



Black River Road: An Unthinkable Crime, an Unlikely Suspect and the Question of Character

Debra Komar

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In 1869, in the woods just outside of the bustling port city of Saint John, a group of teenaged berry pickers discovered several badly decomposed bodies. The authorities suspected foul play, but the identities of the victims were as mysterious as that of the perpetrator. From the twists and turns of a coroner's inquest, an unlikely suspect emerged to stand trial for murder: John Munroe, a renowned architect, well-heeled family man, and pillar of the community.

Munroe was arguably the first in Canada's fledgling judicial system to actively defend himself, and his lawyer's strategy was as simple as it was revolutionary: Munroe's wealth, education and exemplary character made him incapable of murder. The press, and Saint John's elite, vocally supported Munroe, sparking a debate about character and murder that continues to this day. In re-examining a precedent-setting historical crime with fresh eyes, Komar addresses questions that still echo through the halls of justice more than a century later: Is everyone capable of murder, and should character be treated as evidence in homicide trials?

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Delvina Greig says

Oh geeky historical research books, how I adore you. A carefully reconstructed event backed by mostly primary documents and decent explanation of how class played a huge role in people's attitudes about morality.

Stephen Ring says

Read for library book club and this was an excellent start to our 2017-2018 season. Debra Komar takes an actual case from the 1860s set in Saint John and brings to life the society and legal system on the days

Virginia Van says

In 1869, berry pickers discovered the badly decomposed bodies of a woman and a child on a wooded road near Saint John, NB. A bullet hole in the head of the woman suggested foul play, but the identities of the victims were a mystery. However, as the coroner's inquest proceeded, it was revealed that the victims were Maggie Vail, the secret mistress of John Munroe, wealthy architect and family man, and their illegitimate baby daughter. Charged with murder, Munroe's lawyer's defense was simply that a man of Munroe's class, education and exemplary character would be incapable of murder. In looking back at this crime, Komar addresses the question of whether or not anyone is capable of murder and should character be treated as evidence in homicide trials? Past on trial transcripts and newspaper reports, this book offers an interesting look into Canadian judicial history.

Debralloyd.Ca says

This non-fiction historical is book about a true murder crime that happened back in the 1860's in St. John, NB. In the first chapter you may question whether or not this is a book for you but keep going. Debra Komar starts out explaining the whole social concept of murder then in a short time goes right into the story of John Munroe and Maggie Vail. Debra keeps the story based on historical documentation she was able to find on this crime and the Monroe & Vail families as well as other character's. I very much enjoyed reading about Victorian day crime solving and how it differs from today.

Leah says

A question of character...

One day in 1869, well-to-do architect John Munroe drove his mistress, Maggie Vail, and their baby daughter

out in a cab to Black River Road near Saint John (in Canada). All three got out, ostensibly to visit friends, and later Munroe returned alone. He told the cab driver that Maggie would be staying with the friends. Some months later, the putrified and unidentifiable remains of a woman and child were found by people out picking berries near Black River Road.

Debra Komar starts this true crime story by discussing the trial of Jeffrey Dahmer, and the court's decision that, despite the nature of his crimes, he was sane and could be held responsible for his actions. This decision was reached on the basis of evidence from Park Dietz, a forensic psychiatrist, who developed the theory of "universal lethality" - that all people have it in them to kill, and it is only social institutions that train us not to. Komar suggests that before this, character played a large part in criminal trials, including John Munroe's, at a time when forensic science was still in its infancy. There was a widespread feeling that men of good character (aka rich people) couldn't commit horrific crimes, and that moral degeneracy was the preserve of the poor.

Komar then takes us back to tell us the story of how Munroe and Maggie became involved. Munroe was the spoiled child of an indulgent father. By the time he met Maggie, he was an upcoming architect who had married well, but for social position rather than love. His wife, however, didn't show him the adoration he felt he deserved, so Munroe looked elsewhere. Poor Maggie – unmarried, overweight, and not very attractive – was willing to adore him as much as he liked. When the inevitable happened and her child was born, Munroe attempted to dump them, but Maggie wasn't so easily dumped. Munroe played hot and cold with her, sometimes turning up unexpectedly, other times writing to her that she should stop contacting him. And then Maggie and child disappeared. Maggie's sister received a letter, purporting to come from the illiterate Maggie, to the effect that she had met another man and gone off to Chicago to marry him.

This part of the story is very well told, giving a real feel for the coldness of Munroe's character, and the rather desperate attempts of Maggie, now with a ruined reputation, to force him to meet his obligations as a father. The focus of the book is very much on this particular story, but we do get some idea of the wider society of the time, with the usual hypocritical gender bias that despised and ostracised an unmarried mother while cheerfully continuing to respect a male adulterer.

The story then moves on to the investigation and subsequent trial, with Komar showing at each stage how Munroe's respectable position in society led to a widespread refusal to accept his possible guilt. The newspapers ran stories in outraged defence of him, and thirty-five people were called to give evidence of his good character, even though some of them barely knew him except through business dealings. The problem of identification added a layer of difficulty to the prosecution, and Komar gives dramatic, well written accounts of witnesses having to identify pieces of clothing or, gruesomely, the hair of the corpse.

An interesting crime story, well researched and well written. Komar's decision to leave all reference to her sources to the notes at the back means there's a good flow to the narration of events. The fairly narrow focus on the crime keeps the book down to a fairly shortish length. However, it also means we don't get an in-depth picture of the society, nor of Munroe's life beyond the crime – for example, we learn little about his relationship with his wife and legitimate children, before or during the trial. Within those limits, though, it's an enjoyable read that I recommend to fans of true crime.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Goose Lane.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Sarah-Jane says

I could hardly put it down.

Susie James says

Okay, my copy of "Black River Road" arrived in yesterday's snail mail, and I set aside another book I won via Goodreads, the biography of writer Evelyn Waugh, to devour the true crime retrospective by Debra Komar. Clearly written and with authority. I'd recommend it to anyone interested in true crime and history: the events retold in this volume occurred in the late 1860s-1870 in Canada but come with the author's insights on such subject matter extending across the centuries and across national boundaries. Komar's writing is done crisply and smartly, but in a way that does draw the reader's interest. Don't let a killer off because the accused has a "good rep" -- according to theory (and in introducing her story, Komar discusses the Jeffrey Dahmer case) -- evil acts can come out of decisions made by any one of us.

Jeannie says

As in her previous books, Komar uses archival records to look at a crime in the past, this time highlighting our obsession with character in a case from Victorian era New Brunswick. The result is an re-evaluation of our society's obsession with motive, a preoccupation that distracts from the question of whether a person is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. In this one as in her other three "case studies" society's perception of a person's class enters the justice system, muddying the waters. Komar's wry wit enhances the tale. Already looking forward to her next one!

Donald says

A well-written and well-researched page turner. I highly recommend it!

James Fisher says

If you liked any of Ms. Komar's previous historical crime books, then *Black River Road* will not disappoint. It is a quick, fascinating read of the first case to use character as a defense in a murder trial. Her research and past medico-legal experience make for an authoritative, factual and entertaining read. Not to mention educational, for those of us not so well versed in legal matters. Five solid stars!

Sharon Fournier says

Great book.

Courtenay Sutton says

I love local history and where I'm from Saint John it was a no brainer to get this book. This book was very well researched and very well written. If you like history, I recommend it!

Corey says

Fascinating look at "character" as evidence. More relevant with each passing day.

Greg Marquis says

Full disclosure- I read the book and provided an endorsement on the back cover. This is a highly readable but thoughtful examination of mid-Victorian double murder that shocked a New Brunswick community not only because an infant was killed, but also because of the status of the accused killer- a supposedly respectable married architect . The tale has special meaning in Saint John, where in the recent past a monument was erected in honour of victims Margaret 'Maggie' Vail and her daughter Ella May. The author's background in forensic anthropology, and her work on other murder cases from Canada's past, allows her to raise interesting questions that resonate with our contemporary justice system-Greg Marquis.
