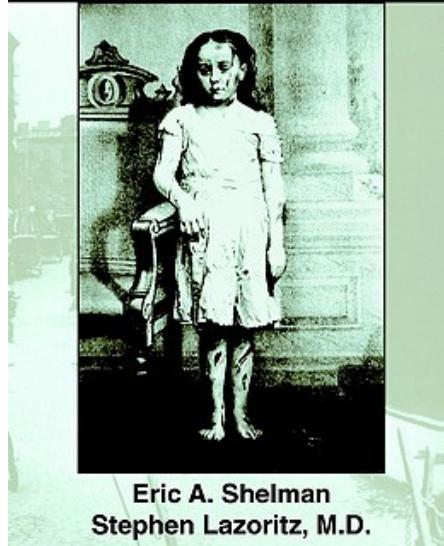


Out Of The Darkness
The Story Of Mary Ellen Wilson



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In 1874, an amazing event took place. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) initiated the rescue of a severely abused child named Mary Ellen Wilson. Little Mary Ellen as she became known, was beaten, burned, and slashed with scissors, her brutal adoptive mother, Mary Connolly locking her indoors for over 7 years. Her rescue initiated the beginning of true child protection in this country, and eventually, the first child protection agency in America was formed, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC) Still in existence today, it is a testament to what caring individuals can do to change the world. Written in a dramatic format, it tells the story of Mary Ellen from her birth to her eventual rescue. This remains the only book on this fascinating case.

Out of the Darkness: The Story of Mary Ellen Wilson Details

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From Reader Review Out of the Darkness: The Story of Mary Ellen Wilson for online ebook

Laura Eckert says

Wow, what a history lesson! I never knew anything about how child protective services were created. I cannot believe that Mary Ellen went on to live a happy life after the awful and heartbreaking abuse she suffered as a child. Thank God for those who helped bring justice to her abuser and free her from a life that was destined to end in tragedy.

Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

This is one of those books that are hard to read - or they are for me anyway - because of the child abuse. In recent years tales of such abuse, specifically autobiographies, have become very popular (or at least they sell well), and I never can quite see what draws people to such graphic abuse stories - because in all of the stories I'm thinking the abuse is very graphic, and horrible. Even if it were less detailed and less terrible, I'd still find it very, very difficult to read. But the stories that really go in-depth with the detail, well, those feel somewhat tabloidy - almost glorying in the horror of it - and in these sorts of stories you can't pull back and say "ah but none of that's real, this is just a horror story." Because it's all supposedly true. I don't blame people for rating them highly - which they usually do under "it's a story of survival" - but all I take away are the detailed, horrible descriptions about defenseless children who didn't get any help. After I read something like that I'm depressed, and I don't have a great feeling for humanity as a whole. (Note, I myself have not been abused, but I have had many close friends who have been. It's not a subject I can take lightly because of that.)

I've tried to think of an analogy that could better explain my problem with the genre (not sure what to call it - the abuse genre? children in peril?), and I can't seem to. I did suddenly realize that there aren't a lot of true crime or murder stories where you see everything from the victim's point of view - you more often see the horror in third person, or from the detective's perspective or even through the murderer's eyes. There just aren't as many readers that want to read stories from the perspective of the person about to be hurt or killed. And frankly, that's not really supposed to be attractive. (Not to mention once the victim dies, their story is mostly over, in reality anyway.)

ANYWAY. That much is why I'm not going to rate this book - my feelings on the issue make any liking for the book itself problematic. It's probably not as graphic as some of the other abuse-autobiographies, but still, it wasn't a good read for me. It doesn't help that the book is history written in a style as if it were a novel. It always makes history problematic when the author is deciding what people are saying and what their tone is - things you can't exactly dig up via documentation.

At the same time, it is a story worth telling, and a story that's to some extent fallen out of history and public memory. I bought it because I read about the book and its subject, and felt that this was history I needed to learn. After reading it I still feel that way, but I'm definitely not hanging onto the book. It's not something I'd want to keep and reread.

From the back cover (wikipedia links for those who want more of the history):

It began with one abused child.

"...I was where the first chapter of children's rights was written, under warrant of that madfe for the dog..."
- Jacob Riis, 1874

Before the world became aware of Mary Ellen Wilson in 1874, it was a hopeless place for abused and forgotten children. Child protection agencies existed, but were reluctant to the point of inaction when it came to "saving" children from the abuses of their parents and guardians. Children were considered property, and to become involved was to invade the family, a sacred and private institution. But to Etta Wheeler, a Methodist social worker, and Henry Bergh, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, a child's safety and welfare were more important.

But what of Mary Ellen's beginnings? What became of her birth parents? What events occurred to place the toddler in an almshouse on Blackwell's Island (now), a narrow strip of land in the East River, home to criminals, the sick, and the insane? How did Mary Connolly, her foster mother and abuser, come to adopt her in the first place?

The historical drama unfolds on these pages for the first time since it appeared in the pages of the New York Times, the Brooklyn Eagle, and the New York Herald of 1874.

"A riveting book. It is not just Mary Ellen who comes out of the darkness, but all of society. The most accurate re-telling of Mary Ellen's story I have read."
--Anne Reiniger, MSW, JD, Executive Director, The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC)

Phillis says

Excellent book. I appreciated the historicalness of it and the author's way of presenting Mary Ellen's story. I couldn't wait to finish it. What kept me reading was that I couldn't imagine how a child from a very loving family wound up in dire straits. First the child, Mary Ellen, as a baby with a very loving mother and whose father was in the Civil War. Later the child winds up in the situation she had to endure for 7 years. I had to keep reading to see how she gets rescued. There was abuse to Mary Ellen, but it was described enough so you knew what happened to her but not in great depth to make you want to not read anymore. By the time you got to her rescue you were so relieved as were the people who sought to help her. I liked the way the author paralleled the people who were in Mary Ellen's life as she was growing up. It helped to understand how this all came about. One of those people was a woman named Etta Wheeler who went to Henry Bergh, who by this time had founded the NYC ASPCA and asked if anything could be done for an innocent child who is as abused as an animal.

It is funny to find out that the ASPCA was founded and in business for a few years before any child welfare agency. But if you think about it animal cruelty was out in the open, child abuse wasn't. Henry saw pack animals being abused in the streets by making them pull loads beyond their capability, whipped, left out in the cold and heat. Children were the "property" of adults and were hit, whipped, burned, etc behind closed doors. Others didn't want to get involved by telling on their neighbors. Its a good thing Etta Wheeler didn't feel that way. Its a good thing Henry Bergh listened to her.

A bit of trivia about Henry Bergh. As much as he was aghast about and did something to stop the abuse of animals he never owned a pet. He never thought of having one. He rescued many but never kept any for

himself.

This book was published in 1999 but its message is as timeless as child and animal abuse. I think this book's popularity should be renewed every decade so no one forgets that the abuse of children and animals is unacceptable.

Ann Crowell says

Beautifully written

This book is about survival. It is written for all the Mary Ellen's out there. I am a victim of emotional abuse as a child.

The story helped me realize I'm not alone and if she survived so can I.

Jodi says

Not for Everyone! There were parts of this book that made me feel downright sick. However, it was well written and a very interesting read and I would recommend to anyone who is not *too* bothered reading scenes of child abuse.

Jeff Herman says

A dark and disturbing look into the life of a girl who was abused and neglected in the late 1800's. Mary Ellen's case is one of the first recorded accounts of child abuse.

Angela says

A heartbreakingly novel about the abuse heaped on a little girl for 7 or so years and the social worker, neighbors, police and attorney who saved her. A emotionally gripping real life story that brings you to your knees, and then lifts you back up.

Debbie Tucker says

Great book!

Anna says

This is a compelling story. My only argument is with the way it's written, which is more like a novel than a nonfiction book or biography. It made me question how much of this was true and how much elaboration on

the part of the writers. I understand there's probably very little information on the case overall. If that wouldn't bother you and you are interested, I would say it's worth a read.

Debbie says

Did you know the ASPCA existed before child protection services? I didn't. And did you know the ASPCA was instrumental in the creation of child protection services? I didn't know that either.

“Out of the Darkness” tells the story of Mary Ellen Wilson, a toddler who was illegally “adopted” by a couple who lost their own children to illness. Once the husband died, nothing held the wife back from abusing Mary Ellen on a daily basis.

The story does seem a bit sensationalized (I enjoyed the history more than authors' interpretation of what dialogue and actions happened almost 150 years ago) but the gist is the same. Concern citizens stepped in to make right something that was terribly wrong. From their good deed, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) was born.

If you read this book, don't skip the epilogue. There you'll find out what happened to “little Mary Ellen” after her rescue.

Brandi says

This is the heartbreak yet triumphant story of Mary Ellen Wilson, a child subject to horrifying physical and emotional abuse for over seven years in the late 1800s in New York.

As a songwriter would later write, “See within that dismal chamber, clothed in rags and chilled with fear, no kind father to protect her, with no watchful mother near, weeps an infant, pale and feeble, victim of her keeper’s rage, tender flower crushed and broken, blighted in her budding age.”

As I read this book, it was difficult to watch the promising life of this baby girl, that began with so much love and affection, turn into a childhood full of misery and pain. I found myself saying, “If only her father hadn’t died in the war, if only her mother had been able to save her...” But then along came her guardian angels, Etta Wheeler and Henry Bergh, and took this child from a life of despair to a life of unending promise and hope. The work of a few passionate souls ended up saving the lives of so many abused and neglected children, and so that work continues today.

Ashley says

This book isn't quite what I expected. I expected more of a direct history, perhaps a more academic text, than what this book is. Instead, it's a dramatized sequence of events, with details that may or may not have happened. I did find that frustrating while reading this. I can't be sure what really happened and what the authors just think might have happened, largely regarding dialogue, the situation of the birth mother, and how Mary Ellen ended up in the care of others. It may make it better reading, but it makes the history fuzzy

and I don't appreciate that. I wish there was an introduction mentioning how much of it was dramatized and explaining the author's reasoning.

Jennifer says

What an interesting story!

Trysh says

Absolutely amazing story very well written. A real heartbreakingly telling.

Joy says

A very sad but inspiring novel about a young child who against all atrocities, grew up to become a loving and caring person. I highly recommend this book.
