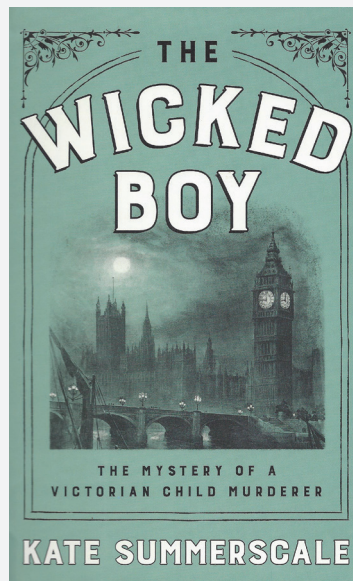


## Second Reaction: Not Just a Mystery, but a Historical Exploration

Summerscale, Kate. *The Wicked Boy: The Mystery of a Victorian Child Murderer*. Penguin Press, 2016.

Sarah Gellott



In my eighth grade classroom, I want my students to love to read for themselves, invest time and imagination in books, and develop their own personal reading goals. Thankfully, in my school district I get to help shape the love of reading of my students in my language arts classroom every day. I am able to do this because my students get to choose their reading books each time they pick up a book. My school allows me to buy numerous books every year to fill the bookshelves that surround my classroom. It is through choice that I get to inspire young readers to keep reading and keep exploring. This also means that in the summer I spend most of my days picking up many of the books my students loved from the previous year, in addition to finding new books to bring to my classroom discussions in the fall. This summer I was able to explore *The Wicked Boy* by Kate Summerscale. At first glance, this book looked like one I would have picked up on my own—a new mystery to add to my recommendations for reading books for my eighth graders. As I started to read, I thought it was helpful that Summerscale placed historically significant information at the beginning of the book: maps of the locations she would refer to, the currency explanation, and family trees. However, as I was reading I found myself distracted by some of these elements. I kept flipping back to the note at the beginning

whenever she talked about currency in the first chapters. This was ultimately unnecessary, as some information was not important to her overall message. I would give this piece of advice to my students if they picked up this book because I found myself getting overwhelmed by all of the historical aspects of the book.

Truthfully, I had to employ a few reading strategies that I give to my students in conferences when I find that they are struggling to get invested in the books they are reading. The first thing I did was set the book down to give myself some distance. Before I picked it up again, I did a little of my own research. I found that many people who liked the book said so because Summerscale was so historically significant in her storytelling. I also read that the main part of the story happens after Robert is sent away for killing his mother. Intrigued by this knowledge, I opened the book again. This time I focused on the elements that Summerscale uses to build her story that I talk about in my classroom. I found elements of foreshadowing throughout the beginning chapters; I noticed the development of the characters as they navigated their challenging worlds; and I found it profoundly interesting how Robert overcame his circumstances and became a man who saved lives. There are many reasons that a young student should read this book, one being that Robert and Nattie are thirteen and twelve when the book begins and their mother is murdered. Students will be able to identify with the characters from the beginning through their initial carefree, teenage lifestyle. Another reason is that the historically accurate information of this text would make for great discussion and connection in history classes. The epilogue alone gave me so much knowledge about Robert Coombes and the research Summerscale employed in creating her story; it read like another story altogether, and I found myself enthralled by the details of her research and the people she met. Reading the epilogue is something I would recommend to every student who picks up this book. By the end, I felt empathy for Robert, even more so than before, as I believed that a person should not be condemned for life based on one event in his or her past. Redemption is an important aspect of a successful society. Summerscale's last line of her epilogue pays tribute to that theme as she states, "when I started working on this book, all that I had known about Robert Coombes was that he has stabbed his mother. . . it was astonishing to hold the hand of a man whom he had saved from harm" (397). The thought that a person could be capable of both murder and salvation is something that we all struggle with, but I believe this text paints a beautiful picture of why and how it can happen—that's an important message to send to students.

Despite my original reluctance toward the book, I will use *The Wicked Boy* as an example in my historical fiction reading assignment for my students. I will recommend it to the students who are interested in historically significant events and seek a challenge in their reading. I already found a student who is interested in this book simply because of the detailed maps and historically accurate information I discussed with them. I will share the challenges that I found in reading Summerscale's text upfront, but I will also have a conference with them after they finish reading the text to get some insight on what they loved about the book as well.

*The Wicked Boy* has a place in the classroom, and I feel that with enough support from me, my eighth grade students will also enjoy reading Summerscale's historically profound text.

### **About the Author**

**Sarah Gellott** is currently an eighth grade teacher at Solon Middle School in Solon, Ohio. Licensed 7–12 in language arts, she also received her M.Ed. in curriculum from Kent State University in Ohio. She has a passion for helping students explore choice in their reading and discovering how their love of reading can impact their future. In her free time, Gellott loves to run and spend time with her husband and numerous pets.