



The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime: Forgotten Cops and Private Eyes from the Time of Sherlock Holmes

Michael Sims (Editor)

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A wonderfully wicked new anthology from the editor of *The Penguin Book of Gaslight Crime*

It is the Victorian era and society is both entranced by and fearful of that suspicious character known as the New Woman. She rides those new-fangled bicycles and doesn't like to be told what to do. And, in crime fiction, such female detectives as Loveday Brooke, Dorcas Dene, and Lady Molly of Scotland Yard are out there shadowing suspects, crawling through secret passages, fingerprinting corpses, and sometimes committing a lesser crime in order to solve a murder.

In *The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime*, Michael Sims has brought together all of the era's great crime-fighting females- plus a few choice crooks, including Four Square Jane and the Sorceress of the Strand.

The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime: Forgotten Cops and Private Eyes from the Time of Sherlock Holmes Details

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From Reader Review The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime: Forgotten Cops and Private Eyes from the Time of Sherlock Holmes for online ebook

Caroline Berg says

I very much enjoyed the stories in this collection by Anna Katherine Green. They really stood out from the rest. Even if this book did only include the first chapter of her collection with detective Amelia Butterworth - which means I'll have to hunt down the rest of the tale to find out how it ends!

Other good authors in the collection are:

Andrew Forrester Jr. (a presumed pen-name, no one really knows the true name of the author), also stood out with a story from *The Revelations of a Private Detective* a series with detective Mrs. G-. The tale was a lot of fun with constant action, and Mrs. G- with her snarky comments feels like she could be transposed into modern times.

C.L. (Catherine Louisa) Pirkis with a tale from her series *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* which is unique for two reasons: (1) Brooke is the first female detective written by a female author and (2) Brooke never ends up married. I'll be hunting down more of her stories.

Grant Allen with *Miss Cayley's Adventures*, the story itself is highly amusing because of Cayley's voice and there is the bonus that she is definitely not all white - she has a dark complexion, black curly hair, and dark brown eyes. Her voice is strong and refreshing, and I'd gladly read the rest of her adventures.

M. McDonnell Bodkin's story about Dora Myrl which appeared in the collection was good - but I've heard his tale where he has Dora meet Paul Beck (another detective he created) is supposed to be one of the worst written (the author could not write love stories...) so while I might read more of Dora's tales, I'm going to steer clear of when she meets Paul. However, he does get accolades for being the first author to have a crime-solving family that worked on cases together.

Then there are some OK authors:

George R. Sims with a story from *Dorcas Dene, Detective: Her Life and Adventures*. He was a contemporary with Arthur Conan Doyle and modeled Dorcas off of Holmes to a certain extent - in a good way (unlike some of the other female detectives in the collection who were also based off of Holmes). The story wouldn't be bad, but it was very dated... very Victorian in feel. However, I will be reading more of his works. I'd like to see if other tales about Dorcas are as stilted as this one, or if it is an outlier. Dorcas was fun to read as she solved the crime, it was the crime that was very Victorian. Unlike the next author.

W. S. Hayward with a story from *Revelations of a Lady Detective* has the distinction of being the oldest "true" detective novel featuring a female detective, but Mrs. Paschal is very Victorian in feel. She does act modern in some ways, she is at least smart enough to remove her petticoats when climbing through trap doors in cellars, but she still obeys a great many restrictions of Victorian society. It would be hard to imagine her transported out of her time, unlike some of the other detectives in the collection, but I'm glad a tale about her was included in the collection.

And then you get to the authors I just didn't like.

Mary E. Wilkins wasn't normally a writer of detective stories, so the tale included by her just wasn't up to the rest of the tales in the collection. Though Sarah Fairbanks was a rather unique amateur detective - she was extremely thorough when searching for clues. Mostly I didn't like the tone of the tale, so I likely won't be searching out her other stories.

Richard Marsh (pen name of Richard Bernard Heldmann) was a prolific writer in his day, and wrote many stories in many genres, but was more famous for his tales of exotic atmospheric horror. I don't like how he writes the female detective in the tale that was included (Judith Lee from *Judith Lee, Some Pages from Her Life*), but I might look into his collection *Curios: Some Strange Adventures of Two Bachelors*. I have a feeling he writes male characters a bit better.

And saving the worst for last, Hugh C. Weir, who created *Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective*. Madelyn isn't just a Mary Sue, she is exactly like Holmes (even down to a Coca - cocaine berry - addiction, which she keeps in a locket around her neck) if you just replace playing the violin with gardening... She is too much of a character to be real! She only ever dresses in all black or all white - we're introduced to her in all white, with even the flowers on her desk matching... it's just bizarre. And not only is her name alliterative, her "Watson" is Nora Noraker a journalist who exclusively covers her exploits. It's too much! It is almost, *almost* into the territory of a parody, but it takes itself too seriously to ever be one. I'm not likely to read anything else by Weir if that's how he tackles female detectives! (Though I could see these as being made into modern TV shows - they have that sort of tabloid quality to them.)

Kay says

A fairly entertaining collection of stories from the golden age of Victorian detective fiction. I had come across a few of these women detectives before (most memorably, Grant Allen's Miss Cayley), but others I'd never heard of. A few of the stories are rather plodding, particularly the one long 'procedural', and I experienced a bit of frustration with another story which is actually the beginning of the book and not a complete story. (It sets out the crime and the investigator... and then leaves it at that. Not very satisfactory.)

One aspect that I did like about the book, though, was the background information that Sims provides on the various authors, and the introductory essay that surveys the field of Victorian detective fiction and the emergence of the female detective. That was nicely done.

Lisa Grabenstetter says

I always find it difficult to fairly rate an anthology. Some of the stories are excellent, others not so much. Definitely worth a read, though, a very interesting collection.

Kat says

This book is so fabulous, I loved the short stories in here. Particularly good is the gripping thriller 'The Long Arm' by Mary E. Wilkins, which rivals any modern page-turner, and the ridiculously entertaining 'The

Adventure of the Cantankerous Old Lady' by Grant Allen, which is exactly the kind of over the top story I wish I'd written.

Let's just say, beware a girl with a bicycle... they're rather uncouth, dangerous and altogether too bad to know. But they might solve a crime or two, and on two wheels at that.

Helen says

A great collection of Victorian detective featuring female protagonists. Not all of the stories are written by women, however, which was a little disappointing, but the biographical sketches of the authors before each story were well researched and interesting.

The only misstep I felt was including the first chapter of "That Affair Next Door", a novel by Anna Katherine Green. I felt it didn't work well enough on its own, either to introduce the character of Amelia Butterworth or as a complete narrative. Green is featured twice, I think the editor could have found something by another author instead to fill That Affair's spot, especially as he admits in the introduction that there were things he chose to leave out.

But on the whole the book was entertaining and interesting in the way that both the changes in ideas in gender and technology during the Victorian era make their way in to the stories, where characters who once rode in hansom cabs are now striking out on their own on bicycles.

Jacob says

[Michael Sims is a wicked bloke. He's a cool cat. He's a hoopy frood who knows where his towel is. He's also the editor of the anthologies The Penguin Book of Gaslight Crime and The Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime, and one hopes he's just getting started. I expect to see The Penguin Book of Cockney Orphans and The Penguin Book of Ghastly Prostitute Murders next. Any day now.

Contents:

- 1) "**The Mysterious Countess**" by W. S. Hayward
 - 2) "**The Unknown Weapon**" by
-

Bev says

It is very difficult for me to rate this one. The stories represent a nice selection of early detective fiction--particularly those that feature female protagonists. They are all interesting and well-written. And I certainly recommend the anthology to anyone interested in this era of detective fiction. My difficulty? Well, Michael Sims makes a point of saying that he has made an effort to include stories that have not been reprinted--or that have not been reprinted as much as other stories by the same authors. It's odd then that of the eleven stories here, only four are new to me--I don't count the excerpt from Anna Katherine Green's longer work. And I've read all of the others within the last two years. I was looking forward to some fresh stories and I guess the disappointment of that expectation has somewhat colored my response to this anthology. If you haven't read much of the early works of detective fiction, then you're in for a treat. As for me, I'm giving the

collection a solid three star rating.

Here's a run-down of the stories:

"The Mysterious Countess" (1864, possibly 1861) by W. S. Hayward. This is the first story to feature a female professional detective--Mrs. Paschal. She is adept at putting herself into any role requested. In this one she poses as a servant so she might discover the source of the Countess of Vervaine's seemingly endless supply of money....despite the lack of visible signs of support. Mrs. Paschal braves underground tunnels and has to track her quarry down in a distant village before she gets to the bottom of the mystery.

"The Unknown Weapon" (1864) by Andrew Forrester. It is about the death of the son of a miserly old man who is killed while apparently in the the process of breaking into his own father's house. He has been stabbed with a weapon that no seems to be able to identify. This story has the honor of being quite probably the first novel about the Metropolitan Police (formed in 1829) , the first modern detective novel, and the first novel featuring a professional female detective. She is absolutely unnamed in this particular outing, but in other stories by Forrester, she is referred to as Mrs. G---- of the Metropolitan Police. She makes reference to herself and another female officer as constables...and I find it interesting to have references to female constables at this early date. Mrs. G---- is a thoroughly scientific detective, reminding the reader of Holmes. Had she the advantages of his training at university, I'm sure she would have examined her own bits of fluff under the microscope rather than sending them off in a tin box and directing "it to the gentleman who is good enough to control these kind of investigations." She faithfully takes up every piece of evidence, giving it a more thorough going-over than the local constable, looks over the scene of the crime, and thinks the problem through with logic that Holmes could not fault. There is no "feminine intuition" at work; it is a thoughtful, orderly investigation. The grand finale is a bit of a let-down--but over all a very good early detective story.

"Drawn Daggers" by C. L. Pirkis (1893). Starring Loveday Brooke--the first known female detective created by a female author. Miss Brooke is presented as not only an intelligent and independent young woman, but as a woman who has taken up the profession because she is good at it. She's not supporting a sister or a disabled husband. She's not ultra-feminine to make up for her brains. She's just a good detective. I have long had *The Experiences of Loveday Brooks, Lady Detective* on my list of books to look for. "Daggers Drawn" pays homage to Sherlock Holmes and I find Miss Brooks' way of keeping clues to herself very much in the Holmes style. Very feminist characterization for the time period.

"The Long Arm" by Mary Wilkins (1895). Not really a female detective. Sarah Fairbanks finds herself suspected of her father's murder--because her father disapproved of the man she loved. There are other suspects--and several clues, like where are her father's overalls and where did the yellow ribbon come from?

The Affair Next Door, Ch. 1 (1897) by Anna Katherine Green. I'm a bit disappointed with this one--not in the writing itself, but that our editor chose to include a chapter of a longer work. It doesn't really give us a feel for Amelia Butterworth and since it's not a self-contained story, it leaves me unsatisfied.

"The Man with the Wild Eyes" by George Robert Sims (1897). Starring Dorcas Dene, a former actress who seems adept at assuming any role. In this one she masquerades as a private nurse in order to find out why a man's daughter claims to have had a fainting fit when it's obvious she's been attacked--and nearly strangled at that.

"The Adventure of the Cantankerous Old Lady" by Grant Allen (1899). This one features Lois Cayley, a recent graduate of Girton College, and down to her last two pence. She agrees to be the companion to a rather cantankerous old lady--saving the lady's jewelry in the process. Not a strict mystery, but a lovely

period piece showing the "New Woman" of the late Victorian era--and one of the few stories I hadn't encountered before.

"How He Cut His Stick" by M. McDonnell Bodkin (1900). Starring Dora Myrl, a glamorous professional detective known at the time her stories came out as "A Sherlock Holmes in petticoats." She is no-nonsense and definitely know how the stick got cut in this tale of the missing 5,000 British pounds.

"The Man Who Cut Off My Hair" by Richard Marsh [aka Richard Bernard Heldmann] (1912). Judith Lee is a young girl who has the gift of reading lips. This gift and her fierce anger when the man cuts off her hair allow her to help the police bring a gang of jewel and precious metal thieves to justice.

"The Man With Nine Lives" by Hugh C. Weir (1914). Madelyn Mack, an "ordinary working detective" who is very Holmes-like--complete with a faithful Watson in the form of a female reporter and an addiction of her own (to a cola stimulant that helps her go without sleep and almost without food while on a case). A man sends a letter to Miss Mack claiming that eight attempts have been made on his life and he fears that a ninth will be made--successfully. He begs her to hurry to aid him. She does, but too late, and finds herself searching for an apparent madman as the culprit.

"The Second Bullet" by Anna Katherine Green (1915). This one features Green's other female detective, Violet Strange. Miss Strange is the most upper-crust of all the detectives in this anthology. She is a society girl for the most part who takes on cases that suit her so she can earn money to help a sister who was unjustly disinherited. "The Second Bullet" is the most tragic of the stories included...Miss Strange must prove that a woman's husband did not commit suicide--a death that resulted in the loss of her child as well. To do so, she must discover what happened to the second bullet.

This was first posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Kathy says

This collection is full of very well-thought-out choices and I love that the stories are presented chronologically (by their publication date; the stories span between 1864 and 1915). I especially appreciated Sims' introduction, which put you into the mind frame of exactly the social and political position women were placed in during the Victorian era in Britain.

The compilation consists of either short stories that were one-offs, shorts that were part of a series, or a chapter from a larger story. Either way, Sims set-up each one very well so you didn't feel lost and you understood where in the Victorian time line this story fell. He also includes a nice intro background to the authors that are included in this title.

Each time I finished a story I thought to myself, "Man, that was really good. I hope the next one isn't a let down." And the next one would be even better than the last. The only story I was kind of "meh" about is the second one, "The Unknown Weapon" by Andrew Forrester. It also happens to be the longest story in the collection, but it was good to read for context and historical purposes.

Susan says

Although there is no record of a woman on the detective force until 1918, they make their debut in fiction in 1864. While few of these stories are exemplary and some are downright clunky, they provide a fascinating look at the early history of the genre. They also offer a revealing portrait of women in Victorian society. While the heroines range from the most proper English ladies to the bicycle-riding “new woman,” each story strives to establish that they possess that most essential trait of female Victorians – womanliness. In one story the heroine is motivated to seek out the villains because they cut off her knee-length hair. In “The Long Arm,” Sarah is a determined investigator who successfully gathers all the clues to solve the case. However, she is not smart enough to work out what they mean until the male detective puts it all together for her. Fortunately many of the heroines do have the brains to figure things out for themselves, although almost every of them is explicitly described as “womanly.” Overall a fun read, especially the bicycle chase in “How He Cut His Stick.”

Suvi says

At the end of the 19th century, a new term emerged: "New Woman". This woman was independent, assertive, educated, career-oriented, and a supporter of women's rights to control their own lives and finances. The concept was radical at the time (meaning that although women gained more rights in terms of legislation, the attitudes were slow to follow), but these short stories don't make a huge deal about the women, and the ones that were written by men don't condemn or disapprove of women who support themselves (and in one case, a husband as well).

As is evident from the second title, *Forgotten Cops and Private Eyes from the Time of Sherlock Holmes*, the protagonists in these stories are either detectives or people who end up in situations where their set of skills is useful. Two authors have dedicated their writings to **Mary Holland**, who among other things worked as a fingerprint instructor and was dubbed as the Sherlock Holmes of Chicago. I can imagine how someone like her would inspire authors who wanted to write about lady detectives.

Granted, most women in the stories end up as detectives because of necessity, their profession isn't necessarily widely considered as a socially acceptable thing to do for a woman, and many people are initially surprised, but like Sims says in his introduction, "[t]he unwavering gaze inspired by confidence is a unifying trait among lady detectives". They need to be sure of themselves to succeed, not timid little flowers.

These ladies end up gaining the trust and admiration of their clients, and as working women they are more than qualified to be role models, such as Loveday Brooke, who *"doesn't act subservient in order to curry favor with her superior; frequently Brooke verbally spars with her boss, Ebenezer Dyer. She is socially mobile, moving constantly between train and cab, princess and housemaid, village and city. Occasionally she must walk alone at night unaccompanied by a man, which instantly places her in the suspect category of a likely prostitute"*. If necessary, they will also point a gun at criminals, or tell a policeman to get his shit together and help with a fainted woman, or chase down a suspect by bicycle.

When it comes to Sherlock Holmes, the best stories aren't inferior to the gentleman detective at all. It's a gross misrepresentation to say that these have been forgotten because of their quality. There are multiple reasons why something is stuck in the back pages of the history books, and it's not always because it's somehow bad.

Sims's collection does contain two or three duds and some of them have a bit too much exposition and telling instead of showing, but all of them have been written well and clearly (nothing that a reader already familiar with 19th century prose hasn't encountered before), and they're genuinely entertaining instead of being mere historical curiosities. I'm looking forward to exploring some of these authors further, and I'll deal with the individual detectives in more detail when I get the chance to search for the stories.

"Under my corkscrew-like qualities as a detective he had no more chance than a tender young cork with a corkscrew proper. I believe that to the end of the chapter he never comprehended that I was a detective. His mind could not grasp the idea of a police officer in petticoats."

Theresa says

Like all anthologies, there's a certain amount of unevenness in the selections, but there are a number of strong stories here--yes, girls can be detectives, too. I object somewhat to the use of the term Victorian to describe some of the American stories, but it is interesting to see developments in crime fiction on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to the stories themselves, this anthology has a useful introduction, as well as biographies of the (generally) obscure authors collected here.

Austen to Zafón says

WHY: It is the Victorian era and society is both entranced by and fearful of that suspicious character known as the New Woman. She rides those new-fangled bicycles and doesn't like to be told what to do. And, in crime fiction, such female detectives as Loveday Brooke, Dorcas Dene, and Lady Molly of Scotland Yard are out there shadowing suspects, crawling through secret passages, fingerprinting corpses, and sometimes committing a lesser crime in order to solve a murder.

A reviewer I follow wrote: "Each time I finished a story I thought to myself, "Man, that was really good. I hope the next one isn't a let down." And the next one would be even better than the last."

Robin Stevens says

A really interesting anthology of early crime fiction starring female detectives. There are some fantastic stories in here, and some weaker ones - I was surprised to see so many of the stories chosen written by male authors - but overall this is great. (14+)

Please note: this review is meant as a recommendation only. If you use it in any marketing material, online or anywhere on a published book without asking permission from me first, I will ask you to remove that use immediately. Thank you!

Monica Willyard says

This is a fascinating and delightful collection of short stories featuring women detectives from the Victorian era. I have found several new AUTHORS whose work I want to investigate.

Emma Probett says

"Another moment might have ended in my fainting also, if I had not realised that it would never do for me to lose my wits in the presence of a man who had none too many of his own."

- 'The Affair Next Door' by Anna Katherine Green.

Women detectives didn't appear in Britain, at least in official, respectable, and public capacity until the early C20th. Across the pond was a different matter altogether; the private Pinkerton Detective Agency employed the first female detective, Kate Warren, in 1856. Whilst female spies date back centuries to the likes of Milady de Winter, which these stories pay a certain homage to, the inspiration of America filters through into real detective work, complete with Sherlockian condescension as to method and the 'big reveal'.

Some of these stories are more enjoyable than others, some more likeable, and some more realistic, and some more engaging than others. But it is an excellent cross section into Victorian women in crime as detective and villains.

In the future I would like to see an edited collection of Victorian Women in Crime that contains only the obscure/forgotten women writers of the era.
