

KATE WINKLER DAWSON, Author of **DEATH IN THE AIR**

Q: How did you discover these two relatively unknown stories? What first caught your attention and why did you decide to braid them into one narrative?

A: During my senior year of college, I studied in London while working at United Press International, and I fell in love with the city. I feel so comfortable there. When I was searching for compelling stories for my debut book, I discovered the story of The Great Smog was immediately intrigued. The smog was a story that no one had written about—it is one of the most forgotten environmental disasters in history—which made it all the more alluring. I knew I had to write about.

As I was delving into the research, I began digging through newspaper archives for 1953. (The fog happened in December of 1952, but the debates in Parliament began in January 1953) As I searched through the headlines looking for smog news, I began to see headlines like “Murder House” or “Third Body Found.” They were, of course, in reference to John Reginald Christie, one of the most infamous serial killers in history. I began exploring John Reginald Christie’s story and realized that Christie and the fog were two killers with many parallels. The fog ultimately killed 12,000 people and Christie claimed at least eight victims of his own – many by asphyxiation. Individually, each story is fascinating, atmospheric, and creepy—together, they are a writer’s dream.

Beyond this, I also became interested what happened *after* the fog and Christie’s arrest, as the parallels between these two stories continued. Politicians in Parliament debated air pollution and the death penalty during the summer of 1953, sometimes on the same day. Most lawmakers seemed more alarmed by Christie’s various confessions than by the emerging death toll from the smog. The public, too, reacted so differently to these two killers (sensationalizing Christie while minimizing the fog’s death toll).

Q: America has a growing fascination with true crime. What fuels this fascination? What about true crime captivates our attention so much? Why are *you* drawn to writing about it?

A: I think true crime fascinates readers for various reasons. Some people are drawn to lurid, true stories of murder the way a sci-fi fanatic relishes the next *Star Trek* movie. My mother’s bookshelves are still filled with crime novels and true crime tomes from when I was a kid, like *The Alienist*, *Blood and Money*, and *In Cold Blood*, so I imagine it all started with her. Ultimately, true crime really shines a light on society and culture—what we value (money, fidelity, family, hubris) and the incredible problems with our legal system. True crime stories are cautionary tales told against rich backgrounds, providing readers with important historical context about important issues like crime, race relations, and government corruption.

Q: What sort of research did you do for the book?

A: I spent few weeks in London at different repositories, most notably the National Archives in Kew. I have a specific approach to research—I don’t enjoy sitting in a library, slowly thumbing through mounds of information until I find something of interest. This probably reflects the journalist in me, but I order all of the research in a specific order, ranking their importance in case I run out of time, and then I systematically take photos of Every. Single. Thing. It’s not even remotely relaxing. I don’t think I read a single archived document in London; I just continued to orders dozens of cartons containing thousands of papers from both the fog and the killer—I took photos of everything and then organized them on the ten-hour plane ride home.

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While I was in London, I visited almost all of the locations in my book: Notting Hill where John Reginald Christie lived, Trafalgar Square, Parliament, and North London. I timed the dates of my trip to correspond with the smog in London in 1952. It was so important to me to connect with that time period and the atmosphere of the places. I wanted to feel the winter wind as I walked along the Thames; I loved standing below Admiral Nelson's statue in Trafalgar Square.

Q: You relied on several first-person interviews in your research, including Rosemary Sargent who was thirteen during the Great Smog and Stanley Crichton, who was a police constable during the Great Smog. Both stories are prominent in the book and bring a critical human element to your story. Why did you choose their stories? How did you connect with Rosemary and Stanley?

A: Rosemary Merritt was 13-years-old when her father struggled to walk home through the fog. Later, she tried to save his life as he lay dying. Her story appeared briefly in a British documentary about the smog, just one of many, but she was really compelling. I spent a few weeks tracking her down and we connected over the phone. She was reticent to recount the whole ordeal, at first, but we talked about how important her story is and she eventually agreed. When I visited London, we met at The Admiralty pub in Trafalgar Square and bonded over fish pie and cider.

Perhaps the smartest thing I did in preparation for the book was to connect with various retirement associations of several professional groups in London: police officers, nurses, doctors and journalists. They sent out email blasts to their members, which indicated that I was writing a book about the Great Smog and needed characters that were working during that time, and I received hundreds of responses. Former Police Constable Stanley Crichton's story was so interesting because he played several different roles during the smog: he located dead bodies, he patrolled the streets, and he encountered criminals. His wife, Maura, was suffering from asthma and he was forced to leave her. I loved that he was really embedded in the fog.

Norman Dodds was a Labour politician who battled Churchill's ministers over air pollution in Parliament. He had only one living relative, his daughter in law, Christine. I hoped to connect with Christine, but she has no email or social media. I called her church in Scotland and talked to her minister who told me she had retired to a remote village in the Scottish Highlands. He called her on my behalf and she and I finally talked on the phone. She was invaluable with background details.

Q: Not only is DEATH IN THE AIR a truly creepy and captivating story, but it's also a fascinating historical window into post-war London. What did you learn about the city during your research and writing?

A: I didn't realize just how dire things were in the city after World War II. Dirty, grimy—the war left many women without husbands, as single mothers. The government was just trying to dig out of war debt. There were remnants of bombed out buildings across London while the government tried to rebuild. Londoners were literally shell-shocked from the war. Clean burning fuel was expensive and not very realistic at the time, so it was a city covered in soot from cheap coal. These factors led not only to the smog itself, but the government's almost desperate attempts to downplay the contributing factors of the smog and blame the deaths on an influenza epidemic. In each of the interviews I conducted with survivors, they seemed to share the same sentiment: "It was London, we had smog." As I say in the book, coping with days of smog was the price Londoners paid for living in the most populated, industrialized city in the world. Once the fog blew away, Londoners just tried to move on. The Great Smog was yet another disaster they were forced to survive.

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Q: What are some of the themes in the book that resonate today?

A: I think the themes are universal and timely: miscarriage of justice, government corruption, the death penalty, pollution, the effects of war on society, and our fascination with serial killers in contrast to our general apathy about environmental issues.

In 2015, there were 149 convicted criminals in America who were declared innocent. A new report shows the epidemic of false confessions under police pressure. The mystery around the Timothy Evans case is a good example of poor police work, regardless of the reader's belief of his innocence. His case might challenge a reader's views on the death penalty.

Another resonate idea is that many voters don't trust their governments, British or American—government corruption and apathy aren't surprising. But those phrases are generic; they don't resonate loudly until you read those confidential memos from politicians. "Today everybody expects the Government to solve every problem," complained the book's main antagonist, Minister of Housing Harold Macmillan. "We cannot do very much, but we can seem to be very busy." Many more notes, never before seen, depict a government that seemed to care little about the health of Londoners.

The effects of the war certainly had an impact on the public's reaction to the smog. Londoners had become experts at coping with a crisis—there were no protests, or even complaints. They wanted to move forward.

Serial killers are certainly more alluring to newspaper readers than pollution—a smog can't sneak into your house and stab you in the middle of night. A deadly fog won't hide in your closet, ready to pounce. The fog wasn't a freak, just a consequence of living in London, something expected. A serial killer is always a surprise. And I do think many people like to be a little scared—I know I do.

Q: What affect did The Great Smog have on clean-air legislation in the UK and around the world?

A: The fog resulted in the 1956 Clean Air Act, which became a blueprint for the rest of the world to follow—the first comprehensive legislation to attack air pollution. And it seemed to have an immediate impact. The Meteorological Office tracked the number of fog events in London every year. In 1956, the year the bill was enacted, there were almost forty fogs, including one that killed more than one thousand people in London. The following year, there were about half the number of fogs. The same was true for industrial and domestic smoke. Eventually, coal was replaced in Britain with gas, oil, and electricity.

The Clean Air Act couldn't accept all of the credit—the severity of air pollution had been declining in the UK for years. But now, the dirty fogs slowly began to disappear. The new regulations helped, but in December of 1962 another smog settled over London for four days, killing 750 people. Past governments simply didn't act quickly enough. And killer fogs were still happening around the world. In 1963, a two-week-long fog in New York City killed almost four hundred people.

Thanks to the Clean Air Act of 1956, the Great Smog was the last major air pollution event in Britain's history and it inspired America's Clean Air Act of 1970—which was landmark for the U.S. in cleaning up the air.

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Q: The United States is not immune to clean-air issues. Donora, Pennsylvania had its own smog crisis that killed twenty people in 1948. During his campaign, President Trump said he wanted to lift restrictions on “clean coal,” which will be a threat to our clean air. What do you make of this?

A: I think that no matter who is in power in government, politicians will seek to find a balance between preserving the environment and appeasing big business—some political parties are more concerned about clean energy than others.

President Trump calls climate change “a hoax.” Of course, that’s ridiculous—government studies prove climate change exists. He rolled back fuel-economy standards for vehicles and lifted a moratorium on coal leasing on U.S. federal lands. He’s gutting the Environmental Protection Agency and will eliminate its enforcement branch. Earlier this year, he announced that the U.S. would pull out of the Paris Climate Accord. That means that air pollution will be an incredibly important focus for the next four years. What happened in London could happen to a town in America, under the right conditions. This is a critical time for our country as we choke in dirty air.

Q: Wrongful conviction seems to be a passion of yours: you’re on the board of the Texas Board for Actual Innocence, an organization your father founded at the University of Texas School of Law and you co-taught a clinical class entitled the Actual Innocence Clinic in which Journalism students and law students investigated claims of innocence from convicted prisoners. It seems like it’s no accident that wrongful conviction is a theme in the book...What effect did John Reginald Christie’s case have on conviction and the judicial process in the UK?

A: In 1965, a resurgence of the Evans controversy led the newspapers when a high court judge revisited the case. There was a tremendous amount of attention on the capital punishment in the UK. That same year, the death penalty was suspended in Britain and then later abolished, at least partially because of Tim Evans’ case (and John Reginald Christie’s confessions). Evans’ execution is considered one of the most extreme cases of wrongful conviction.

My opinion of the Evans/Christie case is unique and likely to be controversial in the UK. Conventional wisdom has it that Tim Evans was innocent of killing his wife and daughter and that Christie was the real killer. The hanging of Evans became synonymous with wrongful conviction. But after sorting through all of the evidence and consulting attorneys, criminal psychologists and pathologists, it seems more likely that Evans did, in fact, kill his wife and daughter and Christie gave a false confession. My work with the Actual Innocence Clinic seems to contradict that conclusion, but we’re taught to go where the evidence takes us.

Q: You own an anthology of American criminals (*Bloodletters and Badmen: A Narrative Encyclopedia of American Criminals from the Pilgrims to the Present*), which absolutely marks your initiation into the stable of authentic true-crime writers. Tell us more about this book! What have you learned? Any trends you’ve noticed? Anything surprising you’ve discovered?

A: I adore that book. It lists the majority of the major criminals in America, beginning with the first killer who was a Mayflower Pilgrim! The book provides a short summary of the history of the criminals, along with pictures or illustrations.

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It's chronological, so it was very reflective of America's history. For example, there were quite a few train robbers until the late 1800s. And there were an awful lot of mobsters until about the 1930s. Women began poisoning their husbands in the Victorian Era—arsenic was sold to the public by chemists! Obviously plane hijackers arrived more than one hundred years later. There are different themes in crime that start and stop over the history of crime, so it was interesting to see which crimes flourished during certain time periods.

Q: Can you give us a sneak peek about what you're working on next?

A: I can't stay away from historical true crime! My next narrative nonfiction book is set during Gilded Age New York, when corrupt politicians and Irish mobsters ruled the city. It's about a killer who also happened to be a genius and how justice can become perverted when intelligence is valued more than innocent lives. I'm fascinated with unique killers: the unassuming murderer who change law, the deadly fog that changed the air we breathe—and a genius who let his hubris get the better of him, with horrible consequences.

Q: What would you most like to accomplish in publishing your book?

A: -My hope is that the characters encourage readers to care about the air they breathe, to cheer on politicians who confront their own government, and to demand better air quality. The Great Smog of 1952 could absolutely happen again—it's terrifying to admit it. I hoped to stimulate conversation about air pollution by writing a hell of a narrative, a roller coaster ride with inspiring characters who readers could root for.