by uncertainty and equivocation as to motive and event. (45)

The historian-critic as a narrator in line with the Victorian realist tradition is an interesting standpoint but Redpath places too much emphasis on the idea that the text is focussed on "uncertainty and equivocation" (45). Summerscale's book - like any other account of the Road Hill murder case, such as those source texts used in the book itself – cannot get to the absolute truth of motive (even a first-hand account by the murderer would not necessarily offer that) but the text is driven by determination to provide certainty and factual evidence of what happened to the central protagonists. Rather than the playfulness of a mock-realist omniscient narration demonstrated by a neo-Victorian novel like John

Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) or even A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Summerscale is self-determinedly an *overly*-reliable narrator. No level of detail is beyond her factuality or referencing, and she does not withhold from the reader how the narrative is constructed. Her emphasis is on *re*-membering all the parts of the textual corpus of the crime but at the same time *dis*-membering the post-criminal biography of the murderer.

Finishing the story through this method means pursuing the murderer – textually, evidentially, and corporally - to their own death in order to give a sense of completion. We – and the Victorians more than a century before us - already know whodunit, the mystery has been solved and the order of the detective-centred world was restored long ago through the punishment of the actual crime. Summerscale on the other hand pushes this further, seeking not only to identify the murderer but to follow up on what happened to that murderer after punishment and retribution. In this sense, the critic-historian reaches well beyond the strict limitations of the detective's role. Instead, Summerscale's mystery in *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* really only begins with the release of Constance Kent from prison having served her sentence. Up until that point, whether guilty or innocent of covering up for her brother's role in the crime, as the criminal body in the case she has been documented and archived through a whole web of Foucauldian material traces: police notes, transcripts of the trial, newspaper coverage and prison records. All of these have been deployed to full effect not to construct the case of what happened (which was already known) but to reconstruct its multi-textual existence into more digestible novel-length format. The real focus of the modern detective-historian's work is displaced on to the novelistic drive to bring the story to a conclusion not as a murder mystery but in locating a new narrative in the body of the corpse, which is not, this time, of the murder victim but of the now deceased murderer.

In the case of Constance Kent this involves following the life she lived under a new name, Emily Kaye, in Sydney, Australia, until her death aged 100 in 1944; a life which involved her becoming a nursing pioneer who was praised publicly when she reached her centenary by those “oblivious to her deeper past” (290). Interestingly, given that this is the more original element of Summerscale's book, it is the aspect of the narrative removed from the ITV adaptation of the text aside from a few short captions at the end of the programme. In the TV dramatisation, the emphasis is firmly placed on the figure of the flawed detective and a whole cluster of personal aspects of Whicher's life (some fictional, some factual) are brought into play. This is especially true in the second series, where a completely different set of mysteries has to be presented for this factual-fictional inspector to solve. The tensions in this approach are evident when one considers that the adaptors have – much as in the case of *The Lost Honour of Christopher Jefferies* – displaced the location of narrative tension from the uncanniness of murder itself to the more comfortable prime time viewing of a flawed middle-aged man who earns his living from detection. Indeed, the distinctiveness of the Victorian Mr Whicher is somewhat blurred by the conventionality of the “undoing” of a male detective that might have been taken from any other contemporary serialisation set within the modern police procedural format. Making the serialisation more digestible for the contemporary audience no doubt had little to do with the ethics of tracing the

post-imprisonment history of Constance Kent but it is therefore a significant choice. The adaptors of Summerscale's book, unlike the author herself, are happy to leave the Victorian story sit firmly within its 1860s context and not bring it too close to the present. In her subsequent study of another Victorian murder she took the project of resurrection and detection further, raising issues of interpretative ethics in the process.

**“There was something disjointed and fractured about his story” (Summerscale, 2016: 279): *The Wicked Boy***

While Christopher Jefferies's assumed guilt was projected on to his largely Victorian (i.e. “suspicious”) reading matter, Summerscale's *The Wicked Boy* (2016) serves as an illustration of the dangerous influence of texts on those with murderous intent. Unlike *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, *The Wicked Boy* does not hold a clear-cut murder mystery at its heart, despite the subtitle *The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*. We know from the first few pages the nature of the murder that has taken place and the two children who can serve as the only real suspects. The “mystery” in this text is much more focussed on two aspects about the murderer himself: what drove his killer action and, as the book develops, the second and more pressing “mystery” becomes what happened to the child after trial, conviction and release. A summary of the crime in *The Wicked Boy* is relatively straightforward: the elder of two brothers was convicted of the murder of their mother, having committed the crime and then gone about aspects of their daily lives while leaving her decaying corpse in the marital bedroom of the family home for several days during the summer of 1895. Following conviction, Robert Coombes spent an extended period of time in Broadmoor, the prison-hospital for the criminally insane, before leaving, like Constance Kent, for Australia (with an interlude of fighting in the First World War) and a new life. He died in 1949.

While Summerscale prefers *Bleak House* (1853) in her epigraphic signifiers in *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, it is another Dickens novel, the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which serves as an important textual reference point here. As Summerscale comments, “By dint of [Dickens's] ... death, this novel became the purest kind of murder story, the kind whose tension was never dissolved.” (272) The parallel here with Summerscale's work is in the ethics of reading absence or the limitations of the unwritten ending. The absences Summerscale pursues in both *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* and *The Wicked Boy*, however, and where the real ‘new’ detection has to come into play relate to the lives of the criminals post-celebrity, post-prison. Despite Summerscale's comment that the incompleteness of Dickens's last novel makes it the “purest kind of murder story”, her own texts are focussed on the absoluteness of completion as a narrative, historical and moral imperative. This stance challenges her own suggestion that she is writing quasi-fiction in the Victorian mode, and may be considered one of the tensions in the definition of the “purest kind of murder story” when applied to Summerscale's own work. It is the “disjointed and fractured” narrative – and readerly – need to know that is presented in

the text as potentially resolvable based on the historical and critical intervention of the contemporary writer.

More than in the earlier book, the narrative in *The Wicked Boy* is firmly positioned towards a desire to uncover the post-prison history of the killer. Indeed, the handling of the murder itself, its reporting, the criminal case and the journalistic coverage of all these aspects is largely an illustration of the ready accessibility of the archive. There are liberal quotations from source materials and the same rich contextual framing of the period, the political environment, even the cricket scores that borrow the technique both from *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* and Summerscale's intervening book *Mrs Robinson's Disgrace* (2012), which - while not about a murder - is also concerned with the corrupting influence of reading. In *The Wicked Boy* Summerscale does not use the same citational device of a quotation from a period fiction to begin each section, but there are also extensive references to the young boy's reading matter of "penny dreadfuls... melodramatic adventures ... published weekly as magazines" (8). Parallels are drawn between these adventure narratives and the boys' behaviour (16) and they even go to see a sensation play, *Light Ahead* which "told the story of a man framed for murder by a shipyard employee who had turned forger, bigamist and killer" (8). The boys sleep in the same room as Robert's collection of tales, as if the fictive world provides the comfort and reassurance in the absence of parental models. All of the evidence collected of the reading matter is given in detailed transcripts of the criminal case and therefore serves as authentically documented material for influence on Coombes's state of mind. But, according to Summerscale, the material also provides the framework for the alternative narratives of culpability and defence between Coombes's case and the comparison with another matricidal convict, also incarcerated at Broadmoor, Frank Rodgers, and their differing treatments:

For much of their childhood, storybooks had offered these boys an escape from anxiety, and when they found themselves in crisis they framed their solutions in the language of those books. Frank's was a *Boy's Own* narrative of chivalric heroism, Robert's a more muddled and lurid penny adventure of rescue and revenge, self-sacrifice and self-interest. The purity of Frank's narrative aroused compassion in his audience; Robert's tawdrier story invoked disgust as well as pity. (234)

The neatness of Summerscale's summary of differing versions of motive and justice revolves around divergent modes of reading and the uses to which such texts are put. Juxtaposing the "chivalric" story with the "penny adventure", the "purity" of the former and the "tawdrier" nature of the latter, Summerscale both interprets the tale she recounts through this language of reading and the differing registers of "literary" texts, their motifs – and motives – alongside the suspicions inherent in the values they propound. But this use of narrative deserves more self-reflection in the case of Summerscale's own mode of writing.



In an astute comment on the nature of the desire for completion within detection narratives, Peters Thoms says that “[a]s readers, we intellectually approve of irresolution . . . and emotionally relish the narrative unrest that sustains the possibility of both order and disorder” (Thoms, 145). These words echo the Barthesian understanding of writerly and readerly pleasures from the text. Mystery and interpretation, the reading of the textual clues, and the creation of the narrative are at the core of neo-Victorian detection’s desire to straddle authorship and detection, narrative and (ir)resolution. It is in the making up and the dismembering of the textual body that we are ultimately most complicit. I am not suggesting that writers and readers are morally equivalent to murderers. But our fascination with the murderer and their afterlife constitutes an ethical decision concerned with the assertion of control over textual bodies and physical histories, evidence and detection, judgement and conviction that is in some instances about the fracturing of identities and the dismantling of lives. This complicity reaches its highest levels in Summerscale’s trail after the history of the released Coombes, and it is through this that questions about the ethics of reading and the act of historical recovery work become most challenging. The complexity of *The Wicked Boy* as a text arises from a largely uncritical writerly standpoint. This is a book about a murder partly prompted – so Summerscale and the writers and judges at the time suggest – by Robert Coombes’s devouring of inappropriate literature: of adventure, murder, crime, and violence. The stories were prompts to and signifiers of his own murderousness and provided the source material for some of the methods by which he sought to cover up the consequences. Yet as twenty-first century readers we are positioned within the text to enjoy this gripping yarn of Coombes’s crime, imprisonment and future life with all the zest of a quasi-fictionalised account. We read history as story and defer aspects of our prurience as a result. While the search for the facts behind his post-incarceration life might be deemed illustrative of a redeemed man, in actual fact what Summerscale has uncovered is a man isolated from his community from childhood, first through state imprisonment and committal, then through self-imposed exile. This isolation did not arise from people *knowing* his history before he settled in small-town Australia; indeed the ‘redemption’ exercised by Coombes for his post-prison life was contained very clearly in a conscious need not to tell further stories or to reveal his own narrative adventure. The exposé here is not of a crime but of an everyday existence achieved against the backdrop of a troubled history.

In her “Epilogue: Another Boy” Summerscale writes of “want[ing] to know if his history had a bearing on his crime” (279). But the majority of her original detective work is actually not about his past but the future he went on to have after the crime was committed. In a sleight-of-hand element to the narrative intention, Summerscale’s recounting of how she set about finding the details of Coombes’s history and his time in Broadmoor for the earlier parts of the book seamlessly leads to a paragraph beginning “It was more difficult to establish what happened to Robert next.” (283) This difficulty arises because, in contradistinction to the murder or trial, there is a comparative absence of documentary evidence. When Summerscale does track down strands of that story following Coombes’s release from Broadmoor, it becomes increasingly difficult to see what form of work or duty she requires the material

to perform. Despite evidence that members of the family of Coombes's closest acquaintance in Australia in his post-convict years are deeply upset by news of his past life (several individuals refuse to discuss the issue), there is little by way of a suggestion that this causes "the journalist playing historian" who converts things into an approximation of a "novel" any pause or hesitancy about recounting this narrative. The individuals exposed as a result of this are the living who have to renegotiate their understanding of their relationship with a history not real theirs but now linked to their own interpretation of the dead man. Coombes is, in effect, convicted a second time. As with Constance Kent, the writer's role appears to be the resurrection of one version of a history to haunt the life that followed the act of murder and its punishment. In the case of Kent, Summerscale remarks that even in prison she was noted for "a gift for invisibility ... The public had no idea where Constance went after leaving gaol, and they were not to find out for almost a century" (2008: 288). This can be presented as a redemptive narrative in that those who encountered Kent (under her new identity, Emily Kaye) and Coombes did not know their pasts, and that by this measure the murderers might be felt to have been redeemed by their punishment and go on to live better lives. Yet there is no deep acknowledgement that the writing of that unknown history unsettles the memories of those still living who did not know of their earlier lives and actions. Inevitably, this is to dismember certain aspects of personal history for them and to displace a narrative of lived experience with an historical but buried truth; it leads to the replacement of the body of the redeemed with the corpse of their past crimes.

### **Reading criminals, criminal reading**

Ultimately, positioning ourselves as twenty-first century readers who must know – and writers who must tell – the stories of nineteenth-century criminals and their lives well into the period of living memory is about exceeding the capabilities of the Victorian reader. It also throws into question the ethical dimension of the resurrection, and dismemberment, of past lives for a sensationalism in writing and reading that in the case of *The Wicked Boy* is analogous to the kind of cheap thrills reading matter that were cited in the case of Coombes. This is the pursuit of the punished taken to an extreme, albeit with seemingly good intentions in wanting to be assured that better lives were led, and that criminal childhoods, and their punishment, resulted in law-abiding, reformed adult behaviour. One argument therefore might be that these are stories that shed new light on the efficacy of the Victorian legal and penal system, that punishment for the crime did lead to redemption and new, reformed lives. Reconstructing the existing evidence of the crime itself in all its documented forms is essential context, one might suggest, for the story to be followed. Except what happens when the story of crime and punishment goes further into a new life, an afterlife of the criminal past? There is a challenge here, as I have argued in this essay, to the role of contemporary accounts of a past event that has been patently and patiently unremembered by its key protagonists in favour of a better future, especially when that impacts on the memories and experiences of those still living. Memory and the archival, media and other traces in which it exists are source material for the historian and the critic, and neo-Victorianism's

revisionary and reinterpreted capacity frequently drives creative interventions and new understandings of the past. Major public figures – particularly author figures like Dickens (see Kaplan 37-84) – receive regular reassessment in fictional and non-fictional forms, as well as lesser-known figures resurrected to tell new tales about the nineteenth century. But the dilemma is different and resides on the “dangerous edge of things” when it is the reputation of a doggedly and determinedly non-public figure and where the narrative steps beyond an account of their famous crime, which is the publicly recorded and documented event, into the later life of the redeemed criminal. Such acts are concerned with remembering but also dis(re)membering a narrative, which in the case of Coombes was the one understood and accepted by those who knew him for the last 40+ years of his life. Writing such an account places suspicion on the subject and also the author and reader of the text. Suspicion here is concerned with motive: what is it we want to know, understand, seek reassurance about through a text that ultimately, like Hughes’s account of Fanny Adams, renders a life merely as a series of disembodied parts, or in the case of Coombes reinforces the idea that a murderer is always to be read as a murderer.

Between the publication dates of *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* and *The Wicked Boy*, the European Union as a legal jurisdiction enacted the controversial “right to be forgotten” rule (see Rosen; Jones), and in 2017 it was announced that the UK government planned to bring forward post-Brexit legislation to achieve the same principle in English law (Mason). This allows for an individual to request that search engines such as Google remove links to aspects of their past where this can be demonstrated to relate to activities that are not relevant to their present lives and actions. The legality of the request is based on the principle – itself derived from the French precedent of *le droit à l'oubli* - that there is a “right to silence on past events in life that are no longer occurring” (Pino, 237). This removes the ease of discoverability (but not the actual records) of individual lives and actions from the web (which ultimately represents the largest living archive in history) as part of very modern understanding of personal data. While not quite a case of wiping the slate clean, it is nevertheless analogous to the idea that criminals convicted in the Victorian period, once time had been served for those crimes, were able to begin new lives, and that this, however imperfectly implemented, was one of the principles of the penal system. Their criminal records were never destroyed and thus remain freely available for Summerscale and others to follow up the details of their often well-documented crimes. But to detect the traces beyond that documentation, to follow them or, ultimately, pursue those who knew them in lives very different from those convict days, raises questions about our belief in the redemptive work of punishment, and the purity of our own motives in reading further.

Christopher Jefferies is now well known and has had his life adapted for public broadcast for not being a murderer; Constance Kent and Robert Coombes sought anonymity and new lives having been punished for crimes they did commit. To see the relevance of the figure of the historian-critic playing with narrative conventions and with the role of reading in this wider cultural debate we need only contrast the quotations with which I prefaced each section where Summerscale’s suspicion in the case of Constance Kent related to the “uncanny control of the narrative”, whereas it was the “disjointed

and fractured” story that stimulated further enquiry in *The Wicked Boy*. Having it both ways – a narrative so tight it needs to be disrupted, another so jarring it needs to be tied together – is to attempt to gain the different types of Barthesian pleasure from the criminal account. It is also to assert the investigator’s (writer’s) primacy in the narrative above that of victim, suspect, or redeemed criminal and their now disillusioned acquaintances from a post-imprisonment life. If Patricia Mayer Spacks is right that “Death fictionalizes everyone”, then there is a real danger that our neo-Victorian, very contemporary, desire to know it all means that that the “everyone” includes both the living and the dead, the neo-Victorian now and the Victorian then.

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