

❖ ONE ❖

AMERICA'S FASCINATION WITH MULTIPLE HOMICIDE

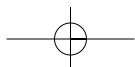


The break of dawn on November 16, 1957, heralded the start of deer hunting season in rural Waushara County, Wisconsin. The men of Plainfield went off with their hunting rifles and knives, but without any clue of what Edward Gein would do that day. Gein was known to the 647 residents of Plainfield as a quiet man who kept to himself and his aging, dilapidated farmhouse. But when the men of the village returned from hunting that evening, they learned the awful truth about their 51-year-old neighbor and the atrocities that he had ritualized within the walls of his farmhouse.

The first in a series of discoveries that would disrupt the usually tranquil town occurred when Frank Worden arrived at his hardware store after hunting all day. Frank's mother, Bernice Worden, who had been minding the store, was missing; so was Frank's truck. But there was a pool of blood on the floor and a trail of blood leading toward the place where the truck had been garaged.

The investigation of Bernice's disappearance and possible homicide led police to the farm of Ed Gein. Because the farm had no electricity, the investigators conducted a slow and ominous search with flashlights. Methodically scanning the barn for clues, the sheriff's light suddenly exposed a hanging figure, apparently Mrs. Worden. As Captain Schoephoerster later described in court:

Mrs. Worden had been completely dressed out like a deer with her head cut off at the shoulders. Gein had slit the skin on the back of her ankles and inserted a wooden rod, 3½ feet long, and about 4 inches in diameter, and



sharpened to a point at both ends, through the cut tendons on the back of her ankles. Both hands were tied to her side with binder twine. The center of the rod was attached to a pulley on a block and tackle. The body was pulled up so that the feet were near the ceiling. We noticed that there was just a few drops of watery blood beneath the body on the dirt floor, and not finding the head or intestines, we thought possibly the body had been butchered at another location. (Gollmar, 1981, p. 32)

The brutal murder and dismemberment of Bernice Worden was not the only gruesome act of the reclusive man whom no one really knew. In the months that followed, more of Gein's macabre practices were unveiled. Not only was he suspected in several other deaths, but Gein also admitted to having stolen corpses and body parts from a number of graves. Gein used these limbs and organs to fashion ornaments such as belts of nipples and a hanging human head, as well as decorations for his house, including chairs upholstered in human skin and bedposts crowned with skulls. A shoe box containing nine vulvas was but one piece of Gein's grim collection of female organs. On moonlit evenings, he would prance around his farm wearing a real female mask, a vest of skin complete with female breasts, and woman's panties filled with vaginas in an attempt to recreate the form and presence of his dead mother.

The news of Gein's secret passion devastated Plainfield. The townspeople were shocked to learn of the terrible fate of Mrs. Worden and to hear of the discovered remains belonging to 51-year-old barkeeper Mary Hogan, who had disappeared years earlier after being shot by Gein. They were outraged by the sacrilege of their ancestors' graves. They were literally sickened remembering the gifts of "venison" that Gein had presented them.

THE GEIN LEGACY

Any small town is shocked by a murder in its midst, but the horror of Gein's rituals surpassed anything that the people of Plainfield had ever encountered or even imagined. Outside Wisconsin, however, few people had heard of Edward Gein. As bizarre and offensive as his crimes were, Gein never really made headlines in other parts of the country; what happens in Plainfield is not nearly as important, at least to the national media, as what occurs in a large city like Chicago or Washington, D.C. Very few eyebrows are raised at the

mention of the name Ed Gein. Hardly a household name or a box office attraction, he might have been immortalized like Charles Manson in the film *Helter Skelter* (1976) had he killed in Los Angeles. Had he lived in a metropolis like New York City, director Spike Lee might have featured Gein in a retrospective docudrama, as he did serial killer David Berkowitz in the film *Summer of Sam* (1999). A killer from Plainfield, Wisconsin—which rings very much like Anywhere, USA—however, probably will never be regarded as important enough to warrant a major movie release called “Autumn of Ed.”

Although the name of Edward Gein is unknown to most moviegoers, he was discovered by Hollywood. His legendary place in the annals of crime has inspired a number of fictional films, both popular and obscure, as well as a low-budget portrayal of the Gein story, simply titled *Ed Gein* (2000).

The promoters of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) claimed that it was based on fact, although a crime of this description cannot be found in reality. One thing is for sure: The film contains numerous elements reminiscent of Gein’s patently deviant behavior. For instance, the farmhouse of the *Chainsaw* family of killers, like Gein’s house, is littered with spare body parts and bones. Also similar to Gein, the family has an armchair with real arms.

A little-known film imported from Canada more closely parallels the Gein theme. In *Deranged* (1974), a killer known as the “Butcher of Woodside” slaughters and stuffs his victims. At one point, he parades in the skin of a woman he has just killed, similar to Gein’s moonlight escapades. A poster ad for the film depicts a woman hanging from her ankles, just as the body of Bernice Worden was discovered.

Probably because of Anthony Hopkins’s memorable portrayal of Hannibal Lecter in 1991’s *The Silence of the Lambs*, some may forget the presence of a second despicable character in the film known as Buffalo Bill. Just as Edward Gein collected women’s skin in order to recreate his mother, so the serial killer Buffalo Bill trapped and murdered his female victims for the same purpose, to harvest enough human skin to complete his “girl suit.”

Perhaps the most noteworthy cinematic production inspired by the Gein case was the classic thriller *Psycho* (1960), the original version of which was directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Operating out of a warped sense of reverence, Norman Bates (played by Anthony Perkins in the original and by Vince Vaughn in the 1998 remake) stuffed and preserved his deceased mother just as Gein had tried using female body parts to symbolize and resurrect his mother. Both conversed with their dead mothers, and both struggled with strict moral

constraints that had been enforced by their dominating and sickly mothers. Finally, Norman Bates was implicated in the deaths of two other young women, just as the excavation of undersized bones near Gein's farm suggested his role in the disappearance of two teenage girls.

MULTIPLE MURDER IN POPULAR CULTURE

Hero worship has always been an integral part of popular culture. Over the decades, we have celebrated those members of society who have reached the pinnacle of success in their fields by honoring them in movies, in documentaries, in magazine profiles, and even on trading cards. More recently, we have extended our celebration to what some consider our new antiheroes, those who have distinguished themselves in the worst possible ways by reaching the pinnacle of "success" as murderers.

In 1991, a California trading card company published its first series of mass and serial killer cards, spotlighting such brutal criminals as Edward Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, Theodore Bundy, and Charles Manson. Selling for ten dollars per pack (without bubble gum), they were no joke. Several other card makers soon followed suit, hoping to cash in on the celebrity of multiple murderers.

Even comic books have been used as vehicles for celebrating the exploits of vicious killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, rather than traditional superheroes. One comic book, *The Unauthorized Biography of a Serial Killer* (Fisher, 1992), goes as far as to portray, in drawings, Dahmer sodomizing his victim. By taking on a starring role once held by the likes of Batman and Superman, the killer is unnecessarily glorified. As in Marshall McLuhan's famous adage "the medium is the message," the victims' memory is trivialized by placing them in a comic book format.

In a more respectable context, the coveted cover of *People* magazine has become a spotlight for infamous criminals. It was bad enough that Milwaukee's confessed cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer was on the cover of *People*, an honor usually reserved for Hollywood stars and Washington politicians, but the popular celebrity magazine also chose Dahmer as one of its "100 Most Intriguing People of the 20th Century."

During the 1970s, only one killer was featured on *People's* cover. In the 1990s, by contrast, the incredibly popular celebrity magazine printed more

than two dozen different cover stories about vicious criminals including Dahmer, David Koresh, Laurie Dann, and Theodore Kaczynski (see Levin, Fox, & Mazaic, 2002).

Television has also helped to turn criminals into celebrities. Docudramas are often biographies of vicious criminals—many of whom are played by leading actors and actresses, such as Mark Harmon as Theodore Bundy, Brian Dennehy as John Wayne Gacy, Jeremy Davies as Charles Manson, and Jean Smart as Aileen Wuornos. Actress Charlize Theron played Wuornos in the 2003 big-screen version, titled *Monster*, winning herself an Oscar for the performance and in the process winning Wuornos some posthumous measure of sympathy. Having glamorous stars cast in the roles of vicious killers unfortunately infuses these killers with glamour and humanity.

Besides the undeserving focus on the criminal as the “star of the show” in these programs, television docudramas are sanitized by virtue of the restrictions that are placed on network television. Ironically, though, theatrical films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Red Dragon* (2002), *Along Came a Spider* (2001), *Copycat* (1995), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *The Cell* (2000) are able to depict all the horrible details of purely fictional crimes without fear of censorship.

A rare true-crime film that does not glorify serial murder can be found in *Henry—A Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), a low-budget motion picture based on serial murderer Henry Lee Lucas and his partner Otis Toole. Among other of their dastardly misdeeds, Toole and Lucas are strongly suspected of abducting and decapitating six-year-old Adam Walsh, the son of John Walsh of the long-standing Fox TV program *America's Most Wanted*. In *Henry*, the two killers are shown for what they really were—cruel and inhumane men without any redeeming social value. They weren't portrayed as smart, friendly, handsome, or charming, and they weren't played by actors most people would recognize as stars. Most important, the film refused to soft-pedal the monstrous acts of this killing team, showing their unmitigated cruelty without compromise.

THE SELLING OF MULTIPLE MURDER

The glorification of multiple killers has created a market for almost anything that they say or do. For example, the art work of John Wayne Gacy became

much in demand, but only after he was convicted of killing 33 young men and boys in Des Plaines, Illinois, and especially after his execution by the state of Illinois. His very ordinary paintings of clowns have been displayed in art galleries and have become collector's items. His paintings had special significance because he had been known to dress as a clown to entertain children at neighborhood birthday parties. While he was still alive, Gacy made \$100,000 on sales of his paintings through a broker. Similarly, the paintings of deceased mass murderer Richard Speck, who slaughtered eight nurses in Chicago and then died in an Illinois penitentiary, now sell for up to \$2,000. Although this kind of price tag may seem relatively slight for original art, his paintings would hardly be worth the canvas they're painted on were it not for his bizarre notoriety.

Along the same lines, a Denver art studio produces and sells serial killer action figures. Similarly, collectors of what has been termed "murderabilia" can purchase a wide variety of clothing items emblazoned with their favorite serial killers or can bid on such items as a lock of Charles Manson's hair or a pair of his sandals at an Internet auction site.

Some individuals are so fascinated with serial murderers that they will purchase any item associated even remotely with a killer's hideous crimes. Bricks taken from Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment building were considered by some as prized souvenirs. Other serial murder fans were willing to bid for the refrigerator in which Dahmer had held his victims' body parts.

More recently, after it was discovered that Gary Ridgway was the so-called Green River Killer who murdered at least 48 prostitutes in the Seattle area, eBay customers were eager to purchase Green River-related merchandise over the Internet. Until it was yanked from the website, customers could bid on a blood-red T-shirt bearing the image of Gary Ridgway and the words "I was good at choking." Or they could purchase a business card from the Green River Task Force and a used mug taken from the truck factory where Ridgway had worked for 30 years. The business card was sold for \$29; the old mug brought \$4.25.

Before his arrest in 1995, 47-year-old serial killer Keith Jesperson was dubbed the "Happy Face Killer" because of the doodle he scribbled on his anonymous confession. The long-haul trucker, who took the lives of at least eight women in five states, sells his artwork online. At two websites, his colored-pencil drawings of various animals in the wild were displayed with their price tags of \$25 each. A signed photograph of the killer came free of charge with every purchase (Suo, 2002, p. E1).

A song written by multiple murderer Charles Manson became a cult classic when recorded by the heavy metal rock group Guns N' Roses in their 1993 album *The Spaghetti Incident*. To publicize their release, lead singer Axl Rose wore a Charles Manson T-shirt on the album cover. Patti Tate, sister of the Hollywood actress Sharon Tate, murdered in 1969 by Manson followers, said in response that the record company "is putting Manson up on a pedestal for young people who don't know who he is to worship like an idol" (Quintanilla, 1994, p. E1). Patti Tate's judgment was confirmed when an iconoclastic young rocker adopted the stage name Marilyn Manson. Charles Manson himself still maintains his own music "career," even from his prison cell. Tapes of his music have been smuggled out from the penitentiary and then distributed on CDs.

Americans have become fascinated with the many "talents" displayed by vicious killers. Drifter Daniel Rolling, convicted in the Gainesville student slayings, performed his own musical compositions. He sang love songs to his sweetheart, both in court and, with guitar accompaniment, on the national television program *A Current Affair*. He and his fiancée Sondra London (1996) published a book containing his artwork and poetry, which many fans purchased at leading bookstores around the country.

Not only is the value of multiple murderer artwork and music inflated, but their statements to the press, both spoken and written, also are treated as "words of wisdom." Suddenly, they become instant experts in everything from psychology to criminal justice. The media often solicit their opinions about how victims might protect themselves from murder, about what motivates other serial killers, and what is the role of pornography in the development of a sexual sadist. In fact, Ted Bundy's "expert testimony" on the eve of his execution concerning the dangers of erotic materials became ammunition for ultraconservative groups lobbying for federal antipornography legislation widely called the "Bundy Bill."

Thirty-eight-year-old serial killer Leslie Allen Williams, after his 1992 arrest under suspicion for the slayings of four women, exploited the Detroit-area media to the hilt. Rather than giving an interview to every media outlet that wanted one, Williams took requests. In a contest the outcome of which he alone would decide, one local television station won an exclusive interview with the serial killer. In addition, one daily paper, the *Detroit News*, was chosen for the "privilege" of printing his 24-page open letter to the public that expounded on the theories and philosophy of Leslie Williams. Anyone who

would question whether this was a privilege for the *Detroit News* should consider what it did to boost street sales over its competitor.

CRAVING ATTENTION

Donald Harvey, who confessed to killing scores of patients while working as an orderly in Cincinnati-area hospitals, agreed to a taped face-to-face interview with popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey, as part of a show on nurses who kill. During the taped segment, Harvey visibly showed enjoyment in recounting the details of how he killed his victims. He described with glee how he had injected some with poisons and had suffocated others. Realizing that Harvey was having the time of his life talking about murdering patients, the *Oprah Winfrey* show wisely decided that it would be insensitive—if not unethical—to air the program and canceled it. By doing so, the producers deprived Harvey of a chance for stardom on a national stage. The show's producers correctly recognized the fine but critical line that divides informed analysis from unhealthy glorification.

Many multiple murderers are all too aware of their celebrity status. Seeking to remain in the spotlight while on the loose, some have communicated with the media and the police, sending clues, instructions, or demands. David Berkowitz, who was dubbed the “Son of Sam” during his killing spree in New York City, mailed cryptic messages to a noted columnist at the *New York Daily News*. Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, demanded that the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* publish his 35,000-word political manifesto in its entirety; the *Post*'s editors complied. The so-called Zodiac killer, while he was slaying dozens of residents of San Francisco, transmitted astrological clues to members of the local press and television. He has not yet been apprehended.

At one of their October, 2002, crime scenes, the Washington, D.C., snipers left a three-page letter containing their demand for \$10 million as well as instructions for the head of the task force to read at a press conference the phrase, “We have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose,” adapted from a children's folktale. Over a period of more than three weeks, the two snipers shot to death 10 innocent people in the Beltway area. But even before 42-year-old John Allen Mohammad and his 17-year-old partner Lee Boyd Malvo had been apprehended, they were already dubbed “The Tarot Card Killer” on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. Not to be “scooped” by its competition, *U.S.*

News & World Report similarly reserved its cover story for the “I am God” message found scrawled on a Tarot card at one of the snipers’ crime scenes. Given such a memorable and glamorized depiction, the serial snipers will surely now take their place in infamy among the many other serial killers who have become household names—the Son of Sam, the Green River Killer, the Hillside Strangler, and the Unabomber, to name only a few.

During the 1970s, a serial killer in Wichita, Kansas, phoned a local newspaper reporter and directed him to locate a mechanical engineering textbook on the shelves of the Wichita Public Library. Inside the text, the reporter found a letter in which the writer claimed credit for the recent massacre of a local family and promised more of the same in the future. In his letter, the killer wrote: “The code words for me will be . . . Bind them, Torture them, Kill them.” He signed the letter: “BTK Strangler,” for bind, torture, and kill.

The BTK moniker, originating with the killer himself, was commonly used by newspaper reporters in their articles about his string of seven murders. In January, 1978, BTK sent a poem to a reporter at the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, in which he wrote about a victim he had slain a year earlier. In February of the same year, BTK wrote a letter to a Wichita television station complaining about the lack of publicity he had received for his murders. “How many do I have to kill,” BTK asked, “before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?” (Scott, 1978). In addition, the killer compared his crimes with those of Jack the Ripper, Son of Sam, and the Hillside Strangler.

Until recently, it was believed that BTK’s killing spree had ended in 1977. The murders seemed to have stopped, the leads in the case never panned out, and the media no longer heard from the killer. After more than 25 years, however, BTK apparently resurfaced to terrorize the Wichita community. In March, 2004, he sent a letter to the *Wichita Eagle* in which he claimed credit for the unsolved death of Vicki Wegerle, who was killed in September, 1986. As evidence of his complicity, BTK enclosed with his letter a photocopy of Wegerle’s driver’s license and photographs of her body.

The reason for the reemergence of BTK is not entirely clear, but it may be that the killer was feeling insecure about being out of the spotlight. Exactly where had he gone since 1986? Was he incarcerated for some other offense? Had he moved from the Wichita area? Or had he recently suffered some catastrophic loss in his personal life that inspired a renewed need for attention from the public? Time may tell, but if the BTK strangler has his way, we may never know for sure.

KILLER GROUPIES

Because of their celebrity status, infamous multiple murderers attract a surprising number of extreme sympathizers, so-called “killer groupies.” Several convicted serial killers, such as Hillside Stranglers Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, were pursued and married while serving life sentences for their brutal and sadistic murders of young women on the West Coast. Other multiple murderers have married from death row, giving the traditional vow, “‘til death do us part,” an ironic twist.

Why would someone in her right mind correspond, visit, or even fall in love with a man who has raped, tortured, and mutilated innocent victims? Why would hundreds of women attempt to visit Los Angeles Night Stalker Richard Ramirez, who was convicted of stealthily entering more than a dozen homes in the dark of night and killing the occupants? Why would a woman like Veronica Crompton be so attracted to Sunset Strip killer Douglas Clark that she would break off her relationship with Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi?

Actually, there are several reasons why convicted serial killers are pursued by adoring women. Some groupies may be attracted to their idol’s controlling, manipulative personalities. A Freudian might attempt to trace this attraction to a woman’s need to resurrect her relationship with a cruel, domineering father figure. At least a few killer groupies strive to prove that their lover is a victim of injustice. These women’s fight for right gives their otherwise unfulfilling lives a strong sense of purpose. Others wish to break through the killer’s vicious facade with thoughts such as these: “The whole world sees Johnny as a monster. Only I see the kindness in him; he shares that with only me. . . . I feel so special.” Still other devotees simply are comfortable in always knowing where their man is at 2 o’clock in the morning—even if it’s on death row: “He may be behind bars, but at least he’s not out in the bars with some other woman.”

Dozens of women have written love letters to Danny Rolling, the serial killer who in 1990 brutally murdered five college students in Gainesville, Florida. One adoring fan wrote to the killer: “I fell in love the first time I saw you. I have even seen you in my dreams. . . . You’re a very handsome man” (Blinow, 1999, p. 42). A 29-year-old woman sent Rolling bikini-clad photos of herself and wrote: “I love you with all my heart. . . . I don’t care what you’ve done in the past. . . . I wish I could hold you and comfort you.” She addressed her letter, “To my sweet prince” (Blinow, 1999, p. 42). Many other women have sent Rolling red roses, locks of their hair, and love poetry. Some

have sprinkled their letters with perfume and have begged the killer to allow them to visit.

Underlying all these motivations, however, are the glamour and celebrity status that killer groupies find exciting. One young teenager from Milwaukee appeared years ago on a national TV talk show to admit that she would give “anything” to get an autograph from serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer; it is likely that she also collected the autographs of rock stars or rap artists.

In general, serial killers are more accessible than other celebrities. If a fan wants to get close to rock idol Justin Timberlake or rapper Eminem, she generally doesn't have a chance. But with someone like Night Stalker Richard Ramirez, all she would have to do is write a few gushy love letters and she might even get to meet him, receive gifts through the mail, and perhaps even get to marry him!

THE IMPACT OF CELEBRATING MURDERERS

Is the glorification of multiple murder—trading cards, art galleries, songfests, and killer groupies—nothing more than harmless media hype? Certainly the families of murder victims don't think so. From their point of view, the sanitized, romanticized, and glamorized image of a killer who is in actuality little more than an unrepentant, vicious, sadistic destroyer of human life only adds insult to injury.

The harm extends well beyond the victims and their loved ones. Worshipping a killer whose actions are so hideous that he ought to be soundly condemned debases our entire society. Making monsters into celebrities only teaches our youngsters—especially alienated and marginalized teenagers—a lesson about how to get attention. “Want to be noticed? Want to feel important? Simple. Shoot lots of your classmates. Then, you'll be on the cover of *People* magazine, you'll be interviewed on CNN, and you'll make headlines all over the nation, if not the world!” Columbine High shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine under the headline “The Monsters Next Door.” Adult readers may indeed have viewed them as monsters, but how many young teens instead saw them more as celebrities and heroes? From the perspective of a few alienated youngsters, not only did Klebold and Harris get even with the bullies and the jocks, but they're famous for it!

By granting celebrity status to villains, therefore, we may be inadvertently providing young people with a dangerous model for gaining national prominence. We may also be giving to the worst among us exactly what they hope to achieve—celebrity status.

SENSITIZE, NOT SANITIZE

Author Lonnie Kidd might recklessly, albeit unwittingly, have put a stamp of approval on murder with his failed attempt at satire. His 1992 book *Becoming a Successful Mass Murderer or Serial Killer: The Complete Handbook* might easily be misunderstood as a murder “how to” book by people who are looking for an excuse to kill. In a section titled “To Get Rid of Your Children, Your Spouse’s Children, Other’s Children,” for example, Kidd (1992, p. 100) suggests:

You will have no problem finding lots of brat children to kill. They are also easily convinced to go off alone with you. You could easily beat them to death. Kick and stomp their little faces and heads into the ground! Hear them promise to be good little boys and girls; but, you know better! They will continue to be little brats if you do not do away with them.

In a disclaimer, Kidd argues that his book is “a way of calling attention to very serious phenomenon [sic] in a satirical manner.” Notwithstanding the legitimacy of his avowed objective, not all of Kidd’s readers will possess the sophistication needed to “get the joke.” Those who are already predisposed to mayhem and murder might instead find plenty of encouragement in the pages of Kidd’s troubling manual.

In the pages to follow, we certainly do not strive to enhance multiple murder celebrity. Rather, we hope to shed light—but not a spotlight—on the motivation and character of these vicious killers. We appreciate the important distinction between analyzing the gory details of a crime and glorifying the image of the criminal. At times, we describe the sickening circumstances of a multiple murder, but always with a purpose: to remind us that these killers are monsters, undeserving of celebration and fanfare.

We must be nothing less than candid about what atrocities modern-day serial and mass killers have committed. Leaving out the gruesome details might reduce the reader’s discomfort, but it would inadvertently minimize the horror of the murders and maximize sympathy for the perpetrators.