

**Book Review: Flanders, J., *The Invention of Murder: How The Victorians Revelled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. 2011. ISBN: 9781250048530.**

Reviewed by George Dwain Spillman, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

*[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org)  
Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2021 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

Always judge a book by the cover. The details are simply in the subtitle. Judith Flanders, a world-renowned author, social historian and journalist, reveals her intentions on the cover and leaves no mystery as to the focus of this work. The author's immediate utilization of the subtitle gives an outline of the book's contents. The subtitle provides a window into historical events inscribed within its pages. Flanders gives details and provides essentials to the development of each of the three categories, revel in murder, detection, and modern crime creation, within the pages of this historically significant work. Via the subtitle, the author provides enough information to build interest. Mixed in with details of each crime are analyses of the pursuit of the suspects while vivid pictorials of trial and subsequent public executions lead up to the accomplishment of sentences issued by magistrates.

A projected audience for this work is undefined in my professional opine, as it has much to offer to a wide variety of readers from true crime, to historians, to travelers, and also knowledge seekers through quality literature. Flanders publication is more narrative driven, telling stories about true crime events of Victorian Britain. Flanders springs right into the murderous narrative history on page 1 and subsequent by describing the infamous Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811, where a shop owner, his wife, apprentice, and infant child were brutally

---

<sup>1</sup> **George Dwain Spillman** received his Master's degree in Criminal Justice from Lamar University. He currently works as a Pre-Trial Diversion Director with the Natchitoches Parish District Attorney's Office. Previously, Mr. Spillman worked as an administrator with the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections.

murdered. Flanders continues very descriptive events throughout the body of the text and culminates with the most notable, and still yet unresolved, Whitechapel murders committed by a serial killer identifying himself as Jack (The Ripper) (pgs. 430-452).

The author also provided much support for the Brits and how they revelled in these heinous events through the popularity of live production plays, poems, various fiction, newspapers and pamphlets (all forms of entertainment) that continued to spring up and were produced during this time in England's crime history. The entertainment value thrived upon the most-gory details, regardless of objections of small sects of the English population in their dissention to murders being glamorized via a variety of platforms, especially for profit, becoming inflated on a daily basis. The morbid entertainment value thrived through newspaper and pamphlet reporting via penny bloods while live productions such as "The Gamblers" or "The Murderers at the Desolate Cottage" immediately grabbed deeper into the public's attention and fascination that fueled the thirst for horrific details of murders during this period. Many more popular plays and even less-known and less successful productions were performed for various lengths of time at all size venues. Novels also sprang up and only added to the overall interest.

The author provides a logical example how just how enthralled the public became with the pursuit, capture, trial, conviction and execution of these killers in referencing the public execution by hanging of William Burke, who along with his accomplices William Hare and two women, were responsible for killing 16 citizens over a one-year term. This execution event of 28 January 1829 was widely promoted in the media of that time and drew estimates of more than 20,000 witnesses (p.67). Continuing to validate the of effect wide coverage of these horrific crimes, Flanders reports that some citizens yelled phrases such as "Burke them" or "Burke her" when suspected murderous accomplices were tracked down, questioned or even tried based on the wide, specific, and mostly sensationalized reports of the Burke and Hare murders.

Pursuit of the murderers and detection are developed through the author's reporting of fledgling police departments and attempts at creating specific detective divisions within. However, she portrays how early police were mostly incompetent as early detective divisions struggled to meet public demands for swift apprehension of these killers, but the summation is validly based on the lack of skills most police possessed to complete their duties successfully. Flanders states that even though the public as a whole were somewhat impatient with police officials in apprehending murderers swiftly, the pursuit made the world

## **George Dwain Spillman**

feel safer for society. Flanders brilliantly closes this work with the concept of modern crime, as we have come to know it, that Brits had very little to worry about in the way of murder prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but their own love of blood and the vast production of entertainment materials that fed this hunger ushered in a new era in crime. "Murder was, finally, a fine art." (p.466).

I find that the author accomplished the mission of describing just how the Victorians revelled in death and detection and created modern crime by giving such great detail in all events portrayed. She was most successful by providing historical, factually documented events, supported by a plethora of valid sources as footnoted throughout and summarized in the ending notes. Flanders' wealth of knowledge and discernment on these topics that captured the attention of the Victorians during this time period is on full display.