

Murder in a mill town : sex, faith, and the crime that captivated a nation (/review/10.5860/CHOICE.233685)

Dorsey, Bruce. (/search?exactauthor=Dorsey, Bruce) Oxford, 2023

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Sex, violence, and public spectacle invite storytelling, and the 1833 death of New England factory girl Sarah Cornell and the subsequent trial of her accused murderer, Methodist preacher Ephraim Avery, were no exception. Dorsey (Swarthmore College) delves into this social drama, asking "What does it tell us about who we are?" (p. 3). As he demonstrates, the answers are often unclear and the narratives are certainly not unified. Dorsey introduces readers to "band[s] of witnesses and storytellers," who in their recounting of Cornell's life and death reveal the powerful forces reshaping 19th-century American society (p. 10). These forces include the evolution of professions and professional knowledge; democratic access to information and equally democratic (and often misleading) creation of that information; the competing waves of reason and passion of the Second Great Awakening; the decline of patriarchy and the crisis of traditional manhood, while young women (the infamous factory girls) gained independence through labor outside the family; and the Market Revolution, which caused "a traditional farming economy [to] vanish before their eyes" (p. 28). All of this led to "a future that threatened landlessness, wage labor, and all-too-certain migration" (p. 28). Through a compelling story of normal people, Dorsey creates an approachable entry into a tumultuous period in American history.

Summing Up: Recommended. General readers through faculty; professionals.

Reviewer: [D. M. Corlett \(/search?reviewer=D. M. Corlett\)](/search?reviewer=D. M. Corlett), University of Virginia

Recommendation: Recommended

Readership Level: General Readers, Lower-division Undergraduates, Upper-division Undergraduates, Graduate Students, Researchers/Faculty, Professionals/Practitioners

Interdisciplinary Subjects:

Subject: [Social & Behavioral Sciences - History, Geography & Area Studies - North America \(/search?q=&sbj\[\]=na\)](/search?q=&sbj[]=na)

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