

A True History of Thirteen  
Respectable French and English Women  
Accused of Unspeakable Crimes

# Victorian Murderesses



Mary S. Hartman

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## **Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes** Mary S. Hartman

This riveting combination of true crime and social history examines a dozen cases from the 1800s involving thirteen French and English women charged with murder. Each incident was a *cause célèbre*, and this mixture of scandal and scholarship offers illuminating details of backgrounds, deeds, and trials.

"The real delight is that historian Mary S. Hartman does more than reconstruct twelve famous trials. She has written a piece on the social history of nineteenth-century women from an illuminating perspective: their favorite murders." — *Time Magazine*

"Noteworthy .... It has several distinctions: its expert prose style, its scholarly authority, and its perceptive analysis of the prevailing attitudes toward women's roles and domestic relations." — *Criticism*

"The author would have made a fine detective .... When she observes the women and men in extreme circumstances, she writes with the gift of a novelist and the depth of a scholar." — *Los Angeles Times*

"Vividly written, meticulously researched." — *Choice*

"Loved this book and so glad to see it's been returned to print! You can't beat the highly readable scholarly treatment of these 13 Victorian murderesses. Harman does a spectacular job of bringing these women and the carnage they created into the 20th and 21st centuries as well as giving the reader an excellent feminist critique of their reception in scholarly and popular culture. Pour yourself a cup of tea and enjoy the variety of their crimes and their drive to define themselves outside the constrictions of Victorian life." — Under the Covers and Reading

## **Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes Details**

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# **From Reader Review Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes for online ebook**

## **Heath says**

So much arsenic.

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## **Susanne says**

Really enjoyed this. Social & historical analysis plus probable reconstructions of the crimes. Scholarly and entertaining.

And in at least one of these cases--that I've read about before and the woman is always portrayed as innocent-- thanks to this meticulous research & reconstruction, I'm now convinced she was totally guilty.

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## **Tintaglia says**

Gli aspiranti lettori siano avvisati: sotto la maschera del true crime vittoriano questo saggio è un'approfondita analisi del ruolo della donna nella Francia e nell'Inghilterra del 1800, delle aspettative e pressioni sociali che la riguardavano, dell'immagine a cui doveva rispondere nelle varie fasi della sua esistenza. E di come questa immagine e queste aspettative insieme generassero delitti e influenzassero sentenze. Accurato e interessante.

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## **Katherine Addison says**

This is a good and interesting book, but it's definitely far more Women's Studies than it is True Crime. Hartman pairs 6 sets of French and English women who were tried for murder in the 19th century, and analyzes their crimes in terms of women's rights and expectations around marriage. (I say "around" rather than "in" because 2 of the women, Constance Kent and Celestine Doudet, were unmarried.) She's interested, as she says, in using these causes célèbres to illuminate the lives of ordinary bourgeois women, rather than having any particular interest in the crimes themselves.

So her interpretations and analyses of the women's crimes are about as you'd expect, heavy on the abstract and light on the forensic follow-through. I mean, it's not her fault that Kate Summerscale came along and wrote *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, but it's still true that that book makes Hartman's analysis of the murder of Francis Savile Kent look particularly shoddy. Given my own interests, I found the book a little disappointing, but it did introduce me to a number of French murderesses whom I had not known about.

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## **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

I found this book's layout a bit confusing. Two women per chapter. Their cases were compared. Except the chapters were really long and the print was minuscule and it was easy to twist the two up. The cases themselves were interesting. Only one had I read about in its own book.

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## **Laura says**

2.5 stars. This book should have been really interesting, but I had a lot of trouble getting into it. I didn't find the author's writing style to be very compelling, which I think was a large part of the problem for me. Also, I thought that including 2 women in each chapter and going back and forth between them got confusing at times - I would have preferred a single chapter for each subject.

Received from NetGalley.

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## **Kelsey says**

It was really interesting, but a bit dry and academic. I'd love to take a class that had this on the syllabus, but as a pleasure-read it was a little dull.

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## **OutlawPoet says**

Scholarly, But Fascinating

When I chose to read this book, I thought I was getting something lightweight - a scandalous, fluffy, and sensationalist book about murderesses. I had my popcorn ready.

But as I started to read, I realized that this is a serious and scholarly study of a woman's place in Victorian society, how it lead to various murders, and how society's view of women impacted the outcome of various murder investigations. And I still munched my popcorn.

This is an intelligently written and fascinating historical perspective that completely opened my eyes to life as a Victorian woman. The book really isn't about the murders per se, so if you are expecting gruesome details and salacious photos, move on. Instead, you get an in depth and very personal look into the lives of thirteen women, as well as a perspective, based on their experiences, of life in general at that time.

Yes, there is sex (in some cases a lot of it), poison, and intrigue, but it's bracketed by a serious look at how women were treated then - and now.

I would have wished for more photos of the women in question (if they exist) and, yes I admit it, a little more gruesome detail, but this was a fascinating read!

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### **Janice Schulz says**

*Victorian Murderesses* epitomizes everything I look for in a true crime study. Mary Hartman tells the stories of 12 women in England and France accused of murder in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, including their motivations, the crimes they committed, and their court trials. (Curiously the book's subtitle claims 13 women, but I only count 12.) Far from making it a mere sensationalized tale, Hartman delves into the societal influences that she believes had a bearing on the way their lives developed and the decisions that they made. Additionally, she looks at how the public reacted to the crimes and the women who committed them, especially the way other women treated the subject of female murderers based on class, family, values, and norms. Broken up into six parts, the book examines two women at a time, using some comparative element that ties their crime, their domestic situation, or their influences. *Victorian Murderesses* is well researched and expertly written. Unlike some true crime authors, Hartman does not attempt to fictionalize the narrative of her subjects, but skillfully uses letters and trial transcripts to bring them to life without making the book read like a simple regurgitation of facts. She also breaks down each crime after describing it and attempts to determine what actually happened based on the evidence, despite the recorded outcome. I highly recommend this book for true crime enthusiasts and anyone interested in Victorian history.

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### **Donna Davis says**

Note the change.

My review below, a three star review, stands as written.

However, my teenager, a high school senior, grabbed this book the instant I set it down, and proclaims it to be "...even better than I thought!" She is using it to acquire extra credit in world history class, and speaks about the various murderesses as if they were family members. This one, she thinks was vindicated; that one, she has NO sympathy for.

So from our household, the average is now four stars; three from me, and five from Emiko.

"True crime" is a big house with a whole lot of rooms. Some true crime books are deliciously prurient; others are as dusty as the top of a ten foot tall bookcase. In this case, the title ("unspeakable") and the jacket artist lead the reader to believe we are really going to get down and dish the dirt, and what is more...it's all true!

Instead, what we have here is a very well-written, well-documented, extremely scholarly if surprisingly dry bit of research, maybe the author's advanced degree work. The collision between the teaser and the product are somewhat jarring. This was a First Read sent me free through the Goodreads program and the publisher. I would have abandoned it more readily had I not felt a duty to get through it.

What would have fit the bill without ruining the author's hard work is a good piece of juicy narrative nonfiction. Put in the documentation, but pick up the pace! As is, the book is sometimes a feminist treatise that all but blames Victorian society's social contract for slut-shaming as an understandable excuse for murder in the case of unsuitable, unmarriageable mates of the lower classes (sorry, no sympathy here), or a self-defensive maneuver against constant verbal abuse, without the loss of a high standard of living that came

with the ornery groom. A baby born out of wedlock gets snuffed when an abortion can't be obtained.

At other times, the pace quickens a bit, as if the author is about to get excited and take us along with her, but then her dispassionate researcher's mind grabs hold of her--stop it right now, you're getting worked up!--and we go back to the librarian's hushed monotone.

The font, while suitably Victorian, is really tiny and hard on the eyes.

It may be that I am being unfair to Hartman; she has done a good deal of work here, and the fault may lie with Dover or whoever is publishing and promoting her work. All I know is that I expected this to be a fun read, and it wasn't. I kept pushing it away in favor of other reading, as if postponing the book might make me like it better once I returned to it.

A strong, scholarly effort that should have been marketed as such. Not a Halloween read.

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### **Andréa says**

The subject matter is quite interesting, but it's addressed in a much more scholarly, academic way than I was expecting. Each chapter contrasts two similar murderesses, switching back and forth between their stories, which makes it hard to keep the individual stories straight. The introduction and conclusion completely summarize the cases studied, much the way a collegiate thesis or dissertation would, and refer to the text as "this study". All in all, it's an intriguing book, but definitely not a quick or easy read.

*Note: I received a digital galley of this book through NetGalley.*

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### **A.L. Butcher says**

3.5 stars

This is not a bad book, but it's not particularly good either - at least structurwise

The cases included in this text are:

- Marie Lafarge and Euphémie Lacoste;
- Madeleine Smith and Angelina Lemoine;
- Celestine Doudet and Constance Kent;
- Florence Bravo and Henriette Francy;
- Gabrielle Fenayrou and Adelaide Bartlett;
- Florence Maybrick and Claire Reymond.

Good points:

The French cases were largely unknown to me and that aspect was interesting. The comparisons between French and English middle-class society and the position of women were fairly well discussed.

There was a mix of cases, although all were 'respectable' women from the time. What was expected of middle-class women, and her own expectations - marriage, children and running the household - were

discussed at length. Many had arranged marriages - often to men much older, or totally unsuitable. Divorce was not a viable option, especially as the father would have maintained control of any children, and the money. Thus most of these women were stuck in relationships, not of their choosing (with the exception of Madeleine Smith - who was in a relationship with a man below her station and disapproved of by her family).

Although the cases were discussed fairly sympathetically there was a lot of the authors own views on whether the particular murderer was guilty of the crime she committed. Not all were, and those who were found guilty may not have been. At least one was judged on her moral crimes (adultery) as much as the actual murder.

The author had done her research and it showed. The social comparisons were good and I think the most interesting aspect was the emerging position of women in both France and England during the 19th century. There was good focus on the societal aspects of what may have caused these women to take, or consider taking, the ultimate solution to their woes.

Bad points:

The book jumped around a lot. All the time. It became hard to follow and sometimes wasn't clear which case was being discussed. References to other cases made things more confusing.

The accounts were long and meandered. They became stories in their own right. Why is this bad? For a book that is meant to be a non-fic there was too much of the 'newspaper' style telling. Give me the facts - if I want a fiction on the subject I'll read historical fic about the cases.

There were quite a few formatting issues.

I just couldn't really get into the long, often dry accounts of the crimes. It's a shame because the sociological side of the book was interesting for the most part. If the book had been more structured then the rating would have been higher.

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### **H.L. Stephens says**

I think my great mistake with this book was having read other books that had a more extensive history of each woman and the crime(s) she was accused of committing. There seemed to be more conjecture than detail in this book and I like the facts more than speculation, especially when each segment is so abbreviated. All in all, it is a good starting place for the novice who is curious about Victorian crimes committed by women. I would not recommend however stopping here.

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### **Cleo Bannister says**

There is something quite fascinating about women who murder, and judging by the amount of contemporary reporting of the details about the cases featured in this book, nothing much has changed over time. In this book the author has selected an Englishwoman and a Frenchwoman for each chapter based upon the circumstances, rather than the method of their crimes. All the women featured are from the middle-classes and a certain amount of conjecture is used to paint a picture of this class of women from the details of their cases the reasoning of the author being that these women's lives weren't documented or studied in the way of the lower classes and so using these cause celebres can give us a glimpse behind the drawing room curtains of their lives. I'm not completely convinced by this argument but for some of the broader details it

works, for instance the chapters that touch upon contraceptive gives us an idea of how widespread or acceptable this was in Victorian England for the middle-classes.

The beauty of this book is threefold; the details of the crimes committed the resulting investigation and if appropriate trial, the popular opinion at the time of the guilt or innocence of those accused using contemporary media and lastly the particular social issues that may have led these women to act outside the law and kill another person. Each case presented was interesting and appeared to be well-researched, although one of the downsides of reading this kind of book on the kindle is that following the notes as you go along is very time-consuming so I tended to wait until I'd finished a chapter to catch-up on these. The fact that there were two women per chapter means that the reader does need to concentrate once the initial setting of the scene has happened, as the author switches between the two subjects to compare and contrast the difference between the two societies in a number of different spheres, including popular opinion and expectations.

The author states in the preface:

These accused daughters, wives and mothers have little to teach any would-be twentieth-century practitioner about the art of murder; nearly all of them bungled badly in the ac, and those who got away with it relied upon methods that required special circumstances and relations between the sexes which no longer obtain.

And that is precisely what makes this study so interesting, women can no longer act coy in the witness box, but they could, and were expected to, in Victorian England and so many of the more salacious details are hinted at rather than baldly stated both at the trial and the resultant reporting.

The cases cover the years 1840-1890's and the subjects covered are:

Marie Lafarge and Euphemie Lacoste which covers the use of arsenic in matrimony

Madeline Smith and Angelina Lemoine who were both between school and marriage when they were accused of killing their lovers

Celestine Doudet and Constance Kent who were both spinsters when they murdered

Florence Bravo and Henriette Francey the so called new women who were defying the old order of society

Gabrielle Fenayrou and Adelaide Bartlett both wives of shopkeepers who were reported to have committed adultery

Florence Maybrick and Claire Reymond who were allegedly victims of the double standards held at the time.

I found this book both interesting and informative although the language at time is quite dry, this is a study rather than a book for entertainment but one that I will be seeking a physical copy of on my bookshelf to supplement my Victorian crime selection.

This book was originally published back in 1976 but has been re-released in 2014 for a new generation of readers by Dover Publications who were kind enough to give me a copy of this book in return for my honest review.

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**graveyardgremlin says**

While I appreciate the extensive research that went into this book, the thorough (and I do mean thorough!) examinations of how these women might have grown up and the expectations of what their lot in life should be, plus other circumstances makes it a real drag to read. If this was for some womens' class, it'd be a good study, but for me, it's going back to the library.

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