

# The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper

By: Hallie Rubenhold

**About the book:** Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, Catherine and Mary-Jane are famous for the same thing, though they never met. They came from Fleet Street, Knightsbridge, Wolverhampton, Sweden and Wales. They wrote ballads, ran coffee houses, lived on country estates; they breathed ink-dust from printing presses and escaped traffickers. What they had in common was the year of their murders: 1888. Their murderer was never identified, but the name created for him by the press has become far more famous than any of these five women.

**About the Author:** Hallie Rubenhold is an American-born British popular historian and author. Her work specializes in 18th and 19th century social history and women's history. Her 2019 book *The Five*, was shortlisted for the Wolfson History Prize and won the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-fiction. In 2025, her book, *Story of a Murder; the wives, the mistress and Dr Crippen* won a Clue Award for True Crime Book of the Year. Rubenhold's focus on the victims of murder (frequently women), rather than on the identity or the acts of the perpetrator, has been credited with changing attitudes to the proper commemoration of such crimes and to the appeal and function of the true crime genre

## People:

Polly (Mary Ann)-Daughter of a Blacksmith. Married William Nichols a printing press operator, had 5 children. Her husband cheated on her, and she left her husband and children at the Peabody Building. Died August 31, 1888 (43)

Annie- Daughter of a Soldier, Married John Chapman a coachman for a nobleman, had three children. Alcoholic and separated from husband to save John's career to keep his income. Dies September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1888 (47)

Elizabeth-Daughter of a farmer. Moved from Sweeden to London. Married John Stride Ship's Carpenter. She had no children. She and John opened a coffee shop until they had to sell due to financial hardship. Lied about surviving the sinking of the Princess Alice. One of the Two known victims being a prostitute . Died on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1888 (44)

Kate (Catherine)- Daughter of a tinplate worker, orphaned at 15 and went to live with her aunt. Was fired for stealing and moved around. Never "Married" but lived with Thomas Conway. Had two children. Died on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1888 (46).

Mary-Jane-Know the least about her, living with Joseph Barnett for a while. The second woman we know that was a prostitute. Known for being an alcoholic. Died on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1888 (25).

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Before reading *The Five*, what did you know about Jack the Ripper and his victims?
2. Rubenhold focuses on the women's lives rather than the killer. How does this shift in perspective affect your understanding of history and storytelling?
3. The author argues that the women were victims of poverty and circumstance, not simply of a murderer. How effectively does she make this argument?
4. Which of the five women's stories impacted you the most, and why?
5. How did class, gender, and societal expectations in Victorian London shape these women's lives?
6. In what ways does Rubenhold use historical evidence and empathy together to reconstruct the women's narratives?
7. The book challenges the idea that all the women were sex workers. Why do you think that misconception persisted for so long?
8. What parallels do you see between the treatment of these women in the press and how modern media covers victims of violent crimes today?
9. Rubenhold writes that these women "were never just victims." How does the book help restore their individuality and humanity?
10. Discuss how the concept of "respectability" influenced Victorian society and the women's fates.
11. How does the book address the intersection of poverty, addiction, and homelessness in 19th-century London?
12. How might the women's stories be different if they lived today?
13. What does *The Five* teach us about whose stories get told — and who gets to tell them?
14. In what ways does Rubenhold's approach represent feminist historiography?
15. How has this book changed the way you think about true crime as a genre?
16. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

### **Read Alike:**

- *The sinners all bow: two authors, one murder, and the real Hester Prynne*  
By: Kate Dawson
- *The sewing girl's tale: a story of crime and consequences in revolutionary America*  
By: John Sweet
- *The case of the murderous Dr. Cream: the hunt for a Victorian era serial killer*  
By: Dean Jobb