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Almost 130 years on, the Jack the Ripper case remains unsolved

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Cornwell fails to convince by rehashing the Ripper

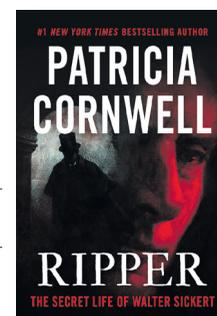


ANDREW LYNCH

TRUE CRIME

Ripper: The Secret Life of Walter Sickert

By Patricia Cornwell
Thomas & Mercer,
€22.40



Patricia Cornwell thinks she may be haunted by the ghost of Jack the Ripper. During her 16-year hunt for the infamous Victorian serial killer, she has sensed “an entity, a terrifically negative energy that, when invoked, causes strange aberrations of physics”.

This entity has apparently made its presence felt through malfunctioning computers, slammed doors and mysterious footsteps, while on one occasion a giant ‘JR’ appeared in the sand outside her beachfront home.

Anyone who feels like laughing had better not let Cornwell hear them. The bestselling US crime novelist may have achieved vast wealth from creating murders for medical examiner Kay Scarpetta to investigate, but she sees solving this real-life whodunit as even more important work. Deeply hurt when her 2002 book on the subject (*Portrait of a Killer*) was panned by most experts, she has now published a revised and expanded account that she believes should silence them once and for all.

Of course, Cornwell is by no means the first armchair sleuth to become obsessed with Jack the Ripper. More than a hundred names have been suggested for the elusive psychopath who savagely mutilated at least five prostitutes in London’s East End in 1888.

The most recent player in this macabre parlour game is Bruce Robinson, writer and director of the cult film *Withnail and I*, whose own 800-page contribution to the debate (*They All Love Jack*, published in 2015) dismissed Cornwell’s efforts as “mind-numbing and outrageous nonsense”.

Sadly, Robinson’s verdict may actually

err on the side of generosity. Cornwell seems to have chosen her suspect first and looked for the proof later, which is enough in itself to set alarm bells ringing. She points the finger of blame squarely at Walter Sickert, an eccentric Impressionist painter who hung out with the Bloomsbury Group and gave art lessons to Winston Churchill.

Nobody accused Sickert of being Jack the Ripper during his lifetime. In the 1970s he was linked to a bizarre conspiracy theory that involved Queen Victoria, Prime Minister Salisbury and some aristocratic Freemasons ordering the Ripper crimes to cover up an illicit royal wedding. The source of this mind-boggling story later described it as “a whopping fib... I made it all up”.

Cornwell is undeterred. Her novels rely heavily on forensic details and she believes that 21st-century science is well capable of convicting a 19th-century villain. She has spent more than \$6 million buying up Sickert artwork, examining old documents and conducting laboratory tests designed to put a metaphorical rope around the dead man’s neck. Her ‘smoking gun’ is the presence of DNA matches between letters sent by Sickert and another held in police files signed ‘Jack the Ripper’. While she rhapsodises about this discovery at great length, reading the small print suggests that it would have been rapidly thrown out of any courtroom. The DNA is mitochondrial rather than nuclear, which means it was probably shared by more than 50,000 Londoners back then.

By far the most irritating feature of Cornwell’s book, however, is its brash and arrogant tone. “For some reason I was meant to do this... it’s my mission to fight murder with my pen,” she writes, making it sound like a vanity project spun way out of control. Her dogmatism would be easier to take if she didn’t use the same sort of zany logic trotted out by conspiracy theorists who think the Earl of Oxford must have written *King Lear* because he also had three daughters.

The crime historian Donald Rumbelow once predicted: “On the Day of Judgment, when I and all the other generations of ‘Ripperologists’ ask for Jack the Ripper to step forward and call out his true name, we shall turn and look with blank astonishment and say ‘Who?’”

If Patricia Cornwell and Walter Sickert are there, it should make for an extremely awkward conversation. ■

the darkness of his narrative is that most likely outcomes will only see his former neighbours swap one tyranny for another.

Long before Isis swept into Raqqa (on the shirt-tails of other fighting militias who initially seemed to offer respite from the oppressive Assad regime), Samer’s family understood how corrupt Assad’s rule was. His father was denounced by the father’s employer and was “disappeared” by Assad’s special police, with the family selling everything they owned to get him back alive.

Such incessant repression made Samer (not his real name, of course) and fellow university students stage pro-democracy rallies, naively believing the outside world would aid their struggle. The fact that Samer raised his voice against Assad’s regime should not have made him a target for a new movement claiming to overthrow that tyrant.

But there is nothing logical in Isis’s nightmare mindset. Under their rule, almost anything can mark you out for a beating, lashing or execution.

At first, Samer sees women attacked for having any body part except their eyes exposed, but soon a male friend is beaten for wearing trousers that are too long. The local simpleton joins Isis simply so he can kill his own mother. Beheadings and crucifixions occur in public, with Isis scrutinising people forced to watch for any hint of disapproval that might result in a similar fate.

Isis is especially obsessed with controlling information. Internet cafés are monitored and phones tapped to ensure that no facts escape about life for terrified civilians in Raqqa. Attempting to contact

western journalists is a beheading offence, but Samer joins a circle of activists, known as Al-Sharquia 24, who (at huge risk) make contact with the BBC. These diary entries, many first broadcast on BBC Radio, were Samer’s way of fighting back by breaking the wall of silence.

Edited by BBC correspondent Mike Thomson, they are obviously fragmented. Future historians will write large volumes that will document the horror the Syrian people are suffering. But few will be as haunting as this simple book chronicling what Samer and his family endure just to survive. He has lost his freedom, and faced the horror of starvation, intimidation and never knowing if you will be next person tortured or killed. There is also the brutalisation of his religion: every barbaric self-justification by Isis is an assault on the true meaning of Islam.

Samer explores what he sees as the tight relationship between Assad’s regime and Isis, “like that between father and son”, as they conspire to foil any attempt to bring freedom to the Syrian people. But his diary is primarily about how the human heart can survive even under a regime so brutal it seeps into every dream.

Our only chance of understanding the tide of human misery attempting to flee from oppression in Syria is to stop seeing these refugees (huddled in camps or enduring blows from Hungarian guards) as a statistic, but to grasp individual tragedies.

This diary will not fully explain the agony of Syria, but it recounts the experiences of one bewildered, courageous and scared individual, and is thus an important starting point.