



The Wages of Sin

Kaite Welsh

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Sarah Gilchrist has fled London and a troubled past to join the University of Edinburgh's medical school in 1892, the first year it admits women. She is determined to become a doctor despite the misgivings of her family and society, but Sarah quickly finds plenty of barriers at school itself: professors who refuse to teach their new pupils, male students determined to force out their female counterparts, and—perhaps worst of all—her female peers who will do anything to avoid being associated with a fallen woman.

Desperate for a proper education, Sarah turns to one of the city's ramshackle charitable hospitals for additional training. The St Giles' Infirmary for Women ministers to the downtrodden and drunk, the thieves and whores with nowhere else to go. In this environment, alongside a group of smart and tough teachers, Sarah gets quite an education. But when Lucy, one of Sarah's patients, turns up in the university dissecting room as a battered corpse, Sarah finds herself drawn into a murky underworld of bribery, brothels, and body snatchers.

Painfully aware of just how little separates her own life from that of her former patient's, Sarah is determined to find out what happened to Lucy and bring those responsible for her death to justice. But as she searches for answers in Edinburgh's dank alleyways, bawdy houses and fight clubs, Sarah comes closer and closer to uncovering one of Edinburgh's most lucrative trades, and, in doing so, puts her own life at risk...

An irresistible read with a fantastic heroine, beautifully drawn setting, fascinating insights into what it was like to study medicine as a woman at that time, *The Wages of Sin* is a stunning debut that heralds a striking new voice in historical fiction.

The Wages of Sin Details

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From Reader Review The Wages of Sin for online ebook

Michelle says

I don't know whether it is a case of every novel being timed perfectly to have the most meaning in today's political climate or a greater awareness of certain issues in general, but it does seem as if every novel I read lately is particularly important in illuminating the history behind current political viewpoints. *The Wages of Sin* certainly fits that bill. With its discussion of women, particularly poor women and their lack of choices when it comes to earning money, it covers women's rights or lack thereof during the Victorian Era. Plus, Sarah's foray as one of the first female medical students highlights the deep misogyny society still holds for women in traditionally male roles.

What I was expecting in this debut novel was not what I received. I expected an interesting story that provides a glimpse into life as a female medical student when women did not do that sort of thing. What I received was a compelling social commentary about so much more than just women in medical school. The mystery kept me intrigued, but it was Sarah's past "sin" and her growing awareness of the dichotomy between her life of privilege versus most other women that made me sit up and take notice.

The Wages of Sin is not the story of a poor little rich girl becoming enlightened. This is a story meant to shine the spotlight on repressive societal norms and the need to rethink one's position within that society. Sarah's troubled past is pertinent to her time volunteering at the charitable hospital in one of the city's worst slums and the patients she encounters there. Her eagerness to become a doctor is just another layer to the story during which she must reevaluate every rule she ever knew.

There is tremendous growth to Sarah which is wonderful to behold. To say much more would be to spoil a key plot point but one that is essential for understanding Sarah's drive and commitment to helping the poor. She is not a perfect heroine however, and it is not a perfect story. In spite of her emancipation proclivities, Sarah is still someone who requires rescuing. Even worse, she has a tendency to let her emotions guide her rather than her intellect, which serves to prove the point of those who oppose the modernization of women. Prone to jumping to conclusions because of her active imagination without asking enough logical questions, her assumptions are not just annoying but also lead to a series of unnecessary confrontations that place her into the very same scenarios about which she was warned. She is a perfect candidate for the use of reverse psychology.

Still, Sarah's weaknesses prove their own point in that they show how easily it is to accept societal norms at face value as well as how difficult it is to break free of them when it is the only thing you know. Then there is the issue of having others accept your breaking of those norms. Much of what Sarah observes and experiences as a woman in the Victorian era will be familiar to modern female readers, and that is the most chilling aspect of the novel. That we continue to have the same discussions about reproductive rights and other feminist issues over 100 years later speaks volumes about societal norms and who establishes them. It also highlights the ongoing uphill battle we face for the next generation of girls.

The Wages of Sin is a pleasant surprise in that it has more gravitas and depth than I expected. It is much more than a murder mystery set in Victorian Edinburgh. It presents a somber portrait of women of all classes in that era and the stifling confines of what was deemed polite society. Sarah might be somewhat ruled by her emotional state, but she is a woman of action and that speaks volumes to her commitment to her beliefs. Kaite Welsh's debut novel makes her an author worth noticing.

D says

The combination of 19th century, feminism, and Scotland gave me high hopes, but I became more unhappy as I read. The sleuthing aspect is minimal; two-thirds of the way through the novel, the protagonist still hasn't advanced beyond "I had no real reason to think she was murdered, but I could not stop thinking about her." Once things start to develop, the narrative flow is cut off at the knees when the backstory of the prime suspect emerges in a long explanation given *while standing over the newly-discovered corpse*. The endless conversations about gender roles in society—also discussed over that dead body, as well as in schoolrooms, drawing rooms, carriages, infirmaries, and brothels—rarely develop beyond the black-and-white pegs of "a woman must know her place" and "I loathed the restrictions and hypocrisy of society."

The author clearly did plenty of research, as shown in the period details, but there were serious historical lapses. Bloomers had their heyday in the early 1850s and their resurgence several decades later doesn't count as being "recently pioneered." The first female medical students to take classes at the University of Edinburgh began in 1869 so why is the class of 1892 causing such an uproar? It felt as if aspects of the nineteenth century were moved around by decades simply for the benefit of the plot, which is not how historical fiction is supposed to work.

The primary reason for the two star rating is the fact that although the mystery aspect wraps up with an interesting twist, the protagonist has no interior development. The novel goes along at the same emotional pitch all the way through, with Sarah in the same constant state of gloomy despair. There is no emotional resolution in relation to any part of her story, in spite of there being multiple plot lines that could have led to one or more - the trauma she experienced, the medical response to that trauma, her difficult relationship with her family, the push towards marriage, the difficulties faced by the female students at the hands of the men. The heroine experiences many difficult things, and she is sad about the murders and the reasons behind them, but she gains no emotional development.

The parallels between streetwalkers and seduced daughters of the better classes could have been developed into a nuanced and thoughtful novel, along the lines of Sarah Waters. (Which reminds me—the lesbian subplot comes out of nowhere and vanishes just as quickly.) Instead, the entire novel feels as narrow as the Old Town closes: a few Edinburgh locations visited repeatedly, a few discussion topics chewed over endlessly, and a protagonist who hardly moves beyond her initial state.

Mackey says

I have grown so bored with mysteries that torture women, terrorize them and basically make women appear to be helpless fools so when I saw the blurb "feminist heroine," I was immediately intrigued. The fact that the book was set in the Victorian Era only heightened my curiosity. I was not disappointed at all! The Wages of Sin is, unbelievably, the debut suspense novel by Kaitie Welsh. The heroine mentioned is Sarah Gilchrist, a former socialite with "a past" who is now one of the first females attending medical school in Edinburgh. It is there that she discovers the very dark underbelly of the Victorian Era and the hidden crimes being committed therein. Uncovering these crimes is one thing; exposing them leads to danger and possible expulsion from university.

Welsh weaves an unforgettable, dark tale of corruption, sexism and debauchery and her exquisite writing brings the stench and horrors of the Victorian Era to life right off of the pages. If you are a fan of historical fiction or historical suspense then this is a must read for you.

nikkia neil says

Thanks Pegasus Books and netgalley for this ARC.

Tantalizing first look at a new series that has everything I love in a historical mystery. Intrigue, rebellion, love, murder with a girl-power theme

Kirsten says

OK, OK, I get it: Victorian women were repressed no matter which class they were from. Men were mostly misogynistic bastards who wanted women for sex or breeding, and woe betide any woman who tried to climb out of the pit of ignorance.

This book veers between earnest musings on how women were repressed forever and hysterical drama. I didn't much care for any of the characters, even my beloved Edinburgh seemed like a hell hole. And the whodunnit in the end was so tremendously implausible that it actually made me giggle. Sorry 'bout that...

I am sure this book will find its fanbase easily enough, but Victoriana is quite simply not my thing.

Emmy says

[The author made it a little obvious who she *wanted* us to think the killer was. And then it felt a little sudden when he went from threatening Sarah to keep out of it, to telling her his whole backstory. About half way through I realized he was going to be the romantic interest and I had a real problem reconciling that man to that new role. Especially when he kept

Tess says

3.75 stars

Historical crime/mystery (with a touch of m/f romance). The first 3/4s was compelling, but I didn't enjoy the resolution. Apparently, this is the first of a series.

Hilary says

It is 1892. Sarah is a social pariah, sent away from her home in London to her family in Edinburgh, where she has joined the first class of female medical students. Supplementing her official training with hands-on work, she meets Lucy, and feels a strange connection with her, and this will change her life.

The social and professional interactions between the genders (including women-women) and students-lecturers were well handled, and all the women themselves varied from the extreme to the moderate, as one

would expect. We're not beaten over the head by Sarah's Past nor by backwards-looking morality. Instead, social issues from chaperonage to phosy jaw and rehabilitation are carefully introduced, none inadvertently taking precedence over the plot but all enhancing the overall feel of the book.

(Side note: I hadn't realized James Thin was already well established at this point! It's obvious the author knows Edinburgh well, and understands its history.)

I look forward to reading the next books in the series!

Disclaimer: I received a free copy from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Diane S ? says

3.5 review to follow.

Victoria says

An unapologetically feminist historical fiction novel set in Victorian Edinburgh with a female lead that deconstructs every single aspect of the patriarchy not only to herself but also with other women and men.

I love Sarah. I love how brave and smart she is, and it shocked me how much I could relate to her. She feels so modern and full of anger; she just wants to be a doctor and not deal with any sexist bullshit.

I've found a new historical series to look forward to.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

THE WAGES OF SIN is a historical fiction that has just the right ingredients for me. We have a strong heroine with a past that haunts her, a murder mystery and just the right amount of romance, which for me is pretty little. I love it when you can feel the chemistry between two characters and the author doesn't rush away with it instead builds it up slowly. The book also deals with something that is very close to my heart, women's right to study. Actually, it deals with more than that, the book also deals with things like a woman's right to her own body for instance abortions is a grave sin.

READ THE REST OF THE REVIEW OVER AT FRESH FICTION!

Elyse Walters says

Sarah Gilchrist knew the world could be cruel. She wasn't the type of woman content to let it remain so. People who were closest to Sarah turned on her at a time in her life when she needed them most. Her parents had her placed in a sanatorium to cure her hysterical, melancholic behavior.

In 1882, given the type of wealthy family Sarah came from in London, if she was raped...a complete victim...she was a disgrace to her family. Shame, blame, and sin would follow her.

"The doctors at the sanatorium had promised my father that it would cure my ramblings about Paul Beresford, about education, and becoming a doctor. When cutting had failed, restraints and the sweet release of opiates had dulled me into submission, but the legacy of surgery lingered. If my aunt's plans came to fruition, I would be a barren wife, a woman whose flat belly would be forever traced with scars from surgery and would never swell, never fulfill the one task society asked of me.

In the sanatorium Sarah was to pray. She was not allowed to read, or dwell on recent events, but to refocus her mind toward healthier topics than medicine, education or desire to become a doctor.

After three months-- not a word from Sarah's parents, they found a solution.

Sarah was leaving for Scotland to study, (if that is what she still wanted -which she did), but would never be allowed to come back home again.

Sarah's relatives would care for her... but she was to expect nothing from her mother or father.

"I had heaped too much shame on the family--first by my hoydenish ways, my suffragist learnings, my obsession with the university education, and now this. A reputation in ruins, and our family name, dragged through the dirt".

This is a page turning story -- I was deeply engaged with this historical novel. Most of it takes place at the University where Sara is now a medical student at the University of Edinburgh. Being it was the first year women were admitted- we get a clear vision of

"Sh!t happens"... (injustice to women by male professors, by male students, and by other catty, competitive, and jealous female students).

Given Sarah's own past...she was particularly determined to bring dignity to a woman she had met when volunteering at a public non-profit hospital. Lucy was one of Sarah's patients at 'The Saint Giles' Infirmary for Women.

Lucy, a prostitute, pregnant, shows up dead - a corpse - she was delivered to the University for dissection. Sarah is almost certain Lucy was murdered. She had bruises on her wrists and neck and there were other signs which made it clear to her that her death was not a suicide as the University professors were saying. Sarah suspects 'her' professor: Professor Gregory Merchiston. She knows a few things: she saw the professor leave the brothel drunk one night. Also, Lucy was found dead on the floor, with her stomach (pregnant), filled with laudanum, (alcohol).

Sarah puts her own life at risk while trying to solve a crime.

The storytelling moved in directions I didn't expect several times. It was a real pleasure to read and fully captured the texture of the times. I don't think Sarah Gilchrist considered herself a feminist. They were not words in her vocabulary. She did feel powerless at times ... yet was committed to justice. The mystery was ongoing to the very end.

Sarah was a woman who wouldn't give up until she had closure. She was simply a woman standing for what was right. To me she felt very real.

Kaite Welsh maintains historical accuracy for the period. Great research and integrity. Imaginative page turner!

Thank You Pegasus Books, NetGalley, and Kaite Welsh

Julie says

The Wages of Sin by Kaite Welsh is a 2017 Pegasus publication.

I love historical mysteries, especially those set in the Victorian era, so I'm always on the lookout for a new series that fits that bill.

Thankfully, I stumbled across this little gem, which shows a great deal of promise.

Sarah Gilchrist is a character I instantly admired and respected. She's suffered much as a woman in 1892 who has been cast out by her parents, who treat her as though she is the one who should be ashamed, and then is practically tortured before finally being allowed to join the University of Edinburgh's medical school.

While her relatives continue their quest to marry her off, Sarah works hard at her studies, enduring abuse from male peers, but when she learns a prostitute, named Lucy, she helped treat in the hospital has been murdered, she is determined to discover what happened and why.

This is a compelling mystery with well drawn characterizations and a strong portrait of the underbelly of Scotland in a historical setting, creating a tense and often lurid atmosphere. The story spotlights the fragility of a woman's good standing, the lack of options or opportunities for someone who has fallen on hard times, blamed for crimes against their person, or who doesn't conform to society's norms.

Sarah is brave, pragmatic, and after her life experiences, a little jaded. But, she's compassionate, smart, and due to her own circumstances, is able to avoid passing judgment, which is a kindness her patients need. The story is one that is all too familiar and one that could easily fit into a modern setting, just as easily. Yet, the mystery was surprising and I was genuinely surprised by the outcome.

This series is off to a solid start and do hope to follow Sarah on her future adventures and hope to see her character and the supporting cast again very soon!!

4 stars

MaryannC.Book Fiend says

A very atmospheric and detailed read about a young woman named Sarah Gilchrist who was allowed to study at The University of Edinburgh's medical school despite strong objections from her family who think her desires are lofty and fanciful. After suffering an assault which left her devastated, Sarah begins to recover and put her life back together only to deal with humiliation and shame in her family's social circles and decides she wants to make something of her life and become a doctor. There at The University she and other female students suffer degradation and insults from their male classmates that propels her determination to make her dream come true. During the course of her studies a young prostitute is murdered whom Sarah must find out what happened to her and leads her through the under belly of London's streets. Imagining what women literally had to go through to be heard and taken serious is almost ludicrous, to think that they weren't thought of being equally smart or capable to become doctors as well as men. I think the author did a good job of giving a sense of what women were fighting for albeit a tad too much throughout the book, but a good book nonetheless.

Linda says

If the eyes are the windows of the soul, then certainly the hands may convey the strength of it.

Ushering in the year of 1892, female hands were thought to solely engage in the rigid stitches around an embroidery frame and not clasped around the likes of a surgical scalpel.

But then you haven't met Sarah Gilchrist.

Sarah arrives in the upscale household of her aunt and uncle, the Buchanans, with a pleasing face and stature. This is Edinburgh, Scotland. Sarah has left behind a scandal upon the lips of those who relish the sharing of gossip and the unraveling of a young woman's reputation. A rest cure at a country sanatorium outside of London is all that she has left of an unspoken ordeal. Curiously, was the ordeal initiated by Sarah or visited upon her by some unsavory means? Secrets left in a jar by the door, you'll come to know.

Sarah puts aside society's version of her delicate, maidenly sensibilities and enrolls at the University of Edinburgh to study medicine. Out of 100 students, only 12 are female. Women's pursuits for higher education were met with scoffs and ridicule. Ironically, some of that same ridicule came from the women themselves toward one another. The female hand that should have been extended in kindness was often clenched around a palm filled with insults and snarky remarks. Birthrights and social standings still took precedence.

And that same weak pedestal of social standing was the exact impetus to move Sarah to work at the Infirmary which catered to the poor and to the women of the brothels. It is here that Sarah comes across the wayward Lucy who ends up dead and being viewed in the dissection room of the university much to Sarah's horror.

Sarah suspects that Lucy has been murdered. In a very round about manner, she engages the help of one of her professors, Gregory Merchiston, until she suspects that he may have been involved somehow in Lucy's murder himself. Trust is such an elusive thing, isn't it?

Kaite Welsh presents a very well-researched historical fiction read including the upheaval of female emancipation. Her characters reflect the era, and yet, they are presented with multi-facets as varied individuals. The banter and dialogue at times was extremely clever and engaging. The Wages of Sin seems to define transgressions in the eye of the beholder. A remarkable read!

I received a copy of The Wages of Sin through NetGalley for an honest review. My thanks to Pegasus Books and to Kaite Welsh for the opportunity.
