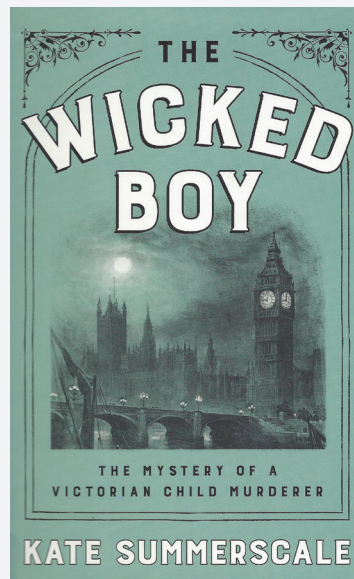


## First Opinion: Exploring Historical Crime Writing as a Genre

Summerscale, Kate. *The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*. Penguin Press, 2016.

Kathryn L. Bauserman



Kate Summerscale, an English author and editor, has received multiple awards for her distinguished work as a historical crime writer. For *The Queen of Whale Cay*, she won the 1998 Somerset Maugham Award. In 2008, she won the Samuel Johnson Prize for *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher or The Murder at Road Hill House*. She has also received the British Book Awards Book of the Year and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her most recent book, *The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*, is another successful product of her craft.

Unlike most murder mysteries that focus on the “whodunit,” *The Wicked Boy* begins with the assumption that 13-year-old Robert Coombes was indeed guilty of the violent murder of his mother, a murder to which he readily confessed. Summerscale begins by summarizing the events immediately after the murder across 10 days in July 1895. Robert and his younger brother gave their neighbors and family members excuses as to why their mother was absent. They pawned valuables from their home and used the money for lavish spending around their neighborhood and the docks in London. When their mother’s corpse was discovered 10 days later due to the dreadful stench of her decaying body, Robert admitted to the crime and was

tried for her murder at the “Old Bailey,” where criminal trials were commonly held. His younger brother, Nattie, took a plea bargain and gave evidence against Robert, who was found “guilty but insane” and sentenced to the Broadmoor Asylum where he spent the next 17 years of his life. Upon his release from the asylum, he with honor in World War I in Australia. Robert never married or had children of his own, but he became a productive citizen in New South Wales, Australia, where he died of a heart attack in 1949.

As the story unfolds, Summerscale tries to uncover the “whydunit” based on the trial transcripts, witness statements, and letters used as evidence during the trial. One theory held that Robert was a huge consumer of “penny dreadfuls,” which were cheap fictional stories of violence and murder, similar to the violence found in modern video games, TV shows, and movies. Some speculated that he filled his mind with this trash, and it desensitized him from knowing right from wrong (108). Another theory was that Robert was a bright boy and well educated for the poor, and he became part of a new generation. It was generalized that this new generation of educated young working-class boys were “cheeky” upstarts, who drank, smoked, and had no respect for their elders. One witness stated that Robert had trouble in one school and ran away (185). Another theory gaining ground with many psychologists of the day was the speculation that a poor home environment and family violence contributed to more acts of violence, including violence of children against their parents (116). In Robert’s testimony, he claimed he murdered his mother because of her violent attack on Nattie: Robert felt he had to save his brother from further violence.

With a touch of irony, in the “Prologue” and the “Epilogue: Another Boy,” Ms. Summerscale shares a story of another boy, Harry Mulville, who was saved from his cycle of domestic violence by Robert. Harry was a victim of abuse from his stepfather when Robert rescued him and raised him to adulthood, thus stopping the progression of abuse. Summerscale learned about Harry when visiting Robert’s gravestone. She began researching Harry’s family and discovered that some of his children lived in Australia. This led her to the discovery that Harry was still alive. She got permission from his children to interview him in 2012 when he was 95 years old.

Summerscale did extensive research into the “whydunit” mystery of Robert Coombes and his brutal murder of his mother. Even though the murder happened in July 1895, she was able to find an online digital transcript of the trial, and the National Archives in Kew, London housed the documents and witness statements placed into evidence at the trial. She further visited the locations of the events leading up to and immediately following the murder. Following the investigative trail after Robert’s release from the insane asylum and his immigration to Australia, Summerscale tracked down information on his military service in World War I and his later life in New South Wales. Summerscale has carefully documented her claims, and her research was impeccable (305 notes on 52 pages of resources). Her skill as a writer helped her to weave the facts she collected into a cohesive story that reads like a murder mystery, but is obviously based on truth.

### Works Cited

"Kate Summerscale," *Penguin Press*, <http://thepenguinpress.com/authorbio/kate-summerscale/>. Accessed 27. Aug. 2016.

### About the Author

**Kathryn L. Bauserman** is a literacy professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Indiana State University. She worked as an elementary classroom teacher for 17 years before earning her doctorate in reading. Bauserman has an extensive collection of picture books and chapter books for children and young adults. Her favorite way to use books with students is through literature circles.