

The Italian Boy: A Tale of Murder and Body Snatching in 1830s London

Sarah Wise

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A thrilling history of England's great metropolis at a point of great change, told through the story of a young vagrant murdered by "resurrection men"

Before his murder in 1831, the "Italian boy" was one of thousands of orphans on the streets of London, moving among the livestock, hawkers, and con men, begging for pennies. When his body was sold to a London medical college, the suppliers were arrested for murder. Their high-profile trial would unveil London's furtive trade in human corpses carried out by body-snatchers--or "resurrection men"--who killed to satisfy the first rule of the cadaver market: the fresher the body, the higher the price.

Historian Sarah Wise reconstructs not only the boy's murder but the chaos and squalor of London that swallowed the fourteen-year-old vagrant long before his corpse appeared on the slab. In 1831, the city's poor were desperate and the wealthy were petrified, the population swelling so fast that old class borders could not possibly hold. All the while, early humanitarians were pushing legislation to protect the disenfranchised, the courts were establishing norms of punishment and execution, and doctors were pioneering the science of human anatomy.

Vivid and intricate, *The Italian Boy* restores to history the lives of the very poorest Londoners and offers an unparalleled account of the sights, sounds, and smells of a city at the brink of a major transformation.



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