

‘Pleasant it is, no doubt, to drink tea with your sweetheart, but most disagreeable to find her bubbling in the tea-urn.’ So wrote Thomas de Quincey in 1826, and it is hard not to agree. What was pleasant, he thought, was to read about someone else’s sweetheart bubbling in the urn.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, murder – a rarity in life – became ubiquitous: transformed into novels, into broadsides and ballads, into theatre and melodrama and opera – even into puppet shows and performing-dog acts. Detective fiction and the new police force developed in parallel, each imitating the other – the founders of Scotland Yard gave rise to Dickens’ *Inspector Bucket*, the first fictional police detective, who in turn influenced Sherlock Holmes and, ultimately, even P.D. James and Patricia Cornwell.

In this meticulously researched and compellingly written exploration of a century of murder, Judith Flanders explores some of the most gripping and gruesome cases, both famous and obscure: from Greenacre, who transported his dismembered fiancée around London by omnibus, to Burke and Hare’s body business in Edinburgh; from the tragedy of orphans left to die of neglect in ‘baby-farms’, to Eleanor Pearcey, who murdered her lover’s wife and child, only for the lover to sell his moustache to Madame Tussaud’s, to give that vital touch of authenticity to his own waxwork after her execution. The modern age is heralded by the case of Tawell the Quaker, the first murderer caught by telegraph, and the perennially notorious Jack the Ripper, the savagery of his crimes setting new standards of horror.

Flanders uses the stories of murder – from the brutal to the pathetic – to build up a rich and multi-faceted portrait of Victorian society. Filled to the brim with swindlers, forgers, poisoners and all-round bad hats, *The Invention of Murder* is both a gripping tale of crime and punishment, and history at its most readable.

Judith Flanders is the author of the bestselling *The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed* (2003); the critically acclaimed *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain*; and *A Circle of Sisters* (2001) – a biography of Alice Kipling, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Agnes Poynter and Louisa Baldwin – which was nominated for the *Guardian* First Book Award. She is a frequent contributor to the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Spectator* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. She lives in London.