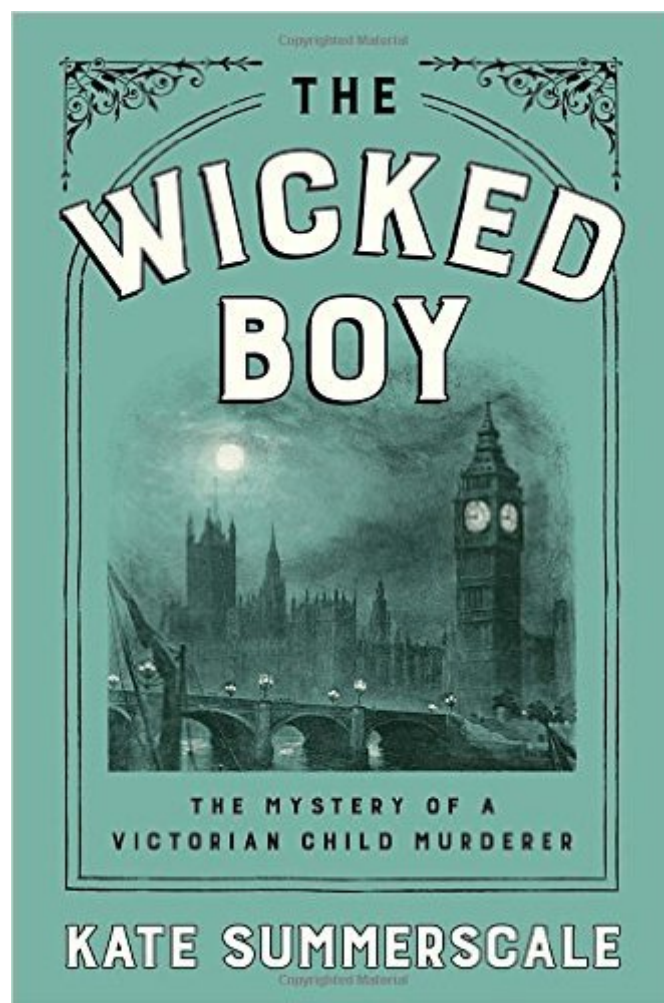


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The Wicked Boy: The Mystery Of A Victorian Child Murderer



Synopsis

From the internationally bestselling author, a deeply researched and atmospheric murder mystery of late Victorian-era London. In the summer of 1895, Robert Coombes (age 13) and his brother Nattie (age 12) were seen spending lavishly around the docklands of East London -- for ten days in July, they ate out at coffee houses and took trips to the seaside and the theater. The boys told neighbors they had been left home alone while their mother visited family in Liverpool, but their aunt was suspicious. When she eventually forced the brothers to open the house to her, she found the badly decomposed body of their mother in a bedroom upstairs. Robert and Nattie were arrested for matricide and sent for trial at the Old Bailey. Robert confessed to having stabbed his mother, but his lawyers argued that he was insane. Nattie struck a plea and gave evidence against his brother. The court heard testimony about Robert's severe headaches, his fascination with violent criminals and his passion for 'penny dreadfuls', the pulp fiction of the day. He seemed to feel no remorse for what he had done, and neither the prosecution nor the defense could find a motive for the murder. The judge sentenced the thirteen-year-old to detention in Broadmoor, the most infamous criminal lunatic asylum in the land. Yet Broadmoor turned out to be the beginning of a new life for Robert--one that would have profoundly shocked anyone who thought they understood the Wicked Boy. At a time of great tumult and uncertainty, Robert Coombes's case crystallized contemporary anxieties about the education of the working classes, the dangers of pulp fiction, and evolving theories of criminality, childhood, and insanity. With riveting detail and rich atmosphere, Kate Summerscale recreates this terrible crime and its aftermath, uncovering an extraordinary story of man's capacity to overcome the past.

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Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed Kate Summerscale's previous books, so I was pleased to get the chance to review her latest, *The Wicked Boy*. Subtitled, *The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*, much of the book took place in Plaistow (coincidentally, the place I lived as a child) and so this book resonated even more with me as I knew all the places mentioned. This begins on a hot July day in 1895. Two brothers, Robert Coombes (13) and his brother, Nathaniel 'Nattie' (12) are home with their mother. Their father, a ship steward, is on his way across the Atlantic going to New York. It appears to neighbours, and relatives, that things are not well at the family home. Robert and Nattie seem to be spending a lot of money and there is no sign of their mother, Emily. The boys involve a friend of their fathers, John Fox, to pawn some items in the house but, eventually, a terrible smell leads to investigation and the body of their mother is discovered, murdered, in her bedroom. Gradually, we discover what happened before this gruesome discovery and then the trial as it unfolds. Robert is the 'Wicked Boy' of the title and much of the blame for his crime is, initially, blamed on the 'Penny Dreadfuls' he loved to read. These trashy, cheap adventure stories were the computer games of their day – blamed for all sorts of delinquent behaviour. What was interesting to me, though, was how progressively Robert was actually treated once he had been tried. Although there was no real way of separating child criminals from adults, it was obvious that once he was in the system, there were attempts to rehabilitate and care for him. This is also an account of Robert Coombes' life after the murder and of what happened to him.

On July 7 1895 Robert Coombes, aged 13 years, murdered his mother, Emily, at their home in West Ham, London. Kate Summerscale stumbled on this simple fact and began a search to understand and investigate. Her earlier foray into the annals of 19th century crime also analysed a Victorian murder [*The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*]. She discovered – as the reader will discover too – many similarities in the two quite shocking cases, and their aftermath. The guilt of Robert was never in question. The trial lasted less than two days. The jury reached its final verdict in two minutes. The short trial is covered in some detail – witnesses are reported in their own words. She gives us an idea of how 'justice' worked in those days at the Old Bailey. Pen pictures are given of flash lawyers, stern judges, friends and relatives of the family, the local pawnbroker, Robert's schoolteachers and a sympathetic curate [not in the end called]. To find out as much as she did is

incredible. More interest, popular and specialist, lay in understanding why he did it and what should be done with him. The first will drive the modern reader too, while the second retains a very contemporary relevance – “ what do you do with child killers? She reviews the opinions of media pundits, lawyers and medical experts. She gives a fascinating account of contemporary psychology pre-Freud. She analyses life teeming in the East End on the cusp of the 20th century. She walks us through the front door of the little terrace – “ describes relationships in the Coombes household and takes us back to the sweltering week-end in high summer when the family imploded. With the aid of modern opinion she offers a plausible reconstruction of the events that led up to the tragedy.

For ten days in the summer of July 1895, two boys spent their time roaming round coffee shops and attending cricket matches, and telling anyone who asked that their mother had gone to visit relatives in Liverpool. They slept downstairs in the back parlour of their house, with a family friend who had come at their request to look after them. Meantime, an unpleasant smell was beginning to seep from the house, becoming so bad eventually that the neighbours complained to the boys’ aunt. When she forced her way into the house, she discovered the badly decomposed body of the boys’ mother, and immediately young Robert Coombes admitted to having stabbed her to death. This is a chilling but fascinating true crime story from the end of the Victorian era. Robert Coombes was thirteen at the time of the murder and his brother Nattie was twelve. The idea of the matricide itself horrified contemporary society enough, but it was the cool behaviour of the boys over the following ten days that made the crime seem even more shocking. Evidence showed that the murder was planned – “ Robert had bought the knife specially a few days earlier, and he later claimed that he and Nattie had arranged a signal for when the deed should be done. The first part of the book concentrates on the crime and the trial procedures and Summerscale covers these with her usual excellent attention to detail. Because they felt that their case against Robert would be stronger if his brother gave evidence, the prosecution were keen to have the charges against Nattie dropped, since at that time defendants were not allowed to tell their story in court. In the early proceedings, Robert had no lawyer or other representation and was expected to cross-examine witnesses by himself.

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