

Introduction, Karen Joy Fowler, *Booth* – by Katy Hull

What makes a murderer? This question permeates Karen Joy Fowler’s latest novel, *Booth*.

Fowler is a Booker prize shortlisted novelist whose book, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, also won the Pen/Faulkner award for fiction. One of her previous novels, the *Jane Austen Book Club*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and “notable book” and was made into a quite lovely movie, starring, among others, Emily Blunt. *Booth*, in turn, has been nominated for the 2022 Booker prize.

Fowler is also a writer of short stories, as well as the current chair of the Clarion Foundation, which supports writers of science fiction and fantasy. And we can see at least some of the seeds of her new novel in a short story that she wrote some 25 years ago, in which time travelling tourists show up in Washington, DC, to gawk at the assassination of President Lincoln.

Across all her novels and short stories, Fowler masterfully observes relationships between family members, friends, and lovers. *Booth* explores these relationships in relatable ways. We read about gut-wrenching sibling rivalry and parenting styles that contain a potentially toxic combination of loving indulgence and not-so benign neglect. And we read about how alcoholism and mental illness can tear through the fabric of a family. These universal themes are part of what makes *Booth* such a compelling read.

At the same time, this book is not your ordinary family drama. It is the story of the family of one of the most notorious men in America. For many Americans, as well as non-Americans, the name John Wilkes Booth evokes brain flashes of a man with a gun, in a theater. John Wilkes Booth is the all-too-famous murderer of Abraham Lincoln.

But from the title of the book until its very last page, Fowler is determined to shift the focus away from the man himself. It is almost as if she is telling us that murderers get too much attention. Her goal, instead, is to explore the particular culture that birthed and nurtured John Wilkes Booth. As a historian, I was really interested in the enabling environment that Fowler describes, which is so bound up in nineteenth century concepts of race and masculinity. Although, of course, questions remain about how much has changed and how much has stayed the same when it comes race and gender in the United States. *Booth*, it seems to me, prompts us—as readers—to reflect on this very issue.

While Fowler's prose remains crystal clear throughout her novel, the story she ultimately tells is an ambiguous one – for instance, around the compromising and compromised position of an ostensibly politically progressive family – which I think has important insights for us today.

And while *Booth* certainly poses again and again the question of what makes a murderer, answers to this question flicker only in and out of focus in Fowler's writing. So, what remains is a tale of complicity, guilt, and shame, on an individual, familial, and national level, which is what makes this book both so touching and so timely.

I can't wait to discuss *Booth* with Karen Joy Fowler and all of you this evening!