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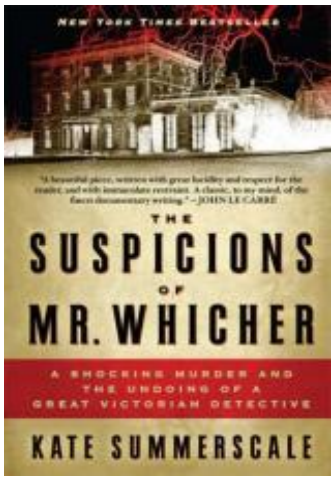
The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher

by Kate Summerscale



About the Book

On June 30, 1860, the residents of Road Hill House awoke to a tragedy: three-year-old Saville Kent was missing from his crib. The family and servants of Samuel Kent, a twice-married factory inspector, frantically searched the house and grounds. Little Saville was found brutally murdered, and the whole household fell under suspicion. Scotland Yard sent Jonathan Whicher, a gifted and confident detective-inspector, to investigate. As Whicher unraveled the Kent family history, numerous secrets emerged, from affairs and deceits to disease and revenge. Long before the murder, Samuel Kent had an affair with his children?s governess while his first wife suffered from mental illness. After his wife?s death, Samuel married the governess and attempted to integrate the two families, with sinister results.

Whicher accused Constance Kent, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Samuel Kent and his first wife, of murdering Saville. Whicher?s case hinged on Constance?s nightdress, a crucial piece of missing evidence. But Constance was set free and Whicher denounced instead, for violating the family?s privacy. As Whicher faded into obscurity, the Road Hill murder remained unsolved for five years, until a sudden, shocking confession in 1865.

With the brisk pace of an old-fashioned murder mystery, **The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher** re-creates the fascinating case that dominated the pages of newspapers and detective novels alike, inspiring some of the best mystery writers of the Victorian era and beyond.

Discussion Guide

1. ?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,? Summerscale writes in her introduction (xiii). How does the form of**The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher** complement its subject? What are some of the ?devices? that Summerscale borrows from fiction?

2. Summerscale delves into the vocabulary of detection, from ?coppers? (46) to ?clue? (68) to ?detect? (157). Which word origins were the most surprising and interesting, and why?

3. What role did privacy play in the Road Hill case? How did notions of privacy impede or advance the case? How do Victorian ideas of privacy and domesticity compare to today?s concept of the home?

4. Summerscale lists some of ?Whicher?s detective qualities: an excellent memory, an eye for the incongruous, psychological acuity, and confidence? (50). Which of these qualities were apparent in Whicher?s investigation of the Road Hill murder? Which qualities seemed to fail him as the case unraveled?

5. Discuss the importance of class relations to the Road Hill case. What was the relationship between the Kent family and the villagers of Road? What were the sources of class tension between Whicher and the local police?

6. How was the Road Hill murder case a product of its time? What features of the Victorian era were especially prominent in the case? What was the influence of Charles Darwin?s emerging theories?

7. Summerscale observes an aspect that Whicher and Samuel Kent have in common: ?Factory inspectors, like police inspectors, were agents of surveillance? (61). What is the significance of this similarity? Did Whicher and Kent seem aware of what their occupations have in common? Might Whicher have had a bias toward Kent? Why or why not?

8. What role did gender play in the case? How were the female suspects, Elizabeth Gough and Constance Kent, treated by the police, the press, and the public? How might the case have proceeded differently with a male primary suspect, such as Samuel Kent, William Kent, or a male servant?

9. ?Whicher?s job was not just to find things out, but to put them in order. The real business of detection was the invention of a plot? (94). How does the chronology of **The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher** parallel the order of detection? When does Summerscale deviate from chronological order, and why?

10. ?The Road Hill case was dense with fabric? (70). How did the material evidence shape or unravel the case? How would a murder investigation today handle these bits of fabric?

11. Summerscale recounts, ?In the early 1860s the emotions aroused by the Road Hill murder went underground, leaving the pages of the press to reappear, disguised and intensified, in the pages of fiction? (217). What was the relationship between fiction and nonfiction in the Road Hill case? Which genre came closer to the truth of the murder and its motives?

12. To the public, Constance?s confession was a sign that ?God had triumphed where man?and science, and detection?had failed? (236). What role did religion play in the unraveling of the Road Hill murder case? Why might the public have credited religion over detection in the resolution of the case?

13. Summerscale points out Constance Kent?s own ?impulse to detect,? dating from her childhood (296). What did Constance and Whicher have in common? Where did their ?detection? methods differ? In the end, how was Constance an ?imperfect detective? (299)? Could the same label also be applied to Whicher? Why or why not?

14. Summerscale identifies a pitfall of investigation: ?The danger, in a real murder case, was that the detective might fail to solve the crime he had been sent to investigate. He might instead get lost in the tangle of the past, mired in the mess he had dug up? (75). In the end, which secrets of the Kent family seem irrelevant to the murder?

15. William Kent is a shadowy figure for much of the book, emerging as a distinct personality mostly in Part Three. Why is so little recounted of William in the beginning? What aspects of his personality emerge as most interesting?and most suspicious?in the final pages of the book? Is Whicher?s accomplice theory the most plausible? Why or why not?

16. Summerscale writes of Saville Kent in her afterword, ?In unravelling the story of his murder, I had forgotten him? (303). Is this forgetting apparent in the book? Is this work of nonfiction ?a tragedy with a happy ending,? as Raymond Chandler deemed the detective story (304)? Why or why not?

17. Which recent murder cases have caused as great a sensation as the murder at Road Hill of 1860? Why might murder prove so riveting in the press and in fiction, both in the Victorian era and today?

Suggested reading

Kate Summerscale, **The Queen of Whale Cay**; Wilkie Collins, **The Moonstone and The Woman in White**; Charles Dickens, **The Mystery of Edwin Drood** and **Bleak House**; Elizabeth Mary Braddon, **Lady Audley?s Secret**; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, **The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes**; Dashiell Hammett, **The Maltese Falcon**; Charlotte Brontë, **Jane Eyre**; Daniel Stashower, **The Beautiful Cigar Girl**; Caleb Carr, **The Alienist**; Erik Larson, **The Devil in the White City**.

Author Bio

Kate Summerscale is the former Literary Editor for the *Daily Telegraph* and author of **The Queen of Whale Cay**, which won the Somerset Maugham award and was shortlisted for the Whitbread biography award. Summerscale lives in London.

Critical Praise

"[A] fastidious reconstruction and expansive analysis of the Road Hill murder case?Summerscale smartly uses an energetic narrative voice and a suspenseful pace, among other novelistic devices, to make her factual material read with the urgency of a work of fiction."

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Publication Date: February 24, 2009
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: Walker & Company
ISBN-10: 080271742X
ISBN-13: 9780802717429