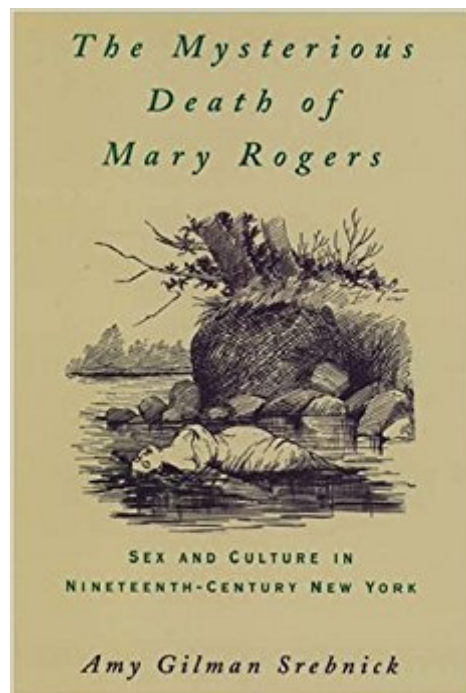




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# The Mysterious Death Of Mary Rogers: Sex And Culture In Nineteenth-Century New York



## Synopsis

In the summer of 1841, Mary Rogers disappeared without a trace from her New York City boarding house. Three days later, her body, badly bruised and waterlogged, was found floating in the shallow waters of the Hudson River just a few feet from the Jersey shore. Her story, parlayed into a long celebrated unsolved mystery, became grist for penny presses, social reformers, and politicians alike, and an impetus for popular literature, including Edgar Allen Poe's pioneering detective story "The Mystery of Marie Roget." In *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers*, historian Amy Gilman Srebnick brilliantly recaptures the story of Mary Rogers, showing how Rogers represented an emerging class of women who took advantage of the greater economic and sexual opportunities available to them in urban America, and how her death became a touchstone for the voicing of mid-nineteenth century concerns over sexual license, the changing roles of women, law and order, and abortion. Rogers' death, first thought due to a murderous gang of rapists and later tacitly understood to be the result of an ill-performed abortion, quickly became a source of popular entertainment, a topic of political debate, and an inspiration to public policy. The incident and the city's response to it provides a fascinating window into the urban culture and consciousness of the mid-1800s. Indeed, in Rogers' name, and as a direct result of her death, two important pieces of legislation were passed in 1845: the New York City Police Reform Act which effectively modernized the city's system of policing, and the New York State law criminalizing abortion. *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* tells a story of a death, but more importantly it also tells the story of a life--that of Mary Rogers--and of the complex urban social world of which she was a part. Like the city in which she lived, Mary Rogers was a source of wonder, mystery, and fear, provoking desire, and inspiring narrative.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1841, beautiful, Connecticut-born, 21-year-old Mary Cecilia Rogers disappeared from her mother's New York City boardinghouse; her badly bruised body was found three days later in the Hudson River. Speculation flourished that she was brutally raped by a gang, or killed by a lone assassin. Later testimony indicated that she had died in a botched abortion; yet, despite the alleged deathbed confession of an innkeeper who oversaw the abortion, her death remained unsolved. Edgar Allen Poe fictionalized the tragedy in his tale "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Journalists and politicians who frequented the Manhattan cigar store where Rogers tended counter made her death a cause celebre. Amid hysteria over crime, New York City passed the Police Reform Act of 1845, allowing closer social and political surveillance; the same year, a state law criminalized abortion. In a mesmerizing, superb study, intriguingly illustrated with period engravings and woodcuts, Montclair State University history professor Srebnick uses the Rogers saga to throw a floodlight on sexuality in antebellum America, women's history, urban mass culture, the rise of the popular press and the birth of detective fiction. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The death of Mary Rogers in 1841, in New York City at the age of 21, has been represented and examined in a variety of accounts, both fictional (Edgar Allan Poe's *Mystery of Mary Roget* and Charles Burdett's *Lilla Hart*) and nonfictional (Raymond Paul's *Who Murdered Mary Rogers*, 1971). Possibly a murder or the result of a botched abortion, her death epitomized the case of the young woman at odds with a violent and sexual city. Srebnick (history, Montclair State Univ.) reveals the culture and life of New York City and its inhabitants through the individuals involved in the investigation. The author then ties these figures to the genres of the dime novel and detective fiction. Her well-written volume is accessible to scholars and the public at large. Highly recommended for all readers. ?Jenny Presnell, Miami Univ. Libs., Oxford, Ohio Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This was required reading for a college history course. The title is the best part of the book. The subject matter wasn't meant to be enjoyable, and it wasn't, but it seemed heavy handed and redundant. I can understand the purpose of assigning it, but, from my standpoint - and I do like

many of my assigned history texts - this is not a keeper. I see this as more appropriately an article rather than a book, but I'm sure that from a standpoint of scholarly research, it fills the bill.

This book is a rather "dry" exposition. Once some pages into reading it, my original enthusiasm for the story of Mary Rogers was seized by a disappointment. I sense this book was originally an academic paper possibly researched and written as a master or doctoral thesis. This is not necessarily an indictment based on the book's initial origin and intention. It does perhaps account for its colorless narrative and a redundant construction meant to reinforce in as many ways as possible an artlessly expressed author's hypothesis. The loss to the reader is a story not brought to life. This was a time of tumult in New York City illustrative of significant social transition and the embryonic appearance of the mercenary tabloid press. Back then, just as it would be today, the molested, murdered body of a beautiful young girl dumped near a river could be crafted into sensational news. Now I got the facts surrounding The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers but little more. A better and more accomplished book on a similar topic centered in New York during the same time period is "The Murder of Helen Jewett" by Patricia Cline Cohen.

I had to purchase this book for a History class I was taking. While I found the author to be a bit redundant in her statements, the overall story was interesting. You hardly hear of crime that happened during the 1800's so it was intriguing to learn about Mary Rogers and her tarnished past.

Product exactly as described.

The Mysterious death of Mary Rogers was an interesting story. I was enjoying the analysis of society and culture, but then a little error threw me off. It was a simple error, I do not even recall now what it was. It was towards the middle of the book. It seemed as though surely someone should have caught it. It was distracting, and it made me wonder about the scholarship of the rest of the book.

sucks

On August 2, 1841, the New York Herald told of the badly mutilated corpse of a 3young and beautiful girl<sup>2</sup> found floating in the Hudson River. Though the random death of an anonymous individual would obviously command more attention in the press in 1841 than 1995, the death of

Mary Rogers, would not, for its relative ordinariness, seem capable of provoking the intense and wide range of reaction that it did. The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers demonstrates the way average people make history by arguing that the case sparked legislation, introduced newly acceptable subjects into the media, and inspired the birth of the crime novel. Through careful examination of the public records and contemporary fiction and non-fiction, Amy Gilman Srebnick, a professor at Montclair State University, explores the identity of Mary Rogers, the twenty-year-old descendent of prominent New England settlers living in Manhattan without a husband or father, as a panoramic window into the origins of American urban culture. She also scrutinizes the new publicization of sex, the fear of random violence in the city and the increasing economic and sexual independence of women that intersected in Rogers's murder and subsequent resurrection through the public discourse. Contemporaries speculating at whose hands Rogers died revealed their own particular paranoia through their various theories: if you thought it was an urban gang, you were probably in fear of the city, a new cultural and physical construct at this time. If you thought it was a single individual who killed Mary, specific fear of certain New Yorkers had invaded your psyche. If you thought Rogers's death was the result of a botched abortion, you were probably more concerned with the newly unrestrained openness surrounding, and commercialization of, sexuality, and its ramifications for the single woman. You would also probably be right. The cause of Rogers's death remains a mystery, and though Gilman Srebnick sides with the abortion theory, she is wise not to assert with certainty one scenario over another. Though she reiterates every known detail of the murder, she uses the research not to speculate but instead to focus on what the facts tell her about Rogers's class, habits, consorts, family history and place in New York society. Following her death, Mary was constructed in everybody's image but her own,<sup>2</sup> writes Gilman Srebnick. The numerous newspaper accounts of her death told more about their editors's predilections than Mary's true persona. As a member of the new female working class untethered by patriarchy or child-rearing, she represented a threat to established social order; as a young, attractive and available female, she was simultaneously alluring and threatening, and in this way served as an extended metaphor for the city<sup>2</sup> she lived in; as a possibly pregnant but unmarried woman, she was linked through residual Victorianism to a lower class standing; as the victim of a murderer or an incompetent abortionist, she served political purposes for those seeking to reform policing methods or outlaw abortion. The death of Mary Rogers presented an opportunity for new experiments in journalism. The newspapers of the day<sup>3</sup>—many were launched around this time to cater to a newly expanding reading public<sup>4</sup>—described in horrific detail the violence done to Mary's body, and though they assumed a position of detached scientific description, the effects were to

eroticize Mary's corpse by describing the female body in a way that had never seen its way into the newspapers, and to construct a narrative of the circumstances of her death that conveniently corresponded to the political agenda of the paper in question. In these descriptions, writes Gilman Srebnick, a new journalistic voice coalesced: the voice of the urban reporter. Tough, angry, voyeuristic and deeply misogynist, the voice used the already familiar form of the (journalistic) crime narrative to focus on the female subject.<sup>2</sup> Depending on whether this voice found Mary guilty of sexual misdeed—like having some—or considered her the symbol of virginity—destroyed by—the modern city,<sup>2</sup> her murder became a rallying point for those seeking to reform policing or place legal and social restrictions on the burgeoning sex industry and on abortion which, however inaccurately, was linked with it. Publicly funded police patrols were relatively new in 1841, and the Police Reform Act of 1845 passed by the New York State Legislature mandated surveillance in addition to simple response and apprehension. Around the same time, the newly formed American Medical Association's powerful lobby made abortion a criminal act for both practitioner and patient; very public trials focused public ire on abortionists, in the process revealing much about the era's sexual prudishness. (Unfortunately, though Gilman Srebnick spends a chapter on the politics of abortion at the time, she never tells of the risks associated with the procedure in the 1840s; if numerous women were dying during abortions, perhaps its restriction was not such a bad idea.) As an attempt at a vigorous book on a faded society, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* sometimes suffers from dry academic writing and excessive repetition, including nauseating overuse of the word labyrinthine.<sup>2</sup> As an academic reformulating a paper for public consumption, Gilman Srebnick (or her editor) thankfully restrains herself from getting bogged down in and relating the primary materials that are the historian's pornography. But as a demonstration of fear of the inner city stemming from its multiplicity of inhabitants; of the economic independence of some women leading to their castigation as sexual predators; of the link between open feminine sexuality and economic marginalization; of the influence of journalism on public opinion and political policy; of the principle of freedom of information (being) yoked in public discourse to voyeurism and melodrama;<sup>2</sup> of the popular preoccupation with single women, fractured families existing outside the domestic model, (and) the availability of abortion;<sup>2</sup> and, most notably, of the fact that these issues did not begin with gangster hysteria, Anita Hill, the Gary Hart/Donna Rice affair, feminism, Watergate, or the O.J. Simpson trial, and may be uniquely and essentially American issues with no temporality, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers* will rock your world.

Amy Srebnick has written a marvelously entertaining book of early Victorian New York, that along

with the Murder of Helen Jewett by Patricia Cohen, takes the reader into a fascinating period of New York history. As an alien in this city, it is wonderful to see how the idea of New York grew out of this period. This short book manages to touch on many, interrelated topics showing how the death of Mary Rogers was used and manipulated by many people for their own political or social purposes, while her life before her death remained a mystery. People interested in the early history of the growth of abortion legislation would also be fascinated in the ways in which this touches Mary Roger's own death. It is a fascinating book that has already led me to others covering this period.

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