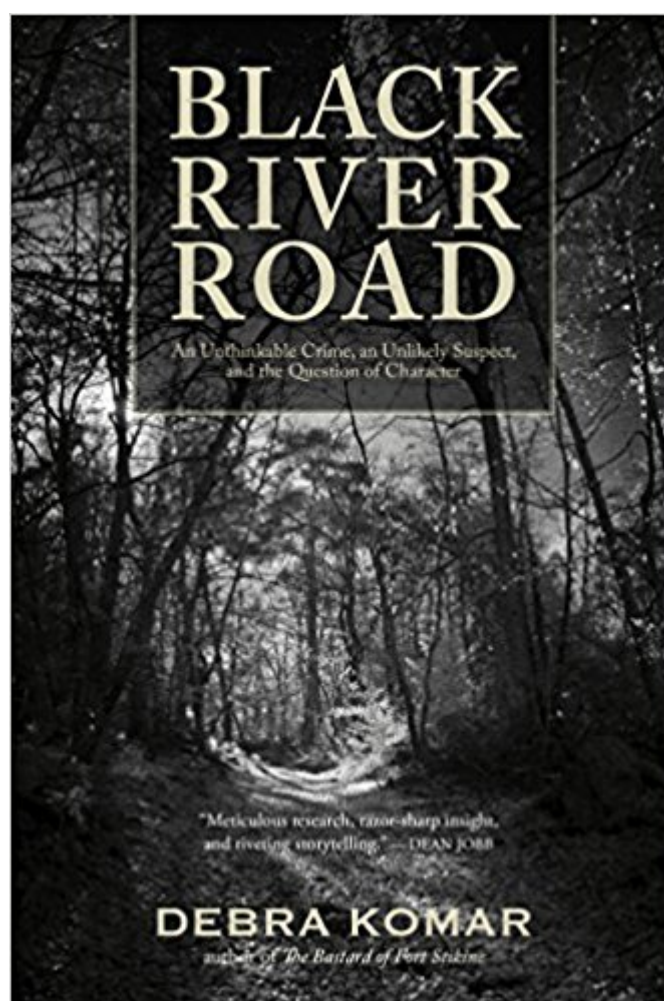


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# Black River Road: An Unthinkable Crime, An Unlikely Suspect, And The Question Of Character



## Synopsis

Shortlisted, Arthur Ellis Best Non-Fiction Crime Book Award  
In 1869, in the woods just outside of the bustling port city of Saint John, a group of teenaged berry pickers discovered several badly decomposed bodies. The authorities suspected foul play, but the identities of the victims were as mysterious as that of the perpetrator. From the twists and turns of a coroner's inquest, an unlikely suspect emerged to stand trial for murder: John Munroe, a renowned architect, well-heeled family man, and pillar of the community. Munroe was arguably the first in Canada's fledgling judicial system to actively defend himself. His lawyer's strategy was as simple as it was revolutionary: Munroe's wealth, education, and exemplary character made him incapable of murder. The press and Saint John's elite vocally supported Munroe, sparking a debate about character and murder that continues to this day. In re-examining a precedent-setting historical crime with fresh eyes, Komar addresses questions that still echo through the halls of justice more than a century later: is everyone capable of murder, and should character be treated as evidence in homicide trials?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Debra Komar's latest foray into Canada's murderous past recreates a sensational Victorian-era morality tale that's brimming with intrigue, shady characters, forbidden sex, and high-stakes courtroom drama. *Black River Road* combines meticulous research, razor-sharp insight, and riveting storytelling to unearth a forgotten chapter in our legal history." (Dean Jobb 2016-07-01)"Fans of Komar's finely detailed forensic re-examinations will find much to enjoy here. No rock is left

untuned, no assumption left to fester, in the search for truth. The complex moral ambiguities that arise will haunt your thoughts, but with Komar's calm manner deftly guiding proceedings, the readers are always in good hands. I can't recommend her books highly enough as much for the philosophical issues they raise as for the first-class storytelling. Black River Road serves to remind us, at a time when it is needed more than ever, that there simply is no reliable forensic test of character." (Brooke Magnanti 2016-07-01)"An intriguing piece of social history that has a few surprising things to tell us about life, love and crime." (Doug Smith Winnipeg Free Press 2016-09-10)"A careful dissection of the question of character." (Jade Colbert The Globe and Mail 2016-09-09)"Meticulously researched and told with style and authority. A strong sense of place, a tense plot, and plenty of cliff hangers will keep the reader glued to the pages." (Desiree Anstey The Journal Pioneer 2016-08-12)"An engrossing book that weaves historical records into a fascinating story." (Beverley Tallon Canada's History Magazine 2017-01-04)"An engaging and atmospheric account of a crime that shocked a mid-Victorian city. The Maggie Vail case lives on as a tale interwoven by deceit, lust, avarice, class privilege, and the 19th-century media's growing fascination with true crime." (Greg Marquis 2016-07-01)

In 1869, in the woods just outside of the bustling port city of Saint John, a group of teenaged berry pickers discovered some badly decomposed bodies. The authorities suspected foul play, but the identities of the victims were as mysterious as that of the perpetrator. During a coroner's inquest, an unlikely suspect emerged to stand trial for murder: John Munroe, a renowned architect, well-heeled family man, and pillar of the community. Munroe's trial was the first in Canada's fledgling judicial system to introduce the accused's character as a defence. His lawyer's strategy was as simple as it was revolutionary: Munroe's wealth, education, and exemplary character made him incapable of murder. The press and Saint John's elite vocally supported Munroe, sparking a legal debate that continues to this day. Re-examining this precedent-setting historical crime with fresh eyes, Debra Komar addresses questions that still echo through the halls of justice: Should the accused's character be treated as evidence? Is everyone capable of murder?

One day in 1869, well-to-do architect John Munroe drove his mistress, Maggie Vail, and their baby daughter out in a cab to Black River Road near Saint John (in Canada). All three got out, ostensibly to visit friends, and later Munroe returned alone. He told the cab driver that Maggie would be staying with the friends. Some months later, the putrefied and unidentifiable remains of a woman and child

were found by people out picking berries near Black River Road. Debra Komar starts this true crime story by discussing the trial of Jeffrey Dahmer, and the court's decision that, despite the nature of his crimes, he was sane and could be held responsible for his actions. This decision was reached on the basis of evidence from Park Dietz, a forensic psychiatrist, who developed the theory of "universal lethality" - that all people have it in them to kill, and it is only social institutions that train us not to. Komar suggests that before this, character played a large part in criminal trials, including John Munroe's, at a time when forensic science was still in its infancy. There was a widespread feeling that men of good character (aka rich people) couldn't commit horrific crimes, and that moral degeneracy was the preserve of the poor. Komar then takes us back to tell us the story of how Munroe and Maggie became involved. Munroe was the spoiled child of an indulgent father. By the time he met Maggie, he was an upcoming architect who had married well, but for social position rather than love. His wife, however, didn't show him the adoration he felt he deserved, so Munroe looked elsewhere. Poor Maggie was unmarried, overweight, and not very attractive but was willing to adore him as much as he liked. When the inevitable happened and her child was born, Munroe attempted to dump them, but Maggie wasn't so easily dumped. Munroe played hot and cold with her, sometimes turning up unexpectedly, other times writing to her that she should stop contacting him. And then Maggie and child disappeared. Maggie's sister received a letter, purporting to come from the illiterate Maggie, to the effect that she had met another man and gone off to Chicago to marry him. This part of the story is very well told, giving a real feel for the coldness of Munroe's character, and the rather desperate attempts of Maggie, now with a ruined reputation, to force him to meet his obligations as a father. The focus of the book is very much on this particular story, but we do get some idea of the wider society of the time, with the usual hypocritical gender bias that despised and ostracised an unmarried mother while cheerfully continuing to respect a male adulterer. The story then moves on to the investigation and subsequent trial, with Komar showing at each stage how Munroe's respectable position in society led to a widespread refusal to accept his possible guilt. The newspapers ran stories in outraged defence of him, and thirty-five people were called to give evidence of his good character, even though some of them barely knew him except through business dealings. The problem of identification added a layer of difficulty to the prosecution, and Komar gives dramatic, well written accounts of witnesses having to identify pieces of clothing or, gruesomely, the hair of the corpse. An interesting crime story, well researched and well written. Komar's decision to leave all reference to her sources to the notes at the back means there's a good flow to the narration of events. The fairly narrow focus on the crime keeps the book down to a

fairly shortish length. However, it also means we don't get an in-depth picture of the society, nor of Munroe's life beyond the crime. For example, we learn little about his relationship with his wife and legitimate children, before or during the trial. Within those limits, though, it's an enjoyable read that I recommend to fans of true crime. NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Goose Lane.

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