



**The Anatomy Murders: Being the True and Spectacular History of Edinburgh's Notorious Burke and Hare and of the Man of Science Who Abetted Them in the Commission of Their Most Heinous Crimes**

*Lisa Rosner*

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*Up the close and down the stair,*

*Up and down with Burke and Hare.*

*Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief,*

*Knox the man who buys the beef.*

--anonymous children's song

On Halloween night 1828, in the West Port district of Edinburgh, Scotland, a woman sometimes known as Madgy Docherty was last seen in the company of William Burke and William Hare. Days later, police discovered her remains in the surgery of the prominent anatomist Dr. Robert Knox. Docherty was the final victim of the most atrocious murder spree of the century, outflanking even Jack the Ripper's. Together with their accomplices, Burke and Hare would be accused of killing sixteen people over the course of twelve months in order to sell the corpses as "subjects" for dissection. The ensuing criminal investigation into the "Anatomy Murders" raised troubling questions about the common practices by which medical men obtained cadavers, the lives of the poor in Edinburgh's back alleys, and the ability of the police to protect the public from cold-blooded murder.

Famous among true crime aficionados, Burke and Hare were the first serial killers to capture media attention, yet *The Anatomy Murders* is the first book to situate their story against the social and cultural forces that were bringing early nineteenth-century Britain into modernity. In Lisa Rosner's deft treatment, each of the murder victims, from the beautiful, doomed Mary Paterson to the unfortunate "Daft Jamie," opens a window on a different aspect of this world in transition. Tapping into a wealth of unpublished materials, Rosner meticulously portrays the aspirations of doctors and anatomists, the makeshift existence of the so-called dangerous classes, the rudimentary police apparatus, and the half-fiction, half-journalism of the popular press.

*The Anatomy Murders* resurrects a tale of murder and medicine in a city whose grand Georgian squares and crescents stood beside a maze of slums, a place in which a dead body was far more valuable than a living laborer.

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## **From Reader Review The Anatomy Murders: Being the True and Spectacular History of Edinburgh's Notorious Burke and Hare and of the Man of Science Who Abetted Them in the Commission of Their Most Heinous Crimes for online ebook**

### **Heather says**

I think a lot of people have heard of Burke and Hare without knowing a lot of detail about their murder spree. The general gist that people know is that Burke and Hare were grave robbers who turned to murdering people as an easier means of selling bodies to medical schools to dissect and were executed when they were caught. Several of those facts are untrue. Burke and Hare never worked as grave robbers. They SAID they were, but they went straight for murder after realizing how easy it was to get rid of an unwanted body (apparently the first sale was just a lodger in Hare's house who died). Another forgotten fact is that Burke and Hare's common law wives also were heavily involved in helping with the murders (particularly Hare's...the information about how informed Burke's was is a bit sketchy). It's always just assumed both men paid for their crimes, but Hare turned king's evidence and was eventually set free. No one knows what happened to him in the end.

The fact remains that somehow there was a atmosphere that allowed for these two men to kill quite a few people (getting more and more sloppy with each kill) and sell their bodies without "more educated" men ever questioning where the bodies, which were all in pristine condition, came from. This book looks into the culture of the time that allowed for the whole system to be set up that created this circumstance. It also deals with Knox, the anatomist who ruined his career by not bothering to check into where all these bodies were coming from. The question remains, "how did he not know?" I think the best answer for that is possibly that he simply didn't care. These were much lower class people compared to him, after all, leading to what I simply assume was a case of "that's not my problem" when it came to the body's questionable provenance.

The book gets a little dry in a few places, but shows a fascinating time period and case that ended up changing how medical dissection was done from then on. It also shows a bit of the puzzle that Burke and Hare were. There is no explanation about how they justified what they were doing to themselves. These were simply men who killed for profit and didn't think much of it.

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### **Midnight Blue says**

A fascinating snapshot of a time in history when a person was literally worth more dead than alive. This book provides an in-depth look at early anatomical research, forensics, and politics at the same time that it provides all of the details of one of the most notorious criminal teams in world history.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

In 1828 Edinburgh, Burke and Hare determined to profit from the rivalry between the University and freelance anatomy lecturers to sell cadavers...and under Scottish law, it was illegal only to dig one up, not to just run across them. And if you get the transient residents of your boarding house drunk and kneel on their chests, you "discover" a nearly inexhaustible supply!

## Christie says

This book sounded interesting to me since I enjoy True Crime and medical history. I had come across Burke and Hare in a few books that I had read, but never knew a great deal about their crimes or what happened to them after the crimes were discovered. This book was a great mix of true crime, medical history, and social history. Rosner shows how the social disparity of the day contributed to the crimes, as well as how the moral restrictions on dissecting bodies affected medical research and caused doctors to seek out cadavers with few questions. The author also discusses the uniqueness of the Scottish court system in depth. I learned a lot from this book and would recommend it to anyone wanting to learn more about two of Scotland's most prolific serial killers.

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## Manda says

Rather than a titillating true-crime thriller about the crimes committed by Edinburgh bodysnatchers Burke and Hare, this book presents an examination of the murders from a socioeconomic perspective. The deaths are presented briefly in the beginning of each chapter, and the subsequent pages are devoted to explaining the socioeconomic aspects that led to a) Burke and Hare committing the crimes, b) the victims being reported missing or not depending on how friendless they were, and c) why the anatomist who purchased their corpses was so quick to buy with no questions asked about the provenance of the bodies delivered to him by the two. It's a thought-provoking read on how often in history the poorer classes are treated as disposable in society.

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## Megan says

This is a thoughtful and thorough examination of the murderers Burke and Hare, their relationship with the anatomist Knox, and the Edinburgh in which they lived. It is well-written and clearly well researched.

I was a little confused by the citation system used by the author: there are not footnotes or endnotes indicated in the text itself, instead the notes at the end are preceded by a page number and the beginning of the sentence. This may make the text more accessible to the non-scholarly reader, but it requires effort to determine what the author is basing on sources and what is inferred or otherwise the results of her own thoughts.

Still, an enjoyable read and worthwhile for fans of Edinburgh's grisly history or crime history in general.

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## Richard Wright says

There are several excellent studies of Burke & Hare to be had, but this one probably offers the greatest understanding of the people involved. Its success is not in biography, but in context. Each murder or event in the well-worn tale is used as a jumping off point to discuss aspects of 19th Century Edinburgh that lay behind the events, be it the state of medical science and its students, the economics of graverobbing, poverty and the Irish immigration, the criminal justice system, or other critical factors that almost inevitably led to an unprecedented murder spree. Through such careful framing, Rosner vividly lays out the world in which so

many killings were conducted over so short a time as a year, and even uses it to question several points previously considered fact. A fascinating and immersive book.

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### **Stephanie says**

I liked the book for the most part. Mainly, because it made me think about what/how I feel about what the medical community needs and should get away with. Yes, cadavers are needed for learning the art of surgery, but at would I donate my body to science?! No! That freaks me out.

I don't know that this was as interesting as I thought it was going to be. Just because there was so much information and I had to really slow down to understand some of what was being said. I couldn't just read it to relax. I wish we had actually learned more about some of the people who died. But, I also understand that it is a completely different time period where people could just show up and then disappear and sometimes no one was the wiser.

I'm glad I read the book and I really liked how I got to learn how medical colleges operated in history. I think the actual murders were down the list of things that this book was about.

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### **Jo says**

Dissection (tee-hee) of the crimes of the notorious Burke and Hare. I know I don't need to explain who they are. This puts the murders in the social history context and tells us about the infamous duo, the medical professionals and the victims. I found it mostly interesting but it did drag in parts

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### **Katherine Addison says**

[library]

Up the close & down the stair / But & ben wi' Burke & Hare / Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief / And Knox the boy that buys the beef.  
--Anonymous doggerel

Like anyone who's interested in criminological historiography (such a mouthful, but it means what I want to mean), I am fascinated by Burke & Hare. Serial killers (16 victims) for the profit to be made by selling their bodies to anatomical lecturers in Edinburgh's cutthroat anatomy class market. (No, really.) Stranger murder (why, no, 20th century America, you did NOT invent it), but not for sex or anger or any deep psychological motive at all. It was just the easiest way to make money they'd ever found.

I had read Roughead, and I knew that, while entertaining, he wasn't very accurate. This is an excellent corrective, well-written, interested in exploring everyone's side of the story without in any way soft-pedaling or condoning what was going on. She's not as explicitly and programmatically interested in the lives of the urban poor as Sarah Wise is in *The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching in 1830s London*, but the story of Burke & Hare is saturated in the realities of the lives and deaths of the destitute in Edinburgh in the 1820s.

And one of the ways that those realities impact the story is that there's so little of it left. We know almost nothing about Hare, not very much more about Burke or Helen M'Dougal or Margaret Hare. Nobody was interested in their biographies; nobody asked Burke to *explain* himself, only to confess. And after he was hanged, the other three just vanish. They leave no trace of themselves in the historical record, only some rumors and urban legends and outright folktales. (The idea that Hare ended up a blind beggar in London, having been blinded by his co-workers at a lime pit when they discovered who he was . . . that's a folktale. You can see the structure of it.) Burke & Hare didn't even know the *names* of some of the people they killed, and of course there's nowhere to file a missing persons report, and really no one to file it. All of the working class people in this story are transient, following jobs (the Irish were migrant workers in Scotland, a tide that ebbed and flowed with the harvest; both Burke & Hare probably ended up Edinburgh that way themselves), staying with family or friends or friends of friends or people they met in the street while they tried to find employment or get back to Ireland. It would be difficult for anyone to be sure that any of them had actually *disappeared*. And even the people who had families . . . there was just no structure in place to *find* people.

And Knox and his students did such a beautiful job of destroying the evidence.

(Knox *had* to know. Or he had to have made a deliberate choice to *not* know. Given what a consummate self-absorbed asshole he was, it's not surprising that he made that choice.)

This was fascinating for me as someone interested in Burke & Hare, but it was also fascinating for the context it gave them.

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### **Caitlin Searcy says**

Honestly, I thought this book was well written, but it went off on some very strange tangents that made it feel a little tedious. Some really interesting information, but I feel like the author included several large sections just for the sake of length. If you don't mind the asides, I'd recommend it. But if you prefer books that get straight to the point, this isn't for you.

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### **Zazzu says**

I felt this often strayed from the main topic of the murders and the murderers. Great detail is sometimes given on the victims but sometimes I was confused about why those details were being presented and how they fit in with the murders.

I also wanted more information about Hare managed to get out of being hung when he was just as guilty as Burke and what became of him after he was released. The details on Burke are fairly clear and gory--but even with giving evidence against Burke why was he even released?

I'd also have liked more delving into why Knox was so blithely accepting of the bodies brought by his resurrectionists--and why as a man of science he missed what should have been some exceedingly suspicious details of the bodies.

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### **Julie says**

It was a little to dense to enjoy as a story. The coverage of Burke & Hare seemed quite secondary or minor and was used as a jumping off to discuss resurrectionists, medical history and Scottish/UK criminal justice history as a whole. Burke & Hare were lost in all the facts and details. I feel its necessary for me to pick up a different book to get a good view of this tale.

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### **Brian says**

Really well written history. Clear, compelling, and informative.

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### **Raymond Larose says**

I really wanted to like this book, but it was so unnecessarily wordy with a lot of back-story of the town and immigrants of the time that seems to repeat itself (using new words, like trying to stretch out a chapter). No doubt, the research that went into telling this story was deep - and it is a fantastic story to tell - but the first quarter of the books seems to use "too much paint to paint the picture."

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