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A delectable true-crime story of scandal and murder at America's most celebrated university.

On November 23rd of 1849, in the heart of Boston, one of the city's richest men simply vanished. Dr. George Parkman, a Brahmin who owned much of Boston's West End, was last seen that afternoon visiting his alma mater, Harvard Medical School. Police scoured city tenements and the harbor, and offered hefty rewards as leads put the elusive Dr. Parkman at sea or hiding in Manhattan. But one Harvard janitor held a much darker suspicion: that their ruthless benefactor had never left the Medical School building alive.

His shocking discoveries in a chemistry professor's laboratory engulfed America in one of its most infamous trials: *The Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. John White Webster*. A baffling case of red herrings, grave robbery, and dismemberment—of Harvard's greatest doctors investigating one of their own, for a murder hidden in a building full of cadavers—it became a landmark case in the use of medical forensics and the meaning of reasonable doubt. Paul Collins brings nineteenth-century Boston back to life in vivid detail, weaving together newspaper accounts, letters, journals, court transcripts, and memoirs from this groundbreaking case.

Rich in characters and evocative in atmosphere, *Blood & Ivy* explores the fatal entanglement of new science and old money in one of America's greatest murder mysteries.

Blood & Ivy: The 1849 Murder That Scandalized Harvard Details

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From Reader Review Blood & Ivy: The 1849 Murder That Scandalized Harvard for online ebook

nikkia neil says

Thanks W. W. Norton & Company for this ARC. All opinions are my own.

This biography has so many echos into the present. You'll be outraged, engaged, and glued to your seat. Collins is a master at his craft.

Thebooktrail says

A real life crime of the century brought to grisly exquisite life!

Take your reading scalpel to this one and get dissecting!

Kari says

For the most part I enjoyed this one. It was kind of cool to read about Cambridge and Boston in the late 1840s. The author did a great job of setting the tone for the true crime story about the murder of a prominent Harvard professor. It was the first case in the US to use dental evidence as well as making a case for reasonable doubt. Worth a read, however it is a little slow.

Sue says

Excellent true crime book! Paul Collins has a great narrative style that keeps the story moving. The 1849 murder of a doctor and real estate mogul, as well as the eventual trial, was a sensation in Boston at the time and well worth a retelling of the story.

Collins weaves historical information about Harvard, including a scandal involving the stealing of cadavers, skillfully to give us a real feel of the atmosphere surrounding the disappearance and murder of Dr. Parkman. I was especially surprised to learn that this was the first case in the United States to use forensic science to prove someone's guilt in court. The presiding judge also gave a well-reasoned and famous explanation of reasonable doubt which remained in use for over 100 years.

Besides the excellent writing and relevant historical information I was surprised at the number of famous persons involved in or interested in the case. Oliver Wendell Holmes and Charles Dickens are only two of them. Dickens was so enthralled with the case that his last novel, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" was based on this case.

I would highly recommend this book for lovers of true crime, those who like historical crimes and those who

like their non-fiction books written in a easy to read narrative fashion.

Disclaimer: I won this book through Goodreads.

Graeme Roberts says

An elegant, beautifully structured tale from real life. Fascinating characters, just the right amount of detail, and a crystal-clear evocation of life in the Boston of 1849. I could smell it. Paul Collins is a modern master.

Paulcbry says

The book starts out focusing on cadavers but soon turns into a first rate murder mystery. The trial subsequent to the crime offers up the first clarification of the term 'reasonable doubt'. This is a terrific read from a terrific author. I look forward to more writings from him.

Cindy H. says

Thank you to NetGalley and WW Norton Publishing for gifting me with an ARC of Blood & Ivy by Paul Collins. In exchange I offer my unbiased review.

I absolutely loved this true crime account. Collins skillfully and artistically draws the reader into the mid 19th century and the exclusive halls of Harvard University. In 1849 Dr. George Parkman, a Harvard graduate and benefactor of the esteemed university left his home to run some errands and never returned. Foul play was quickly suspected and within a week the culprit arrested. The book goes about describing the victim, the accused, the trial and the aftermath. I was riveted from page one and completely mesmerized by the startling conclusion.

Paul Collins extensive research was evident as this nonfiction account read like fiction with all the astonishing details, newspaper headlines, letters and journals. Appearances from Harvard alumni, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes and poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow really added to the drama and mystery. Evocative and exhilarating this is a must read for all true crime fans and history buffs!

Rosa Tremaine says

In Blood & Ivy: The 1849 Murder that Scandalized Harvard, Paul Collins weaves a complex true crime tale that twists around itself rather like the hangman's noose that casts a long and deadly shadow over the plot. The book begins and ends with Charles Dickens, a device that is both clever and relevant to the context. I had always assumed Dickens to be exaggerating his characters into caricatures of themselves, but the real-life people in Blood & Ivy are every bit as eccentric and bizarre as any fictional creation, and under Collins' expert hands they spring to vivid life and march boldly off the page. It is a masterpiece of storytelling but also of historical investigation. The extensive notes in the back of the book are a testament to the author's dedication to accuracy and detail, yet it never reads as a dry recitation of history. A distinctly Victorian

flavour of gruesome fascination pervades the story, but is tempered by a frank modern appreciation of fact as well as how the case of Professor Webster was a legal trailblazer for subsequent trials.

If the conclusion of the case is somewhat unsatisfying, Paul Collins cannot be held to blame for the unanswered questions left hanging in the air - real life does not always provide a tidy and complete explanation for its mysteries.

Paul says

Blood & Ivy is another smart true crime book from Paul Collins. A slew of new types of evidence for the time and this great subject matter (a case that inspired Dickens!) will engage his existing fans and should bring a legion of new readers.

Many thanks to NetGalley, W. W. Norton & Company, and Mr. Collins for the advanced copy for review.

Full review can be found here: <https://paulspicks.blog/2018/03/17/bl...>

Please check out all my reviews: <https://paulspicks.blog>

Judith says

This book is important because it focuses on a court case, obscure I suspect to many Americans, that established the legal definition of "reasonable doubt" and the use of medical forensics. Certainly this case has been much cited. The writing is vivid and detailed and the main characters are described well. However, I think it would be improved by reviewing or detailing what legal jurisprudence used (or perhaps it didn't use anything?) before the judge of this case established the definition. I have sat on two juries and found the experience enlightening, but again like most Americans i think I have little legal background. This definition, however, is an important one in our legal system but an overview of what was the situation before the establishment of medical forensics would have made the significance of this case more significant, so to speak.

Emily says

True crime is not my usual genre, in fact, I think Devil in the White City is the only other true crime book I've read. For fans of that book, I recommend you give Collins a try.

Blood and Ivy has that interesting narrative style of a lot of modern history books like Devil in the White City. Collins has an extensive list of references—over 60 pages of notes and sources at the end of the book—and judging by his acknowledgments, it took him a lot of time to pull it all together into something readable.

Besides the grisly details and unraveling of the murder, the history of Boston, Cambridge, and specifically Harvard around 1849 was interesting to me. I was surprised by how many famous authors were connected to this case, either because they were faculty at Harvard, they knew Webster, or simply because they were alive during the trial and its aftermath. The Epilogue notes that the case was inspiration for Dickens's The Mystery of Edwin Drood, which I didn't know.

The legal precedents that came out of this case were fascinating too, particularly what became known as the “Webster charge,” based on the judge’s definition of reasonable doubt for the jury. It endured over 100 years after the trial, and Massachusetts didn’t decide to modernize it until 2015.

The history is by turns sad, perplexing, and disturbing. Collins did a nice job incorporating historical detail into his linear narrative of the investigation and trial. It was truly worth the read, and I’m interested in checking out his other work.

Steve says

A very interesting book. In 1849 Boston, a wealthy doctor by the name of George Parkman was last seen at Harvard Medical School. What makes this interesting, Is it became the first case where medical forensics was involved and the meaning of reasonable doubt. A great edge on your seat page-turner!!!!

Steve says

Disclaimer: I received this book from GoodReads' First Reads program.

Blood & Ivy is the story of a horrible murder that happened in mid-19th century Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dr. Parkman was making his rounds, collecting payments on debts owed him when he disappeared. A massive search and posted rewards turns up a whole lot of nothing. A janitor who works for one of the professors at Harvard notices something is wrong - one of the walls in the professor's lab is exceptionally hot. Worrying that a fire is in the next room, he investigates further. He finds nothing at first, but becomes suspicious, and while the professor is away, he breaks into the one area that hadn't been search - the privy. He manages to break through the wall into the privy and finds human remains. The police are notified, finding a torso and leg, and teeth and bones in the furnace. This leads to the arrest and eventual conviction of the janitor's employer, Dr. Webster. The trial becomes a huge sensation, with the professor claiming his innocence the whole time, and trying to pin the murder on the janitor. The jury doesn't buy it, and he is convicted and sentenced to death. In the end, he confesses to his crime and meets his maker. A very interesting true crime story, which I highly recommend to fans of the genre.

David Schwinghammer says

BLOOD AND IVY is about a famous murder trial occurring in 1849. What's unusual about it is that a Harvard professor is accused of murdering a famous doctor and real estate landlord.

The case was also unique in that there were no eye witnesses but the victim's false teeth were found in a small furnace in the accused's lab. The dentist who made his false teeth took the stand and identified the teeth as those he made for the victim. A handwriting expert also testified that one of the letters sent to the police and newspapers was written by Dr. Webster, the accused.

We also learn that no distinction was made between premeditated murder and second degree murder in those days. If guilty the accused would hang either way

One of the most valuable witnesses was the medical school janitor who noticed the lab door was locked in

the morning when he was accustomed to firing up Dr. Webster's furnace, since he constantly complained about being cold. He also noticed the wall of the lab was hot to the touch, which meant the furnace was being stoked almost beyond capacity. The janitor also found what remained of the body. The defense, used the now much used charge of accusing the janitor of the nefarious deed. He took the fifth when he was asked if he used the lab to gamble occasionally.

The newspapers of the day were basically tabloids and every wild scheme and accusation was duly published as were some of the letters sent in by obvious scammers, but as noted above, one of them was apparently sent by Dr. Webster.

I got the impression from the synopsis that the wrong man had been accused. I waited for a last minute reprieve and a last minute witness clearing the doctor. Otherwise this was a rather predictable true crime endeavor. But the authorities did make exceptions for the doctor since he had been at Harvard for many years and had never shown any sign of this type of malevolence, although he did have a bad temper.

Amanda says

Paul Collins sets you squarely in the insular 1840s Harvard, and pages fly by as you're drawn in to the story of how a murder rocked this staid society. I picked up this book having some familiarity with the case, but the whole thing turned out to be so much more than I knew! Recommended for true crime, Harvard/Boston history, or legal history enthusiasts.

I received a digital ARC from the publisher via Netgalley.
