



The Wilderness of Ruin: A Tale of Madness, Fire, and the Hunt for America's Youngest Serial Killer

Roseanne Montillo

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In late nineteenth-century Boston, home to Herman Melville and Oliver Wendell Holmes, a serial killer preying on children is running loose in the city—a wilderness of ruin caused by the Great Fire of 1872—in this literary historical crime thriller reminiscent of *The Devil in the White City*.

In the early 1870s, local children begin disappearing from the working-class neighborhoods of Boston. Several return home bloody and bruised after being tortured, while others never come back.

With the city on edge, authorities believe the abductions are the handiwork of a psychopath, until they discover that their killer—fourteen-year-old Jesse Pomeroy—is barely older than his victims. The criminal investigation that follows sparks a debate among the world's most revered medical minds, and will have a decades-long impact on the judicial system and medical consciousness.

The Wilderness of Ruin is a riveting tale of gruesome murder and depravity. At its heart is a great American city divided by class—a chasm that widens in the aftermath of the Great Fire of 1872. Roseanne Montillo brings Gilded Age Boston to glorious life—from the genteel cobblestone streets of Beacon Hill to the squalid, overcrowded tenements of Southie. Here, too, is the writer Herman Melville. Enthralled by the child killer's case, he enlists physician Oliver Wendell Holmes to help him understand how it might relate to his own mental instability.

With verve and historical detail, Roseanne Montillo explores this case that reverberated through all of Boston society in order to help us understand our modern hunger for the prurient and sensational.

The Wilderness of Ruin features more than a dozen black-and-white photographs.

The Wilderness of Ruin: A Tale of Madness, Fire, and the Hunt for America's Youngest Serial Killer Details

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From Reader Review *The Wilderness of Ruin: A Tale of Madness, Fire, and the Hunt for America's Youngest Serial Killer* for online ebook

Kim says

The book was interesting but fragmented. I thought it was going to be about Jesse Pomeroy, the child serial killer, but the author strayed from that storyline with whole sections going into great detail about the great Boston Fire of 1872, author Herman Melville, and then Oliver Wendell Holmes. I really don't understand how all of these subjects were supposed to coincide. All of the subjects were interesting even though I still don't get the connection.

Jessica (booneybear) says

I felt like this book had an identity crisis. There were three distinct stories throughout the book a) the boy killer, Jesse Pomeroy; b) the Great Fire of Boston in 1872 and c) the author Herman Melville. All well and good topics, however, put together in this book, they really didn't have anything to do with one another. Sure, they all existed at the same time, but that is not a good enough connection to place them all together in a book. I felt like I was reading three separate books that just happened to be conveniently packaged in one volume.

I kept waiting for each event to tie into each other by some common thread but that never happened.

Mauoijenn ~ *Mouthy Jenn* ~ says

I had high hopes for this one, but I have to follow so many others with my review... NOT GOOD! This really was more about Boston's shady history, than about the youngest serial killer in the US. I was more interested in his story, which we did get a little bit of, but not enough to warrant a whole book. I was bummed, as I enjoy books about serial killers. I know, I'm not right in the head!

Mandy says

Wilderness of Ruin by Roseanne Montillo

I received a digital ARC of this book from the publisher in exchange for a fair, honest review, all opinions expressed are my own

Boston in the late nineteenth-century, the streets are haunted by the shadow of the 'red devil' a malevolent entity that preys on local boys, leaving them beaten and bruised. As more children are found a similar chilling detail in their memories surfaces: their torturer and abductor is not a devil but a boy barely older than themselves: fourteen-year-old Jesse Pomeroy.

This book follows the seemingly interlinked tales of Jesse Pomeroy, Herman Melville (author of *Moby Dick*) and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes. The nature and understanding of madness and how it impacts the

individual are fleshed out in order to make the book more three dimensional.

Ok, here is my blunt rundown:

The information on Pomeroy is well structured.

The atmosphere is well developed, excellent extra details such as the great fire and Melville's life.

But the author has sensationalised the story and the use of hyperbole really lessened its impact for me. The biggest irritant is the use of the term "Serial Killer". Jesse Pomeroy was a killer and a serial torturer/mutilator but he does not fit the classification of a serial killer.

The Princeton definition is: A serial killer is typically defined as a person who murders three or more people over a period of more than 30 days, with a "cooling off" period between each murder, and whose motivation for killing is largely based on psychological gratification."

Jesse Pomeroy had two victims. Only one fitted his 'pattern' (with reference to his earlier tortures/mutilations/abductions), the second was based on circumstance and luck (not planning). This is where; despite all the research the author had done it all fell apart for me. The over-use of sensational language makes it seem less relevant. Jesse Pomeroy is worthy of a case study that details his story without relying on emotive, over the top language. His trial and subsequent attempts for release are fascinating.

If this book had the emotive language changed, references to "America's youngest serial killer" removed and copies of supporting documents (newspaper articles that are referenced, etc.) it could be a stand-out work in historical true crime, but as it is it reads more like a discount crime library selection.

Cheryl says

Prior to reading this book, I had not heard the name Jesse Harding Pomeroy. I am fascinated by serial killer stories. Looking for a book to read and having this one on my shelf for a while, I decided to pick it up.

I want to say that Jesse was evil but it was more than this. In fact, it was like the killings were more of an experiment to him. He was very analytical and intelligent. Even at a young age, he spoke as an mature adult. The way that he did not show emotion when questioned about the killings was scary.

I could see where the author was trying to take me with providing me with history of the Boston fires and diving into mental instability but I just did not feel these things really brought much to the story. Which at times read too much like a text book...dry. Overall, this book is fine but nothing too re-memorable to make me jump to check out another one of this author's books.

GoldGato says

In the latter part of the 19th century, the Boston area was plagued with attacks on young children. The assaults became worse and eventually ended with murders. Sadly, everyone knew who the culprit was, and this book examines how and why this all took place. There's a lot happening in this book, so let's look at each subject (Serial Killer, Fire, Insanity).

Jesse Pomeroy was a big boy for his age, but that didn't stop others from making fun of him and his white cataract eye. Locals knew him as a torturer and killer of animals, the first sign of a deranged personality. Then, small children started being tortured. They accurately described their tormentor and Pomeroy was put away. But not forever. The author looks at Pomeroy's angry mother, who blamed the victims for the problems. Mother's boy, another sign of whackiness.

But America's youngest serial killer is not the only subject of this book. There is also the Great Boston Fire of 1872, which plays a role in Pomeroy's environment. And, mostly, there is a big focus on madness, specifically with an entire chapter devoted to Herman Melville (?).

To be honest, I felt I was on a Wikipedia ride. Start with youthful serial killer, segue over to urban catastrophe, then go back and forth between *Moby Dick* and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mr. Melville. Made me a bit dizzy. Montillo writes with good research on each subject, but I never felt any real connection to any of the title tracts. One minute I'm reading about a little victim of Pomeroy, next thing I'm reading about something completely different. This is a method used by other authors, but here it never really ties together. Still, it's all very interesting and reminds one that just because someone is young, it doesn't mean they are an angel. And Helicopter Parents existed long before their spawn antagonize us now.

Book Season = Summer (fast food reading)

Alisi ? wants to read too many books ? says

This is truly up there with the worst of the crime fiction. Off the top of my head I can only think of one book that I'd consider worse than this.

This book has very little to do with the actual serial killer himself and more to do with random tangents the author seems to find herself writing. There are large sections of the book that just dive into utter randomness and these can go on and on and on. Then, when the author decides, hey! this is a book on a serial killer. Perhaps we should rejoin him? she does it in such a way that it's incredibly jarring.

These segues are not only boring but they're so poorly done that it's almost breathtaking. The author should fire her editor. But here are some examples...

Example 1: The boy apparently read a lot of books (what, I suppose, we'd call trash novels today) and one witness describes how he always had a book in his back pocket. We are then ripped away from this description of the killer and draw into a very long discussion on the history of these sorts of books. We are told how many authors (literary authors, I mean) look down on these books for being trashy and how these are mostly written by women and the author even gives us quotes on this.

I'm reading this and thinking WTF do I care about the publication of dime novels in the 1800s? I didn't buy this book to read about that.

Example 2: The boy apparently made a remark to someone that, if his life had been different, he'd've gotten a job on a boat and had lots of adventures. This is right after he was caught the first time so I expected some more trial stuff...

Instead we are treated to the entire life history of Herman Melville from his birth in the 1810s and so forth --

well, this actually starts with the his father. What does Melville have to do with this story? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.

After this long, boring bio on Melville, we are treated to the long, rambling account of the Great Boston Fire. Why the fire? Who knows. Apparently the fact that it happened while he was there was enough (though he is not mentioned in this account.)

We're told then that he's been given back into the custody of his mother and a tiny bit about a disappearance and murder then ...

We're kicked into the entire history of the Boston Police starting back in the 1600s.

Besides all this irreverent and boring detail, the author does a terrible job trying to convince us of the boys guilt. I know he did it but if all I had to go on was this book then I'd say this was a miscarriage of justice.

We have the boy basically saying 'if you said I did it, I must've done it' while the police questioning was very much 'you did it! you did it!' and giving him leading questions (and lying about prison sentences -- like, 'confess and you'll only get a year.'). It's more telling that the police conveniently didn't record the interrogation at all. This is basically all the proof the author really gives us.

Tiffany Reisz says

slow paced but not bad. 3.5

Melanie says

Whoops, forgot to post this one after I finished. (Sorry, BEP090 class!) Anyway, I really liked this one. The development of Boston as a city is kind of a character in this book, so, boo, Red Sox, but the growth of cities is interesting to me. ANYWAY--Jesse Pomeroy, for some reason, when he is about 12, begins kidnapping, torturing by beating, and, later, killing, younger children. Eventually--spoiler alert, but not much of one--he is caught and imprisoned. When released, and still pretty much a boy, he goes back to his wicked ways and kills a couple of young children, This time, he is sent away for life. This takes place against a backdrop of a significant fire that Boston experienced, shortly after the Chicago fire.

The author is at pains to weave in the story of Herman Melville, author of works about men with obsessions, who lived and wrote at the time, interesting to me, but kind of an awkward insert into the book, as if the author feared she wouldn't have enough to write about.

Jana says

In *The Wilderness of Ruin: A Tale of Madness, Boston's Great Fire, and the Hunt for America's Youngest Serial Killer*, Roseanne Montillo strives to make connections between a catastrophic fire, a fourteen-year-old psychopath, and the tendency toward madness in Herman Melville's family. Unfortunately, the fire and Melville's hereditary mental weaknesses really have no connection with the sadistic actions of Jesse

Pomeroy, and detract from what could otherwise be an interesting read.

Furthermore, by referring to Pomeroy as "America's youngest serial killer," Montillo indulges in and capitalizes on the same sensationalism that she claims to be scrutinizing. Pomeroy was only accused of committing two murders, one of which was connected to him through very circumstantial evidence. There are some sources, such as the American FBI, who consider "two or more murders which occur on separate occasions" to be enough for "serial killer" classification, while the Princeton University's definition is "three or more people over a period of more than 30 days." Typically, most people (if asked) would say that serial killers have to kill at least three people, perhaps as many as five or seven, in order to be given the title. Clearly, there is some confusion, and Montillo does not explain her use of the term.

Prior to the two children he was accused of murdering, Pomeroy was found guilty of kidnapping, torturing, and mutilating several young boys in the months spanning 1871-1872. The details of what his victims endured are stomach-churning, especially when their very young ages are considered: not one boy was over the age of 10. Pomeroy was sentenced to six years in a Reformation House for delinquent boys, but was let out after only a year and a half due to "good behavior" and his mother's influential friends. The two murders occurred shortly afterward, in April and May of 1874, and he was pronounced guilty of murder in December of that year. There were numerous problems with the case against him, notably the fact that Pomeroy gave a verbal confession to the murder of Horace Miller, but no written confession was ever produced or signed. Montillo's elaborate progression of the attacks, murders, case, and Pomeroy's subsequent life behind bars is very well-written when her focus remains on Pomeroy himself.

Unfortunately, Montillo's narrative wanders frequently and at length. The Great Fire of 1872, while devastating for the city of Boston, has no bearing on or relationship to the Pomeroy case. I do not understand why the event was included at all: if Pomeroy had taken advantage of the confusion and ruin resulting from the fire, abducting children from burning buildings or panicking parents, the fire would have been relevant. Likewise the chapters discussing Herman Melville's struggles with depression, unemployment, and alcoholism. Since Melville was not living in Boston at the time of Pomeroy's attacks, and his only connection to Pomeroy appears to be lifting important newspaper-reported details for use in Melville's unfinished novella *Billy Budd*, it seems a touch ridiculous to include him at all.

I could not recommend *The Wilderness of Ruin* to other readers unless the text underwent some serious revisions and excision of extraneous information. There is a good book in here, especially when Montillo limits herself to the fascinating life and history of Jesse Pomeroy, but the multiple chapters devoted exclusively to the Great Fire and Herman Melville's exceedingly sad life were nothing but distractions for me.

I received a free review copy of this book through a First Reads giveaway on Goodreads. This did not affect my review in any way.

Will Byrnes says

He pointed out that “a strong lack of conscience” is one of the hallmarks for these individuals. “Their game is self-gratification at the other person’s experience,” Hare said. “Psychopathic killers, however, are not mad, according to accepted legal and psychiatric standards. The acts result not from a deranged mind but from a cold, calculating rationality combined with a chilly inability to treat others as thinking, feeling humans.” -

the author quoting Robert Hare, author of a book on Psychopathy

Call me Will. Some years ago, a lot, don't ask, I thought I would see a bit of that northern rival city. It was wintry, snow on the ground. Accommodations were meager. No, I was not there alone, and the journey was not without portents. But I was spared a room-mate of the cannibalistic inclination. I still feel the pull, on occasions. Maybe stop by to see relics of Revolution, fields of dreams crushed and fulfilled, walk spaces where giants once strode. So I was drawn to Roseanne Montillo's latest. In her previous book, *The Lady and Her Monsters*, she followed the trail of creation blazed by Mary Shelley as she put together her masterpiece, *Frankenstein*. In *The Wilderness of Ruin*, Montillo is back looking at monsters and creators. This time the two are not so closely linked. The monster in this tale is all too real, the youngest serial killer in US history. The artist in this volume is Herman Melville (and, of course, his monster as well, but the killer is the primary monster here). Montillo treats us to a look at his life, or at least parts of it, and offers some details on the elements that went into the construction of *his* masterpiece, *Moby Dick*. A consideration of madness, in his work and in his life, and public discourse on the subject of madness links the two. A third character here is Boston of the late 19th century, as Montillo offers us a look at the place, most particularly in the 1870s. I am sure there are parts of the city remaining, in the Fenway-Kenmore neighborhood, for one, where a form of madness is regularly experienced.

Roseanne Montillo - image from Penguin Random House

Before the infamous serial killers whose names we know too well, before BTK and Dahmer, before Bundy and Gacy, long before the Boston Strangler, Bean Town was afflicted by a particularly bloody small-fry with particularly large problems. Jesse Pomeroy was a sociopathic little beast who, as a pre-teen, preyed on small children, kidnapping, assaulting and cutting them. He was even known to have taken a bite. As a teen, after a spell in juvie, he graduated to murder. The book calls him *America's youngest serial killer*. A drunken, abusive lout of a father played a part, but was Jesse born a monster or was he made? Of course, he would probably not fit as an actual serial killer, as currently defined, but he was definitely a multiple murderer, generated considerable terror in the area, and was certainly sociopathic.

The young Jess Pomeroy and Herman Melville

Montillo offers us a look at the mean streets of Boston in the 1870s. Her descriptions are filled with illuminating, and sometimes wonderful details. It was a very Dickensian scene with poverty widespread and in full view. Child labor was usual, housing was cramped and susceptible to conflagration. Class lines were sometimes demarcated quite clearly. Montillo tells of one in particular, Mount Vernon Street, that marked where well-to-do South Slope ended and working class North Slope began. It was also known as Mount Whoredom Street for its concentration of bordellos. My favorite period detail concerns a World Peace Jubilee that took place in 1872, following the end of the Franco-Prussian war. (The mayor was trying to spruce up the city's image.) Johann Strauss played Blue Danube, and one hundred fifty firemen took the stage of the newly constructed Coliseum to perform a piece of music by pounding on 150 anvils, which probably makes Boston the birthplace of heavy metal (sorry).

The Coliseum in the World Peace Jubilee

Montillo also tells of the sort of political shortsightedness which has plagued governments everywhere. The Fire Chief had taken note of the unpleasantness endured by Chicago in 1871 and urged the city government

to do some infrastructure investment to prevent a similar outcome. Think the city did it? Of course, after the conflagration, the media, indulging in their usual investigative acuity, somehow focused blame on the one guy who was trying to prevent catastrophe. Same ole media.

Baked Beantown - from Library of Congress

Melville had to endure some troubles of his own. We in the 21st century may regard *Moby Dick* as one of the masterpieces of American literature, but it sold like three-day old fish. Melville earned less than \$600 for his effort, which labors took a considerable toll on his health and maybe on his sanity. Imagine you are Herman Melville and are working on your Opus Magnus, in a place (Arrowhead, in Pittsfield, MA) that is heavy with family, visitors, screaming children, constant distraction, and your family is trying to get you to stop writing, because, of course, it is the writing that is making you nuts. It is amazing to me that Melville did not take a page from Pomeroy's book and reduce his distractions a notch. It will come as no surprise that he was quite interested in the notion of madness. It was a widely discussed issue of the day. There was direct applicability of the madness discussion to matters like sentencing. If a prisoner is considered insane, would it be ok to execute him? Montillo goes into some of the thought at the time and the thinkers making their cases. Melville's interest in madness was certainly manifest in his book. Ahab has...issues.

Another treat in the book is some more back story on where and how Melville got some of his material. I had thought it was the tale of the Essex that had been the sole white whale inspiration. Turns out there was an earlier one. *Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the whaler...* I am not aware of the name of the aged whale that took out the Essex, but the earlier one was named *Mocha Dick*, *Mocha* for the island near where it was sighted, and *Dick* as a generic appellation, like the *Joe* part of GI Joe. It does, however, sound like an unspeakable beverage not on sale at Starbuck's, so far as I am aware.

Cover of J. N. Reynolds story Mocha Dick or the White Whale of the Pacific

Due to the joining together of a city and a multiple murderer, *The Wilderness of Ruin* does bear a base similarity to Erik Larson's outstanding book, *The Devil in the White City*. Both tell of an awful killer, and depict a major American city at a time of great change. However *Wilderness...* does not deliver quite the punch of the earlier book.

First, the link between the killer and Melville lies not in their having anything to do with each other. It is in the fact that madness is associated with both of them. And that is a fairly thin tether with which to connect the two. There are added links having to do with perception of relative skull size and skin color, but I thought those were a stretch. Given how magnificently Montillo had delved into the underpinnings of Mary Shelley's great work, I believe she would have been well served to have offered up another on Melville. It is possible, of course, that she did not have enough new material with which to populate an entire volume. And there is no shortage of material on Melville out there already. (a Google search of "Melville biography" yielded 9,460 results) Of course, I expect the same might have been said for Mary Shelley. Don't know, but the linkage felt forced.

Second, there is not really much of a hunt for Pomeroy. He spends most of his time in the book well contained behind bars, attempting to escape his come-uppance legally, and with digging tools, unlike the devil in Chicago, who remained at his dark task for most of that tale.

Third, the title may suggest something to the author, (terminology used to describe the aftermath of the

Chicago fire, perhaps) I did not really get a clear image of the stories being told from the title. I suppose Pomeroy creates his fair share of ruin, and Melville endures far too much, and, of course, the city goes all to blazes, but the title just felt *off* to me.

However, there is still plenty to like in *The Wilderness*... That one can come away from this book with a Zapruder-like mantra, "There was a second white whale," is almost worth the price of admission on its own. For those who have not already availed of material on Herman, there is enough here to whet one's appetite, without going overboard. Some of the details of 19th century Boston (Yes, the parts may not have been legally part of the Boston of the era, but they are part of it today) are fascinating. There is a nugget on the origin of a famous Poe story, from when he was stationed in Boston. The discussion on madness is certainly worth listening in on. As is an exchange of ideas about the benefits of solitary confinement. Finally, there is cross-centuries relevance to how government and media function. It will certainly come as no surprise to anyone living in 21st century America that lily-livered politicians would rather take a chance on their districts burning to the ground sooner than spend public money to protect them. And were you aware that Boston had suffered a catastrophic conflagration only a year after Chicago? (excluding you folks from the Boston area. You know about this, right?) And it will come as no surprise to anyone with a radio, television or computer that substantial portions of the media are dedicated to dimming the light by increasing the temperature. The book may not be equal to the sum of the parts, the linkages are a bit frayed, the hunt for and serial designation of the killer may have been exaggerated, but the parts are still pretty interesting. It is always a good thing to visit Boston.

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=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's Twitter and FB pages

Moby Dick for free on Gutenberg

Billy Budd for free on Gutenberg Australia

Here is a wiki on Mocha Dick, and here the text of the Knickerbocker article in which that tale is told.

A wiki piece on the World Peace Jubilee

My review of Montillo's amazing book, *The Lady and Her Monsters: A Tale of Dissections, Real-Life Dr. Frankensteins, and the Creation of Mary Shelley's Masterpiece*

Nicola Mansfield says

Like Montillo's first book, "The Lady and Her Monster", this book is not just simply about one thing. It is a history of a young criminal though two murders does not a serial killer make, named Jesse Pomeroy. Placing the reader in the late 1800s from approximately 1870 onwards, this is a social history of that time in Boston. Many topics are covered and even entire chapters are devoted to Oliver Wendall Holmes, Herman Melville,

the history of mental illness to this point in time, the great Boston fire and Boston's World Fair of the 1880s. Jesse Pomeroy's life is detailed from birth to death, most of which he spent in prison in solitary confinement, upwards of fifty years. Mental illness, insanity pleas, the recognition of not being sane, and a backwards look at Jesse as a prime example of a psychopath are all key issues dealt with in this book. Roseanne Montillo has written a very literary volume that explores all the issues of the day at the time Jesse Pomeroy was alive. It is a particularly in-depth look at "madness" as referred to in the title and how this era seriously began the study and genuine concern and a degree of compassion for people and criminals suffering unbalanced minds. Herman Melville was interested in Pomeroy's case and thus a chapter is devoted to him biographically detailing his obsessions, morbidity and madness. This book deals with main topics I'm interested in from Victorian true crimes to the history of mental illness and I found it a fascinating read. However, it is not a page-turner. As I mentioned, *The Wilderness of Ruin*, is most definitely a literary work that captivates and compels yet calls for a slower thoughtful pace.

Charlie says

Read an advance copy of this book. I came away feeling that there was much still to be known about Jesse Pomeroy. This may not be the fault of the author given the fact that he died over 80 years ago and that he seemed unwilling to divulge much whenever interviewed.

Despite the subtitle of the book "A Tale of Madness, Boston's Great Fire, and the Hunt for America's Youngest Serial Killer" in my opinion the fire had little to do with the story and the "hunt" an exaggeration, as is the use of the term serial killer (usually determined as killing three or more people).

The author seemed more fascinated by Herman Melville and a large part of the book is devoted to him yet, the link between Melville & Pomeroy is tenuous at best.

Another minor but, for me, irritating thing is that the author mentions Pomeroy's age several times but it occasionally off by two years. While not the end of the world it does make you wonder what other facts or details are "off".

I honestly came away knowing much more about Herman Melville than I did Jesse Pomeroy...not a good thing given the supposed focus of the book.

Virgowriter (Brad Windhauser) says

The book is written well (at the sentence level, and it's interesting enough. You can also clearly tell the author has read (and digested) every book Erik Larson wrote. The issue with the book is not necessarily that it can't figure out what it is (or what story it's trying to tell); rather, the issue is how this book has been pitched. The cover suggests the story is about a hunt for a serial killer. First, killing two people does not a serial killer make. Furthermore, there's not much of a hunt. The story is really about the point at which our country became fascinated with mental insanity--I would have enjoyed the book a little more if I had this frame in mind. Even so, the author does not do a strong enough job tying everything together--a few of the connections are too forced--such as all the Melville content. It's all interesting, it just doesn't come together

in the end.

Tony says

THE WILDERNESS OF RUIN. (2015). Roseanne Montillo. ***.

The run-on title description for this book was: “A Tale of Madness, Fire, and the Hunt for America’s Youngest Serial Killer.” That helps us know what to look out for, doesn’t it? It should, but don’t be fooled into complacency. Although the book starts out with the story of Jesse Harding Pomeroy, a 12-year-old resident of Boston, it soon drifts off to some other topic. Pomeroy, after a brief survey of his family and general life description, is soon identified as the boy responsible for the mutilation and subsequent murder of two other children from the neighborhood. We are also treated to a summary of his previous offenses involving torture and assault of other children prior to the murders. The time was the 1870s. In essence, Pomeroy walked into a police station and gave himself up after the murders were discovered. We learn, too, that his childhood was full of abuse by his father and that, after a divorce, he was raised by his now single mother. The author tries to provide us with all we need to know about why Pomeroy turned out as he did, but the violence of his acts leaves us uncaring as to root causes. After he is tried and convicted of the murders, he is remanded to prison and solitary confinement. After the sentence, there is a swelling of public opinion related to capital punishment vs. life imprisonment. It’s an old story. Suddenly, we are introduced to people related to the great Boston fire. I could not figure out what the fire had to do with the story of Pomeroy, but soon learned that it was the first of several tangents the author took on the way to the end of her book. We are also treated to the opinions and backgrounds of several famous writers on the subject of sanity vs. madness. Principal among these was Herman Melville. Suddenly the focus of the book changes once again. Bottom line, the book suffers from a serious case of split personality. If the author had only picked her theme and stuck to it, this might have been a much better book. Unfortunately, the resultant diffuseness of the final product left me cold. I think that three stars was optimistic.
