



Fatal: The Poisonous Life of a Female Serial Killer

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In an era that produced some of the most vicious female sociopaths in American history, Jane Toppan would become the most notorious of them all.

AN ANGEL OF MERCY

In 1891, Jane Toppan, a proper New England matron, embarked on a profession as a private-duty nurse. Selfless and good-natured, she beguiled Boston's most prominent families. They had no idea what they were welcoming into their homes....

A DEVIL IN DISGUISE

No one knew of Jane's past; of her mother's tragic death, of her brutal upbringing in an adoptive home, of her father's insanity, or of her own suicide attempts. No one could have guessed that during her tenure at a Massachusetts hospital the amiable "Jolly Jane" was morbidly obsessed with autopsies, or that she conducted her own after-hours experiments on patients, deriving sexual satisfaction in their slow, agonizing deaths from poison. Self-schooled in the art of murder, Jane Toppan was just beginning her career -- and she would indulge in her true calling victim by victim to become the most prolific domestic fiend of the nineteenth century.

Fatal: The Poisonous Life of a Female Serial Killer Details

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From Reader Review Fatal: The Poisonous Life of a Female Serial Killer for online ebook

Rachel says

I am torn on this book. It is a good read. Very easy true crime novel and it actually reads more like fiction. On the other hand for non-fiction there doesn't seem to be a lot of documentation of what the author is saying. In fact some of it is likely conjecture but presented as fact.

Overall I would say that the author's stated point in the opening pages that America had women serial killers prior to Aileen Wuornos is well presented.

I would recommend this for those who really enjoy historical true crime.

Cornerofmadness says

This is a well written true crime novel about Jane Toppan that was about a 3.5 star read for me. At first I was annoyed with it because it took over fifty pages to get to Jane. The beginning was spent on another serial poisoner with only connection, beyond the type of crime was one of the doctors knew both poisoners via their victims (which you don't know until much later so this seemed like so much needless filler.) There's another odd bit of filler toward the end with the world's fair that I basically skimmed.

Jane is interesting because not only is she a sociopath gaining sadistic sexual gratification from the poisonings, she's intelligent. Jane did have a rough start in life (something many -but not all like the book claimed - sociopaths share). Jane was very jealous of her foster sister who landed a good husband (pastor) but Jane had no luck in the love department (which she later blames for her murderous habits).

Jane trained as a nurse and like most narcissistic sociopaths was adept at charming people and blaming others for mistakes. In spite of never getting her license (and killing dozens while training) Jane became a private nurse, killing patients, family and friends as she please. What makes her interesting and different from the usual arsenic poisoners is her choice of murder weapon.

She used two contrasting drugs of atropine and morphine to mask their pupillary affects and other symptoms. It worked wonders in confusing the doctors. What really amazed me was who finally figured it out (hint, it wasn't a doctor). It dragged a bit with all the court details (for me the less said about the court proceedings the better). I'd recommend this one.

And a minor spoiler here: I wonder if what happened in the asylum was Jane being influenced by the other patients, the way we see a decline in cognition in competent patients if they're put among those with dementia.

Ruth Turner says

Well written, well researched and entertaining.

An easy, enjoyable read although I thought it was a bit long.

Susan says

This is my favorite of Schechter's books (so far) and I've read a lot of them. His thesis is that women who kill do so for different reasons than men, and he makes a compelling case and this particular woman is fascinating. And horrifying. And just wait for the last chapter when you find out how she died.

♥ Marlene♥ says

My least favorite of all the books I've read of this author but still good!

Mimi says

As a nurse and true-crime fanatic, I thought this book was very interesting. However, I found it to be a slow read. It took me almost two years to finish. I was interested in the Jane Toppan case because I am a nurse and because I found the case fascinating. I wonder if she really did kill more than 30 people? I don't think she could remember all her victims. How ironic was it that she was smart enough to so call 'fool' the psychiatric experts into thinking she was 'crazy'. In the end, however, she really did end up being senile. I guess her karma ended up getting the best of her.

Rachel says

It's not so easy to get away with poisoning someone in 2016. Modern medicine can typically detect any poisons that can be obtained by the average human. Additionally, we're not so blinded by antiquated ideas of femininity that we'd fail to consider the possibility that a mother could poison her children or a nurse the patients in her charge. However, as Harold Schechter illustrates in *Fatal*, it was almost too easy for a woman in the late 19th century to get away with murdering those under her care.

The focus of Schechter's book is Jane Toppan, a nurse who murdered as many as 31 of her patients using a combination of morphia and atropia. By her own admission, Jane committed these murders for the sexual thrill she got when she would climb into bed with her patients and feel the life slip away from them. Schechter prefaces his story by telling the stories of other female poisoners who murdered those around them with arsenic, which was a commonly used household product at the time. This illustrates how truly inept modern medicine was at the time. In multiple instances, entire families are wiped out and no one suspects it is anything more than terrible misfortune.

Jane Toppan and her contemporary female poisoners were not like male serial killers who killed random

strangers. The late 19th century female poisoner made victims of their husbands, children and dear friends who trusted the person attending their bedside. Fatal is a great addition to the true crime genre that offers a less than picturesque view of the U.S. in the later half of the 1800s.

Kristin says

Schechter's true crime books tend to be guilty pleasures that wallow in the icky details of the historical crimes but Fatal is just boring. Their clearly wasn't enough information available on Toppan to warrant an entire book so the narrative is constantly wandering off on tangents in order to up the page count. The first section of the book isn't even about Jane, it's about the female poisoners before her.

Schechter also really likes to harp on women's looks-- especially their weight-- but when you see the photos of the "obese" or "ugly" females in question there's very little difference between them and the "slim" or "pretty" ones.

Libby says

Interesting book. Very thoroughly researched. Maybe too thoroughly. The background stories on the previous killers and the side trips into McKinley's assassination may have been interesting tidbits, but they kind of slowed the story down.

Vicki says

As usual, Mr. Schechter's book was fascinating! I couldn't stop reading! I was going to give the book four stars, but I couldn't imagine how the book could have been any better -- we don't have to save the five stars only for high-minded stuff -- they're for extremely enjoyable books, too! If you think only men are serial killer, you've got news coming. We ladies do it, too, but in more subtle ways, of course. We don't go after strangers -- we prefer to kill our nearest and dearest with arsenic-laced porridge and mineral water with a splash of morphine. Don't worry, this book didn't give me any ideas... haha

Tim Nordstrom says

In 'Fatal' true crime author Harold Schechter chronicles the life and crimes of one of America's most prolific serial killers, Nurse Jane Toppan (born Honora Kelley).

The book begins with Schechter discussing the case of a 1989 female serial killer and touching on a few other modern cases where the headline usually highlights a person as the "first" female serial killer in American history. He then goes back to the late 19th century and highlights a couple more famous female killers before turning his attention to the main subject of the book, Jane Toppan.

I've read a few books by Harold Schechter and one of the things he excels at is bringing these historic figures to life, bringing out their personalities and idiosyncracies. He does the same here with Jane Toppan, a nurse

who poisoned to death numerous people in the late 19th century. He covers her difficult childhood, her transition into the world and into nursing, and of course, her descent into murder.

If you are interested in either true crime or late 19th century history, Schechter's book is good from both perspectives. Jane Toppan is not a well-known name today, but at the time of her arrest, she was achieved significant notoriety for her crimes and for the difficulty society had in understanding the motivations of a female murderer.

Good book overall, and recommended.

Lady ♥ Belleza says

Harold Schechter starts off his book discussing Aileen Wuornos who in 1989 killed 7 men, she claimed self-defense, prosecutors saw it differently. This led to Wuornos being given the distinction "America's First Female Serial Killer", which as Schechter goes on to show, is completely wrong.

The main subject of this book is Jane Toppan, before we get to her we are introduced to Lydia Struck who after her husband and 6 children died of "natural causes" aka arsenic poisoning, married a farmer in Stratford CT named Dennis Hurlburt, after he died of "cholera morbus" aka arsenic poisoning, she married Horatio N. Sherman who also died. This time the doctor recognized the symptoms of arsenic poisoning and became suspicious.

Then we travel to Boston and meet Sarah Jane Robinson a skilled seamstress who had some nursing experience, a lot of her patients died, her landlord, her husband, 3 of her 8 children, well you know how medicine was at that time, she says with a roll of her eyes. She had amazing accurate premonitions, usually involving someone dying. She was arrested in August 1886 for the murder of her son and eventually convicted and sentenced to hang. These two accounts set the stage for Jane Toppan's life story.

Jane Toppan was born Honora Kelley, how she came to be Jane Toppan is a factor in why she began to murder, the full number of her victims may never be known, her reasons are classic serial killer, killing gave her a high, a sexual thrill. All of this is covered in this book, "Harold Schechter is a true crime writer who specializes in serial killers." Therefore he knows a lot about them and it shows. This is a fascinating story told wonderfully by Mr. Schechter. A friend, when recommending the book to me said: "My least favorite of all the books I've read of this author but still good!" I haven't read any others by him, it looks like my reading experience is about to improve since I have more of his books on my list.

Everything is covered here, Jane Toppan's childhood, as much as is known of it, including some speculation on how she was mistreated by her father, her treatment by her adoptive family resulting in much resentment on her part. Her efforts to become a nurse, how she manipulated people around her. The suspicious deaths at the hospitals where she worked, the private nursing deaths and the deaths that were her final undoing. A fantastic tale that proves the truth of the saying, "truth is stranger than fiction". I highly recommend this book.

Juanita says

Loved it from beginning to end. Harold Schechter is hand's down, my favorite living author, but I've read all of his true crime books already and so I'm SO hoping to delve into a new one soon. I dig Schechter because even though he writes about serial killers, he always, ALWAYS makes his book about the victim - not the assailant. Even though you learn quite a bit about the killer because Schechter never shies away from giving background on him/her, your main focus still remains on each vic. And he does this by not just giving details about the killer. You get small but poignant details about the vics too. I LOVE this man and can't WAIT to read his newest book in February of 2014!!!

Hannah says

So...this book was different. It tells the story about Jane Toppan, a female serial killer in the 1890's. However, before we get to her, we are introduced to two other serial killers - Lydia something or other and Sarah Jane Robinson. Why? Who knows? Maybe Harold needed some filler. Every once in a while he also meanders off topic to discuss other murderers around the same time period. Thus ensuring the reader that the 1890's was just a pretty dangerous time to live.

Anyway, the story is about Jane Toppan, who goes from orphan to indentured servant to murderer. Quite the life I must say. She's fun, she's lively, she has the nickname "Jolly Jane", and she poisons people for the fun of it. They estimate her number of victims to be in the 30's, but they can't be sure. She used a concoction of morphine and aphoria to drug her victims, they fall into a coma, and eventually dies.

Jane makes the decision to kill an entire family...which she does. But that finally tips off someone that there's something wrong with that nurse who keeps killing her patients.

I was just not really interested in the book. There wasn't a great character study, probably because not much was known about her, and what they did have was written in that lovely 1890's prolific style that gets pretty boring. So, kind of sub-par.

Selena says

It isn't always men who are savage enough to kill without rhyme or reason. There is always your Elizabeth Bathory, Lucrezia Borgia, Lydia Sherman, Sarah Jane Robinson, Aileen Wournos... and of course, Jolly Jane Toppan.

Schechter begins the book with Aileen Wournos, an underappreciated woman I think, who killed her seven victims because they allegedly tried to rape her/assault her while she was working as a prostitute. Next to Jane Toppan, however, Aileen Wournos is a tame kitty-cat.

Jane Toppan was brought into the world as Honora Kelley but was indentured to and adopted by the Toppan family, consisting of Mrs. Ann Toppan and her lovely daughter Elizabeth. As far as we know, they treated her well, but her role in the family was that of a slave.

Jane attended nursing school which was no small feat in that day and age. There was a rigorous training that we now might find unconstitutional. Despite all of the training and work, Jane found time to experiment on some of her patients and the morphia & atropine fun began.

Jolly Jane never graduated with any degree and instead of continuing with nursing she went into private home care. It was then that Jane really began having fun. The freedom of not being under anyone's watchful eye - the power of being the only care provider for your patient... well, let's just say she got a little excited. And when Jane get excited, many funerals are had. Still, it was years before Jane was ever suspected and brought to trial, leaving as many as one hundred alleged corpses in her path.

This book was wonderfully written. Schechter really researched the topic before embarking on the book. He referenced newspaper articles of the time as well as public records. My favorite part of this entire book is the intimacy of "watching" her kill her victims. There is a lot of information about just how she went about killing her patients and it was phrased beautifully.

So I guess there's a lesson to be learned.

Beware the next time you're handed medicine. "Drink it, it's good for you," may be the last words you hear.

(I'd give it an eight/ten)
