



The Suspicions of Mr Whicher by Kate Summerscale

William

Based on a true story of a famous Victorian murder case. What I didn't know was that the story had been dramatised and shown on ITV.

The scenario is set in 1860 with a family waking to discover a gruesome murder has taken place in their home. Mr (Jack) Whicher of Scotland Yard, the most celebrated detective of his day, arrives at the scene of the crime two weeks after the event where he faces the unenviable task of solving a case where members of the family are the principal suspects. To say that the murder provokes national interest is an understatement and raises challenges questioning Victorian middle-class behaviour and respectability. Mr Whicher's inquiries are hindered by the lack of cooperation manifested by the local police. Eventually our detective correctly identifies the culprit as Constance, the victim's older sister, but initially isn't believed until some years later when the accused voluntarily admits her guilt. Between those two events Whicher is publicly excoriated by the press and retired with a sullied reputation which remained until his professional character was restored with her confession. Constance had been examined by local magistrates. Her defence lawyer had made a mockery of Whicher's inquiries and hypotheses, while the local constabulary campaigned to discredit the unwelcome 'outsider'. The detective, meanwhile, was also being denounced in parliament for his ineptitude and the home secretary ordered a fresh inquiry into the case. I enjoyed reading the book as much for its sociological reflections and comment on Victorian class and society. Samuel Kent's rigorous (brutal) enforcement of the provisions of the 1833 Factory Act, which made him so unpopular. Perhaps as a consequence he was in turn identified as a suspect as he had married the children's governess after his first wife went mad and died in suspicious circumstances. Most onlookers were appalled at the notion that a child could have carried out such a crime. But then it also appalled them that a middle-class father could have been guilty of killing his own child. But in 1865, a year after Whicher's retirement, Constance walked into Bow Street magistrates court to confess to the crime and the detective's investigation was vindicated. Constance was saved from execution by Queen Victoria, but served 20 years for the crime despite several appeals for clemency, then disappeared. Newspapers at the time still felt that the details of her confession weren't conclusive and some didn't correct their vilification of the detective. I also appreciated the detailed parallel identity reflected in the portrayal of the street scenes and their activities and the courtroom procedures. The author suggests that the Victorian detective was "a secular substitute for a prophet or a priest"

What the book does brilliantly, however, is to examine indigenous class, criminality, and human nature in the Victorian era and reflect the incipience of the police as an organised function at a time when its emergence and intrusion was not universally welcomed.

Margaret

Based on a true story where Whicher is sent to Road in Wiltshire to solve the murder of a child. The Kent family and their servants fall under suspicion but nothing is proved. Whicher came late to the case but came under criticism and deemed incompetent, especially according to the Press. Although, rather distracting, it was nevertheless interesting that Summerscale gave us so many examples of detection from other novels such as from *The woman in white* by Wilkie Collins and from Charles Dickens' novels, especially from *Bleak House*. Also distracting were the mention of other crimes that Whicher had solved. After Constance's confession and subsequent imprisonment we learned what happened to the rest of the family which I found a most informative background to the history of this dreadful murder in Victorian times. A couple of interesting queries cropped up: did Constance's brother, William, play a part in the crime? Could Samuel have passed Syphilis down through the family causing madness to some of the women?

This factual detective book certainly absorbed my attention although in some ways it read rather like a text book on how to solve a crime.

Ann

This is the true story of a horrific murder at an English country home in 1860. Rumour, speculation and accusations cause great distress to all the family and servants living in the house at this time. The story is told alongside the history of the man who investigated this gruesome crime, Detective Inspector Jonathan Whicher of Scotland Yard, one of 8 men who formed the beginning of the detective force. He was a successful detective and his investigation convinced him by whom the murder was committed, but the evidence he was able to produce was not considered sufficient for a conviction. Many years later, his conclusions were proved to be correct. The author has done an amazingly in-depth and comprehensive amount of research into this mystery and she takes the story to the end of the lives of people involved, which I found very satisfying. This story reflects the strong emotions, divided loyalties and unhappiness which can be caused by changes in family relationships, as told in fictions, such as Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and numerous other stories.

Angela

I intended to get this book on Kindle but it was recommended that I get a hard copy and I am glad I did as I found the photographs very interesting. This was a factual account so the circumstances were obviously very tragic at the time and I was gripped by the description of the murder and events surrounding it. The subsequent investigations at Rode (then spelled Road) were also very interesting as the various relationships within the house and between the police investigators were unveiled. It held a personal interest too, as this murder took place in the area where I grew up and went to school. However, the middle of the book seemed to drift away from this specific murder into other cases and historical detail and I found myself losing the plot rather. Having struggled to keep going I decided to skip some portions and went on to the latter

sections where the solution to the mystery is made clearer, although there seemed to be parts which remained unresolved I thought. Perhaps this indeed reflected reality. Overall an interesting book with just some reservations about the middle section.

Jean

'I don't pretend to be a fan of 'whodunnits' and I have mixed feelings about this novel, which is a forged link between crime and fiction.

Summerscale has produced fastidious analysis and reconstruction. She focuses, equally, on Whicher as well as Constance and the Road Hill House case destroys the career of the greatest detective of the mid-nineteenth century. The novel begins in a gruesome way, when the body of a three-year-old boy, Saville, is found at the bottom of an outdoor privy, with his throat cut. He's a member of an affluent, upper middle-class family and there's an element of class-distinction here, as the London detective has working-class origins and there is resentment that he appears to be meddling in the privacy of his so-called 'social betters'. These were times of increasing social mobility. Also, the local police resent the fact that a London detective has been assigned to the case. The Road Hill House murder triggered off many detective novels, one example being Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novels, although Holmes was a gentlemanly amateur. Charles Dickens, (*Bleak House*): Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone*): and Charlotte Bronte, (*Jane Eyre*): were all influenced by the case, which caused hysteria and lots of gossip in the newspapers. People don't change in their preoccupation with sensationalism. I felt that the novel was, sometimes, slow-paced, and I wasn't keen on the characters. In my opinion, Whicher never developed as a real person. At times, it read like a thesis. However, it has certainly increased my knowledge! When, five years later, Constance confessed to her crime, Whicher was finally vindicated. Nevertheless, we are left with an unanswered question. Was Saville's death a combined murderous act, carried out by both Constance and her brother, William? One also wonders if, in Constance's case, there was a genetic problem passed on to her by the first Mrs. Kent, who was apparently unbalanced. She, in turn, had possibly been infected by Mr. Kent, who could have contracted syphilis from an encounter with a London prostitute, some years earlier. There will always be a sense of mystery and more unanswered questions attached to this Victorian crime.

Chris Scott

I really liked the book, an excellent read. Whicher's character was done well and the historical facts were interesting.

Chris Timmins

I couldn't get on with this book. It reads like a researcher's notebook - in other words not like a book at all just multiple jottings sourced from many places and strung together. A vast amount of serious research seems to have been done, and every bit of it written down here. All sorts of references are thrown in, historical, geographical, biographical, quotes from all sorts of literature, publications, letters, court reports, hearsay, newspapers, books - some with reference to the main characters and quite a lot not. Quotes from Charles Dickens seem a favourite. Some interesting facts about Victorian society were piled one on top of the other. Only half way through I found a horrific murder had been made boring and gave up - not a good read for me.

Stephanie

This is a non-fiction account of the investigations of the murder of a young child which took place in the mid 1800s. I found it a very interesting insight into the very early foundations of a police force and of investigative methods; the latter obviously very poorly developed by today's standards. There also seems to have been poor co-operation between the different sectors of the police investigating the circumstances of the murder and much evidence missed for a range of reasons. I was also interested by details of how the family interacted with each other and their living conditions. The family seemed fairly troubled. The mother of the older children had passed away and the father then married one of the servants who was possibly his lover even before the death of his first wife. The second wife gave birth to more children who were much loved and pampered whilst the older children of the first wife were sent off to boarding school and were probably jealous of the younger brood, one of whom is murdered. Hence the police investigation. Details of the domestic arrangements of the family were also very interesting including plans of the (large) house, a number of live-in servants and of the health issues of the father of the families. The research into the topic was meticulous and very extensive and references were included.

I felt that it read as if it was a slightly laborious thesis, good for detailed historic pictures but not an easy read.



Anna

Mrs Robinson's Disgrace

Kate Summerscale

I had read "The Suspicions of Mr. Whitcher" some time ago, so I decided to go for the one I didn't know. "Suspicions" stuck in my mind because of the (rather lurid) light it shed on Victorian mores, and "Mrs. Robinson" does very much the same. Sometimes their world seems like some other planet, so little does it resemble our life today. Kate Summerscale has the gift of transforming the facts of Victorian life, and the machinations of the courts into a page-turner, where one can hardly wait for the next revelation. One important theme is society's view of women, and also the practice of medicine, which was often tantamount to simple superstition. Mrs. Robinson emerges as a very real, dynamic personality, whose intellect and sexual drive were equally frustrated, and expressed in her over-imaginative diaries. We know so much about Isabella, but we do not have the same access to Edward Lane's thoughts and motives, which unbalances the narrative a little - but the success of the book shows itself because we feel so engaged with all the characters. I would still like to know what Edward Lane thought he was up to!

Chris Scott

Also enjoyed **Mrs Robinson's Disgrace**.

Alix

Mrs Robinson's Disgrace

Managed to skim through the rest of book last night. I did not enjoy this book. There was too much about masturbation and mental issues for my liking. The study of Phrenology was meant to throw light on why George and Isabelle suffered from sexual deviances and fantasy about sex. I felt sorry for Isobel as like a lot of Victorian women with servants etc they did not have enough meaning in their lives and had time to wish for what they did not have. Most of us today are so busy that there is no time to think of what we hanker after we are busy with work, kids, cooking housework etc etc. I was glad that Henry did not get a divorce as he was trying to get hold of as much of Isabelle's money and inheritance as he could. He already had another woman and other children. Was glad that Isabelle was able to have a reasonable end to her life and that one of her sons stayed loyal to her. Sorry if I have any of the names wrong as am in a rush but just wanted you to get something from me.

Sharon

I read *Mrs Robinson's Disgrace*, having read *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* years ago. I was glad the book was quite short as I kept waiting for something to happen. The historical detail was interesting, particularly on the emerging medical sciences and the attribution of any mental health problems in women to "uterine disease". It was not clear how psychiatric disorders in men were explained. I did find the cast of characters quite tedious and became furious at the detail on how women's lives were controlled by men (but this was the case until very recently financially and women are still trapped in abusive relationships). Anyway, I won't go on but, on balance, found the *Mr Whicher* book the better of the two - more pacy and interesting in it's detail.