American Murder and Its Literary Consequences: The Rise of True Crime

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
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Abstract

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This dissertation is a study of the popular non-fiction genre known as "true-crime." True- crime has been one of the most popular and successful mass-market genres since the 1970s, but the genre has been neglected as a topic of serious literary study. This dissertation situates true- crime within its historical origins of late-1960s/early 1970s social upheavals, rising crime rates, inter-generational tensions, the rise of New Journalism, and a changing publishing industry. Close readings of key texts within the genre—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* (1967) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Joseph Wambaugh's *The Onion Field* (1973), Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter* (1974), Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), and Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980)—reveal that the genre is an expression of post-war American fears of rapid social and cultural change. True-crime confirms the reading public's fears about violence in America, bringing the reader into closer relationship with real killers, while simultaneously distancing the reader from the possibility of random violence and death. A cultural studies methodology is used to understand the ways in which the genre both reflected and helped to create those fears.

True-crime is also the site of a dramatic renegotiation and revaluation of the rhetoric of evil, and is one of the sites in American public discourse where that rhetoric is

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used without irony, and where notions and definitions of 'evil' are presented without ambiguity. The genre posited the psychopath/sociopath as a character type, thereby popularizing a new a way of framing the irrational and horrific. Different sub-categories within the genre demonstrate its growth and establishment, and true-crime now includes a large group of female-centered texts whose portrayals of deviant domesticity act as both corrective and talisman against inter-personal violence. When seen within its proper literary-historical context, true-crime emerges as a vibrant and meaningful strand of popular culture, little-understood and often devalued as 'pulp.' This dissertation seeks to define the cultural work of true-crime, and finds that work important and compelling.

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Acknowledgements and dedication

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American Murder and Its Literary Consequences: The Rise of True-Crime

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Chapter 1: True-Crime Precursors

The title of this dissertation, "American Murder and Its Literary Consequences: The Rise of True-Crime," is a reference to two very different books: Truman Capote's 1966 *In Cold Blood: A True Account of A Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*, and Ian Watt's 1957 *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. My dissertation is a critical study of the popular, mass-market genre known as "true-crime." Beginning with *In Cold Blood*, in the 1960s and 70s the true-crime genre rose to prominence and began to dominate non-fiction murder narration in America. Since Capote, true-crime has acquired a specific set of generic conventions, narrative techniques, and assumptions about audience which its writers have adhered to, creating a coherent body of texts which narrate real crime and posit a consistent way of understanding it. The nod to Ian Watt's text in my title is an acknowledgement of the notion that literary forms both reflect and contain a perspective on their cultural moment; just as the 18th century "rise" of the novel corresponded to the realities of emerging market capitalism and social and political changes in England, true-crime rose in America during a period of drastic and rapid social upheaval, the emergence of New Journalism, and a dramatic and frightening upsurge in violent crime. This study seeks to reveal the strategies of making meaning out of impossibly horrible and irrational acts in contemporary American culture, and finds that true-crime responds to murder with both irrational fear and compelling fascination.

The ways that real murder is narrated, and therefore understood by any given culture, change through time and with differing historical circumstances. In her book *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, Karen Halttunen

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writes that "Any story of murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to serious transgression in its midst." [1] There is a trajectory of American non-fiction murder narration, which both responds to and reflects its context. Halttunen has found that 17th and 18th century American murder narratives, primarily execution sermons, focused on the spiritual condition of the murderer. Such murder narratives also posited a view that violent transgression, although shocking, was not entirely beyond comprehension because of widespread acceptance of the Christian doctrine of innate depravity and fallen human nature. She finds that in the 19th century, a change occurred in the ways that murder was narrated, which in turn revealed a shift into viewing murderers as "moral aliens," and as entirely beyond the pale of human experience and understanding, largely because of the increasing domination of Enlightenment ideas about the supremacy of rational thought and behavior. Halttunen suggests a growing fascination and interest in the figure of the killer, revealed through changing narrative forms such as newspaper accounts, books, and pamphlets. In the 19th century, killers began to be portrayed with a set of "Gothic horror" conventions, including a concern with the hidden nature of murder, an increasing emphasis on depictions of gore and more graphic violence, and a greater interest in mystery.

Halttunen's study ends with the late 19th century, but the generic conventions she identifies and describes dominated non-fiction murder narratives well into the next century. In the early decades of the 20th century, mystery and detective fiction became dominant forms of understanding and comprehending violent transgression, as the first

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[1] Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 2.

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World War raged and readers sought an escape from larger, more sweeping and visible forms of violence. The wry, sardonic, and irony-laden non-fiction murder narratives of British writers such as William Roughead were popular in the early 20th century, and they emphasized clever and evenly matched killers and detectives and a deconstruction of mystery. Roughead's tales, published as collections, always ended with the triumph of justice and a re-ordering of social chaos, as did mystery and detective fiction of the period. No single American writer found the prominence and popularity of Roughead, but collections of real case studies were common into the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. The courtroom drama became popular at this time as well, as the insanity plea became contested ground and racial science sought to identify criminals according to physical characteristics and genetic or social predeterminations, and therefore, prevent crime. Changes in understanding crime, including the theories of late-19th century criminalists such as Cesare Lombroso and Alphonse Bertillon, the increasing professionalism and proficiency of police and prosecutors, a new understanding of psychology, and advances in forensic science, were all written into non-fiction murder narratives during the first few 20th century decades. Single sensational cases, such as the Leopold and Loeb murder and trial (1924), produced many textual treatments, both single case study books and inclusion in collections. But until the 1950s, murder narratives varied widely, and there was no single genre or collection of conventions which dominated the way that the story of murder was told. [2]

[2] Some examples of earlier 20th century murder narratives include Edwin H. Porter, *The Fall River Tragedy: A History of the Borden Murders* (originally published privately in 1893, reprinted in 1985 by King Phillip Publishing Company); Frank P. Geyer, *The Holmes-Pitezel case: a history of the greatest crime of the century and of the search for the Pitezel children* (Publishers' Union, 1896); Benjamin H. Atwell, *The Great Harry Thaw Case, or, a Woman's Sacrifice* (Laird & Lee, 1907); C.P. Connolly, *The Truth About the Frank Case* (Vail-Ballou, 1915); Thomas Duke, *Celebrated Criminal Cases of America* (1920); Osmand Fraenkel, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1931); Craig Rice, *45 Murderers: A*

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Non-Fiction Crime Writing in the 1950s

In the 1950's, some of the conventions and techniques which would later inform and shape the true-crime genre began to appear in non-fiction murder narratives. In general, 1950s murder narratives tended toward sensationalism and simply-drawn portraits of both the killer and the circumstances of murder. But in some, the percolation of forces and the creation of new techniques of representation which would become hallmarks of 1960s true-crime are evident. Joel Bartlow Martin's 1952 *Why Did They Kill?*, Lucy Freeman's 1955 *"Before I kill more... "*, and Meyer Levin's 1956 treatment of the infamous Leopold and Loeb case, *Compulsion,* were three popular murder narratives from the 1950s. Each of these texts is a significant predecessor to Capote's *In Cold Blood*, primarily because each author treated real crimes in narrative form using crude versions of the techniques that Capote would perfect. One of the primary techniques is a narrator who is at once an objective reporter, an observer who stands outside the action and records events, and an insider with special knowledge of the killers and the crime. Other true-crime conventions are a sense of simultaneous distance from and identification with the killers, the seamless blending of fiction and non-fiction, a readily identifiable four-part narrative structure of murder-pursuit-trial-execution, a preoccupation with similar types of killers, killings, and victims, the desire to portray murder in a social context, and an overriding sense of the inevitability of evil.

If certain time periods are preoccupied with representations of certain types of killers, then the 1950's was the era of the teenaged "thrill-killer." Martin, Freeman, and

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Collection of True Crime Stories (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952); Charles Samuels, *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (Fawcett, 1953).

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Levin all chose to write about teenaged killers; Martin's case was contemporary, as was Freeman's, but Levin dredged up the Leopold and Loeb case and shaped it for a 1950's reading public. The crimes treated in these three texts were each stunningly random and meaningless, and were aptly called "thrill-killings." The fascination with random violence would show up in true-crime in the 1960s and 70s, for those texts would almost exclusively treat so-called "stranger killings," murder between people who don't know one another. [3] Murder narratives from the 50's and 60's would also often focus on two or more killers—Martin, Levin, and Capote each chose cases which featured either pairs or multiple killers, enabling the writers to explore from different perspectives the impulse to kill, and simultaneously to suggest more than one way to view a killer. The multi-layered, multivalent nature of the true-crime text was emerging in nascent form in the 1950's.

In *Why Did They Kill?*, the reporter Joel Bartlow Martin reports and attempts to explain the random killing of a nurse by three juvenile delinquents in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1951. The structure and focus of this text are crucial: it begins with the murder and unfolds by narrating the childhoods of the killers and by exploring the psycho-social forces which shaped their personalities. The context within which murder occurs is drawn in great detail by focusing on the killers; the story of murder becomes the story of how killers are made. The answer to the question that is the title, *why* did these kids kill this nurse, a stranger to them, is contained at the very heart of the book. The events of the night of the murder are revealed only after detailed portraits of the killers have been drawn, and the killers are allowed to describe their actions, introducing the

[3] Even in those cases of murder between intimates, such as the sensational Sam Shepard case, a stranger figured prominently and was posited as the real killer.

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killers' voices into the text. The book resembles a classic detective story puzzler, only the puzzle is not 'whodunit,' but 'how and why did they do it?' Martin also relates the capture and punishment of the killers, how they felt about being in prison, and how they behaved while there, an element of murder narration which would become very prominent in true-crime.

In the epilogue to *Why Did They Kill?*, Martin refers to another of these characteristics in a statement about the type of non-fiction crime writing that he practiced, and that was beginning to emerge as typical:

> Some years back I got the idea that most crime writing of the traditional sort seemed to assume that crime happened in a vacuum. It seemed to me that crimes don't just happen by blind chance—that something causes them. Sometimes the matrix is social, sometimes psychological, most often both. Writing about an individual criminal case, then, offers also an opportunity to write about a whole society: Crime-in-context. [4]

The notion of murder narration as 'crime-in-context' is one of the defining characteristics of true-crime, and was clearly becoming an important goal for non-fiction crime writers during this period. True-crime does much more than simply sketch out the gruesome details of an act of murder—it contextualizes the crime by drawing a 'thick description' of the conditions leading up to it. Further evidence that this trope was growing in importance is present in anecdotal form about the origins of *In Cold Blood.* In George Plimpton's biography of Capote, Brendan Gill says that "I think Shawn [William, then editor of *The New Yorker*] told Truman that he was interested in seeing the effect of a

[4] Joel Bartlow Martin, *Why Did They Kill?*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1953, Epilogue.

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murder—a story of a small Midwestern town responding to an unprecedented catastrophe in their midst." [5] These statements are significant because they show a growing desire to contextualize murder. The impulse to present murder in a social context by focusing on how and why the killers came to be, instead of simply presenting facts, would shape the genre irrevocably.

Martin's position as a reporter, the special perspective on and access to materials that being a professional reporter gave him, is another way that his work portends the coming changes in murder narration. The convention of the writer being close to the killer—emotionally, through close lengthy contact, by conducting extensive interviews, by participating in his trial, by witnessing his execution—would become an important defining characteristic of true-crime. This new closeness of the writer to the subject produced a shift in the depiction of murderous deeds and minds, a shift which would in turn forge an intense ambiguity in the way evil would be configured and understood in true-crime. Again in the epilogue, Martin writes about the difficulty of doing the interviews and research for his book:

> I think it was probably the most difficult story I ever worked on. Not in a technical writing sense but in a more personal way. I have children of my own. I know a lot of other kids not very different from Bill Morey [the killer]. I know a lot of parents not very different from his parents. When I was Bill Morey's age, I, and my friends, did a lot of the things he did. There were so many *points of recognition* [my italics.]. The story rather frightened me, I think.[6]

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[5] George Plimpton, *Truman Capote* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1997) 166.

[6] Martin epilogue.

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Martin's struggle to distance himself from these teenaged killers, his efforts to see himself as different from people with whom he identified deeply, the fear he expresses about the horror of murder amid the normalcy of middle-class suburban life, all would become dominant themes and ruling preoccupations within true-crime. This in turn would have a great impact on the depiction of murder and the underlying assumptions and beliefs about evil which guided those representations. From the 1950's onward, killers were being depicted as not so very different from the average person, the average reporter, the average reader. The reader's ambiguous identification with the killer via the unique position of the writer would become a hallmark of true-crime. The intimacy that would mark the writer/reader/killer triad had its roots in the 1950's, in the shock of recognition that writers like Martin felt when they looked at these real murderers and their contexts too closely.

Although *Why Did They Kill?* contains some similarities to later true-crime, it is also rooted in its own time. Martin was in essence a journalist with little interest in the literary quality of his work, and although he may personally have felt a sense of unsettling identification with the killers, that does not come through in his text. The authorial presence in *Why Did They Kill?*, although objective, is heavy; one never forgets that the narrator is interviewing the principals, sorting the material, and imposing his vision onto the raw facts of the case. The result is a deeply detached perspective on the killers. Martin never guides the reader into the kind of identification with his principals that later true-crime writers would, because he doesn't turn his subjects into literary characters. We never forget that these are real people who committed a very real atrocious act; we are not consistently encouraged to see them as ordinary boys with

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ordinary emotions, just like ours. There is no free indirect discourse, no attempt made at even light fictionalization of events. The account of the murder reads like a newspaper report: sentences like "Bill was wearing moccasins. He stepped along behind the nurse. She did not hear him. The moon was full and bright, the foliage thick" and "'I could not see him from the chest up and he was making swinging motions'" typify the flat documentary reporting style of Martin's prose. The accretion of details about the killer's family life, his friends, descriptions of his daily existence before the murders, the organization of his personality and psyche, his likes and dislikes, motives pure and impure, take up most of the text. Because there are three principal actors involved in this crime there's more material to cover, but the text is essentially a thin and artless piece of reportage.

Lucy Freeman's 1955 *"Before I kill more..."* is a narrative treatment of the infamous Chicago "lipstick killer," William George Heirens. 17-year-old Heirens killed two women and one young girl between June 1945 and January 1946; he was caught and his confession, induced by sodium pentothal, led to life imprisonment. If not for his young age and his unbalanced mental state, he would probably have been sent to the electric chair. Freeman was an amateur psychoanalyst as well as a journalist, and her text is one of the first instances in non-fiction murder narration of the use of Freudian depth psychology to understand a murderer. Freeman took the title of her book from the note that Heirens scrawled in lipstick on the wall of his second victim's apartment, which read "For heavens sake catch me before I kill more I cannot control myself." *"Before I kill more..."* is an interesting hybrid of novelistic techniques, contextualization of the murders, psychological study of the murderer, and additional documentary materials,

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including a transcript of Heirens' full confession, a photograph of the lipstick-scrawled note on the wall, photos of the detectives who apprehended him, Heirens' childhood home, and even a shot of Freeman interviewing Heirens. These elements show an emerging documentary impulse, and they support Freeman's psychoanalytic approach to her subject. Including photographs and evidentiary documents allows Freeman to frame the killer within a subtle and more psychologically sophisticated understanding of madness, for the reader gets to see how essentially 'normal-looking' Heirens is, while also viewing his unconscious handiwork in the form of his scrawled plea for help. In Freeman's text, Heirens is portrayed as a mentally ill individual, and the horror of his crimes is subsumed by the representation of the new concept of psychopathy.

"Before I kill more..." opens like a novel, with the writer outside the narrative and a strange character on the stage: "He paced up and down the small, narrow room trying to quell the familiar, exciting urge as it started to possess his body." [7] This character is Heirens, and he's out the door committing a heinous crime in the next paragraph. The text moves quickly, and Freeman does not linger on details of the murders. Within 30 pages, he's been apprehended and is confessing under the influence of sodium pentothal, or 'truth serum.' The four-part narrative structure of crime-pursuit-trial-punishment which would be clear in later true-crime is compressed here, and not yet fully formed. Most of the text is given over to accounts of Freeman's interviews with Heirens in prison, as well as interviews with his parents about his upbringing. Apart from her interviews, much of Freeman's information is gleaned from the official psychiatric report, which had been ordered by the courts to determine Heirens' ability to

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[7] Lucy Freeman. *"Before I kill more..."* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1955) 9.

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stand trial. Freeman admits that "if any one thing may be said to have inspired this book, it was that report," and in her characterization of Heirens she relies heavily on the information obtained by the trained psychiatric professionals who wrote the report. [8] Freeman's reportorial style is akin to Martin's—she is a detached and professionally observant outsider, a journalist writing a book about this boy-murderer. Also like Martin, she uses first-person narration, and writes herself into the text. But her Freudian psychoanalytic perspective creates a new representation of the killer, for Freeman gains access to Heirens' innermost thoughts and feelings using psychoanalytic techniques of questioning, examination of his dreams, and interpretation of his experiences using a Freudian lens.

This perspective contains within it an understanding of the killer as a sick and troubled person, but a person nonetheless. Throughout the text, Heirens is variously categorized by law enforcement personnel, psychiatrists, and Freeman herself as "emotionally insensitive within," "put together wrong," a "disassociated psychotic schizophrenic," and a "sane psycho." [9] Most of the narrative space and force is devoted to trying to understand Heirens as an ill human being, and he is never categorized as a baffling and hideous monster. One element of his insanity is noteworthy, for it would have huge implications for true-crime—Heirens is characterized as lacking a conscience, that intrinsic ability to empathize with others and feel the wrongness of his crimes. Heirens is questioned by the police about his actions and thoughts in the aftermath of the murders, and they ask him "How did you feel when you read about it?" [in the papers] Heirens replies "Just like anything else in the paper. It did not bother me." The

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[8] Freeman 65.

[9] Freeman 65, 71, 241.

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policeman asks "Feel any remorse?" and Heirens answers "No." When asked about the murder of the 6-year-old girl, Heirens reports that he felt "Nothing at all."

Policeman: "No emotion, no feeling that you have done wrong?"

Heirens: "No."

Policeman: "Do you feel that you have done wrong now?"

Heirens: "I do, yes. I'm in here [jail], but I don't feel anything about the whole matter. I never did."

Policeman: "But when it was done, you did?"

Heirens: "I had a realization of what had happened."

Policeman: "But no feeling any more than chewing a piece of chewing gum?"

Heirens: "No." [10]

Bill Heirens exhibits the symptoms of what we now recognize as sociopathy, the inability to feel remorse or regret about hurting others. Heirens feels sad and sorry for himself, but not for the people he has so profoundly hurt. Freeman does not dwell on Heirens' lack of conscience, but she writes extensively about his ability, honed since childhood, to repress his own feelings. This mechanism is so well-developed in Heirens that he is immune even to physical pain, never crying out when the psychiatrists prick his body with pins as part of their examination. But instead of characterizing Heirens' lack of feeling as super- or non-human, Freeman suggests that this ability is born out of his own pain: "he buried his feelings so no one could know of the resentment unless they penetrated the mask or Bill decided to cast it off for the moment. Those who glimpsed

[10] Freeman 195-196.

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the fury underneath were not allowed to live." [11] Detached from the horror that his pain brought into the world in the form of his ghastly deeds—Heirens dismembered the 6-year-old girl's corpse and threw the parts in various sewer grates—Freeman represents Heirens as a frightened child, wracked with psychological anguish and unable to control himself.

Through the application of newly-popularized psychiatric concepts, Freeman presents a killer who elicits a great degree of sympathy from the reader. The reader views the pain that his emotional disturbance causes to Heirens himself—at different points in the text we see him crying, in great physical and emotional pain, and struggling to understand himself as he speaks openly with Freeman and allows her to psychoanalyze him. Freeman writes that "However terrible the crimes, that much greater the terror inside Bill." [12] Sympathy for the killer here competes with the hideousness of the murders he has committed, as Freeman educates the reader about a Freudian understanding of homicidal insanity. The apotheosis of the text is a chapter entitled "Murder Is Madness," where Freeman waxes philosophical about the current state of the American criminal justice system. Like Martin, she argues that understanding the killer is crucial. Unlike Martin, she suggests that a new understanding of killers should lead to an overhaul of the system of punishment, and that the legal definition of insanity should be changed. Freeman's text contains a strong call for reform; if murder is a form of madness, then prevention of such crimes is possible with the recognition and treatment of mental disorders.

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[11] Freeman 221. Compare this with Ann Rule's portrayal of Ted Bundy, especially when he shows his rage one day in court, and she sees underneath his mask for the first time.

[12] Freeman 216.

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Freeman's understanding of Freudian psychology shapes her representation of the murderer and her portrayal of murder, but *"Before I kill more..."* is not entirely unique among 1950s murder narratives. The reform impulse, overt in this text, was present in many 1950s representations of murder and killers. The growing popularity and knowledge about psychotherapy brought with it optimism about the ability of psychiatry to cure social, as well as individual, ills. Freeman suggests that if the killer could be diagnosed and treated before he acted, the world would be a much safer place. [13] Similarly, Martin writes about a murder largely to understand why kids go bad, what role parents have in shaping their children's psyches, and how that knowledge can prevent more people from becoming killers. Freeman is a journalist-crusader, and because of her reformist impulse, she remains detached from the killer even as she presents the most personal details about his personality and psychology. Heirens may be presented sympathetically, but it is with a political end in mind—Freeman uses him to issue an indictment of the criminal justice system as presently (in the 1950s) organized. The reader may have sympathy for Heirens, but there is no identification with him, because for Freeman, he is simply a tool for social change.

Meyer Levin's 1956 text *Compulsion* contains the same impulse to understand the motivations of killers. But Levin is not a reformer, or a psychoanalyst, so there is no call for reform or change in the way killers are treated by the judicial system. Because Levin isn't making an overt political statement, he doesn't present his killers in the detached and journalistic style of Martin and Freeman. Rather, his Leopold and Loeb are fully fleshed-out characters, and the reader is invited to identify with them. Levin does this by

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[13] See chapter 3 in Sara L. Knox, *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life* (Durham, Duke UP: 1998) for a good overview of the mid-century interest in psychiatry as a 'cure' for murder.

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playing on the trope of the intimate connection between reporter and killer. Unlike the books previously discussed, this text is heavily fictionalized, and Levin does not claim that *Compulsion* is anything but fact-based ficion. Levin is freer to create characters, and he does so in the figure of his youthful journalist-narrator, a character who becomes an integral part of the story. In the real Leopold and Loeb case two novice journalists did help to solve the crime by matching some letters that Richard Loeb had written to the typewriter used to write the ransom note, and Levin's narrator is a combination of those two real people. [14] But his choice of narrator, his use of the reporter as way in to the innate truth of the story, shows a certain fascination with the role of the reporter as a crime writer, an author of crime. In the early 1950's, the role of the writer of crime fiction was shifting from reporter of crime into that of the killer's confidante, as seen in embryonic form in *Why Did They Kill?* and *"Before I kill more…"*. The writer was becoming not just a reporter of facts, but a participant in the events that he was writing about, and a shaper of both the event and the narrative with his own actions.

Levin's fictional journalist-narrator, Sid, takes on many of these roles—he is a journalist who happens to have been college classmates with the killers Judd Steiner and Artie Straus (Levin's fictional Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb), and who later finds the epistolary evidence that links Steiner to the murder. This narrator simultaneously helps write the story of the murder for the local newspaper, helps the police gather the evidence which will indict his friends, and testifies against them in court. Then, 30-odd years later, he 'writes' this book, *Compulsion*, with the following introduction:

> I was, for a most personal reason, in the very centre [sic] of the case. I partly identified myself with Judd, so that I sometimes felt I could see not only

[14] Jay Robert Nash, *Bloodletters and Badmen* (New York: M. Evans & Company, 1995) 384.

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> into the texture of events that had taken place without my presence but into his very thoughts....Because of this identification, it sometimes becomes difficult to tell exactly where my imagination fills in what were gaps in the documents and in the personal revelations....there is no finite reality; our idea of actuality always has to come through someone, and this is the reality through me. [15]

This is a most peculiar series of statements, for through the figure of his narrator, Levin here outlines some of the tropes which would define true-crime twenty years later. The reporter identifies with the killer, he has a unique ability to see and interpret events, and he admits that his imagination fills in the blanks left by lack of information in telling the story of a real crime. Furthermore, this journalist-narrator says that 'finite reality' doesn't really exist, that reality changes depending upon who narrates events, a remarkable admission considering the subject matter—a real murder. These ideas about what a murder narrative is, spoken by a fictional reporter-narrator in a hybrid true-crime text, pave the way for true-crime, beginning with Capote's narrative style in *In Cold Blood.* With *Compulsion*, Meyer Levin was simultaneously narrating a murder and outlining the contours of a new relationship between the crime writer and his material, a shifting relationship which would become a convention of true-crime.

Social Contexts

The killer in true-crime would come to contain a multiplicity of meanings and anxieties reflective of the concerns in the larger society. There is, of course, no strictly defined—or definable—relationship between any single text and the society or culture that the text came out of. But we can say that dominant formulaic genres, such as true-crime, that follow specific rules and conventions and treat specific subject matter in

[15] Meyer Levin, *Compulsion.* 14

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definable ways, are both reflective of and defined by some of the beliefs about that subject matter held by many of its readers. In other words, when dealing with popular literary formulas, there is a relationship between the conventions of the formula and the expectations, desires, and beliefs of its audience. True-crime follows certain rules because the 1960s and 70s reading public reacted favorably to the depictions of crime and criminals in its pages. The murderer in true-crime is usually depicted as a stranger to his victims, a loner (or a pair of loners), a person from an abusive or violent background, alienated from most normal social ties such as friends and family, and most fundamentally, as a person lacking a conscience. Each of these features correlates to some element in the larger culture that caused anxiety or distress, and the killer in true-crime became the receptacle for some of the fears, real or imagined, of 1960s America.

Some of those fears were real, and they were exploited and exaggerated in the pages of true-crime. One undeniably real trend was an escalating murder rate. Since 1931, the FBI has compiled yearly statistics about crime in the United States.[16] These statistics, known as the Uniform Crime Reports, are gleaned from state and countywide police agency reports about all known crimes. [17] Uniform Crime Reports are published yearly by the FBI, and they record the actual numbers of homicides committed in a given year, as well as details about the race and gender of victims and killers, relationships between the two, the circumstances of the crime, the kinds of weapons or means used in

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[16] In the late 1920s, President Herbert Hoover commissioned a comprehensive study of law enforcement in the United States. The result of this work was the Wickersham Commission Report, published in 1931. Using the information from the Wickersham Report, H.C. Brearly published the first American scholarly treatment of murder, *Homicide in the United States*, in 1932. The FBI began publishing its yearly Uniform Crime Reports, which covered crime in the entire country, in 1933. Roger Lane, *Murder in America: A History* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1997) 229, 242.

[17] Unknown crimes are, by their nature, not officially counted. The FBI uses the term "dark figure" to account for the presence of unknown crimes in its statistical reports, usually quite low for homicides.

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homicides, and the clearance rate, or how many murders are solved by arrest. Further extrapolations produce the murder rate, or the number of homicides committed per 100,000 citizens per year. The murder rate does not reflect the number of homicides committed, but the percentage of the population murdered in a given year. Since these records have been regularly kept, the murder rate in America has been statistically stable, but there have been dips and curves during certain periods. There had been a downward trend in murders since the 1930s, with the lowest murder rate, 4.5 per 100,000 people, occurring in 1955. But in the 1960s, the murder rate underwent a dramatic upward surge. Roger Lane, in his book entitled *Murder in America: A History*, summarizes this change:

> Certainly with respect to murder, as much else, the 1960s was an era that witnessed more rapid, worrisome, and sometimes paradoxical new developments than any earlier. As television replaced newsprint as the major source of information, new and heinous kinds of murder, including assassinations and killings for ideological reasons far more complex than those of the Civil War era, were publicized more graphically than any before. The result was to lift questions involving the causes of criminal violence and the effectiveness of legal procedures out of scholarly journals and the several states into national politics and the public arena. And all of this was happening just as, in response to deep-seated changes in the nature of the economy and work, the long downward international trend in homicide rates was strikingly reversed. [18]

In the decade between 1964 and 1974, the American murder rate doubled, from 5 to 10 homicides per 100,000 people per year. During this same period of time, Lane says that

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[18] Roger Lane 268-269.

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issues of criminal violence and justice found their way into the 'public arena.' I suggest that the public arena includes and is informed by the genre of true-crime. During the 1960s the conventions of the genre are codified into a formula, murder narratives begin to represent stranger-killings most frequently, and the structure of the true-crime text settles into its ossified present form of crime-pursuit-trial-execution. The concerns of the genre reflect the changes in the society, and some of those changes are borne out by the statistical evidence.

One of the most significant changes occurred not just in the dramatic upswing in the murder rate, but in the types of homicides being committed. In the 1960s, stranger-killings—that is, homicide between two persons unknown to each other—became much more statistically significant. Equally important, the clearance rate for murder, or the percentage of cases solved, was dropping; in the 1950s, the clearance rate for homicide was about 90 percent. In 1974, it was 80 percent, and it's been dropping steadily ever since. [19] These two changes are related, for stranger-killings are much more difficult to solve than homicide between relatives or friends; as the rate of stranger-killings rises, the clearance rate drops. The conflation of these three elements—a rising murder rate, an increase in the number of stranger-killings, and a corollary increase in the number of unsolved homicides—registered in true-crime narratives as an emphasis on the unknown, and unknowable, killer. There was a subtle difference in the types of real crimes being committed in 1960s America, a change that would be explored—and exploited by—true-crime.

[19] Today, as reported in the 2002 UCR, the clearance rate is 64.0 percent. The 2002 murder rate is 5.6 percent.

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The kinds of killers treated in true-crime changed during the 1960s, largely due to the change in the most sensationally gruesome crimes being committed. Fears about the existence of "bushy-haired strangers" (the term used by Dr. Sam Shepard to describe the alleged killer of his wife in 1955), sex-murderers such as Albert DeSalvo (the Boston Strangler) and Richard Speck (the Chicago nurse-killer), and mass killers like Charles Whitman (the University of Texas tower sniper) were stoked by heavy media coverage of these crimes and criminals. At the same time, there was a growing fascination with the killer who had an inconspicuous and impeccably 'normal' façade. One of the most popular framing devices for killers in true-crime would be that of highlighting the seeming normalcy of the killer, and then trying to uncover and understand the monstrously aberrant personality which lurked just beneath the surface. In this way, killers came to be framed as both hideously outside the boundaries of normal humanity, and yet still within those same boundaries. One of Capote's triumphs was his recognition and narrative treatment of this split, achieved with his differing figuration of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock.

The shift in the narrative construction of killers was undoubtedly influenced by changing categories of mental disturbance within the discipline of psychiatry. The terms 'psychopath' and 'sociopath' became part of the popular vernacular after 1941, with the publication of Hervey M. Cleckley's *The Mask of Sanity: an attempt to clarify some issues about the so-called psychopathic personality.* [20] Cleckley's text, a combination of psychological theory and case studies, made the concepts and language of psychiatric criminal deviancy accessible to non-professional readers. The book was popular during

[20] Hervey M. Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: an attempt to clarify some issues about the so-called psychopathic personality* (St. Louis: Mosly, 1941).

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the period, and was reprinted in 1950, 1955, and 1964. Another concept which entered popular consciousness during the 1950s was that of the 'sex fiend,' or 'sex psychopath,' the man who, because of some disorganization in his mind, was unable to control his sexual impulses and posed a significant threat to the perceived weakest part of American society, women and children. [21] The psychopath also appeared in high-brow literature of the time; in his 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," Norman Mailer says that the hipster is a "philosophical psychopath," and that "the psychopath may indeed be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over." [22] Emotionally cool, uncaring, lacking feeling, the hipster would become a quintessential mid-20th century icon, and the cold-blooded killer in the pages of true-crime his dark double.

Another shift in murder narration, first seen in 1950s texts, was the increasing focus on one murderer or one murder event. Preoccupation with the killer has not always been a defining feature of murder narration during a given period, in either fiction or non-fiction. The dominant mode of fictional murder narration before true-crime, the hard-boiled detective pulp story, was preoccupied with detectives, not criminals. Some of the pulp magazines from the 40s and 50s did narrate crime from the criminal's perspective, and certainly some texts from the 50s would explore murder by trying to understand the murderer, but not until the 1960s would true-crime texts consistently focus on the figure of the murderer. In the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, collections of case studies were the most

[21] See Neil Miller, *Sex-Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (New York: Alyson Books, 2000).

[22] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) 343-345.

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common form of non-fiction murder narration, particularly treatments of notorious cases and famous killers. Writers followed the British model of murder narration set by the early 20th-century writer William Roughead, whose ironic, sardonic, and somewhat light-hearted treatment of infamous killings had a great deal of popular appeal. The 'whodunit' style of non-fiction murder narration dominated the field until about mid-century.

But in the 1950s, single case-studies of relatively unknown and obscure crimes would begin to appear, such as *Why Did They Kill?*, and by the 60s, such cases would make up the bulk of murder narratives. Of course, sensational crimes would always warrant narrative treatment, and perhaps the most sensational of the period was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. The narrative result of that crime, *The Warren Commission Report*, would become one of the best-known murder narratives of all time, as well as one of the most-disputed, most-rewritten, and most exhaustive. Certainly, the research, depth of detail and structural arrangement of *The Warren Report* reinforced the notion that entire texts could be devoted, very successfully, to a single crime. The combination of these forces—a rising murder rate, new understandings and categories of madness, and the impulse to examine single murderers or murders in depth, culminated in 1966 with the publication of *The Boston Strangler* and *In Cold Blood.*

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Chapter 2: *In Cold Blood & The Boston Strangler*

The Boston Strangler

Just after midnight on November 15, 1959, two petty hoodlums named Perry Smith and Richard Hickock entered the home of Herbert William Clutter in rural Holcomb, Kansas, hoping to find and plunder Clutter's safe. Herbert Clutter didn't have a safe, however, and the two intruders murdered him, his wife Bonnie, and their two children, Nancy and Kenyon. All four members of the Clutter family were bound with clothesline and shot at point-blank range with a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun; Clutter himself was also stabbed and slashed before he died. Smith and Hickock were executed by the State of Kansas for this crime, but not before Truman Capote had extensively interviewed and befriended both murderers. The result of that work became Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood, A True Account of A Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*, which was published in 1966.

The Clutter murders, although hideous, pale in comparison to the bloody work of Albert DeSalvo, otherwise known as the Boston Strangler. From June of 1962 until January of 1964, DeSalvo murdered 13 women in the Boston area; his usual mode of operation was strangulation and sexual assault. In 1966, the same year which saw the publication of Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a journalist named Gerold Frank published a book about the DeSalvo crimes, titled *The Boston Strangler*. Although Frank's book was well-received and was a popular success, Capote's text has achieved the status of a classic within both literary and journalistic circles, while Frank's languishes in the twilight world of a now-forgotten sensation. *In Cold Blood* became an instant best-seller, and has since sold millions of copies. What was it that made Capote's book so wildly popular? And

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why has *In Cold Blood* spawned so many copy-cat volumes, indeed, become the template for an entire new genre?

Although it is true that other true-crime texts were published in the 1960s, none of them generated the lasting literary and popular interest of *In Cold Blood. The Boston Strangler*, although popular when published, further strengthens *In Cold Blood*'s position as the originator of a genre because of what it did not do. *The Boston Strangler* won the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best "Fact Crime" book in 1967, just as *In Cold Blood* had done in 1966; however, *The Boston Strangler* is currently out of print, while *In Cold Blood* has been reprinted continually since its publication. [1] This is both an indication of the significance and lasting relevance of *In Cold Blood*, and of the fleeting popular interest in the real crimes of the Boston Strangler. It is true that one reason for the success of *In Cold Blood* was Capote's literary talent, for he turned plain facts into gripping suspense and pathetic losers into dynamic characters; Gerold Frank was a journalist, more accustomed to writing instant copy and quick headlines.

But a large part of the success of *In Cold Blood* results from the lasting relevance and acuity of Capote's depiction of killers. Frank didn't organize his material or portray the killer in the complex and new ways that Capote did, even though he had the same material as Capote, culturally speaking, to draw on. Working out of the same mid-60s intellectual, literary, and pop culture climate, Frank did not produce the same innovation in the techniques of murder narration. *The Boston Strangler* doesn't present a new perspective on murder or a different construction of the killer—instead, it offers a picture of the serial killer Albert DeSalvo as a distant, twisted, impossible to understand moral

[1] The Edgar Allan Poe Awards, or "Edgars," are awards given annually by the Mystery Writers Association for outstanding work in several categories, including (since 1948), "Fact Crime." For more information, see < http://www.mysterywriters.org/index.htm>.

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outsider, a fundamentally demented and ultimately mysterious subject. This was the standard 1950s representation of the killer, less intricately drawn, and less responsive to a shifting popular understanding of the epistemology of evil. For this reason, *The Boston Strangler* is a near miss in terms of genre-formation, and it lacks the genre-setting power of *In Cold Blood.*

Frank's portrayal of Albert DeSalvo elicits no sympathy from the reader, and carries no lasting interest or reverberations within the genre. DeSalvo is presented as a simple and rather simple-minded murderer, with no understanding of his own motivations or feelings. The real Albert DeSalvo probably was a simple man: he was a married working-class laborer, father of two children, honorably discharged in the late 1950s after serving in the Army of Occupation in Germany. He had no great aspirations or complexities of character; his only deviant characteristic was his penchant for talking himself into strange women's apartments, and sometimes raping and strangling them. He was also a petty and pathological thief, arrested numerous times for breaking-and-entering in the greater Boston area. Although given a thorough psychological work-up while in custody, and retained indefinitely at Bridgewater State Mental Hospital, the riddle of DeSalvo's violent and predatory behavior was never successfully cracked. He is variously diagnosed as having "schizophrenic reaction, chronic undifferentiated type" with "very extensive signs of sexual deviation." He is also said to be "strictly sociopathic" and showing signs of "sexual panic of some sort."[2] Gerold Frank portrays DeSalvo as a straightforward sexual psychopath, similar to Freeman's depiction of William Heirens.

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[2] Gerold Frank, *The Boston Strangler* (New York: The New American Library, 1966) 359. All Frank cites following this are in-text.

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Unlike Heirens, however, DeSalvo does seem to have a conscience, a departure from the direction murder narratives were taking in the representation of killers. He speaks for himself throughout the end of the book, as the Assistant District Attorney John Bottomly interviews him (in a bizarre twist in the case, DeSalvo must implicate himself to avoid the electric chair, so he confesses to the D.A.). DeSalvo had a remarkable memory, and he was able to recount the smallest decorative details of the hundreds of apartments he had been in; his ability to recall details that nobody but the killer could have known convinced the police that he really was the Strangler. But even with his shockingly accurate memory, DeSalvo struggles when it comes to describing his actions during the murders. He avoids talking about the most violent and disturbing murder until the very end of his interviews with Bottomly. At this point, he breaks down, and when Bottomly asks him "Does this bother you more than the others?" this is DeSalvo's answer:

> "It all bothers me," DeSalvo said suddenly, passionately. Since the confessional mood he had struck in his last session, he spoke with much more emotion. "It's like a double nightmare, going back. She looked like my grandmother, my mother's mother....She died in my arms, this woman—" He stopped. "Man, this is too much! I'm getting sick of it, talking about it—" He seemed on the edge of tears. (339)

A few minutes later, DeSalvo does break down in sobs, and he says "I didn't mean to hurt nobody." He cries out "I got feelings as well as anybody else. It's too much! These people...I stay awake, I wonder, my grandmother, my daughter...these things did happen. Why? Why? Why does it have to be me?" (339-340) These outbursts complete a

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picture of a half-human DeSalvo, a man with a conscience but still capable of outrageous acts of violation and violence. Ultimately, his self-examination doesn't help the reader to understand him at all. DeSalvo remains a mystery, and although there is some suggestion that his wife's aversion to sex caused him to murder other women in anger, his motivations and the dimensions of his madness are never described, his particular psychosis never sufficiently explained.

But the Assistant D.A., John Bottomly, certainly tries to unravel the mystery of this Strangler. In an interesting twist on the insider/outsider position of the writer, Bottomly acts as both an agent of law enforcement and as DeSalvo's therapist/confessor. Although he's not the writer of the text, through his close contact with DeSalvo, and because of his unique position as trying to determine whether or not DeSalvo really is the Strangler, Bottomly becomes DeSalvo's confessor and, almost, his friend. Throughout the emotional interview described above, Bottomly coaxes DeSalvo to tell more, to speak his truth, much like a caring psychotherapist would. Bottomly says things like "You've come a long way, Albert. You couldn't even talk about this before," and "You've got a lot to carry. It's surprising you haven't broken down more often."(340) At one point, when it appears that speaking is too much for DeSalvo, Bottomly suggests quietly "Do you want me to come back in two or three days?" DeSalvo answers "No…whether it's *today* or *tomorrow* or the *next day* I got to tell you when you come back. It just takes a minute to tell it, but it's so shocking, telling you--" (341) DeSalvo needs to tell, and not just to avoid the death penalty—at this point, confession is necessary for his psychic survival, and Bottomly has become his therapist. In this way, Bottomly participates in the authorship of the tale, for he carefully and gently encourages DeSalvo to fill in the

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blanks, the details of how he actually committed each murder. But even though the reader sees a psychologically vulnerable Strangler, a quiet detachment persists in Frank's prose, and he maintains a crucial distance between himself, the reader, and his subject. Writers had not yet fully taken on the confessor role, and ultimately Frank never allows the reader to sympathize with DeSalvo.

Even though *The Boston Strangler* resembles a non-fiction crime text from the 1950s, and has little in common with *In Cold Blood*, there are some elements of the text which do refine certain conventions of true-crime. The text is important because it adds another nuance to the emerging picture of the killer who doesn't seem like a killer, because of the way it documents and exploits a climate of fear of strangers, and because of some technical elements which would become standard within the genre during the 1970s and 80s. [3] The book opens with the now-familiar statement of authorial intent: in his "Note to the Reader," Frank writes "My interest, therefore, was not so much in writing a book about the Boston stranglings as it was to write about what happens to a great city when it is besieged by terror—terror stemming from a horrifying explosion of the violence that seems more and more a part of contemporary life."(ix) Unlike Capote, or Martin before him, Frank does devote more narrative attention to the effects of the murders on Boston than he does to explicating the mystery of Albert DeSalvo. Instead of strengthening its narrative power, however, too much focus on the context makes *The Boston Strangler* a weaker book. The suspense of finding the real Strangler is constantly interrupted by tedious examinations of false leads and blind alleys in the case. Frank

[3] Ben Harrison, a scholar who has compiled an annotated bibliography of 20th century true-crime narratives, views *The Boston Strangler* favorably. In his bibliography, he writes that it is "one of the most famous true-crime books ever written: a critical and popular success, and a book that transcends the genre label." Ben Harrison, *True-crime Narratives: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, M.D.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997) 90.

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utilizes the four-part structure that was becoming conventional in the genre, but two of the four parts are devoted to gratuitous descriptions of a parade of suspects, each of whom would turn out not be the real Strangler. Frank also spends far too much time describing the variety of kooks and psychics who offered their help to the police during the investigation, very few of whom had anything truly significant to offer.

But this same element makes the book important within the nascent genre. Fully one-quarter of *The Boston Strangler* is given over to descriptions of would-be suspects, a series of deeply disturbed men, each of whom could have been the Strangler. With these descriptions, Frank gives the impression that Boston—and, by extension, America—is crawling with weirdos, and is a dangerous and frightening place for young women. He ends Part Two of the book with this summation of the suspects to date:

> Nothing was settled.
>
> There was nothing to do but to probe even more deeply into the stranglings, to examine even more exhaustively every possible suspect, meanwhile keeping an eye—and an ear—on four men:
>
> On Thomas O'Brien, at this moment behind the walls of the Massachusetts Mental Health Center, who protested that he had nothing to tell anyone about anything;
>
> On Arnold Wallace, at this moment behind the walls of the State Hospital at Bridgewater, who could not tell anyone anything;
>
> On David Parker, at this moment behind the same walls, who would not tell anyone anything;
>
> On Paul Gordon, free to go about Boston holding to himself whatever

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> secrets he possessed beyond the reach of hypnotic drugs, yet ready to tell everyone everything.(149)

The constant repetition of the phrase "at this moment" reiterates the idea that these psychotic, violently misogynist men could not be held forever in custody; they are only held *for the moment*, and will soon be released. One of them, Paul Gordon, is "free to go about Boston" possibly holding the key to the mystery of the Strangler's identity. The idea that these men hold dark secrets is reinforced with the repeated phrase "nothing to tell anyone." This kind of portrayal of context stoked the reader's fears about the murderousness of American cities, because even though the 'real' Strangler would eventually be captured and locked up forever, both in the text and in real life, these other possible stranglers were still roaming around at large. The ever-present possibility of murder, the representation of a real threat, is embodied in the depiction of these characters. Part of the cultural work of true-crime is to reiterate that threat, to make murder real over and over again to the reader. Gerold Frank was one of the first writers to recognize and amplify the increasing fears of a reading public becoming increasingly preoccupied with random violence.

Another element of *The Boston Strangler* would have implications for later true-crime texts, and would ultimately add to the growing sense that murderers hide behind a façade of normalcy. In addition to using psychics in trying to locate the Strangler, the Boston police department enlisted the aid of psychiatrists, and Frank documents one of the earliest known instances of "criminal profiling." Early on in the investigation, one of the detectives assigned to the case

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> had turned to Boston's leading psychiatrists to ask if they could produce a psychiatric profile of the Strangler. Could they re-create the criminal from the crime? Give police an idea of the sort of man to look for? His age, appearance, personality, type of work? What drove him to his deeds? Where might he be found? And—if every man had the latent capability within himself—how pinpoint the target of the search? (153)

Frank's subject matter, a sensationally violent and appalling serial killer, would prove immensely popular in true-crime during the coming years, particularly in the 1980s, and the book is significant for being one of the first treatments of such a case. Criminal profiling was a novelty in the 1960s, and this text is one of the first instances of what would become a considerably interesting part of true-crime. More important than this technical detail, however, is the suggestion contained in the last sentence of this passage. Frank suggests that "every man" has the capacity for violent serial killing, that the Boston police are in trying to locate a needle in a haystack. The notion that the killer could be anybody, and that anybody could be a killer, does two important things: it strengthens the idea that killers are 'normal-seeming' men, that we cannot tell by looking at a person his likelihood to commit murder. It also reinforces the idea forwarded throughout the book that killers walk the streets, unnoticed and unidentified, anonymous until they strike and are caught—or aren't caught, even worse. These assertions added to the fears of a reading public which was already prone to be frightened of strangers because of increased media attention on random acts of violence. As said earlier, stranger-killers were becoming more common, although one was still—and is still—statistically more likely to be killed by a relative or associate than by a stranger. Stranger-killings would

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become even more frightful as the decade wore on, and the sensational success of *In Cold Blood* is surely due in part to Capote's ability to touch the raw nerve of such fears.

In Cold Blood

By 1959, Truman Capote was a successful published author. He had already written much of what he would write in his life, including *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, *Tree of Night and Other Stories*, *The Grass Harp*, *The Muses Are Heard*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Capote had been interested in writing nonfiction for many years, and had been looking for a suitable topic for a "non-fiction novel." He says that "one morning in November 1959, while flicking through the *New York Times*, I encountered on a deep inside page, this headline: 'Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain.'" [4] Over the next couple of days, he decided that this event was just the one he was waiting for. On assignment for *The New Yorker*, Capote took his friend Nelle Harper Lee (the author of *To Kill A Mockingbird*) to Kansas with him, and the pair arrived in Garden City, the nearest city to Holcomb, just a few days after the Clutters were killed.

Capote was able to engender the kind of trust in both the murderers and their prosecutors that allowed him access to their most intimate thoughts and feelings about the case; he also did extensive research before, during, and after he was in Kansas. Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Smith were arrested in Las Vegas on January 2, 1960, and they were executed on April 14, 1965. For most of those five intervening years, Capote exchanged letters with the prisoners twice a week, and he lived in Garden City for extended periods of time. He interviewed the detectives involved in the case, townspeople in Holcomb and Garden City, friends and family of the Clutters, and the friends and family of Hickock and Smith. Unwelcomed at the start into the deeply

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[4] George Plimpton, *Truman Capote* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1997) 198.

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provincial towns of Garden City and Holcomb, by 1960 Capote was able to boast at a Manhattan party, "At first it was hard…but now I'm practically the mayor!" [5] He became close not just to the murderers, but also the detectives involved in the case. In addition, he visited all the places that the murderers went between their crime and capture, from Mexico to Miami to Nevada—he took the "long ride," as Hickock and Smith called it. The result of all that work was published in *The New Yorker* in four installments in September-October 1965, and published in book form in January 1966. In 1968 the book was made into a film, also a spectacular success, starring the then-unknown Robert Blake as Perry Smith.

Capote's six year immersion in the circumstances of the Clutter murders would help shape another major convention of true-crime: the writer becomes an intimate of the killers, thereby gaining special access to their feelings and memories, and specific experiential knowledge of the judiciary procedures which would become a large part of true-crime narratives. The true-crime which would be written in the 1960s and 70s would focus on the aftermath of murder, not on the crime itself, as trials became lengthier, debates about the legality and morality of the death penalty raged, and death-penalty appeals dragged out over years. Because Smith and Hickock were captured quickly, and because they were involved in appealing their sentences for nearly five years, Capote was put in the unique position of having to wait for them to die in order to finish his book, while growing closer to them personally during that time. For the years of his research and writing, Capote built his life around his work with Smith and

[5] Gerald Clarke, *Truman Capote* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) 328.

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Hickock; as a result, *In Cold Blood* is an astonishingly intimate portrait of the two murderers. In his book on Capote, William Nance writes that

> Where the average documentary novelist would keep his research distinct from his deepest personal life, Capote transplanted his deepest personal life to Kansas, knowing—as *In Cold Blood* was finally to prove—that the real meanings of the book would be framed at that deep level. [6]

More than simply a reporter, Capote became engulfed in the events surrounding the Clutter murders. The 'real meanings' of *In Cold Blood* grew out of Capote's own experience with knowing, identifying with, and even loving a murderer. Capote became very close to Perry Smith; he was also convinced that Smith had killed all four of the Clutters. The simultaneous evocation of compassion for the murderer and horror at his deeds makes *In Cold Blood* a new form of murder narration.

By becoming close to the murderer personally, entering his world, and reliving the events of the murder itself, Capote reinvigorated a much older notion of the role of the writer as confessor. In the 17th and 18th century in America, a murderer would often be counseled for months by his or her clergyman between sentencing and execution. The American Puritan understanding of Calvinist theology held that a person who committed a grave sin such as murder should be brought to an understanding of his sins, and gently guided into heartfelt confession and repentance before being executed. In this way the condemned murderer was allowed the chance to receive spiritual counseling in the hope of saving his eternal soul; a "Season of Grace" was offered to effect this possibility. Karen Halttunen reports that New England judges "prescribed a set period before

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[6] William L. Nance, *The Worlds of Truman Capote* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970) 178.

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execution as 'a space to repent,' 'commonly a Month at least' but often longer."[7] In addition to helping save the murderer's soul, the 'season of grace' afforded the clergyman the opportunity to get to know the murderer, thereby enabling him to gather the material necessary to write the execution sermon. As Halttunen says, this period of time "provided the presiding minister with plenty of material by which to track and report on the criminal's spiritual progress right down to the moment of execution," material which was then shaped into the murder narrative.[8] Capote's exceptionally long 'season of grace' with Smith and Hickock, although it may not have saved their souls, afforded him the opportunity to deeply know his subjects.

Capote's narrative treatment of his subject would draw the reader in to an uneasy and unprecedented relationship with the killers, creating a sense of simultaneous identification and distance between reader and killer. The critic Melvin Friedman has written that "one feels a sympathy for Perry Smith which one does not feel for Alvin Dewey, even though Dewey's voice of respectability is the last one heard—much like the final pronouncement of the Greek chorus.[9] Capote at once admired Smith and believed that he had murdered all four of the Clutters without remorse, and he wrote the difficulty of that relationship into the deepest structure of his text. The reader experiences the disparity of closeness to the person and distance from the horror of his acts when he reads true-crime. Perry Smith's most famous statement about Herb Clutter, "I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat,"

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[7] Halttunen, Karen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 19.

[8] Halttunen 18.

[9] Melvin J. Friedman, "Towards An Aesthetic: Truman Capote's Other Voices" in Irving Malin, ed., *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1968) 166.

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was emblematic of the organization of his entire personality. Capote crafted his narrative so that the reader shares his fascination with Smith, who was at once a devious and dangerous loner and a sensitive, wounded man. The ambiguity and intensity of the reader/killer relationship allows the writer to integrate notions of good and evil, self and other, into his text that writers of previous murder narratives did not and could not do. Capote's closeness to the subjects of his book would set the standard for a different degree of involvement between writer and subject, and would forever change the nature of murder narratives.

But just as Joel Bartlow Martin had been deeply unsettled by his experiences in trying to write about what he termed 'crime-in-context,' Capote's work took a devastating toll on him.[10] He has said that "If I had known what that book was going to cost in every conceivable way, emotionally, I never would have started it, and I really mean that."[11] The working relationship Capote formed with the murderers had to be uniquely challenging and draining, for they knew that he would be present at their executions—and he was. Capote's close relationship with Smith in particular changed the focus of *In Cold Blood* from a simple story of murder to a complex and multi-layered story of one murderer. By all accounts, Capote and Perry had an intense relationship.

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[10] It is interesting to consider any influences the 1950s crime narratives may have had on Capote. It's not clear that Capote read *Why Did They Kill?*, but in the 1950's and 60's Joel Bartlow Martin was a fairly well-known non-fiction writer. *Why Did They Kill?* was reviewed favorably in both the *Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*. As reported in Plimpton's biography, Capote was an avid consumer of detective fiction, particularly during the period when he was writing *In Cold Blood*. It is not inconceivable that he read the book, if not at the time of publication then perhaps when he was doing background research for *In Cold Blood*. He may have read it in 1952, when *Why Did They Kill?* was serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Even if there was no direct influence, the example of Martin shows that the narration of real murder contained, in nascent form in the early 1950's, some of the conventions and techniques that Capote would use in *In Cold Blood*.

[11] Nance 175.

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Clarke writes that "their relationship was more complicated than a love affair: each looked at the other and saw, or thought he saw, the man he might have been." [12] Capote and Smith were both children of divorce, each had a vexed relationship with his father, and both were artistic, although Smith had not developed his talents. Capote seemed to see in Smith a version of himself that he had not become, a kind of dark double. If Capote's choices had been different, if Smith's had been more like Capote's, their places in society may have been reversed. Yet, as Clarke writes, Capote would become impatient with Smith's self-pity and blame of others for his actions, and he would say "I had one of the worst childhoods in the world, and I'm a pretty decent, law-abiding citizen." [13] The exploration of that difference, of the forces, choices, circumstances and events that shape one man into a murderer and another into a 'law-abiding citizen,' is the engine that drives *In Cold Blood.* Out of that nut of ambiguous mutual identification would grow a significant trope of true-crime, for the fascination of Capote for Smith produced the lengthy examination of his psyche that takes up so much narrative space of *In Cold Blood.*

Another trope of true-crime, the shaping of real people into literary characters and the introduction of fiction-writing techniques into non-fiction writing, is directly attributable to Capote's closeness to Smith and Hickock. Capote was able to use free indirect discourse, which interjects objectivity and intimacy with the subjects, because he knew what the men's most intimate thoughts and feelings were. Smith and Hickock, friendless, alone, and waiting for years on death row, opened their lives to Capote, offering their most personal and private selves for his narrative ends. Hickock's

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[12] Clarke 326.

[13] Clarke 327.

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incredibly accurate memory helped Capote to craft a detailed and 'real' picture of their experiences. Soon after publication, Capote's veracity was attacked, particularly in passages such as when Hickock swerves his car to purposefully hit a dog in the road. It seemed too 'literary,' too beautifully indicative of Hickock's character, to have actually happened. But it did happen, Capote was able to say, due largely to Hickock's extraordinary memory for details. Smith's openness about his innermost self enabled Capote to give him the dimensions of a literary character. Norman Mailer called Perry "one of the great characters in American literature," that he has "achieved a kind of immortality as a literary darkling" who stands with Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth, Melville's Claggart, and Faulkner's Flem Snopes. [14] The reader learns about Perry's naïve faith in the stories he reads in adventure pulps, his childish dreams of diving for sunken pirates' treasures in Mexico, his homo-social attachment to fellow-convict Willie-Jay, the imaginary parrot, "taller than Jesus, yellow like a sunflower" who serves as his fantasy savior throughout his childhood and into his adult life. As we get a clear picture of Smith's psychological makeup, we come to know and understand a character whose deep wounds, sustained mostly in childhood, have twisted him into a creature capable of senseless and remorseless murder.

The early critical responses to the book were largely positive, as was the popular reception. *In Cold Blood* was an instant best-seller. The novel was published almost simultaneously with an interview in the *New York Times Book Review* in which Capote speaks about his creation of a new literary formula, the "nonfiction novel." [15] Capote really gave the critics something to chew on, for in addition to the book itself being

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[14] Clarke 326.

[15] The interview was conducted by George Plimpton, and it appears in his *Truman Capote*, 197.

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widely acclaimed and worthy of thoughtful criticism, his grand statements about genre creation were taken as a ready-made challenge. Critics argued about the relative merits of this new genre, if it was indeed a new genre or simply a rehashing of an old form, whether or not the novel was a 'dead' form, and debates raged about the defining characteristics of fiction and non-fiction, novel and documentary. As a result, many focused in particular on Capote's claims to truthfulness or factuality. [16] Capote himself touted his strict factual accuracy as one of the chief virtues of his book; as he told George Plimpton in the *New York Times Book Review* interview, "one doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions." [17] Capote never denied that he shaped his material, and that is a different thing from factual accuracy.

In Cold Blood, like any other literary artifact, is constructed—the author, in this case Capote, chooses what to include, how to portray characters, what to emphasize, and what impression he wishes to leave the reader with. In another section of the Plimpton interview, Capote agrees that making such choices is critical: Plimpton asks how he was able to present his own point of view while maintaining such strict objectivity. Capote replies:

> Of course it's by the selection of what you choose to tell....I could have added a lot of other opinions. But that would have confused the issue, and indeed the book....in the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: if I put something in

[16] Much of the dissection work on the 'facts' as they are presented in *In Cold Blood* is done by Phillip K. Tompkins in his essay "In Cold Fact," published in *Esquire* in June of 1966. Tompkins, whose home state happens to be Kansas, did his own research on the Clutter murders, and does find some serious discrepancies between the memories of the actual people involved in the case and how Capote presents certain scenes and events. Malin, 44-58.

[17] The Plimpton-Capote interview is republished in Malin, 25-43. This quote, 39.

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> which I don't agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight. [18]

There is a contradiction in his descriptions of how he wrote *In Cold Blood*, a tension which Capote does not dwell upon, between sticking to facts and constructing a text. Capote admits that he has put forth an opinion about the facts of the case by carefully choosing which materials to include, and by paying close attention to how all his material is presented. The choices and presentation of the facts create meaning, and in the case of *In Cold Blood*, create the impression that Perry Smith, and not Dick Hickock, was the one who killed the Clutters. The true-crime text, then, is more than just a collection of facts presented objectively, so that the reader can decide about the guilt or innocence of a murderer/character by weighing the facts. It is a collection of facts that have been carefully chosen and shaped by an author, which he presents to the reader as absolute truth. The emphasis on factual accuracy as a way of narrating and understanding murder, without an overt acknowledgement on the part of the writer that facts have been chosen to create a pattern of meaning, is one of the defining characteristics of what would become the true-crime genre.

In Cold Blood is divided into 4 equal parts, each with its own subtitle: "The Last To See Them Alive," "Persons Unknown," "Answer," and "The Corner." Each section is really a large chapter, and each is further divided into between 18 and 24 sub-sections, each separated only by blank space in the text. Each of the four chapters deals with a different aspect of the Clutter murder case, and the story is told in chronological order. It was Capote's genius to shape the familiar 4-part structure of crime-pursuit-trial-execution like a classic detective tale; that is, the murders occur in the first chapter, but we don't

[18] Plimpton in Malin, 32.

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understand the killers' motives until the third and last chapters. More suspense is embodied in the treatment of the appeals process, as the reader is uncertain about when and if Hickock and Smith will be executed, and perhaps more importantly, *how* they will go to their deaths. In the first chapter, "The Last To See Them Alive," Capote sets the scene and kills off the victims—that is, he describes the Western Kansas landscape where the crime occurred, then he provides character sketches of each member of the murdered Clutter family, and finally he describes the aftermath of the murders from the perspective of the person who found them dead. In "Persons Unknown" Capote follows Hickock and Smith in the aftermath of the murders, and he uses the descriptions of their activities to understand their inner motivations and explore their backgrounds. "Answer" is primarily an account of the police work and the manhunt that resulted in the capture of Hickock and Smith, and "The Corner" covers their trial, appeals process, and execution.

One of the most striking aspects of *In Cold Blood*, and one that would become a major convention in true-crime, is the way that Capote structured the sections of each chapter so that the actions of the killers and the victims are interwoven. Particularly in the first chapter, Capote cuts back and forth between scenes which feature either the Clutters or Smith and Hickock, in a technique borrowed from filmmaking. In fact, the book is strangely more filmic than the movie—there seem to be more cuts back and forth between the Clutters and their killers in the book, whereas the movie concentrates more heavily on Dick and Perry. Critics noticed this technique immediately: Dwight Macdonald, writing in *Esquire* in 1966, noted the "Griffith cross-cutting in the first chapter" and the "'establishing' long shots of the Kansas milieu." The film critic Stanley Kauffman said that "Capote's structural method can be called cinematic: he uses

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intercutting of different story strands, intense close-ups, flashbacks, traveling shots, background detail, all as if he were fleshing out a scenario." [19] The first chapter is like a slide show: the book opens with a description of western Kansas and the town of Holcomb. The next section, or shot, introduces Herb Clutter, "The master of River Valley Farm." [20] The next shot introduces the reader to Perry Smith, with this opening sentence: "Like Mr. Clutter, the young man breakfasting in a café called the Little Jewel never drank coffee." (24) The first chapter consists of twenty-two sections, each of which focuses on either the victims or the killers. The victims and killers do not appear together in the same section, for there is no description of the actual murders until much later in the book. In the last few sections of the first chapter, the people who discovered the slain Clutters are given voice as they describe how they found them, and we see the immediate effect of the murders on the town of Holcomb.

The technique of cutting back and forth between victims and killers does several important things which further defines the genre. The cutting creates tension, as the reader sees the killers converging on the victims slowly yet inexorably. Using flashbacks and cuts between past and present creates a narrative without a past tense, because everything seems to be happening in the present moment. Paradoxically, quick-cutting between scenes also creates a deep sense of inevitability, because the reader knows what's going to happen. Reading a true-crime text is itself an experience of inevitability, for the reader always knows several of the most important features of the crime—who got killed, how, and (usually) by whom. These facts are given on the dust jacket of a book,

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[19] Both quotations in Malin, 165.

[20] Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Signet Books/Random House, 1965) 15. All Capote cites to follow are in-text.

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and the books are often about high- or medium-profile crimes. Perhaps most significantly, interweaving the scenes allows the writer to make powerful comparisons between the victims and killers. As the killers draw closer in physical proximity to their victims, similarities in personality and behavior can be drawn, while the differences between the two groups of characters can be made stark. In true-crime, victims and killers become characters, with the poignancy or maliciousness of their personalities emphasized by the writer according to his own vision of each character, and his own version of events. Cutting back and forth between victims and killers heightens the already-present tension and the sense of inevitability, and it allows the writer to increase the emotional impact of his characters' features.

The first chapter of *In Cold Blood* is a study in the creation of such narrative tension. The very first sentence of the book is a paean to the pastoral, an appeal to that old American dream of freedom and self-reliance on the western plains: "The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there.'" [21] Capote's descriptions of the landscape around Holcomb paint a picture that is both starkly beautiful and bleak, and the last sentence of the first section is a heavy-handed bit of foreshadowing:

> Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb. But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises…four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives. (13)

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The first sentence of the very next section introduces Herb Clutter, one of those 'six human lives.' Throughout the chapter, Capote ends one section with a particularly heavy or portentous line, and picks up the next section with one which stands in counterpoint to it. A scene of Smith and Hickock traveling in their car toward the Clutter home is followed by one of Clutter in his car, traveling back to Holcomb from a Garden City 4-H meeting. Evil and innocence are constantly juxtaposed, up until the point where the murderers finally get to Holcomb: Nancy Clutter's diary entry the night of her murder ends one section, and the killers' exclamation of "This is it, this is it, this has to be it" as they approach the Clutter's house begins the next section. Words of innocence—15-year-old Nancy writes about helping a young neighbor make a cherry pie, watching TV with her boyfriend, and going to bed at eleven—are set in contrast to the sinister glee of the killers as they approach their prey.

Capote uses the quick-cutting technique throughout the rest of the book, as well. In the next chapter, "Persons Unknown," another set of characters is introduced—the law enforcement agents who would break the case. We meet Alvin Dewey, the local Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent, and three other agents from Kansas City—Special Agents Harold Nye, Roy Church, and Clarence Duntz. The next section describes the reactions of some townspeople, and the following section opens with Smith and Hickock again sitting in a diner—this time planning their next move as they read about their crimes in the newspaper. Scenes featuring Smith and Hickock are interwoven with descriptions of the reactions of the Clutter's friends and neighbors and those featuring the words and actions of the K.B.I agents. There is a kind of suspension of action—it took about six weeks for the detectives to find Smith and Hickock—as the town reels from the stunning

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violence of the murders and the investigation gets underway. Capote builds Smith and Hickock as characters, and in this chapter he begins to explore their personalities and motivations. They take the "long ride," down to Mexico, as the K.B.I. agents track down false leads and grow frustrated, and the Clutter's family and community mourns. But near the end of the chapter, tension and a sense of inevitability again increase as Smith and Hickock leave Mexico after running out of money, and the detectives finally get some promising leads. Just as in the first chapter foreknowledge of the murders makes them seem inexorable, the reader here knows that Smith and Hickock will be caught—the question becomes, how will it happen? Capote masterfully orchestrates his characters to effect the maximum amount of suspense and tension.

One of the major themes of *In Cold Blood* is that of the American Dream turned into the American Nightmare by the actions of two unsavory outsiders, an action that seems inevitable and unstoppable. Some early critics recognized this aspect of the text immediately, and placed Capote within a uniquely American story-telling tradition: Malcolm Muggeridge, writing in *Esquire*, said "From Huck to Dick and Perry is quite a span; from Twain to Capote too, for that matter. If Huck was the beginning of the American Dream, Dick and Perry are perhaps its end." [22] Capote writes that the inhabitants of Holcomb were "quite content to exist inside ordinary life—to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club. But then, in the earliest hours of that morning in November, a Sunday morning, certain foreign sounds impinged on the normal nightly Holcomb noises" sounds which, we know, meant murder and an absolute interruption of normalcy (15). The prosaic details of rural American life—church, hunting, television—are listed and set against the

[22] Malin 165.

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prospect of violent death that we know is coming. There is even an overt Biblical reference, as Capote writes that "Mr. Clutter often remarked, 'an inch more of rain and this country would be paradise—Eden on earth'" and gives the reader a picture of Herb Clutter eating an apple on his last day alive. (23) These suggestions that Holcomb, Kansas, is a new Garden of Eden allow Capote to create a mythical place, this world in which murder takes place. Using techniques of scene-setting that are more typical of fiction-writing, Capote offers a fictional Holcomb, a place which simultaneously does and does not exist. The rich description, overshadowed by the horror that the reader knows is about to occur, simultaneously distances the reader by creating a place that clearly does not exist, and draws the reader into surroundings which seem eerily like his own.

The notion that random violence can easily destroy idyllic American lives is one of the defining tropes of true-crime. The genre always sets innocence against evil, and this convention, combined with the filmic technique of intercutting scenes of victims and killers, portrays a strong sense of the inevitability of evil. The action seems fated, and murder seems destined to occur; the Clutters cannot escape their fate, and Smith and Hickock cannot resist forming their ill-conceived alliance which will ultimately lead them to their deaths as well. This is one of the major themes of true-crime, and it is reinforced of course by the subject matter—always, when a true-crime book is written, a murder has *already* occurred, and it will occur again within the book. The reader enters a true-crime text knowing the outcome, so that the genre reinforces, and does not allay, the fears and anxieties that knowledge of the presence of evil engenders. This sense of the inescapability of evil is different from the earlier dispensation, epitomized in texts such as

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An American Tragedy and *Native Son*, that social conditions create murderers, and social reform can stop murder. There is no social reform impulse in true-crime, just a vast, sometimes sordid and graphic demonstration of the inexorability of evil.

There is another element of *In Cold Blood* which would become a generic trope, and which strengthened the reader's sympathy and emotional identification with the killers. It is true that Capote presents a fatalistic and cynical view of the killer, and after *In Cold Blood*, notions of reform and 'cure' in true-crime, present in 1950s texts, become subsumed by sensationalism, exploitation, and manipulation of the reader's fears. Unlike the writers of *Why Did They Kill?* and *"Before I kill more…"*, Capote does not argue, nor does he even subtly suggest, that understanding killers may lead to less killing. But his descriptions of Smith and Hickock's lives on death row constitute an argument against the inhumane circumstances which attend executions by the state. In fact, the title of the book can be read as an indictment against capital punishment: just as the killers took their victims in cold blood, without feeling, so the state hangs killers in the same way, coldly and with a great deal of forethought and dedicated action. While Smith and Hickock are appealing their death sentences, they are confined to death row, isolated from other prisoners and treated by their jailers with the special detachment afforded soon-to-be-dead men. They are housed in a dreadful "coffin-shaped" stone edifice in Lansing, Kansas, where they can hear the gallows trap-door snap open when their former cell-block mates are executed. The barbarity of this existence prompts Smith to go on a hunger strike, saying to Hickock "You can wait around for the rope—but not me." (356) The reader cannot help but feel sympathy for men living under these conditions, drawn as they are in such detail, and so far away in the narrative from the brutal murders which

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brought the prisoners to this point. Nevertheless, this part of the book is relatively brief, and is neither a strong political statement or a call for change.

The final two chapters of *In Cold Blood*, "Answer" and "The Corner," interweave scenes of events involving Hickock and Smith, their actions and memories, and the detectives. Capote continues the technique of cutting back and forth between scenes as the killers are captured, tried, and finally executed. But for two-thirds of the book, another convention is most prominent—that of the killers taking over the story. *In Cold Blood* is really the story of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, and the narrative focus on the killer has become so much a part of contemporary murder narration that it is seems axiomatic. Capote himself did not envision the book as being about Smith and Hickock; indeed, when he began the project and went to Kansas, the identity of the murderers was unknown. It did not matter to Capote, for as Gerald Clarke writes,

> That...was beside the point, or at least the point he wanted to make. What excited his curiosity was not the murders, but their effect on that small and isolated community. "As he originally conceived it, the murders could have remained a mystery," said Shawn [William, editor of *The New Yorker*], who once again gave his enthusiastic approval. "He was going to do a piece about the town and the family—what their lives had been. I thought that it could make some long and wonderful piece of writing." [23]

Clearly, Capote did not think that the focus of his writing would be the murderers. He seems to have wanted to write about the context alone, and the subtitle of *In Cold Blood* bears that out: *A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences*. But as had happened with *Why Did They Kill?*, the killers commandeer most of the book.

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[23] Clarke 319.

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In Cold Blood offers two competing views about what a killer is and about what evil looks like. Richard Hickock is vulgar, ugly, brutal and shallow; Perry Smith is sensitive, handsome, artistic, a dreamer. Hickock looks like a murderer: his left eye is "truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature."(43) Perry Smith has "a changeling's face…now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic." (26) Hickock wants to rape 15-year-old Nancy Clutter before he kills her; Smith prevents him from doing that. Hickock as killer is ultimately less disturbing and threatening—even though, ironically, he plans the crime—because it is clear from the outset that he is capable of violence. He is a known quantity of evil, somebody to steer clear of, he's a conventional villain. Hickock is conventionally frightening, and he is an older representation of what a murderer looks and acts like. Smith, on the other hand, is a more fundamentally disturbing character because he *seems* like a good and harmless soul, even though he agrees to go along with Hickock and rob the Clutters. He tries to stall Hickock on the night of the murders, he gets sick in the gas station restroom, he almost loses his nerve as they drive up the Clutter's driveway. Smith *can't* go through with it, the reader thinks, he won't let it happen. But it is Perry Smith who ends up killing all the Clutters, and the revelation of his hidden self is stunning.

One of the most chilling and powerful moments in *In Cold Blood* occurs as Smith and Hickock are being driven back to Kansas by the police after their capture in Las Vegas. The prisoners are in different cars, each accompanied by two K.B.I. detectives. Hickock has confessed their part in the killings, but Smith has not, and he doesn't believe

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that Hickock has yet spilled his guts. But then K.B.I. agent Alvin Dewey relates a tale that Smith had told Hickock long before, about how Smith had killed somebody in Las Vegas just for the fun of it. At that moment, Perry Smith becomes a different man: "To Dewey's surprise, the prisoner gasps. He twists around in his seat until he can see, through the rear window, the motorcade's second car, see inside it: "The tough boy!...I thought it was a stunt. I didn't believe you. That Dick let fly. The tough boy! Oh, a real brass boy. Wouldn't harm the fleas on a dog. Just run over the dog." (263) Smith realizes that Hickock really had talked to the police, told them everything about the murders and what led up to them, and has indicated that he, Perry, pulled the trigger on all four. At this point, Smith lets his killer-self appear. In the next few pages, he relates the incidents in the Clutter house, and for the first time the reader gets details about the horror of the murders. The scene very powerfully conveys the split within Smith; for the first time in the text, he speaks with vehemence and hatred, and the reader is stunned. He says he should have killed Hickock when he had the chance, then tells the story of the murders. It is as if Smith had been keeping a secret from the reader, had been hiding the deepest and most destructive part of himself from us until now. The difference between the image of Smith in the text until that point and just what that image covers up is jarring, and compelling for a reading public with growing fears about deadly, normal-seeming strangers.

Capote reverses the reader's expectations by portraying his most deadly killer as the seemingly kind one, and the one who seemed evil as essentially innocent. It is important to remember that these are Capote's designations: in the 'real' case, Smith only confessed to killing all the Clutters as a kind of favor for Hickock, so Dick's parents

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wouldn't have to live with the idea that their son was a murderer (Smith was estranged from his family). Alvin Dewey, one of the principal detectives on the case, never thought that Smith had killed all four Clutters; he believed that Hickock murdered Nancy Clutter and her mother. What seems most true is really Capote's shaping of the story, for his categorization of Smith and Hickock as two types of killers is a construct that offers a suitably complicated view of murder. But it is a construct which resonated with his readers because it articulated an idea of evil as being hidden, insidious, and mysterious; the killer was becoming a literary character, a complex and masked figure, not the simply-conceived and emotionally separate monster of earlier depictions. Contextualizing the crime and exploring the killer's life and psychological makeup in great depth, while allowing the reader to 'know' the killer, paradoxically strengthened the emotional distance from the killer.

Consistent with Capote's other non-fiction, *In Cold Blood* is an artistic exploration of a story, of specific men's lives, of a place and of specific events. The one significant departure from the non-fiction he wrote both before and after *In Cold Blood*, is his position as narrator. *In Cold Blood* remains one of the only pieces of his non-fiction in which Capote does not appear; the omniscient narration affords him the detachment he felt was necessary in the non-fiction novel. In the aforementioned 1966 interview with George Plimpton, Capote said that "for the nonfiction-novel form to be entirely successful, the author should not appear in the work." [24] And in the preface to *Music for Chameleons*, Capote says about *In Cold Blood* that "I felt that it was essential to the seemingly detached tone of that book that the author should be absent. Actually, in all my reportage, I had tried to keep myself as invisible as possible." But Capote's 'me'

[24] Plimpton in Malin, 32.

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or 'I' are present in varying forms throughout the rest of his work, from the travel sketches of *Local Color* (1950) to *The Muses Are Heard* (1956), up until *Music for Chameleons* (1980)—Capote appears as a character in all of his nonfiction both before and after *In Cold Blood*. He may have tried to remain invisible, but he was not able to do so.

Capote has written that "Ordinarily, the reporter has to use himself as a character, an eyewitness observer, in order to retain credibility." [25] But in his non-fiction murder narration, the opposite is true. From the very first page of *In Cold Blood*, Capote's credibility is never in doubt. Even though it is full of poetry and literary techniques, the reader knows that *In Cold Blood* is 'true,' that the events narrated really did happen. In Capote's other non-fiction murder narrative, *Handcarved Coffins*, authorial credibility is called into question because the murders are so perfectly poetic. Did the murderer *really* inject rattlesnakes with amphetamine and place them inside Roberts' car? Did he *really* send miniature coffins to each of his victims before killing them, sometimes months before? [26] It seems impossible, unlikely, too much like fiction. In this text, Capote is very much present as a character, interviewing the principles, interjecting his own experiences and thoughts, shaping the material as we read it. *Handcarved Coffins* lacks the power of *In Cold Blood* because it just doesn't seem true, because the murderer is never caught and order restored, and chiefly because the interrupting authorial presence doesn't allow the reader to identify with the killer.

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[25] "Preface to *Music for Chameleons*," reprinted in *A Capote Reader* (New York: Random House, 1987) 722.

[26] "Handcarved Coffins," *A Capote Reader*, 463-514.

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The most powerful effect of omniscient narration, of the writer not appearing in the text, is that the reader is then completely free to identify with the protagonists. The reader's sense of identification with the killers in true-crime is strengthened by the various narrative techniques used, and because the writer doesn't appear in the text. The bonds of sympathy between writer/reader/killer are enhanced when the writer is invisible, because the reader is free to imagine that he is interviewing the killers, asking the questions, that he is inside the killer's head. Just as the writer was becoming more closely identified with his subject, the writer was becoming more confidante and confessor than reporter, so the reader was able to become closer to the killer. The writer attains credibility not by showing himself with the killer, interviewing and shaping the narrative, but because the reader is allowed in to the story more immediately. The reader can feel himself interviewing the killer, viewing the action, almost becoming a part of the story. Detached narration also imbues true-crime with a sense of timelessness, because events are fixed in the ever-happening present moment. Without a strong authorial presence, time and chronology are more fluid, able to be fixed at any time and almost any place. Capote didn't take himself out of his other non-fiction because the reader doesn't have to identify strongly with his other characters—but the strong reader identification with murderers in true-crime is crucial to the new mode of representation which Capote introduced. The detached omniscient style of narration has become one hallmark of true-crime, and it became one of the most-copied effects in 1970s murder narratives.

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Chapter 3: Hunter S. Thompson

Hell's Angels

1967 was a good year for creative non-fiction: Tom Wolfe was writing *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Joan Didion wrote several of the essays in what would become *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and Hunter S. Thompson published *Hell's Angels.* Thompson's book began as an article for *The Nation* newsmagazine in April 1965. At the time, Thompson was making his living as a freelance journalist in San Francisco, a hot-bed of motorcycle gang and counterculture activity. Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*, asked Thompson to write a piece on the Hell's Angels, who had been receiving voluminous negative coverage in both local and national publications for several months. Thompson's career was launched by his book, and, along with *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, it has become one of his most important works.

John G. Cawelti, a scholar of popular culture, has written that "The process through which formulas develop, change, and give way to other formulas is a kind of cultural evolution with survival through audience selection." [1] The true-crime formula, as it was introduced by Capote, sparked the kind of 'cultural evolution' that Cawelti refers to. Such an evolution includes elements of both high- and low-brow arts, as the influence on the genre of Hunter S. Thompson's writing in the early 1970s shows. Although not a work of true-crime, *Hell's Angels* (1967) added another layer of meaning to the nascent genre, and furthered the technical component of true-crime whereby the writer becomes an actor-creator in the events he writes about. The subject matter of the book, a violent outlaw motorcycle gang, engages many of the same issues that true-crime does: violence

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[1] John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1976) 20.

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in America, the existence of a growing and, seemingly, threatening underclass, and the fears middle-class Americans harbor about those who choose to live outside of normative moral, economic, and legal structures. *Hell's Angels*, like true-crime in the mid and late 1960s, both fired and allayed fears about 'bushy-haired strangers' and marauding gangs of potential killers. Thompson's distinctive style of research and writing, further developed in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), called for direct action within the stories and with the people one was writing about. *Hell's Angels* is a quasi-ethnography, for Thompson lived, rode, and drank with the motorcycle gang for a year while composing his book about them. This technique would have far-reaching implications for the production of true-crime during the late 60s and early 70s, as a crucial convention of the genre became the 'insider' status of the writer.

The Hell's Angels were the most notorious and organized of the local motorcycle gangs, and Thompson had a rare 'in' to their culture—he was friendly with a journalist who was himself a former Angel. Thus began one of the most famous alliances of the era; as a result of his *Nation* article, Thompson got a book deal from Ballantine. He used his advance to buy a motorcycle—although not a 'chopped hog,' the Harley Davidson 74 favored by the Angels—and began spending all his free time with Hell's Angels. Along the way, Thompson introduced the Angels to Ken Kesey, who with his own outlaw gang of Merry Pranksters, was engaged in a mind-expanding LSD experiment at his home in the redwood forests of nearby La Honda. For a short period, the Angels and the Pranksters, their significant differences erased by their mutual interest in drugs, formed a loosely-knit raucous psychedelic party scene, famously documented in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. This happy family quickly disintegrated, however, as did

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Thompson's tenuous trust in the Hell's Angels. As their infamy grew, some Angels believed they could cash in on their image by charging journalists for interviews. Eventually, Thompson was attacked and severely beaten by a group of Hell's Angels because of his perceived reluctance to pay them, and his anthropological excursion came to a screaming halt. [2]

Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga was published in 1967, and as Douglas Brinkley writes in his introduction to the text, "American journalism reached a weird new peak on the cusp of the Summer of Love".[3] The book was an instant bestseller, and catapulted the little-known Thompson to the top of a list of the "New Journalists," a phenomenon whose practitioners included Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer. The first printing of *Hell's Angels* sold out before it was published, and as of 1999, the book had sold more than 2 million copies. But what, exactly, was so 'weird' about this book, and why did it have so much appeal? The sensational subject matter was certainly a large part of the book's popularity; the Hell's Angels had received massive media coverage in 1964, 1965, and 1966, as a result of their annual Fourth of July and Labor Day 'runs,' or mass parties, and the criminal behavior they engaged in at these events. [4] Thompson describes the media-driven panic about the Angels in great detail,

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[2] This information gleaned from E. Jean Carroll, *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1993), Peter O. Whitmer and Bruce VanWyngarden, *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), and Peter O. Whitmer, *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), as well as Douglas Brinkley's Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *Hell's Angels,* and *Hell's Angels* itself.

[3] Douglas Brinkley, "Introduction" to Hunter S. Thompson *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga.* 1966 (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1999) ix.

[4] Thompson reports that "Their blood, booze and semen-flecked image would be familiar to readers of The *New York Times, Newsweek, The Nation, Time, True, Esquire* and the *Saturday Evening Post.*" Thompson, *Hell's Angels,* 13.

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offering throughout the book excerpted newspaper accounts of their crimes juxtaposed with testimony from the Angels involved in the alleged crimes. Thompson weaves pithy quotations from law enforcement personnel, snatches of overheard conversation, and clips from the popular press together to form a patchwork of contradictory statements and beliefs about the Hell's Angels menace—as he wrote in a letter to Norman Mailer, "the book is a grab-bag of word-photos, libel, straight narrative, and occasional wisdom." [5] Such elements provide veracity and remind the reader constantly that this is a work of non-fiction; the narrative is so vibrant and strange that one could easily think the book is fiction. Thompson's pastiche style is part of what makes *Hell's Angels* such an interesting and compelling text, and partially accounts for its 'weirdness.' Critics and readers alike seemed to recognize that here was something fresh and new, in subject matter, the writer's approach to his material, and the elements of the book itself.

Thompson's unique treatment of his subject is apparent from the very first pages—the book opens with a third-person view of the gang on one of their legendary runs:

> California, Labor Day weekend...early, with ocean fog still in the streets, outlaw motorcyclists wearing chains, shades and greasy Levis roll out from damp garages, all-night diners and cast-off one-night pads in Frisco, Hollywood, Berdoo and East Oakland, heading for the Monterey peninsula, north of Big Sur...The Menace is loose again, the Hell's Angels, the hundred-carat headline, running fast and loud on the early morning freeway....like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can

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[5] Hunter S. Thompson, *The Fear and Loathing Letters, Volume 1:The Proud Highway, Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955-1967* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997) 547.

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> and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given; show the squares some class, give em a whiff of those kicks they'll never know...[6]

All the themes of the book are presaged in this first passage: outlawry, violence, machine-worship, class-based antagonism, criminal sex, and above all, the provocation of middle-class fear. Thompson's hyperbolic mockery of that fear is also present in his descriptive language: the motorcyclists are "The Menace," capable of producing the "hundred-carat headline," the newspaper copy which trails after them garnering riches they'll never lay hands on, riches given up by a middle-class reading public hungry for titillation and excitement. The prose is pure and vintage Thompson: witty, acidic, prickly description dense with social commentary and disdain for American mores and conventions. These themes run throughout the text, and the accumulation of Thompson's prose presents the Hell's Angels as, paradoxically, both less and more of a menace than the American public believes they are. What Americans really have to fear, Thompson suggests, is not random violence or brutal strangers: rather, the real threat is the fear and paranoia produced by the instability of the old social order, and the inability of the middle-class to deal with radical difference.

The book may not be actual true-crime, and it is certainly not a murder narrative, but Thompson's aims and methods mimic those of Capote and other non-fiction crime writers. Thompson represents his subjects just as true-crime writers do—as simultaneously threatening and benign, monstrous yet familiar, back-stabbing yet trustworthy. The Hell's Angels are characterized variously as "not bad guys,

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[6] *Hell's Angels*, 3.

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individually" and as "pure animals." [7] Thompson creates continual tension by drawing comparisons between the Angels' human and inhuman aspects. They are low-life rapists who somehow always beat the charges, filthy thugs with names like "Mouldy Marvin" and "Charger Charley the Child Molester," but men who are also capable of legendary loyalty to their band of outlaw brothers. Thompson's Angels are as "malignant as anything in American society" and "the last American heroes we have," fulfilling the classic contradictory function of the outlaw. [8] What makes *Hell's Angels* worthy of reprint in the Modern Library series, and what made the Hell's Angels terrifyingly relevant during the 1960s, was their appearance in a new American context of the birth of true-crime, real counter-cultural revolution, and an upward spiral of crime and violence in the 1960s and 70s.

The formal and textual elements of *Hell's Angels* show some important similarities with contemporary true-crime texts. Many of the conventions set out in Capote's *In Cold Blood* are also visible in *Hell's Angels*: the narrator or reporter has an insider's relationship to the culture and subjects, there is both distance and identification with the protagonists/killers through the narrator, the text blends fiction and non-fiction, the social context is richly drawn, the subjects are multiple (a gang, in this case), and there is an overwhelming sense of the inevitability of violence, murder, and evil (or, to use a less-fraught term, destruction). Thompson befriends his subjects, becoming close to them throughout the research phase of his project. The group became his social network for a year; he was very friendly with an Angel named Terry the Tramp, and the

[7] A San Francisco jailer and Birney Jarvis, quoted in Thompson, *Hell's Angels,* 4.

[8] Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 83 and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth quoted in *Hell's Angels*, 50. All following quotes from this book are in-text.

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night he was jumped an Angel named Tiny pulled him out of the melee and probably saved his life. In fact, even Thompson's stomping signaled a perverse kind of acceptance or initiation into the Hell's Angels group, considering that most of their violence was inflicted on insiders. Thompson himself called his beating a "Validation by fire," an event which provided a perfect ending to his book. [9] Thompson became deeply enmeshed with the group, and he writes "I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them....In the beginning I kept them out of my own world, but after several months my friends grew accustomed to finding Hell's Angels in my apartment at any hour of the day or night." (45)

Thompson's simultaneous identification with and psychic distance from the Hell's Angels conveyed that double-consciousness to the reader. Thompson identifies deeply with the Angels; after all, if he hadn't shared some traits with them, he would never have been so readily accepted into their social group. It helped that they shared an obsession: the corruption and money-grubbing hypocrisy of the American press establishment, represented by mass-market magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Life*, and *Time*. The Hell's Angels hated journalists, primarily because they knew the press was capitalizing on the sensational lies about their exploits, while they were having trouble making rent every month. Thompson hated the press establishment for its general venality, which he knew firsthand, and for its being "sycophantic mouthpieces for the Rotary Club, the U.S. government, and the Eastern establishment." [10] Thompson also

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[9] Thompson, *The Proud Highway*, 565.

[10] Douglas Brinkley in *Proud Highway*, xxiv.

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shared the Angels' contempt for the institutions and morals of society; he too hated cops and laws, especially drug laws. If the circumstances of his life had been different, Thompson might himself have been a Hell's Angel.

But the circumstances of his life were different, and Thompson's sharp intelligence and witty insights provide a counterpoint to the Angels' general ignorance and mindless violence. His contempt for them is visible in such statements as "their everyday scene is as tedious and depressing as a costume ball for demented children" and "it is hard to call the Hell's Angels anything but mutants." (85, 252) Thompson has the clear-eyed vision and the raw experience of them which enables him first to dismantle the myth that turned them into "the Menace," and then to build another, the myth of the alienated outsider. The tension between these two poles, between Thompson's representation of the Angels as cold-blooded brutes and as counter-culture heroes, mimics the dual representations of the killers in true-crime. Thompson replaces the reader's expectations of a sensational tale of motorcycle mayhem with an ethnographic assessment of the origins and future of these working-class outcasts. Readers experience the effect of seeing "the Menace" at close range, which reduces the stark distinctions of us/them or good/bad.

One facet of *Hell's Angels* which is comparable to *In Cold Blood* is the forthright literariness of the texts and the literary goals of their authors. One of the special conditions which shaped true-crime into a genre in its own right was the collapse of distinctions between high-brow, literary writing and low-brow pulp or sensational writing. By including direct quotations from mass-market magazines, Thompson brings the voice of the low-brow popular media into his own text, thereby addressing the lies of

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the press and simultaneously validating those voices by taking them seriously. The hyperbolic mania of the Hell's Angels' phenomenon as reported in the popular press is matched by Thompson's own hyperbole, and deflated along the way. Thompson very self-consciously sought to create a work of literature when he wrote *Hell's Angels*, but the low-brow subject matter more often appeared in publications with no literary aims or qualities. The mixing of facts and fiction-writing techniques, a signature of both true-crime and New Journalism, is prominent in *Hell's Angels*. Even though the text is subjective journalism and a first-person account, from the very first page, with the 3rd-person description of the Labor Day run, the text is rich with fictionalized-yet-probably-real exploits, bits and pieces from other books, clips from the popular press, songs, and poems, quotations from law enforcement agents and Hell's Angels, and anthropological/sociological analysis. [11] *Hell's Angels* is a pastiche, and a forerunner of the postmodern text which cobbles together various discrete items to draw a complete picture. In this regard, Thompson succeeded in his literary aims. *Hell's Angels* is a hybrid text because Thompson mixes techniques of ethnographic research and straight reportage, and ratchets up the quality of the writing by self-consciously crafting his material. *Hell's Angels* is a literary work which brings together the high and the low, both literally and metaphorically.

1960s non-fiction was being shaped by New Journalism, which was, in the assessment of many of its practitioners, the only reasonable response to the times. [12] In a

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[11] Thompson wanted to include a long passage from Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side*, but Algren wouldn't give him the permission to do so. Thompson fired off three salty missives to Algren, accusing him of collusion with the "ten-percenters," literary agents and lawyers who make their livings off the hides of writers. See *Proud Highway*, pages 557-564.

[12] For more on this point, see Tom Wolfe's Introduction to Wolfe, Tom and E. W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism: With an Anthology* (New York: Harper, 1973).

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1966 letter to an independent scholar who had done an earlier study of the Hell's Angels, Thompson conveys his sense that the documentary impulse drove his text:

> I'm not sure how to describe the book, but it's not at all what I had in mind when I started. I gave the "adults and authorities" a pretty rough time, and my only regret along that line is that I didn't have another six months to really dynamite them. I don't really see any "solutions" except to document the madness (and the mad humor) of a society that breeds Hell's Angels just as surely as it breeds Nixons and LeMays and Negro gangs on darktown streetcorners. [13]

One wonders what Thompson "had in mind" when he began writing *Hell's Angels*. True-crime in the 1960s shared the reportorial style of New Journalism, a voice without judgment or moral assessment, both more 'objective' and 'subjective' than previous journalism. Thompson knows he can't 'explain' the Hell's Angels, any better than Capote can 'explain' the existence of good and evil in Holcomb Kansas. But what they can do is 'document the madness,' and the best way to do so is to get as close to that madness, to that murder, as possible. Capote delivers a text which is a kind of report from Kansas, with a cool and distant narrative style which sets the reader apart from moral judgments and emotional involvement, just as Thompson's text is a 'report from the counterculture.' Apart from raising the bar for the writer-as-insider status, Thompson's contribution to true-crime rests with his recognition, expressed subtly throughout *Hell's Angels*, that there is no satisfactory explanation for violence and destruction. The impulse to

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[13] *Proud Highway*, 564. The footnote for the LeMays reference reads: "Major General Curtis LeMay ran the U.S. Strategic Air Command 1948-1957. Following his retirement from the Air Force in 1965 he became a bellicose advocate of bombing Vietnam."

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document events, without a conscious effort to explain them or make moral assessments, to rely on narrative and chronology to sort and imbue seemingly random events with meaning, are characteristics of true-crime from its inception. Thompson pioneered this approach in *Hell's Angels* by applying a documentary style devoid of sensationalism and moralizing.

In his seminal work on the era, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Todd Gitlin writes that "The Angels, malevolent shaggy toughs, were the counter-culture's resident bad guys, stark embodiments of California's stark media-pumped nightmare, striking fear into even the hippest middle-class heart, making Marlon Brando's wild ones look like Mickey Mouse." [14] *Hell's Angels* explodes that 1960s image, for Thompson both deflates the reports of their criminality and mythologizes their status as 'losers' and 'outlaws.' The scenes of violence in *Hell's Angels* are not the spectacularly sordid events reported in the straight press: rather, Thompson finds that the Hell's Angels' violence is incestuous and brutally mundane. Beatings and stompings characterize the daily life of a Hell's Angel, with the occasional gang-rape of what Thompson reports are willing participants, usually female Angel-groupies. Violence in this sub-culture remains, for the most part, within the community itself. The Angels fight with members of other gangs, bartenders, law enforcement agents, and former or potential members of the group. They often physically attack each other, although not with intent to do serious harm. Rarely do they attack outsiders without provocation; rather, the violence is directed at members of their own social circle, denizens of the bars, strip clubs and garages which are their natural habitat. Middle-class fear of attack by Hell's Angels is, almost without exception, portrayed by Thompson as deeply irrational and illogical, given his observation of the

[14] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987) 210.

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Angels' usual behavior. Just as in true-crime, the fear which is struck "into even the hippest middle-class heart" by these motorcycle outlaws is out of proportion with the reality and frequency of random violence visited upon 'innocent' victims.

As Thompson sees it, however, violence is the least-perilous threat posed by the Angels. He identifies their status as alienated losers, and the potential affinity of middle-class kids with the Angels, as their most powerful threat. He writes that

> In the terms of our Great Society the Hell's Angels and their ilk are losers—dropouts, failures and malcontents. They are rejects looking for a way to get even with a world in which they are only a problem. The Hell's Angels are not visionaries, but diehards, and if they are the forerunners or the vanguard of anything it is not the "moral revolution" in vogue on college campuses, but a fast-growing legion of young unemployables whose untapped energy will inevitably find the same kind of destructive outlet that "outlaws" like the Hell's Angels have been finding for years. The difference between the student radicals and the Hell's Angels is that the students are rebelling against the past, while the Angels are fighting the future. Their only common ground is their disdain for the present, or the status quo. (*Hell's Angels* 248-249)

In this passage, Thompson identifies the anti-status quo impulse which would unite, in the popular imagination, the Hell's Angels with the various student movements, the urban riots, and the actions of the Manson family. All these groups would be painted with the same brush of violence and radicalism in contemporary media representations. More frightening than any single, isolated instance of aggression, the Hell's Angels stood for a kind of discontentment, class-based and with a multitude of targets, which would crack

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the youth culture wide open by the end of the 1960s. Gesturing towards what he sees as a violent yet not ultimately destructive imminence, for Thompson, middle-class American fear is broadly the fear of the rejection of the status-quo, however it is achieved and in whatever guise effected.

Thompson characterizes the Angels as "not some romantic leftover, but the first wave of a future that nothing in our history has prepared us to cope with." (*HA* 246) Thompson addresses the larger topic of the post-World War II escalation of American violence, and the perception of increased lawlessness, by examining the Hell's Angels as a "logical product of the culture that now claims to be shocked at their existence." (*HA* 250) The shock and horror with which the Angels are perceived by the wider culture is the same as that expressed throughout true-crime, in reaction to murderers. Hunter Thompson was one of the first American writers to isolate a phenomenon which would become crucial in the rise of true-crime, for as the genre gained prominence and its conventions became codified, the draw of sensation and violence would become increasingly powerful. Claiming for the Angels an "extra 'something'" which accounts for their wide mass appeal as objects of public fascination, Thompson compares them to the mass killer Charles Starkweather, who "had something extra too, but he couldn't get an agent, and instead of taking his vitality to Hollywood, he freaked out in Wyoming and killed a dozen people for reasons he couldn't explain." (*HA* 251) An irony-laden critique which equates a mass murderer with a movie star addresses the public hunger and tolerance for depictions of violence, an appetite which was growing rapidly during this period. One reason true-crime became an identifiable genre was its extreme popularity, a

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popularity born of a cultural need for a narrative which could document and describe the violence which Thompson identifies as that 'extra something.'

Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas

By becoming part of the group he's writing about, Thompson was working both within an established journalistic tradition, and forging new ground. A student of the journalism of Stephen Crane, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway, Thompson knew that the best first-person work grows out of living with the subject. Because of his tabloid subject matter and his exact methods, however, he was both breaking new ground, and following in the footsteps of Capote. No mere reporter, Thompson became a protagonist in *Hell's Angels*, riding with the gang and taking part in their activities. Thompson's style of "Gonzo Journalism," evident in rudimentary form in *Hell's Angels*, would be even further developed in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971).

Thompson characterizes *Fear and Loathing*, his best-known work, as "a first, gimped effort in a direction that what Tom Wolfe calls "The New Journalism" has been flirting with for almost a decade," and "a vile epitaph for the Drug Culture of the Sixties." [15] Drug-inspired and drug-induced, *Fear & Loathing* is a description not of the ostensible subject, the 1971 Mint 400 motorcycle race on the outskirts of Las Vegas, but of Thompson's experiences in the town while on assignment for *Sports Illustrated.* Ever an extremist—"a real connoisseur of edge-work"—Thompson allows the first-person Gonzo technique to take primacy, and the book ends up as a narrative of his drug-addled

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[15] Thopmson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and Other American Stories* (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1996), "Jacket Copy for Fear and Loathing," 211, 213. All following quotes from *Fear & Loathing* will be in-text.

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state of mind. Subjectivity takes off with the story, and Thompson pushes the limits of 'insider' status further than ever. (80) Just as the murderers commandeer the narratives of *In Cold Blood* and *The Boston Strangler*, as Capote and Frank had each planned on writing more about the context of murder than about the murderers themselves, Thompson's story becomes a narration of his perceptions, paranoias, and drug-fueled antics in Las Vegas.

Just as with *Hell's Angels*, there are many points of comparison between *Fear & Loathing* and true-crime, and although not a murder narrative, it partakes of the conventions of true-crime: the reporter has an insider's perspective on the story (in *Fear & Loathing*, the reporter *is* the story), there is simultaneous distance and identification with the subjects (in this case, not murderers, but the District Attorneys at the National Narcotics convention), and the tension born from that distance/identification, the text is a blend of fiction and non-fiction (as Thompson writes in the jacket copy, anybody who would actually commit the multitude of crimes detailed in the book would be imprisoned, and at the very least, they wouldn't boast about such acts!), there are two subjects, Thompson and his "attorney" (Oscar Acosta), plenty of social context and commentary, and a sense of the inevitability of destruction and corruption. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* fits neatly into the generic pattern of early true-crime, and follows the conventions meticulously; however, the book is not a murder narrative; and although plenty of criminal action takes place, it would be a stretch to call it true-crime.

Fear and Loathing expands the convention of examining the social context of the crime and drawing a vivid picture of the scene. Thompson's experiences of the events meld with his drugged and paranoiac descriptions. The scene of this series of 'crimes,'

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Las Vegas, is for Thompson the rotten heart of America, peopled by straight-laced weirdos, uptight money-hungry freaks, and terrifyingly boring middle-American conventioneers in town for a weekend of gambling and drinking. The only way to tolerate these people, he suggests, is with a head full of drugs. The American Dream referred to in the title is really an American Scam, and this is what Thompson's Vegas consists of:

> The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war....The gambling action runs twenty-four hours a day on the main floor, and the circus never ends. Meanwhile, on all the upstairs balconies, the customers are being hustled by every conceivable kind of bizarre shuck. All kinds of funhouse-type booths. Shoot the pasties off the nipples of a ten-foot bulldyke and win a cotton-candy goat. Stand in front of this fantastic machine, my friend, and for just 99¢ your likeness will appear, two hundred feet tall, on a screen above downtown Las Vegas. Ninety-nine cents more for a voice message. 'Say whatever you want, fella. They'll hear you, don't worry about that. Remember you'll be two hundred feet tall.' (46-47)

This is the scene at Circus-Circus, the epitome of the absurdity and meaninglessness of American life. *Fear and Loathing* is a very dark book, for it details the death of both the American Dream and the American soul—the multiple references to Charlie Manson throughout are not simply hippie-contemporary cites, inserted for shock-value cachet for an early 70s audience. The intimations of doom which Thompson describes in 1967 in *Hell's Angels* are, by 1971, realities: the undeclared War in Vietnam has been raging for seven years, claiming the lives of (to that point) 55,000 American G.I.'s and countless Vietnamese, Charlie Manson's 'Family' has wreaked havoc in Los Angeles and given

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hippies everywhere a bad name, and Richard Nixon will, most likely, be re-elected in 1972. From Thompson's bitter, wry, twisted humanist perspective, the apocalypse appears in the form of "the possibility that any freak with $1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head." (47)

Fear and Loathing is ultimately about the failures of the 1960s—a peculiar stance for Thompson to take, since he had always been pessimistic about the state of the world, even in the early 60s. Thompson's prose contains the last dying gasp of the kind of breathless, reckless chemical excess which seemed to hold the promise of a new social order, for those who wanted one. But the book is also about the recognition that the hippie ideal that "somebody—or at least some *force*—is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel" is dead. (179) Thompson and his "attorney" don't experience any spiritual or social epiphanies during their drug orgies—they curse at each other and fight constantly, and there's no truth or beauty in their LSD-visions. Drugs are used only to escape, not to expand consciousness. The Manson references remind the reader that the days of peace, love, and understanding are over, and as a way to goad the straights who both fear and are fascinated by the various counterculture movements. This fear is brilliantly evoked by Thompson's attorney in conversation with one of the District Attorneys attending the Narcotics Conference. Speaking about the threatening behavior and nefarious deeds of drug-users, the DA says "But now, Jesus, *nobody's* safe. They could turn up anywhere." The attorney answers:

> We learned that in California. You remember where Manson turned up,

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> don't you? Right out in the middle of Death Valley. He had a whole *army* of sex fiends out there. We only got our hands on a few. Most of the crew got away; just ran off across the sand dunes, like big lizards...and every one of them stark naked, except for the weapons. (148)

The idea of Manson is the ultimate threat to the square middle-American, and even though Thompson had learned to "never turn your back on a drug," the square middle-American lawman is more a threat to him than Manson ever could be. It is the District Attorneys who are monstrous and criminal, as representatives of the government-sanctioned clampdown on drugs and freedom which were Thompson's American Dream.

Thompson did write non-fiction about crime, however; his most well-known murder narrative, collected in the Modern Library edition of *Fear & Loathing*, is "Strange Rumblings in Aztlan." This true-crime story is about the murder of the Chicano journalist Ruben Salazar, in East Los Angeles in 1970, at the hands of the Los Angeles police. Strangely enough, Thompson wrote these two texts simultaneously. Here's Thompson on his writing process during 1971:

> I was...sleeping most of each day and writing all night on the Salazar article. But each night, around dawn, I would knock off the Salazar work and spend an hour or so, cooling out, by letting my head unwind and my fingers run wild on the big black Selectric...jotting down notes about the weird trip to Vegas. (209)

"Strange Rumblings in Aztlan" is a more traditional—at least, in Hunter Thompson's canon—piece of journalism than either *Hell's Angels* or *Fear & Loathing.* Although written during the same period of time as *Fear & Loathing*, unlike that text, it does not

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adhere to any of the conventions of murder narration, as they had been laid out by Capote and elaborated upon by others. The story is not about the killers—the L.A. cops who fired a tear-gas cartridge into the bar where Salazar was having a beer—it doesn't contain any distance or identification with them, and the story is straight fact, not a mix of recognizable fiction techniques and facts; the true-crime conventions it does utilize are the presentation of social context and an underlying feeling of ineluctable destruction. Rather than being an overt murder narrative, "Strange Rumblings" is a lengthy first-person examination of the Chicano-rights movement in East L.A. in the early 1970s, using the Salazar murder as a lens or a unifying theme. Thompson was interested in the Salazar murder because it indicated, to him, something new and ominous on the American scene: that cops had killed a reporter because they didn't like what he was writing. This was threatening and repugnant to Thompson, both personally and politically. As he says, "When the cops declare open season on journalists, when they feel free to declare any scene of 'unlawful protest' a free fire zone, that will be a very ugly day—and not just for journalists." [16] For Thompson, this murder was political, and his essay about it was to be political, as well.

So, Thompson's non-fiction non-murder narrative holds to the conventions of true-crime, and his murder narrative does not. What does this signify? Apart from his general penchant for perversity and his contrarian nature, this transposition of the generic markers indicates that Thompson was influenced by the collected strength of the conventions which would eventually coalesce into true-crime. His use of these conventions further strengthened them, for Thompson was immensely popular, and although considered a counterculture writer, his prose was recognized by critics and other

[16] F & L, "Strange Rumblings in Aztlan," 228.

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writers as being legitimately 'literary.' Thompson uses the conventions of true-crime to comment upon his generation's excesses and failures in *Fear & Loathing*; as a format or template for crafting a non-fiction story, the conventions work well, as they had worked with the anthropological romp that is *Hell's Angels*. The literary innovations of inserting oneself into one's story, deflating the power of destruction and violence by bringing it closer to the reader, mixing fiction and techniques of fiction-writing with non-fiction, creating pastiche texts, focusing on two or more subjects, and treating formerly taboo or tabloid subject matter with literary finesse, were all being experimented with by other 1960s and 70s writers. Both the New Journalists such as Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe, and the postmodern novelists Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, among others, were playing with these techniques in their work.

Thompson may not have been consciously using the techniques laid out by Capote, but he was certainly a very careful writer. He re-wrote *Fear & Loathing* three times, and he knew that it was a significant contribution to New Journalism, although he felt it was a failed attempt (a failure as New Journalism *because* it was edited and revised, something he felt should not be done in Wolfe's conception of the genre). Characterizing his work as fitting into a new literary category, New Journalism, shows that Thompson was conscious of and interested in innovations in journalism and literary techniques, as well as affirming his connections to people such as Wolfe. It is a near certainty that Thompson read *In Cold Blood*—it had been a smash best-seller, and he read voraciously and had an interest in new literature. That he didn't apply the techniques Capote used to his own non-fiction crime writing is not an indication that he was not aware of them.

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Perhaps the most significant point about Thompson's use of the conventions of true-crime, however, is that he applied them to a story that is about the persistence of destruction and the failure of people to effect positive change. In the passage from *Fear and Loathing* quoted above, Thompson refers to a "force" which could be responsible for human hope, figured as the "light at the end of the tunnel." At another point in the book, he writes that in San Francisco in the 1960s, members of the counterculture, "people…just as high and wild as I was" felt a "sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil." But those days are over, and "now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and…you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back." (67-68) The 'wave' of hope, reform, and the triumph of the good in human nature has crested, Thompson suggests, and everything to come is bleak. This is the closest Thompson gets to acknowledging a metaphysical plane and forces outside humanity, such as good and evil. It is also only in describing the death of good that he acknowledges the existence and persistence of evil. Thompson's use of the newly-minted conventions of murder narration in *Fear and Loathing* signals his recognition, conscious or not, that this set of generic markers was uniquely suited to describing modern malaise and a sense of foreboding. "Strange Rumblings," although it is a murder narrative, isn't an exploration of the principle or existence of evil, so Thompson doesn't need to deploy the true-crime conventions to shape his story. Those conventions were becoming more widely recognized, by literary and popular writers alike, as the best means of representing the modern concept of evil.

Thompson embodied, in his subject matter and his writing career, the decadent impulses toward glorifying or reveling in sensationalism and violence which would

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characterize much later true crime, and would give the genre such a loathsome reputation (among some). After *Fear & Loathing*, Thompson turned his searing gaze toward the political scene, publishing *Fear and Loathing: on the Campaign Trail 72* in 1973. After writing that text, which was widely acclaimed and further established his "Gonzo" journalism style, Thompson's career did a nosedive. Since the late 1970s, with publication of the first volume of the "Gonzo Papers," Thompson's work has been repetitive and uninteresting; he has become a literal and metaphorical caricature, immortalized as "Uncle Raoul Duke" in Garry Trudeau's comic strip *Doonesbury,* reviled and deified as a legendary consumer of substances. The Hunter Thompson myth has grown as his writing has deteriorated, and Thompson has enacted a kind of fall from grace, with his literary ambitions stagnating under the weight of his powerful impulse toward self-destruction and abuse.

A lover of violence—pictured most regularly holding one of his many firearms—unpredictable, obnoxious, usually drunk and high, Thompson now writes for ESPN.com, penning sour little commentaries in a regular column entitled "Hey Rube." Thompson is still funny, and he remains "The Good Doctor," but he hasn't produced a new idea, or a fresh piece of writing, in thirty years. He seems to stay afloat in popular culture on his reputation alone, a reputation which has proved remarkably sustainable and buoyant, particularly among younger people during the past twenty years or so. He resides in "a fortified compound somewhere near Aspen, Colorado," and the impenetrable edifice of his home is a metaphor for the legend. Reading Thompson anew for this chapter, I found that his older works retain their power and vibrancy; yet, like a typical true-crime book, the later Thompson is dull, for we know the story already—fear and loathing, derangement and violence, the modern American underbelly is, in such texts, unchanged since the 1960s.

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Chapter 4: Joseph Wambaugh & *The Onion Field*

In the 1960's and 70's, the writer of best-selling true-crime would become an agent of law enforcement, evidenced in the work of Joseph Wambaugh and Vincent Bugliosi. From Capote onward, true-crime authors have become involved in their subjects' stories in unprecedented ways: writers have been advocates or adversaries for the killers they have written about (*Fatal Vision, The Defense Never Rests*), they have helped law enforcement agents gather evidence (*The Stranger Beside Me, Murder in Greenwich*), they have acted as confessors (*Dead Man Walking*), befriended and rallied public support for convicted killers (*Dr. Sam—An American Tragedy*), and witnessed the execution of their subjects. [1] Wambaugh's *The Onion Field* (1973) shows certain aspects of the maturing genre, including a more complex narrator/insider, with a different relationship to criminals and crime, and the inclusion of more complicated themes such as guilt, retribution, and the psychology of victims as well as killers. As a police officer, Wambaugh had a unique perspective on murder and undeniable credibility as a witness, a participant, and a commentator. *The Onion Field* further demonstrated that popular true-crime could be subtle, sophisticated, and terrifically powerful, and that the genre could support the exploration of serious themes, and was able to transcend displays of graphic violence and sensationalism.

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[1] The entanglement of Joe McGinniss and his killer-protagonist, Jeffrey MacDonald, is a prime example of the kind of vexed relationships which writing true-crime can foster. McGinniss wrote *Fatal Vision* (New York: Signet/Penguin, 1983) and was later sued by his main character, Dr. Jeffrey MacDonald, for breach of contract, because McGinniss portrayed MacDonald as a killer. Janet Malcolm wrote *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1990) about that lawsuit and the complicated relationships which can grow between non-fiction writers and their subjects.

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Joseph Wambaugh had been a cop in the Los Angeles Police Department for ten years when in 1970 he began writing novels about policemen and the work they do. His first book, *The New Centurions* (1970), received both critical and popular acclaim. This novel is now understood as one of the first in a genre which would become known as the "police procedural," a form of narrative (either fiction or non-fiction) which details the lives and everyday work experiences of law enforcement agents. Wambaugh is the recognized master of this genre, for he almost single-handedly changed literary representations of policeman from unchallenged heroes into fallible human beings, and crime narratives from simplistic representations of good and evil into complex and ambiguous explorations of modern morality. [2] Wambaugh's work would hugely influence television depictions of police, for he created and consulted for *Police Story*, the 1970s television series which had a profound and lasting impact on televised representations of police and their work. As William Marling writes, "Such later series as *Hill Street Blues*, *Law and Order*, *NYPD* and *Homicide* owe their form and tone to Wambaugh's pioneering work." [3] Wambaugh's cops are fallible human beings, not the cool and stolid investigators of gumshoe fiction or film noir. Wambaugh's best-known

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[2] In 1971, NYPD Officer Frank Serpico testified at the Knapp Commission corruption hearings about widespread corruption within the New York City Police Department. In 1973, Peter Maas published *Serpico*, a biographical account of Serpico's experiences in the NYPD. *Serpico* helped change literary depictions of policemen, and led to the increased popularity of sensational, graphic, and lurid treatments of police topics.

[21] William Marling. *Hard-Boiled Fiction*. Case Western Reserve University. Updated 2 August, 2001. <http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Wambaugh.html>.

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work includes *The Blue Knight* (1972), *The Onion Field* (1973), and *The Choirboys* (1975).

Wambaugh's most famous work was *The Onion Field* (1973), a true-crime account of the kidnapping of two LAPD patrolmen by two petty crooks in 1963. On a Saturday night in March of that year, officers Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger, both relatively new to the job, were disarmed at gunpoint and driven to a remote California onion field by Gregory Powell and Jimmy Smith. Powell and Smith murdered Campbell, and Karl Hettinger narrowly escaped the same fate by running for his life through the field to safety. Hettinger returned to police work immediately, and suffered a nervous breakdown as a consequence of the murder of his colleague and the aftermath of the crime, which included the longest criminal trial in California history. An incredible series of appeals and retrials led to several juries overturning death penalty convictions for the murderers, largely as a result of changing laws and the institution of the Miranda Rights ruling in 1966. Wambaugh was an LAPD officer when the onion field crime took place, and his experiences working alongside cops and apprehending criminals shaped his narratives when he began to write.

The Onion Field reinforced and further developed the changes which were already underway in murder narratives; because of his unique position as an 'insider' in the world of policemen and criminals, Wambaugh brought an intensely intimate perspective to bear on true-crime. Building on what Capote had begun with the shifting position of the writer as an intimate of the killer, in both his police fiction and *The Onion Field*, Wambaugh would further the notion that cops and murderers are separated by very thin fibers of moral structure indeed, and that 'good' and 'evil' are almost inextricably

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interwoven concepts. Wambaugh's suggestion that cops and criminals are similarly human and driven by forces beyond their control leads the reader into both identification with and distancing from both groups. There are no unambiguous heroes in Wambaugh's writing, because his cops are gritty and flawed, his criminals twisted and damaged people. His work is important to the growth of true-crime because—like Capote—he invites the reader to experience a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to his 'good' and 'bad' characters equally. This distancing/identification underlines 'evil' as a moral construct, which was in the 1970s crumbling under the mediation of social forces and new understandings of crime and criminality.

In *The New Centurions*, his first book, Wambaugh traces the early careers of three idealistic rookie cops, fresh out of the Police Academy and eager to fight crime. A master of painting the bleak workaday world of the beat cop, Wambaugh shows how quickly they each lose their moral bearings by indoctrination into the racism, petty corruption, misanthropy, and alcoholism of their older and more experienced colleagues. Each of the three rookies witness the suffering of crime victims, and each becomes hardened to the perpetrators of crime—uniformly referred to by the cops as "assholes." In this text, Wambaugh tentatively introduces the ideas that cops and robbers inhabit the same moral universe and are driven by similar human desires. After five years on the force, the three men meet again during the Watts riots, and register the changes each has undergone. In the last chapter, we learn that Serge Duran, after denying his Mexican heritage for years, has made peace with himself and will marry a Mexican woman. Gus Plebesly has overcome both his cowardice and the temptation to cheat on his wife, and he emerges with his psyche and his marriage intact. Only Roy Fehler doesn't survive—in the final

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paragraphs, he is fatally shot on the job, after having struggled mightily to reset his moral compass and overcome alcoholism. Throughout the text, Wambaugh's descriptions of Los Angeles and its denizens provide a counterpoint for the cops' moral development, and he drives home the point that cops and criminals are more alike than different.

Wambaugh's second book, *The Blue Knight* (1972) follows 20-year veteran cop Bumper Morgan during his last three days before retirement. In his *New York Times* review in 1972, Eric Pace wrote that "Its warty portrayal of the police will make it controversial in some quarters," for like the policemen in *New Centurions*, Morgan is a realistic and complex character. [4] He is both noble and base, as exemplified by his act of perjury in order to convict somebody whom he knows to be criminal, but who will never be convicted because of a lack of evidence. In the end, Morgan does not—cannot—retire and marry the woman of his dreams, as he had planned, for his identity is defined by his job. Morgan's best friend on the force, Sergeant Cruz Segovia, describes the patrolman's beat as a "puta," the Spanish colloquialism for prostitute. Morgan is seduced by the beat, for only on the streets of his patrol can he fulfill his self-image as a "Blue Knight," an avenging angel with knightstick and sap gloves. In the final image of Bumper Morgan, on the last page of the book, Wambaugh writes him as profoundly alienated and narrating a distanced judgment on himself: "I laughed out loud at him because he was good for no more than this. He was disgusting and pathetic and he couldn't help himself. He needed no one. He sickened me. He only needed glory." [5] Morgan is a wrecked man, and his tenuous connection to another person has been shattered with Segovia's death. His only

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[4] Eric Pace, *New York Times*, February 13, 1972.

[5] Joseph Wambaugh, *The Blue Knight* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972) 344.

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sense of connection and love arises from his entanglement with the stinking corruption of crime and vice on the streets, exemplified in a bar called the "Pink Dragon." Morgan remains loveless, empty, and alone, because he cannot disentangle himself from his job. In the end, he vows to "kill the Dragon and drink its blood," driving towards the bar, literally into the Hollywood sunset.

Wambaugh shared his basic philosophy about police work, which revolutionized portrayals of cops in popular literature, in an interview with *Playboy Magazine* in 1979:

> I don't really buy the idea that being a cop is all that physically dangerous. But when you look at figures for suicide, divorce, alcoholism, mental illness and so on, police are at the top of the list...I've said, and maintain, and can prove that the average policeman never fires his gun in combat in 20 years. But that same average policeman will suffer all sorts of blows to his self-esteem because he starts to believe the world is a garbage pile, and from there it's a short step to saying, 'Well, if people are garbage and I'm a person, then I'm garbage, too.'[6]

Wambaugh's contention is that the danger of police work inheres in the "emotional violence" endured by average cops on a daily basis, and not in the physical violence which most will never encounter in the line of duty. This insight would inspire his understanding and representation of police characters in his writing, and would have great implications for true-crime. Wambaugh's belief that cops are just human beings doing a terribly difficult job would lead him to portray them as often venal, and sometimes criminal. Wambaugh brought policemen and criminals onto the same moral plane, one where the most base and sordid human instincts and behaviors are enacted.

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[6] Joseph Wambaugh in *Playboy Magazine* Interview, July 1979.p. 81.

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Because of their exposure to the worst of human nature in the course of their daily work, Wambaugh contends, policemen too often begin to view the world and everybody in it as "garbage," themselves included. Wambaugh would explore this negative leveling force in *The Onion Field* in the form of the devastating guilt which crippled Karl Hettinger after his partner was murdered.

Wambaugh has said about his third book, that "I feel I was put on earth to write this story. Nothing could ever stop me from writing *The Onion Field.* I felt it was my sole reason for living." [7] Wambaugh was clearly emotionally enmeshed with this story, and it changed his life. After writing it, he retired permanently from the police force, unable to be both a celebrity author and an effective cop. It was his first attempt at true-crime, and the book was an instant success. William Marling reports that "Critics unanimously praised the book, comparing it to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and the author to Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell." By 1973, the conventions of true-crime were familiar to both readers and writers: the four-part structure of crime-pursuit-trial-execution, the reporter/insider, distance from and identification with the killers, blending fiction and non-fiction, presentation of a rich social context surrounding the murders, and a sense of the inevitability of murder and persistence of evil, were all being used, with varying degrees of success, by writers of murder narratives. Books such as Emlyn Williams' *Beyond Belief* (1968), John Gilmore's *The Tucson Murders* (1970), and William A. Clark's *The Girl on the Volkswagen Floor* (1971) had helped to popularize narrative treatments of spectacularly gruesome crimes; although none of these had the literary and popular appeal of *The Onion Field,* nor the genre-shaping impact, each

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[7] William Marling. *Hard-Boiled Fiction.* Case Western Reserve University. Updated 2 August, 2001. <http://www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Wambaugh.html>.

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contributed to the growing genre by using some of Capote's conventions. In the early 1970s, true-crime was close to being a distinct genre, and Wambaugh's contribution refined it even further.

The Onion Field is essentially a story about guilt, but not on the part of the murderers. One day after the kidnapping and murder of Ian Campbell, his partner, Karl Hettinger, who had himself almost been murdered, returned to the job; the LAPD offered Hettinger no psychological counseling, for at that time the Department did not recognize that suffering such a traumatic event could have severe psychological consequences. Again, Wambaugh himself best describes the story:

> From then on, subtly and not so subtly, the police department and his fellow officers made Hettinger feel responsible for the death of his partner, and he began to deteriorate. Hettinger was condemned by his peers who believed—because of some totally absurd police concept of *machismo*—that he didn't do enough to save his partner. The police department, you see, feels that God kills by thunderbolt, and that you don't let some punk disarm you, kidnap you and kill your partner unless you die trying to prevent it. [8]

Hettinger became so consumed by his unacknowledged, unconscious guilt that he began shoplifting; he then became so obsessed with guilt about stealing that he allowed himself to be caught and fired. The text focuses on Hettinger—it begins and ends with his internal monologue, and the narrative follows his psychological condition into and out of his mental breakdown.

In writing *The Onion Field*, then, Wambaugh was not simply telling a murder story; consistent with his earlier work, he wanted to show police officers in extreme

[8] Wambaugh in *Playboy* interview, 74.

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situations, and to reveal and examine the moral structures which bind cops and criminals together in webs of action and consequence. In his *New York Times* review, the critic James Conaway writes that Hettinger "narrowly escapes his own suicidal impulses. One of the men who later reviewed his case for the Department made the astute observation that 'the archetypal police mentality and the psychopathic mind were both utterly unable to identify with their victim in this case.'" In his figuration of Hettinger's guilt and the LAPD's ignorance of psychological subtleties and trauma, Wambaugh draws an implicit comparison between cops and a specific kind of criminal—the sociopathic, psychopathic murderer. The text becomes crucial in the formation of the genre because Wambaugh, like Capote before him, showed that true-crime could accomplish more than just sensation—it could be used to explore large themes about human nature, and postulate fresh ideas about guilt and innocence, good and evil, that were commonly treated in more literary texts. With *The Onion Field,* Wambaugh helped to redefine the cultural work that true-crime was capable of doing.

Guilt was a very strong factor in Wambaugh's intellectual and emotional makeup, as well as in his writing. In the 1979 *Playbo*y interview, he says that he has always been "interested in guilt as a concept, and I think *The Onion Field* was a catharsis." He speaks at length about his own feelings of guilt, and their importance in his life and writing:

> I *do* feel a tremendous amount of guilt....The sense of guilt the [Catholic] Church gave me made me the writer that I am, it made me as sensitive as I am and it actually gave me a great deal of intense feeling about how to enjoy life in all its aspects. Frankly, I would hate to be a sociopath, a person who doesn't experience

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> guilt. I would hate to go to bed at night and just fall asleep without any qualms of conscience about my fuck-ups for that day. How dull that would be. [9]

Wambaugh's linkage here of his own sense of guilt and the lack of guilty feelings which the sociopath experiences is crucial. Wambaugh's intuitive and personal preoccupation with guilt, and the lack of guilt which defines the sociopathic killer, became in the early 1970s another fixed convention within true-crime. As true-crime matured as a genre, killers began to be uniformly understood and represented by writers as sociopaths, and the defining feature of sociopathy within the genre is the inability to feel remorse, sympathy, empathy or guilt. The psychopath—in the simplest terms, a sociopath with psychotic delusions—would be the uniform protagonist of 1970s and 80s true-crime.

The fixation on the figure of the psychopath in true-crime is an intense meditation on the value of guilt, and the place and importance of conscience in society. The 1970s is often characterized as the "me" generation, for it was during this period that notions about duty and selfless service to others gave way to the cultivation of selfishness and an emphasis on the ideal of personal freedom. People left organized religion in droves, divorce rates skyrocketed, popular parenting styles ran to the undisciplined and guilt-free, and young and old were encouraged by the popular media to 'let it all hang out.' [10] The sociopath or psychopath—represented and understood as essentially a person without a conscience, unable to experience feelings of guilt which most people feel—became

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[9] Wambaugh in *Playboy*, 112.

[10] Information about church-attendance rates and divorce rates can be found in David Frum, *How We Got Here:The 70s,The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (for better or worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Most interesting is Frum's explanation of how and why fundamentalist evangelical churches swelled their ranks during this period, while conventional denominations became less popular. An emphasis on eschatological teaching, and a return to a kind of Manichean dualism of good/evil, God/Satan, were very common to many of the newly-popular evangelical doctrines, something which doubtless contributed to the popular understanding of evil.

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fascinating because in him, the ideals of selfishness and attention to the individual were taken to their logical extreme. The psychopath in true-crime is the site where fears about the dangers of selfishness are expressed and explored, fitting for an era wherein such notions were gaining popularity. True-crime became a warning, with the emphasis on the 'truth' in true-crime as a form of prophecy, as if to say "look, this if what a person becomes if you scuttle the idea of guilt and personal responsibility!" Wambaugh was one of the first to recognize that the force of guilt in everyday life was waning, and to use true-crime to place the sociopath alongside the hyper-moral subject in a literary investigation of guilt.

By Wambaugh's using the conventions of true-crime, *The Onion Field* helped to coalesce the genre into a slick, distinct, and easily identifiable package. The text embodies the four-part dramatic structure of crime-pursuit-trial-execution which was by now becoming a commonplace in murder narration. [11] It is immediately apparent that this text is a 'non-fiction novel,' to use Capote's term for this form of writing. The first passage in *The Onion Field* is an italicized bit of third-person free indirect discourse, and the first sentence is "The gardener was a thief." [12] The gardener is actually Hettinger, turned into a fictional character within his own story by Wambaugh. The book opens after Hettinger's mental decline and dismissal from the LAPD, long after the kidnapping/murder had occurred. This kind of manipulation of time and chronology, a

[11] Powell and Smith were never actually executed, although Powell received the death penalty. They were tried separately, and by the time their lengthy series of appeals and retrials had run its course, the death penalty had been declared unconstitutional in California. The Afterword of the 1987 edition reads as follows: "In 1978 the Community Release Board of the state of California decreed that Gregory Ulas Powell and Jimmy Lee Smith shall be released from prison no later than March 1983." Presumably, Powell and Smith are free today.

[12] Joseph Wambaugh, *The Onion Field* (Dell: New York, 1973) 7. All following quotes are in-text.

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narrative strategy borrowed from the novel, was becoming common in true-crime, and reinforced the sense of inevitability of events, itself another important convention. [13] Like *In Cold Blood*, *The Onion Field* is structured like a classic mystery tale, in that it opens with murder (after Hettinger's monologue), and much of the suspense resides in the reader's desire to know *why* the killers did what they did. Unlike *In Cold Blood*, however, there is a surviving victim in *The Onion Field*, and the strongest suspense builds in the question of what will become of Hettinger.

The text proceeds like a novel, in that the social context, personalities, and living conditions of the four protagonists—Powell, Smith, Campbell and Hettinger—are portrayed through imagined dialogue, free indirect discourse, and dramatization of events. Wambaugh, like all other writers of true-crime, certainly did his homework in terms of research and interviews. He took a leave of absence from the LAPD while doing this work, but by necessity, much of his text is imagined or fictionalized treatment of what actually happened. Only once does Wambaugh let the seams of his third-person, novelistic account show: in Chapter 10, he writes himself into the story. This appears at a moment when one of the controlling themes of the text, and Wambaugh's motivation for telling this story, becomes clear. That he would use his own voice to speak one of his most important points strengthens the convention of the writer as an insider in true-crime; without his presence in the text, Wambaugh's point would have lacked the resonance of truth which only his real voice as a cop could lend.

Wambaugh was working on the force when the kidnapping and murder occurred, and in Chapter 10 he recounts the memo which was read at roll call in the weeks

[13] The technique of narrating the discovery of the corpse first, then introducing the murderer and narrating his actions up to and including the murder, was becoming most common in true-crime: see *The Tucson Murders* (1970) and *The Girl on the Volkswagen Floor* (1971) for good examples of this.

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following the Campbell murder. Referred to as the "Hettinger Memorandum," this memo implied that Hettinger was to blame for his partner's death, and stated that "You cannot make deals with vicious criminals," "Surrender is no guarantee of an officer's safety," and "there are situations more intolerable than death." This memo would have a terrible effect on Karl Hettinger, making it seem to his fellow officers—and most importantly, to himself—that he could have prevented Ian Campbell's death, and enormously increasing his sense of guilt about the murder. Wambaugh's reaction to this memorandum was this:

> The young red-faced vice officer at Wilshire Station had been a policeman less than three years, but he had learned certain fundamental truths about policemen. Policemen thoroughly believed that no man-caused calamity happens by chance, that there is always a step that should have been taken, would have been taken, if the sufferer had been alert, cautious, brave, aggressive—in short, if he'd been like a prototype policeman. They saw themselves as the most dynamic of men, the ones who could take positive action in any of life's bizarre and paralyzing moments. (235)

Wambaugh here uses himself as a character to reflect upon one of the preoccupations of the book, and of true-crime generally—the horror of random violence, and the intractability of destruction and evil. One of the defining characteristics of policemen, Wambaugh suggests, is that unlike ordinary weaponless, unwary citizens, cops think they can combat random violence and stave off evil. But Wambaugh's cops, ordinary human beings doing their best under extraordinary circumstances, cannot combat random violence any more surely than the rest of us. This is one of the large truths of *The Onion*

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Field, and Wambaugh makes clear that, as he would state years later in the *Playboy* interview, he doesn't believe the myth that cops are "the most dynamic of men."

Throughout Chapter 10, Wambaugh portrays himself as "the young vice cop" outraged about the order never to surrender one's weapon, because unlike his higher-ups, he sees the folly of that directive. He recalls reading "an issue of *Official Detective Stories* magazine which featured an erroneous, lurid story of the killing of Ian Campbell," and the reader can see the wheels turning in the young Wambaugh's mind which would motivate him to write the present text. In a moment of fascinating transparency, Wambaugh writes about how he "would one day try to record what he knew about police life, but for now he seethed in silence." (240-241) That he would choose to write himself into one of the most resonant moments of his book has many effects on the reader, most importantly that it strengthens Wambaugh's argument about the ultimate injustice and ignorance of the police department. His rage shows in this chapter, and the disembodied writer becomes a real person, and a participant in the story. Writing himself into this passage also reinforces the importance of the writer/insider position, and reminds the reader about this dual role. Up until this point, the book has seemed like a novel—that is, even though we know it's true-crime, Wambaugh's writing mimics fiction. But at this point, we're dragged back from the fiction to recall that indeed, these horrible events really did happen, and Joe Wambaugh was there to experience them. It's a very odd moment in this text, but one which is entirely consistent with his overall goals and methods.

Another method which Wambaugh employs, initiated by Capote but imitated in most true-crime, is that of gradually drawing the protagonists more closely together in the

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narrative until the cathartic and explosive moment when they meet. In *The Onion Field*, Wambaugh achieves this effect by interweaving passages which focus first on Hettinger and Campbell, then on Powell and Smith. The suspenseful drawing together of the cops and killers is exaggerated because of certain parallels which Wambaugh points out: each pair is driving around the streets of Los Angeles on the evening of March 9, 1963; each pair became partners only days before the fateful encounter; and each are working-class young men, with similar preoccupations—money, sex, and adventure. Of course, there are significant differences in the details of their lives because one pair is the law and one is criminal, but Wambaugh unmistakably emphasizes their similarities. In sentences such as "The partners in the four-door Plymouth and the partners in the little Ford coupe were both battling traffic at that moment," Wambaugh connects the four men inexorably.

The four men meet because Campbell and Hettinger are looking for trouble—that is, after all, their job—and they stop Powell and Smith because the pair of crooks looks suspicious. The traffic stop goes very badly, as Powell pulls his gun on Campbell. Powell and Smith then disarm both officers, and Wambaugh describes what happens next:

> For another moment then they were inert. All four of them. Four brains fully accelerated, four bodies becalmed. Staggered. Inertia for a long moment. Four young men bathed in the purple glow of the street light. Detachment on the faces. Total bewilderment. Two policemen facing that which all policemen firmly believe can never happen to them. Two small-time robbers, fathoms deep, holding the Man at bay. Four minds racing. Tumbling incoherent thoughts. (153-154)

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This is the moment of explosion, when the four have met and begin to fulfill their entwined destinies. Wambaugh's powerful evocation of that moment turns upon the repetition of the words 'four' and 'two,' furthering the theme that these four men share a common humanity. As Powell drives them all to the remote onion field, Wambaugh writes that "Karl's heart began pounding with new vigor, as did Ian's, as did Jimmy Smith's and Gregory Powell's, as each approached his destiny." Wambaugh portrays the inexorability of evil, crucial to both this particular story and to the genre, with enviable skill; his writing is not particularly subtle, but neither is it overblown or clichéd. Wambaugh perfects this convention by building on what Capote had begun with the cinematic intercutting of scenes of the protagonists drawing ever closer to each other, but he embellishes it with more intense omniscient narration.

After Campbell is murdered, and Hettinger has returned to the force, Wambaugh continues to interweave the stories of the two cops and the two murderers. Chapters which deal exclusively with Hettinger follow those dealing exclusively with Powell or Smith, as the murderers are tried, convicted, re-tried, and re-convicted. In an odd twist for the genre, Jimmy Smith was eventually represented by the same lawyer—Irving Kanarek—who would represent Charles Manson several years later, so that the same 'character' shows up in different texts about entirely different crimes. A master of creating endless appeals and delays, Kanarek becomes Hettinger's torturer, as he is called repeatedly to testify at the numerous Powell and Smith trials. Hettinger comes to feel as though he is on trial, for his buried guilt about Campbell's death is brought to the surface on cross-examination in the trials. Wambaugh shows Powell and Smith becoming stronger as Hettinger weakens; the passage when Hettinger almost takes his own life with

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his service revolver is followed by one in which Hettinger's avenger, Detective Pierce Brooks, learns about the Escobedo, Dorado, and Miranda rulings which would be retroactively applied to the Powell and Smith cases, strengthening their appeals and nearly allowing them to go free. [14] Above all, Wambaugh continually reasserts the theme of the ironic transposition of guilt from the murderer to the innocent, as Hettinger gradually becomes the broken "gardener" and Powell flourishes in prison. Brought together in one life-defining moment in the empty onion field, Wambaugh suggests that the inner lives of the two men, at that crucial moment, changed places. This could happen only because up until that point, Wambaugh has closely identified them with each other.

At the end of the book, in a twist of supreme irony, Hettinger ends up managing a plant nursery in a rural area not far from the same onion field where he almost lost his life ten years earlier. In 1973, Hettinger sold his house in Los Angeles and moved north with his family, to be "near a place he had tried to escape for ten years." Wambaugh chooses to end the book with this moment to further emphasize the notion of inescapable destiny, and to introduce a kind of Freudian return of the repressed—for Hettinger, a return to the scene of his trauma, suggestive that he has healed his psychic wounds. Wambaugh writes "Karl Hettinger was destined to face his devils. He could never escape irony." He would be living near a "place where a policeman ran through the fields with a farmer one cold and bitter night under a late and lonely moon near the foot of the Tehachapi Mountains, near a place called Wheeler Ridge, near a place they marked with a blood red arrow." (439-440) Christopher Lehmann-Haupt has written that "Before he is finished, Mr.

[14] *The Onion Field*, 361-362. *Escobedo v. Illinois* (1964), *People v. Dorado* (1965), and *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) were instrumental legal rulings which together led to the national Miranda Rights Law, which holds that arrested individuals must be made aware of certain rights when they are initially detained. These rulings made inadmissible the confessions given by Powell and Smith at the time of their arrest.

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Wambaugh tries to explore all the ambiguities of the case, and even to see the hopeful side of what he could easily have dismissed as a thoroughly destructive series of incidents." [15] Wambaugh shapes his material to fit his themes: the hideous negative power of unacknowledged guilt, the strange and ironic similarities of cops and criminals, and the monstrous nature of violence.

Wambaugh would go on to write four more non-fiction crime books, two of which were murder narratives. *Echoes in the Darkness* (1987) has been praised as a forthright true-crime tale about the 1979 murder of a high school English teacher by her lover for her insurance money. *The Blooding* (1989) explores the power and promise of the (then) emerging technology of DNA analysis, or "genetic fingerprinting" by narrating two British murders. Although both books have merit, and the Wambaugh voice—unflinching, tension-filled, cynical—remains strong, neither has the power or impact of *The Onion Field*, mainly because Wambaugh's earliest true-crime was a first and formative effort in the genre. By the 1980s, true-crime was a fully-realized formula, and instead of adding any innovative techniques or insights, Wambaugh deploys the familiar structure. In a 1973 *New York Times* Review of *The Onion Field*, James Conaway compares Wambaugh's work to *In Cold Blood*, and he finds that "in terms of scope, revealed depth of character, and dramatic coherence, this is the more ambitious book." [16] Wambaugh's true-crime after *The Onion Field* lacks his early ambition, and his later

[15] Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "More Than Meets the Eye," the *New York Times*, September 7, 1973.

[16] James Conaway, "The Onion Field," *New York Times Book Review*, September 2, 1973.

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themes and subjects don't move beyond explorations of forensic science or the deviant criminal personality. [17]

The Onion Field marks another important development in true-crime, that of the western setting of most (American) texts in the genre. It is certainly true that the American west, and California in particular, was the site of many spectacularly gruesome murders during this period, and those crimes inspired a great number of popular true-crime texts. But the California of the true-crime imagination would greatly outperform the reality in terms of horror and blood, due to its overrepresentation in the ranks of the genre. California became fixed in true-crime as the site of outrageous, rapacious, and stunning violence, an image which was helped along by the likes of Charlie Manson and the Zodiac killer. Because of this, a kind of East Coast/West Coast dualism sprang up, with the Eastern literary establishment metaphorically turning up its nose at the violent and unseemly new genre of true-crime. [18] There are very few true-crime texts written between 1965 and 1975 which deal with contemporary murders that occurred in the eastern half of the United States. Most true-crime followed the geographical contours which began with Capote—the Clutter murders took place in Kansas—and the early genre is composed of accounts of murders from Santa Cruz, California (*Sacrifice Unto Me*, 1974; *The Co-Ed Killer*, 1976) to Arizona (*The Tucson Murders*, 1970; *The Pied Piper of Tucson*, 1967) to Texas (*The Man with The Candy*, 1974; *Mass Murder in Houston*, 1974). This geographical bias is suggestive, particularly because the most

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[17] Although his 2002 true-crime text *Fire Lover*, about an arsonist, won the 2003 Edgar for Best Fact Crime.

[18] Although it is true that *The New Yorker*, that bastion of Eastern literati, first published *In Cold Blood*, true-crime as a distinct genre didn't receive real critical attention until the 1980s, when it could no longer be ignored as a force in the publishing industry.

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violent region of the United States is and always has been the south, not the west. The western states during this period became a locus of American fear, figured as a preoccupation with the random violence characterized by the kind of murders which true-crime was forming around.

Perhaps it was the influence of Hollywood—after all, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, American cinema became more graphically violent, more bloody, and many more times more profitable and popular than ever before. The production site of all this consumable violence being the west, and Hollywood in particular, associating violence with the west would seem natural, and almost pre-ordained by American history as well. The Western frontier has always been viewed as more violent, more primitive, and more unsettled than the rest of the country; perhaps horrific crimes which occurred in the west had more cachet, more believability, within a genre which focused on unusually brutal crimes. Scholarly work from this period as well shows an interest in violence as part of the American 'character,' in particular Richard Slotkin's 1973 *Regeneration Through Violence*, which examines the presence and role of violence in American life as a foundational myth. It is also true that the hard-boiled and noir literary tradition focused on the American West as well, and the settings of those stories may have had long-lasting implications for the non-fiction portrayals of crime and violence in true-crime. In the early 1970s, with the national murder rate rising rapidly, it comes as no surprise that modern violence, emblematized in the figure of the rootless, valueless, psychopathic random killer, would seize the American imagination with such force.

One is reminded of Hunter Thompson's meditation in *Fear & Loathing* on the near-triumph of goodness in the 1960s, centered in California, and the melting away of

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that dream: Thompson writes that "people…just as high and wild as I was" felt a "sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil." But those days are over, and "now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and…you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back." [19] California, the birthplace of the hippie movement, was the natural site for that 'high-water mark'; the death of the hopes produced by the 1960s social and political upheavals would occur in California as well, as the nadir of the hippie movement occurred with the actions of a small cult of personality formed around a pimp and car thief named Charles Manson. True-crime, and the American middle-class fears about violence, social change, and weird strangers which the genre encouraged, would reach a climax in California in 1973, with the publication of *Helter Skelter*.

[19] *Fear and Loathing*, 67-68.

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Chapter 5: *Helter Skelter*

"I am whoever you make me....you want a sadistic fiend because that is what you are. You only reflect on me what you are inside of yourselves."

Charles Manson [1]

One of the most notorious mass-murders in American history was carried out in 1969 by followers of Charles Milles Manson. After their capture, when it was ascertained that the bloodthirsty killers were a bunch of hippies, the Manson Family became even more infamous, their crimes even more frightening to a public primed by the media (and by books such as Thompson's *Hell's Angels*) to fear and feel threatened by the counterculture. The Manson slayings came to be viewed as the hideous—but not unanticipated—end of the joyful, hopeful, and innocent 1960s hippie counterculture. Writers and cultural critics like Joan Didion made such claims at the time, and the middle-class reading public, perhaps eager for such news because they were losing their sons and daughters to the ethos of 'tune in, turn on, drop out,' ate it up. [2] The Manson killings and ensuing year-long trial and media circus were the ultimate "I told you so" moment for countless middle-class parents and conservative commentators, as this group of mentally disturbed, deeply aberrant misfits transformed themselves into middle America's supreme nightmare. In the same way that Joseph Wambaugh was writing anxiety about a growing culture of permissiveness into his true-crime, noting the emergence of the psychopath as the logical endpoint of the perceived moral collapse of the 1960s and 70s, the Manson killings were seen as the logical outcome of communal living, loose sexual morals, and wholesale rejection of modern society, which

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[1] Rosemary Baer, *Reflections of a Pseudo-Juror: Reflections on the Manson Trial* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1972) 72.

[2] See Joan Didion's essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*.

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characterized the values of the counterculture. And the book which best expressed the fears of the middle class about losing their children to cults, communes, and free love happened to be a best-selling blockbuster true-crime text, Vincent Bugliosi's 1974 *Helter Skelter*.

In 1967, Charlie Manson was a 32-year-old parolee, newly released from the Federal penitentiary at Terminal Island, California, where he had served seven years on charges of parole violation and interstate prostitution. Manson was by then an 'institutional man,' unable or unwilling to cope with life outside of the structure of prison. Highly charismatic and manipulative, he began to pick up young girls in San Francisco, usually runaways, and form them into a tightly-knit band of followers, who called themselves "The Family." This group of young people, including a few men, eventually took up residence in a semi-abandoned movie set on the edge of Death Valley, the Spahn Ranch. Living on the margins of society, Manson fed his delusions and formulated a bizarre theory about the coming racial apocalypse by combining misreadings of the Book of Revelations and the Beatles' White Album with elements of Scientology and 1970s Satanism. [3] The prosecutorial narrative which won the conviction of Manson and his followers is that, in a kind of folie à famille, Manson's followers believed his predictions about the end of contemporary society, and at his urging they slaughtered seven Los Angeles residents in their homes as a means of bringing on "Helter Skelter," the apocalyptic Black/White revolution. The Manson group also killed at least three other people, and speculations abound about other murders. Several members of the

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[3] Chief among these influences was The Process Church of the Final Judgment, "dedicated to observing and aiding the end of the world by stirring up murder, violence and chaos, and dedicated to the proposition that they, the Process, shall survive the gore as the chosen people." George Schrader, "An American Tragedy." *The Manson Murders: A Philosophical Inquiry.* Ed. David E. Cooper (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1974).

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Family, including Manson himself, are still serving life sentences in California for these crimes.

The most infamous Manson family slaying was that of actress Sharon Tate, along with three of her friends and an 18-year-old youth at the Tate residence in Benedict Canyon, in the Hollywood hills. Tate, the wife of film director Roman Polanski, was 8 months pregnant at the time of her murder; she and her friends Abigail Folger, Voytek Frykowski, and Jay Sebring were stabbed and shot to death on the night of August 9, 1969. Steven Parent, a young man who had been visiting the groundskeeper of the Tate house, was also slain that night. The next evening, the Manson group murdered Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in their home in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, this time stabbing their victims to death with a kitchen knife. Both murder scenes were exceptionally bloody and gruesome—the killers had written the words "pig," "healter skelter" [sic] and "rise" on the walls of the homes in the victim's blood, and when Leno LaBianca's body was found, there was a large kitchen fork sticking out of his belly and a knife still stuck in his throat. All the victims appeared to be chosen at random, by Manson, who did not take part in the actual slayings. It was proven in the subsequent group trial that Manson had ordered five of his followers—Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, Leslie Van Houten, Charles Watson, and Linda Kasabian—to carry out the murders for him.

These crimes terrorized Los Angeles residents, particularly the Hollywood community, the movie stars, directors, and hangers-on who believed in the invincibility bestowed by their fame, but who now felt like vulnerable targets for the same reason. Sharon Tate, although not a big star, had achieved a small measure of fame and fortune,

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and many more prominent actors and directors were friends with her and Polanski. After the LaBianca murders, regular Los Angeles citizens also felt unsafe, for the LaBiancas were not Hollywood characters. The killings received enormous national and international media attention—the Tate murders were featured on the front page of *The New York Times*, a paper in which crime stories rarely made the front page—and the LAPD was criticized for not capturing the culprits soon enough. It took three months to apprehend the murderers, and even then, they were captured accidentally—the Manson group had removed to another remote ranch in Death Valley, which local police raided for auto theft violations and suspicion of arson.

The Manson Family crimes have inspired scores of true-crime texts, written from late 1969 until the present day. The first book about the murders was published in December 1969, shortly after the apprehension of Susan Atkins. Entitled *The Killing of Sharon Tate*, it was created from a jailhouse interview with Susan Atkins and was initially published serially in the *Los Angeles Times*, then rushed into print by Lawrence Schiller as a quickie paperback. [4] Each of the primary Manson Family members has written an autobiography, usually with the help of a journalist or ghostwriter. As of this date, there are approximately twenty-five books about the Manson events still in print, and several more which are out of print. The most recent Manson text was published in 2002 (*Charles Manson: Music, Mayhem, Murder*). The books range from interesting

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[4] This is the same Lawrence Schiller who would become a powerful figure in true-crime publishing and would collaborate with Norman Mailer on *The Executioner's Song*. Schiller got his start in the business with the Manson murders. Bugliosi describes him as "a self-described Hollywood 'journalist and communicator,'" and says that "Schiller, though listed as co-author [of *The Killing of Sharon Tate*], not only didn't write the story, he never even met Susan Atkins." *Helter Skelter*, 259. During this period, true-crime becomes its own media world as well as genre, and develops a cast of writers and lawyers who reappear in several books, narratives, and courtrooms. Irving Kanarek, who represented Manson for much of his trial, also represented Gregory Powell and Jimmy Smith, the killers in Wambaugh's *The Onion Field.*

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early and mid-70s cultural documents (*The Garbage People; Mindfuckers*), to apologetic or conversion narrative biographies of the major Manson Family players (*Squeaky, An American Runaway*; *Child of Satan, Child of God*), to sensational accounts of Manson's behind-bars activities (*Taming the Beast*, written by one of Manson's jailers, a California corrections official). [5] There have been many film and television treatments of the subject, perhaps the best being the Robert Hendrickson documentary entitled *Manson* (1972), which was nominated for an Academy Award. Manson's music is available on CD, as are interviews with him. Several of his songs have been produced and performed by popular rock groups, and there has even been an opera written about the Manson family, entitled "The Family," featuring rock icon Iggy Pop. The Manson murders, often represented as a cultural milestone which signified the end of the hippie era and the beginning of the current period of media-created criminal sensations, have generated an enormous amount of popular and scholarly interest. Two texts which stand out from the field give entirely different shape to the events: Ed Sanders' *The Family* (1971) and Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter* (1974).

The Family & *The Family*

No portrayal of Manson has been as wildly popular and well-known as Bugliosi's text; in fact, the very name of his book, *Helter Skelter*, has become synonymous with the entire Manson phenomenon. The cover copy of the 1995 Bantam/Norton edition boasts of its status as "The World's #1 true-crime Bestseller," and more recent editions report that it has sold more than seven million copies worldwide. One reason for its success,

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[5] John Gilmore, *The Garbage People* (Los Angeles: Omega Press, 1971); David Felton, ed., *Mindfuckers: A Source Book on the Rise of Acid Fascism in America* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972); Edward George, Dary Matera, *Taming the Beast: Charles Manson's Life Behind Bars* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998).

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other than its compelling subject, is that *Helter Skelter* brought together all the conventions of the emerging genre into an easily-digestible, appealing and endlessly imitable form, with the added feature of ratcheting up the shock-value of the murder narrative. In many ways *Helter Skelter* is the standard-bearer of true-crime, a book which, although not itself *sui generis*, bestowed autonomous genre-status upon true-crime. A large part of its status involves book sales, popularity, and a writing style which appealed to many readers. *Helter Skelter* was one of the first true-crime texts whose enormous sales were propelled by a burgeoning paperback industry. It saw separate print runs as a Book-of-the-Month club selection in 1974, and in 1975 it had a *Playboy* Book Club edition, a condensed version in *Book Digest*, and was serialized in *The New York Times*. But more than just a popular text, *Helter Skelter* is both a phenomenal low-brow sensation and the culmination of an impulse to treat murder narratives with more literary, writerly care, thereby investing sensational material with greater meaning, a trend started by Capote with *In Cold Blood*. As such, *Helter Skelter* brings together all of the conventions which had been laid out before it in non-fiction murder narration, but adds a dimension of contemporaneity and timelessness, making it seem as though the genre had always existed in its present form. Although not a great literary achievement, *Helter Skelter* is nevertheless a masterpiece of murder narration.

To better understand the power and function of *Helter Skelter*, it is instructive to first examine another well-known Manson book. Ed Sanders' *The Family*, first published in 1971, has also seen multiple editions and claims thousands of readers. Sanders is perhaps best known as a member of The Fugs, a 1960s-era group of "folk-rock

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pranksters."[6] He was on the 'scene' in California in the 60s and 70s, and knew many of the people involved peripherally with Manson. As a different kind of insider than Bugliosi, Sanders offers an entirely different perspective on Manson and the murders—his account is more intimate, and, as expected, treats members of the counterculture with a respect and discernment which Bugliosi, the straight-laced LA prosecutor, could never muster. *The Family* is an insider's account of what it *felt* like to be a part of that world: druggy, repetitive, filled with second- and third-hand stories and wild anecdotes about what people were saying, doing, and feeling in the late 60s in Southern California, Sanders' text is a multiply-layered counterweight to Bugliosi's. Sanders is never sympathetic to Manson and his group, and he uniformly and strongly condemns the murders; nevertheless, his account of the multiple contexts within which the Manson events occurred offers a perspective which fills in the huge blanks in *Helter Skelter*.

The Family does employ some of the conventions of true-crime: it has the readily identifiable four-part dramatic structure of crime-pursuit-trial-execution or punishment, it has the narrator/insider, and the creation of distance and identification with the killers through the narrator; it blends fiction and non-fiction (Sanders narrates thoughts and actions he couldn't possibly have been privy to), the story is 'about' the killers, there's lots of social context given, and even with Sanders' non-judgmental voice, there remains a sense of the inexorability, and incomprehensibility, of evil. The chronological layout of the story is the same as in *Helter Skelter*, and Sanders comes to many of the same conclusions as Bugliosi, at one point even expressing the fear of a backlash against the hippie movement "Because a few American kids committed a rice paddy massacre in

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[6] Back cover copy from Ed Sanders, *The Family, Revised and updated edition* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002).

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Southern California." [7] *The Family* includes photographs, and the first edition ends with Manson, Atkins, Van Houten, and Krenwinkel receiving the death penalty. [8] Just like *Helter Skelter*, there are updates to the text—one written for the 1989 edition, and a chapter entitled "The Long Aftermath (1971-2002) ," added for the 2002 edition of the text, in which Sanders details the Manson phenomenon through the 1990s to the present day.

The most important feature which distinguishes *The Family* from *Helter Skelter* is that Sanders does not manipulate the reader's fears. Ironically, in many ways, *The Family* is a more frightening book than *Helter Skelter*, for Sanders describes in great detail what Bugliosi can only clumsily imagine. Sanders writes out exactly what the group of killers did on each night of killing, in vivid and lengthy descriptions. He knew what these people were like, because, if not knowing them personally, he knew people very much like them, and was a 'drop-out' himself. Bugliosi allows pat phrases to stand in for graphic description, such as "All things considered, it's surprising that more people didn't hear something," "Like the shock waves of an earthquake, news of the murders spread," and "I couldn't summon up very much compassion, not after having seen the photographs of what had been done to the Tate victims." [9] Sanders gives the reader a *truer* picture of what the Manson girls were really like, without the patronizing tone; he presents them as human beings, certainly warped, but not as the moral monsters Bugliosi depicts. There is no question that the girls are frightening individuals, largely due to their

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[7] *The Family* 434.

[8] The death penalty convictions were overturned in 1972, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the death penalty unconstitutional because its uneven application was proven to be cruel and unusual punishment. Abolition of the death penalty was applied retroactively to all cases pending at the time. The death penalty was not reapplied retroactively when it was reinstated in California, in 1977, for obvious reasons.

[9] *Helter Skelter* 3, 19, 229.

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unthinking willingness to enact Manson's insane plan. But it is Bugliosi's caricatures of murderous Barbie dolls who are immortalized in *Helter Skelter*, and remain riven in the public memory as the Manson Girls.

Sanders contextualizes Manson richly and more effectively than does Bugliosi; he's particularly good at describing the Southern California culture of drugs, rock'n'roll, and the ways in which people lived an anti-establishment ethic. One intriguing aspect of *The Family* is Sanders' portrayal of Manson and his clan as being involved with real Satanism, particularly with The Process Church of the Final Judgment. There is an ongoing, and unsolved, mystery which runs threadlike throughout the *The Family*, a claim which is finally neither withdrawn nor proven: Sanders believes that somewhere, in what he calls the "ur-sleaze" of Hollywood, there is a film which shows the Manson family enacting a Satanic ritual of blood sacrifice. This claim rests upon old information gleaned from shadowy private investigators, former LAPD officers, and the wild stories of Hollywood contemporaries of Tate and Polanski. At one point, Sanders constructs a classic 1970s conspiracy theory linking Sharon Tate, Manson, Sirhan Sirhan, the Son of Sam, and an "English Satanist cult" (this would be The Process, although Sanders never names them). Sanders is obsessed with finding evidence of the Manson group's Satanism, and he comes tantalizingly close to laying his hands on the famous film.

This emphasis on the possible Satanic link highlights two issues: the first is that here is the possibility of real evil—what could be more conventionally 'evil' than Satanism?—and yet, Sanders' prose pointedly lacks any inflated rhetoric of evil. He rarely uses the term, yet his subject is practical evil. The second point is that he does employ the rhetoric of mystery and detection. In trying to track down the elusive film, he

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encounters several cloak-and-dagger figures, has some Sherlock Holmesian adventures, and ultimately, leaves an open-ended plot full of loose ends. Does such a film exist? Who would want to keep it a secret, and why? What's at stake for the Hollywood community, or its dark underbelly, in keeping secrets about the 'real' Sharon Tate-Charles Manson connection? Sanders' text brings to the fore, then leaves unanswered, questions such as these; for this primary reason, *The Family* isn't really true-crime. Ed Sanders wrote a book about the Manson events and milieu, and neither arranged his material according to the rules, nor entertained the ruling preoccupations of, true-crime. The genre, as it was forming, was beginning to dictate not only a set of conventions, but a certain ideology and perspective on murder, one which leaves very little unanswered in the formation of the killer and the description of his crimes.

The Family is a 'better' book than *Helter Skelter*—it's more readable, less sensational, and it contains more compelling details and characterizations. Sanders portrays several of the law enforcement agents involved with the case in a positive light, and he gives plenty of background material about other events during the late sixties and early seventies. But *The Family* is not true-crime. I make the distinction at this point because *Helter Skelter* is that culmination of forces, combination of conventions, and creation of an ideology about murder which would be endlessly copied in large numbers up to the present time. It is the predecessor of the true-crime mass market potboiler, books such as *The Stranger Beside Me* (Ann Rule, 1980), *Buried Dreams: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer* (Tim Cahill, 1986), and *Deviant: The shocking story of the original "Psycho"* (Harold Schechter, 1989).

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The Family never achieved the status or the sales figures of Bugliosi's text because it doesn't deploy the conventions of murder narration in the way that Bugliosi does, and it offers a different worldview than *Helter Skelter*. *The Family* also never tapped into the rich publishing industry resources in the way *Helter Skelter* did, perhaps because Sanders was a counterculture figure, and so a different kind of insider than Bugliosi. Sanders wanted to capture and contextualize a moment, not shape a murder story to create, satisfy, and allay fears. With *Helter Skelter*, the function of murder narration turns from the impulse to tell a story and better understand the world into the unapologetic creation of a product for consumption. *The Family* is a product of culture, a text which grows out of and attempts to explain events, behaviors, and attitudes at a certain time and place; *Helter Skelter* is a cultural product, a text with the function of transforming a murder story into a product meant for consumption. From this split, this moment in textual history, true-crime as a distinct genre was born.

The difference between the two books, and the two modes of narrating murder, lies in understandings of audience and authorial intent. Bugliosi, and true-crime after him, speaks to and for a reading public which neither wants nor accepts ambiguity and critiques of culture. In true-crime, "evil" is an unchallenged, un-ironic, and unquestionably real moral force. True-crime after *Helter Skelter* becomes a monolith, with a tightly structured and undeviatingly formulaic way of narrating and comprehending hideous criminality. With *The Family*, Sanders diverts murder narration onto a different track, one which allows for individual textual differences and delights in ambiguity. Bugliosi's self-interest leads him to portray himself as a major character in his book, collecting evidence, discerning facts, and shaping the arguments which convicted a

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major murderer, and he profits from his role in the Manson events to this day. Ed Sanders, although he certainly wanted to make money from his book, didn't have access to the power or influence of Bugliosi in setting the tone or the terms of the Manson events—Sanders was not involved in any way with the apprehension or conviction of Manson.

These twin pillars of American murder narration, true-crime and non-fiction about crime, hold up through the next two decades and into the twenty-first century. True-crime became a consumer-driven publishing industry category, garnering huge profits for mass-market paperback publishing houses in the 1980s and 90s. In the decade of the 1960s, there were approximately 37 texts which treated single cases of contemporary murder and/or the activities of single murderers. In the decade of the 1970s, there were 78 examples of the same; in the 1980s, there were 145, and in the 1990s, the number rose to 165. [10] Entire careers—that of Ann Rule, for example—have been spawned and nurtured by true-crime, and single-author offerings of murder stories, such as Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1980) or Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever* (2001) continue to be written.

Helter Skelter and the Formation of a Genre

Helter Skelter is a sprawling and complicated text—713 pages, counting the index. It consists of ten parts, or super-chapters, each covering some phase of the basic four-part crime-pursuit-trial-execution structure of true-crime murder narration. Each of the ten parts has its own title, such as "The Murders," or "The Search For the Motive," and each title has a quote beneath it, either from Manson or some other relevant source

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[10] These numbers are gleaned from Ben Harrison, *True-Crime Narratives: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1997).

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such as The Beatles' *White Album*, the Bible, or another Manson Family member. Each section within the large parts is dated, so that the reader tracks the progression of events through time. Editions published after 1994—when the 25th anniversary edition of *Helter Skelter* was issued—include Bugliosi's 36-page Afterword. There is a frontispiece, a 64-page photo section, an 11-page index, and a 7-page list entitled "Cast of Characters." Unfortunately, Bugliosi allows his legal mind to get in the way of his telling a good story—about halfway through the book, *Helter Skelter* becomes mired in legal pedantry and details which, although they may hold interest for a criminal lawyer, are boring for the average reader. [11] However, the importance of the text, and the reason why it epitomizes the genre, is that *Helter Skelter* fulfilled and embellished all seven of the by-then well-established conventions of murder narration as they coalesced into true-crime in the early 1970s. The book also introduced what would become a standard true-crime ideology about murder and murderers by reintroducing a rhetoric of evil and applying it to modern murder, and by showing that such evil is simultaneously unleashed and contained.

As the genre grew and its conventions became set in the 1970s, its concerns and preoccupations revealed a certain level of paranoia, particularly focused on strangers and the dangers posed to young, single women in an increasingly mobile and 'rootless' American society. As the murder rate soared in the decade between 1964 and 1974, going from 5.1 to 9.6 per 100,000 people, true-crime became an important site for the expression of fear which such a shift naturally produced, as it afforded the reader a safe place from which to observe the graphic acts behind such numbers, and to watch from the

[11] Bugliosi maddeningly does this in his later true-crime, as well, most notably *"And the Sea Will Tell..."* (1991).

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sidelines as psycho killers were serially tried, jailed, and executed. [12] Another aspect of the rise of the genre was the corporatization of the publishing industry in the 1960s and 70s, which fueled the supply and demand of cheap paperbacks. The huge publishing houses and their divisions, including Pocket Books, Ballantine, Bantam, Vintage, Avon, Random House and Dell consolidated their power during the period when true-crime was being created, and in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of these houses created their own "true-crime" imprints. [13] The confluence of rising murder rates and a rising paperback book trade helped true-crime to grow and mature as an autonomous genre, and *Helter Skelter* was a herald of things to come in the paperback true-crime trade. Its format—photos in the middle of the book, lengthy treatment of one crime or crime event, updated information added as developments in the case occurred, a lurid cover boasting about the book's fearful contents—all would become staples of the genre. Bugliosi is one of the fathers of true-crime both because he represented the justice system, and so had the ability to judge and to enact punishment and retribution, and because his book would become a prototype.

Bugliosi deploys and embellishes each of the conventions of murder narration which first appeared in *In Cold Blood*, and he introduces a new convention which would become standard in all true-crime to date—the inclusion of photographs in the book.

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[12] *Uniform Crime Reports*, 1965-1975. The 'murder rate' itself is not an uncontested figure, even though it is gleaned from quantitative data, but is subject to interpretation based on differing political and intellectual perspectives.

[13] Ann Rule publishes exclusively with "Pocket Books True-Crime," for example. For more on the publishing industry during this period, see Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), *Mass Market Publishing in America*, edited by Allen Billy Crider (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982) and Diana Tixier Herald, *Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction*. Fourth Edition (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc. 1995).

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Photographs had appeared previously in non-fiction texts (and even in murder narratives, such as Lucy Freeman's *"...Before I kill more"*), but they were not always included in a murder narrative. A competing true-crime text which covered the Manson events (*Witness to Evil*, by George Bishop, 1971) included courtroom artist's sketches from the trial, but no photographs. Bugliosi included a large number of photographs and a map in his text, and the entire section was labeled "A Chilling 64-page Photographic Record of the Victims, the Killers, the Evidence." (346) Adding an extra dimension of titillation and veracity, nearly every mass-market true-crime narrative since *Helter Skelter* includes a middle section of 6-10 photographs, usually consisting of before-and-after photos of the victim, and snapshots of the crime scene, the murder weapons, the trial, and the killer. Sometimes, as in Joe McGinniss's 1983 *Fatal Vision*, there is even a photograph of the writer, reinforcing his or her status as a character in the narrative. Some photographs were perhaps added because they couldn't be introduced as evidence in the trial, and Bugliosi would have wanted to give the reader a fuller picture than evidentiary rules permit. Others are included for the sake of gore, although interestingly, the mutilated bodies of the murder victims are blanked out, leaving just the context without any graphic horror. This courtesy has been extended to victims and their families in most true-crime, although sometimes the damaged bodies do appear.

As the genre gained strength in the 1970s and 80s, the feminized victim—women, children, and gay men—became the norm. Sara Knox notes in her book on the social construction and representation of murder that "Serial killers account for very few of the victims of murder per capita in the United States, but they make popular representational fare. The curiosity evinced by the public about this supposedly new category of murder

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has itself made the 'psycho' or 'serial' killer the bogeyman of murder."[14] Although the Manson crimes were not typical serial killings, the multiple and feminized victims (Jay Sebring was a hairdresser; Gary Hinman, the first victim, was gay; Voytek Frykowski is portrayed as weak and artistic) and soulless, weak-willed female killers set a strong precedent for future texts. *Helter Skelter* is an important text in the history of murder narration because it located and identified an interest in a very specific, very rare, and very sensational kind of murder, and started non-fiction murder narration on the road to widespread representation and exploitation of such events.

The very first page of *Helter Skelter* is a frontispiece with an all-capital-letters proclamation which reads "THE STORY YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ WILL SCARE THE HELL OUT OF YOU." This direct address to the reader is impressively blunt and unabashedly sensational, and it signals a trip into new territory in the annals of murder narration. As a writer, Bugliosi comes on strong and just gets stronger, transferring his courtroom style onto the page. An ultimate insider, Bugliosi was the lead prosecutor of the Mansons, and he worked on the case from November 1969 until the very end, in April 1971. Such a demanding case was extraordinarily time-consuming, and Bugliosi writes that when he took on the case, he was "unaware that I would be living with the Tate-LaBianca case for almost two years, averaging one hundred hours per week, rarely, if ever, getting to bed before 2 a.m. seven days per week."(160) It is rare for a writer to have the relationship to his subject that Bugliosi had; rarer still was his lengthy and intense immersion in his subject. It was in a sense his great good fortune to be chosen to head the prosecution team in the Manson trial, because that led him to become a writer.

[14] Knox, Sara L., *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998) 146.

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To date, Bugliosi has written or co-authored ten non-fiction books, his most recent on the O.J. Simpson trial. Charles Manson didn't just help to end thirteen lives—he irrevocably altered the course of Vincent Bugliosi's career, inadvertently propelling him into true-crime superstardom. [15]

Bugliosi's role as a prosecutor of the Manson murderers shaped his text, leaving a strong imprint of his judgmental and involved relationship to the events. With the startling news delivered by the frontispiece, Bugliosi announces the importance and relevance of his story, and compels the reader to continue. What could be so bad, we think, what could possibly scare the hell out of me? The statement posits a middle-class, conservative, distinctly non-radical or even left-leaning reader, for Manson and his group had been infamously lionized in the counterculture press. [16] Bugliosi also positions himself as an intimate of the reader, at once reading along with us, but already knowing the scary outcome, the heart of the matter, the real reason why these shocking and brutal crimes occurred. His position as prosecutor lends veracity to his tale, and authenticity to all his perceptions. Lawyers are trained to shape material and craft arguments, but as a

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[15] In addition to being a famous writer, Bugliosi is now a sought-after public speaker, well-known television talk-show guest, and minor celebrity in popular culture circles. Instead of following the more common political track of a public prosecutor, Bugliosi launched a career based upon his infamy as the prosecutor of Charles Manson.

[16] Todd Gitlin, in *The Sixties*, reports that "Jerry Rubin paid...Manson a visit in prison, and wrote: 'I fell in love with Charlie Manson the first time I saw his cherub face and sparkling eyes on national TV....His words and courage inspired [me]....and I felt great the rest of the day, overwhelmed by the depth of the experience of touching Manson's soul....' The Los Angeles *Free Press* let Manson write a column, and ran free ads for a recording he made; another underground paper, *Tuesday's Child*, depicted him as a hippie on the cross. Marvin Garson looked at the hypnotic-eyed photo of Manson on the cover of *Life* magazine and proclaimed the portent: 'Charles Manson, *son* of *man*.'" Gitlin also reports Bernardine Dohrn's (one of the leaders of the Weathermen) famous reaction to the LaBianca killings: "Dig it! First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into the victim's stomach. Wild!" and that a favorite greeting of the Weathermen became "four slightly spread fingers—to symbolize the fork." Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. 404-405; 400. These reactions, I believe, had more to do with a misreading of Manson than with any inherent murderous violence in the counterculture.

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prosecutor, Bugliosi is also a representative of the state; as such, his is an authoritative voice. His position in society is to protect us from things which "scare the hell" out of us. If he's scared, the reader reasons, there must be something really bad going on. Bugliosi's voice is so strong that he overpowers that of his co-writer, Curt Gentry. Unlike Bugliosi, Gentry does not appear in *Helter Skelter*, for this is Bugliosi's story and most certainly his book.

Fulfilling one of the central demands of true-crime, Bugliosi is a true insider, with the singular ability to uncover, and speak openly about, facts and details about the murders, the trials, and the characters in this murder narrative. Like Capote, he had lived with his subject for years, and like Wambaugh, he was a law-enforcement professional. Because of his unique role in the events portrayed, he became a character in both the 'real' story and in his book, embellishing and developing the convention of the writer/insider. In his role as prosecutor, Bugliosi helped create the shape of the Manson trial—his words, his actions, his legal motions, are all imbricated into the story of *Helter Skelter*. He also appears throughout the investigation phase of the events and constantly uncovers evidence, situating himself as the prime mover behind not just the conviction of Manson, but his apprehension and indictment as well. His pro-active position enhances his authority, for Bugliosi authors the events and their narration. His "prosecutorial ire" is always audible in his judgmental, unforgiving, and authoritative writer's voice. [17]

Bugliosi introduces himself as a character in the third part of the text, which he calls "The Investigation: Phase Two." The first two parts of *Helter Skelter* consist of third-person descriptions of the actual murders and the aftermath of the crimes, and an

[17] Alex Ross, "The Shock of the True," *The New Yorker*: August 19, 1996, 70-77. p.73.

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introduction to the killers, especially Susan Atkins. Bugliosi opens part three with this unusual statement:

> By now, the reader knows a great deal more about the Tate-LaBianca murders than I did on the day I was assigned that case. In fact, since large portions of the foregoing story have not been made public before this, the reader is an insider in a sense highly unusual in a murder case. And, in a way, I'm a newcomer, an intruder. The sudden switch from an unseen background narrator to a very personal account is bound to be a surprise. The best way to soften it, I suspect, would be to introduce myself; then, when we've got that out of the way, we'll resume the narrative together. This digression, though unfortunately necessary, will be as brief as possible. (157)

This passage is unusual for three reasons: the first is that in noting the shift in narrative voice, Bugliosi is highlighting the artificial structure of his text to the reader. Trying to help the reader to understand why the shift happens, in an effort to sustain readerly interest and care, Bugliosi admits that his text is constructed, that he is shaping the material and crafting the story. The transparency of the text, and Bugliosi's willingness to share his writing process, more fully realizes his presence to the reader, but it also allows the reader to see and take part in that artifice. Capote had never stepped outside his text, and the narrator remains hidden and unknown in *In Cold Blood*; Wambaugh had gestured toward a self-conscious admission of manipulating the story when he briefly appears in *The Onion Field*; but Bugliosi wholeheartedly admits that he's not just reporting objective reality, but shaping it, and thereby creating entertainment.

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The second interesting point in this passage is that Bugliosi tells the reader about his considerable stake in artifice and creating entertainment. He proudly reports having "served as technical consultant and edited the scripts of two pilot films for Jack Webb's TV series 'The D.A.' Series star Robert Conrad patterned his part after the young prosecutor." (157) He admits his fluency in the language of television and Hollywood representation, giving the reader a clue about his large investment in artistic representation, portrayal, and artifice, not necessarily in writing 'the truth.' By the early 1970s, the growing television industry had both noticed and catalyzed the public appetite for crime, courtroom, and police dramas, having produced such series as *Dragnet* (1952-1959, then 1967-1970), *Perry Mason* (1957-1966), *Car-54* (1961-1963), *Ironside* (1967-1975), *Adam-12* (1968-1975), and *Hawaii Five-0* (1968-1980). As a part of that industry, Bugliosi had a real stake in transforming criminal events into entertainment, and was rapidly becoming an expert in that endeavor.

The third point about this passage is Bugliosi's self-dramatization and the creation of himself as a character in the story. Here he is "the young prosecutor" in a television drama, reporting his readiness to become a dramatic character. Like Wambaugh's characterization of himself in *The Onion Field* as "the rookie cop" who is outraged about the Department's handling of the onion field murder, Bugliosi self-consciously styles himself as a character throughout his text. In *Helter Skelter*, Bugliosi continually collects crucial evidence that the police have overlooked or ignored, making himself the hero or antagonist in his drama. Of course, a prosecutor is supposed to help collect and arrange evidence into indictments which can turn into convictions, but Bugliosi both enacts this and writes about it in his book with a zeal approaching the super-human—or the super-

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heroic. To read Bugliosi's version of events, the LAPD and LASO had very little to do with the apprehension of Manson and the Family, something which members of those agencies would certainly dispute. Bugliosi here fashions himself as a Sherlock Holmes, the traditional extra-law enforcement agent who both identifies and apprehends the criminal. And Bugliosi isn't alone in his efforts to 'solve' the crimes: at one point, a television news crew finds the cast-off clothing that the killers had worn the night of the Tate murders in a ravine off Benedict Canyon Road, furthering the self-referential and self-sustaining role of the reporter as antagonist in true-crime. This all points to the true-crime text as a constructed item with a growing and overt investment in entertainment value.

After the frontispiece, and the pages of pithy and gripping excerpts from critical reviews of the book, the opening material in *Helter Skelter* is a "Cast of Characters," a list of the following: Members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office (LASO), the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, the Inyo County District Attorney's Office, the Defense Attorneys, and the Manson Family Members and Associates.(xiii) Bugliosi's 'characters' are the cops and robbers, good guys and bad guys in this morality play, and rolling the credits at the beginning of this tale reinforces its status as a tale, not simply a non-fiction account. The Manson Family's complex and multiple aliases are given very carefully, in coptalk. Manson is listed as "Manson, Charles Milles, aka Jesus Christ, God, Soul, the Devil, Charles Willis Manson. Leader of the Family and mass murderer." Succinct, authoritative, and utterly without irony, Bugliosi's Cast of Characters betrays his Manichean worldview of good and evil, with no shades of gray or moral ambiguities. The

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"Manson Family Members and Associates" part of this list includes the names of all of the young people who found themselves in Manson's thrall, for however brief a period. Sixty names appear, along with all their strange aliases; doubtless, there were others who were never identified, or who fled the publicity and potential legal trouble of being a known Manson associate.

Bugliosi excels at creating the tension between identification with and repulsion for his murderers, another of the important conventions of true-crime; indeed, this quality of simultaneously knowing/not knowing the killers, of presenting them as innocent and wayward children and hideously hardened murderers, is a chief strength of *Helter Skelter.* Part of the reason why the American public was both fascinated and horrified with the Manson case was that it offered something for everybody, in that it spoke to and about a multitude of contemporary preoccupations—crazed killer kids for parents frightened by their own children's increasingly strange 'lifestyle' choices; a misogynist Svengali hero/villain with supernatural powers over women for the anti-Feminists; radical, if insane, politics for the New Left fringe and Weather Underground freaks; a racial element for disaffected blacks (and whites); a sharp and articulate hero-lawyer for Nixon Republicans. Bugliosi examines and amplifies each of these elements in his text, turning the story around himself as the text's moral center and narrative eye. Bugliosi shaped his material to both attract and repel each of these large groups of readers, a shaping so subtle as to be nearly invisible. The seams of the text show when examined closely, however, most clearly in Bugliosi's treatment of the Manson "girls."

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Murderous Barbie Dolls & One Good Hippie

The Manson "girls," the young women who worshipped, lived with, loved, and killed for Manson, are the stars of *Helter Skelter*. In Bugliosi's complex portrayal of them, he encourages the reader to both identify with and distance himself from them. He portrays them first as anybody's children, as wayward refugees from the middle-class, further developing the 'killer inside' or 'killer next-door' motif. Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme and Sandra Good had "come from fairly well-to-do families" and both had been enrolled in college, yet Bugliosi recalls that Sandy had once said "I've finally reached the point where I can kill my parents."(177-178) If these young, hapless hippie girls are really cold-hearted bloodthirsty brutes, then nobody can be safe—particularly not their parents. Bugliosi says that they have an unsettling "little-girl quality…as if they hadn't aged but had been retarded at a certain stage in their childhood. Little girls, playing little-girl games." (178) Bugliosi retains this tone throughout the book when writing about the Manson girls—he is at once condescending and contemptuous, but also somewhat caring and almost fatherly. Describing the early questioning of the girls, Bugliosi remarks that when the Inyo County detectives "instead of threats, tried patient, sympathetic understanding," the change of tactic "made all the difference." (205) Bugliosi is a stand-in for the white middle-class parent-reader, the well-intentioned adult who, instead of happily seeing his 18-year-old daughter enroll in college or marry and start a family, discovers that she's been living in hippie squalor with a drug-addled pimp and his motley harem.

Bugliosi's horror and disbelief about the deeds of these women encourages the identification of an enormous number of readers, for these murderers perfectly dramatize

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the anxieties of an oft-ignored but very powerful demographic—1960s parents. When Bugliosi remembers what Sandy Good said about killing her parents, he writes that "a chill ran up and down my spine" and the same chill would have afflicted his parent/readers. These young women are portrayed as both normal, loving daughters and perverse, murderous monsters, and Bugliosi uses this dual representation to provoke the reader into an unwilling sense of identification with them. Manson's revisionist notion of "family" strikes a chord of hideous recognition within the parent/reader as well, and Bugliosi plays with this terrifying trope. He writes that the first time Susan Atkins and Manson had sex, Manson told her to "picture in your mind that I am your father," drawing attention to the twisted interpersonal relationships Manson cultivated with the women he collected like Barbie dolls. (233) The Manson family communal living, with the women foraging through dumpsters for food every day, then doing all the cooking, cleaning, bearing and raising of children (yes, disturbingly, they had children), mimics and contorts idealized and conventional family roles, which were becoming contested as the feminist movement gained ground in the late 60s. Contemporary readers would have recognized and responded to Manson's ability to control 'his' women, and even though he used his power for murderous ends, his anti-feminism would have forged an unacknowledged identification with chauvinist and misogynist readers of *Helter Skelter*.

Manson's use of the concept of 'family,' and Bugliosi's exploitation of it, tapped into the widespread anxiety about rising divorce rates and the disintegration of the traditional patriarchal family unit, changes which largely grew out of the growing 1970s feminist movement. "As the seventies opened," writes Bruce Schulman in his book *The Seventies,* "the women's liberation movement commanded the attention of the nation for

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the first time. Nearly every major news outlet ran stories on women's lib in the first months of 1970." [18] And the press, naturally, emphasized the most radical versions of feminism, such as Valerie Solanis' "SCUM Manifesto" and Ti-Grace Atkinson's 1967 proclamation that "Marriage and the family must be abolished as institutions." [19] Familiar structures of society were collapsing, and in the early 1970s, perhaps even more than in the 1960s, the counterculture became a hugely influential force. Schulman writes that:

> Polls revealed widespread disenchantment among American youth. In 1970-1971, one-third of America's college-age population felt that marriage had become obsolete and that having children was not very important. The number identifying religion, patriotism, and "living a clean, moral life" as "important values" plummeted. Fifty percent held no living American in high regard, and nearly half felt that America was "a sick society." In this setting, many young Americans no longer saw any reason to heed established conventions about sex, drugs, authority, clothing, living arrangements, food—the fundamental ways of living their lives. [20]

The fear surrounding such changes must have been immense for 1960s parents, and *Helter Skelter*—both the crimes and the text—reflected and amplified those fears. Manson's followers were enacting the beliefs described in this passage, and many middle-aged readers must have given a collective shudder when reading *Helter Skelter*. Identification with Manson's sexism mixes with disgust about his deeds, and the potent

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[18] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002) 163.

[19] Schulman 165.

[20] Schulman 16.

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cocktail keeps the reader involved with the story and compelled to go on. Adding fuel to this fire, Bugliosi also included descriptions of the group sex scenes which were, apparently, a regular occurrence at Spahn Ranch. Titillation mixed with one of the major aspects of true-crime, the reader's simultaneous identification with and distancing from the murderer, is very strong and deployed throughout *Helter Skelter*.

Bugliosi's subtle sexism mimics Manson's much more overt and violent misogyny, and he describes the girls as having "a sameness about them that was much stronger than their individuality…they reminded me less of human beings than Barbie dolls." (179) To Bugliosi, the Manson girls had no autonomy, and did not make the decision to murder on their own. Ignoring the fact that these young women had chosen to live with Manson, had chosen to use him as a father-figure/savior, had chosen the path their lives had taken, Bugliosi instead sees and portrays them simply as murderous Barbie dolls. In this way, Bugliosi acts as the conduit for the reader's uneasy identification with Manson, for Bugliosi saw the girls as Manson did: as little dolls, as objects, present only to be used sexually and to carry out his devious plans. This trope of the "pretty" little girl-killer activates a range of late 60s and early 70s American fears: the fear of strong women, becoming stronger with the growing feminist movement, a fear of a loss of control over young adults, and a fear of mind-expanding drugs and open sexuality. Bugliosi never overtly acknowledges or confronts the strength of the Manson women—a destructive, insane strength, to be sure—which would carry each of them through cult-life, murder, death-penalty convictions, and lives in prison. But his characterizations of them betray both his sexist categorization of them as Barbie dolls, and his manipulation of the reader's fears about strong, dangerous women.

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Bugliosi's masterful manipulation of the tension between reader identification and distancing from the killers is most evident in his characterization of the Manson girls. At certain points in the text, he characterizes them as unfeeling, unthinking children, as when he says that Squeaky and Sandy are "little girls," invoking the identification of the parent-reader. At other points, those same girls are portrayed as dangerous criminals—Bugliosi quotes Sandy saying "Snitches, and other enemies, will be taken care of."(521) But the girls who actually killed—Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten—are given super-human appellations of horror, as Bugliosi portrays them using conventional rhetoric, clichés, and pat phrases. Susan "Sadie" Atkins in particular is written as a murderous, conscienceless brute, hideously overzealous in carrying out Manson's commands. After her Grand Jury testimony he writes that "The jurors had looked at the heart of Susan Atkins and seen ice." (237) At the penalty phase of the trial, Bugliosi argues forcefully and successfully for the death penalty, proclaiming "These defendants are not human beings, ladies and gentlemen....These defendants are human monsters, human mutations...There is only one proper ending to the Tate-LaBianca murder trial, verdicts of death for all four defendants." (606) Part of the horror which comes from viewing Atkins' heart, and the minds of the Manson women, is that they are so disarmingly *normal-looking*, so pretty, so quiet. And of course, it is true that these women were simultaneously brutal and loving, killers and mothers, freewheeling love-children and the murderers of mother-to-be Sharon Tate. But Bugliosi underscores this contradiction, and amps up the language of evil in order to further disarm the reader. We are asked to both pity and castigate, love and hate, understand and condemn, the Manson

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women. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Bugliosi's relationship to, and portrayal of, Linda Kasabian.

Kasabian was the only Manson family member to turn state's evidence, and she was crucial to Bugliosi's winning the convictions. [21] He could never have proven the far-out Helter Skelter theory without her testimony, and he admits it. Kasabian was present at the Tate crime scene, but she refused to take part in the murders. The only family member with a legal driver's license, Charlie had recruited her to drive the car that night, and she chose to stay in the car during the commission of the murders. Misguided, confused, and criminal herself, Kasabian only agreed to testify when she was granted immunity from prosecution. But to Bugliosi, she's a saving grace, and he continually sets her in opposition to Atkins, Krenwinkel, and Van Houten: "There is no evidence that any of these defendants objected to Charles Manson about these two horrendous nights of murder. Only Linda Kasabian, down in Venice, said: 'Charlie, I am not you. I can't kill.'" (550) In his summation, Bugliosi explodes into this bit of sensational invective:

> On the hot summer night of August the eighth, 1969, Charles Manson, the Mephistophelean guru who raped and bastardized the minds of all those who gave themselves so totally to him, sent out from the fires of hell at Spahn Ranch three heartless, bloodthirsty robots and—unfortunately for him—one human being, the little hippie girl Linda Kasabian. (552)

Bugliosi has it both ways in this passage, and in his representation of the Manson girls, for the reader is at once asked to identify with the "little hippie girl," the only "human being" in the evil Manson family, and distance himself from the "bloodthirsty robots."

[21] Although Susan Atkins had been the original snitch, and had offered damning grand jury testimony, she later changed her story and wouldn't testify during the trial.

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Kasabian is cast as a lost innocent who later nursed a terrible regret for her part in the family's activities, her presence at the Tate scene, and her initial silence about what she knew. That Linda Kasabian was also a Manson family member who chose to be aligned with them is a contradiction which Bugliosi gestures toward, but never adequately works out.

Instead of allowing the ambiguity of good and evil to exist in one person, each player is designated a set role—the killer-girls are inhuman monsters, Manson is pure evil, Kasabian is a human being. The rhetoric of evil is prominent in this passage, and in his portrayal of the other Manson family members, because Bugliosi cannot allow any mediation of his moral structure. Bugliosi tells us that a "Mephistophelean" beast reigns over the "fires of hell" in southern California—of all places!—and in such a world, no moral gray areas are allowed to stand. His rhetoric during summation, and throughout *Helter Skelter*, is reminiscent of much older murder narratives. This passage, for example, could have appeared in an issue of the nineteenth century *Police Gazette*: "What resulted was perhaps the most inhuman, nightmarish, horror-filled hour of savage murder and human slaughter in the recorded annals of crime. As the helpless, defenseless victims begged and screamed out into the night for their lives, their lifeblood gushed out of their bodies, forming rivers of gore." (552) Such rhetoric belongs within an older tradition of murder narration, that of the nineteenth century Gothic horror-inflected murder narrative. [22] Bugliosi resorts to a rhetoric which places murderers firmly beyond the pale of normal human experience, and renders them ultimately mysterious and unknowable.

[22] For much more on Gothic horror and murder narratives, see Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998).

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Casting Manson and his girls in this way enables Bugliosi to deploy the rhetoric of evil in a new way, using the term to describe both Manson, the planner, and the girls, the actual murderers. Manson is the conventional devil, a modern-day Mephistopheles, but the girls, with the qualities of wooden unfeeling and lack of conscience, are the newest and most frightful version of the same old thing. Manson raves and is quite obviously unhinged—the girls, however, are difficult to comprehend and frightening because of their quietude, their hidden evil, and their status as sleeper sociopaths. Kasabian's exercise of her free will humanizes her, and the other girls' submission to Manson marks them as sociopaths, a moral category which would become prominent in 1980s true-crime. In *Helter Skelter*, free will is posited as a force which can work effectively against evil, and its presence is the antithesis of sociopathy. With this dichotomy, Bugliosi implies that the danger of joining a movement, whether for social justice, communal living, or free love, was the submission to a greater cause, or, sometimes, to a stronger personality. *Helter Skelter* sounded an alarm about the inherent dangers of social, political, and cultural movements, by showing that sometimes, collections of like-minded individuals can enact terrible evil. Just as Wambaugh was warning his audience about the potential disasters of loosening moral strictures, Bugliosi warned his audience against the excesses and potential wrongs of collectivity.

It is crucial to understand that Bugliosi's narrative of the Manson family killings, and the events surrounding them, was entirely circumstantial and very carefully constructed. Manson has never conceded that he ordered his followers to kill, and an entirely different set of events and alternative fact-pattern was laid out by the Manson defense. It is true that the jury did not believe the defense's explanation of events, but

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Manson and others have stuck to their story throughout the past thirty-five years. In her autobiography entitled *Child of Satan, Child of God* (1978), Susan Atkins endorsed this alternate version of the Helter Skelter killings. Atkins says that after Bobby Beausoleil was apprehended for the murder of Gary Hinman (a convoluted side story in itself), she and her friends, without Manson's intervention, decided to kill some Los Angeles residents in an attempt to posit a copycat killer and exonerate Beausoleil. The tremendous number of outrageous lies, drug-induced memory lapses, twisted bragging and conscious dissembling surrounding the Manson trial make it impossible to ever really know the 'truth'; one story which circulated for years, and which Bugliosi himself believed until it was proven otherwise, was that the family had hacked to death and decapitated a Spahn ranch hand named Shorty Shea. Only when his intact body was found (he was shot to death) was that story finally laid to rest. Bugliosi's Helter Skelter narrative was taken as truth by both the jury and the American public, and the frightening vision of mind-controlled murderous robots persists. The truth of the story is probably something equally appalling, but perhaps less frightening.

Manson as Satan

Part of the immense public interest in Charles Manson, both in the sixties and now, is provoked by his alleged ability to control people, particularly women. Bugliosi writes that although Manson did at times employ drugs to help him gain control over people, the killers were not on drugs on the night of the murders, as had been rumored. Drugs "had no part in these crimes, for a very simple reason: on these two nights of savage slaughter, Charles Manson wanted his assassins in complete control of their faculties."(249) Bugliosi proved in court, and won a conviction, on the premise that

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Manson was not himself present at any of the murders; rather, he had convinced his (mostly) female followers to do the killing for him. Bugliosi finds this fact terrifying, and goads the reader into sharing that fear: "The reality, and its implications, were far more frightening than the myth" that Manson fed his killers LSD to induce them to murder. The "reality" that Bugliosi perceives is that Manson ordered a group of middle-class young hippie girls from good homes to murder wantonly, and they did it. The implications which Bugliosi dramatically and ominously refers to, but does not explain, point toward a radical breakdown of morality which was perceived to be accompanying the counterculture movement.

Of course, Charles Manson is the real monster at the heart of *Helter Skelter*, the mastermind who collected the girls and transformed them into 'robots,' then directed them to murder. In the same way that Capote handles the dichotomy between Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in *In Cold Blood*, casting Hickock as a satanic monster and Smith as the hapless, almost accidental killer, Bugliosi demonizes Manson and humanizes his witness, Kasabian, who was in fact present and unprotesting at the Tate killings, and lived in the "fires of hell" at Spahn Ranch. He evenly divides the other killers: Atkins and Charles "Tex" Watson are evil; Krenwinkel, and Van Houten are very bad, but not as evil as Sadie. But Manson is pure, unmediated, unmitigated evil, and Bugliosi doesn't even allow Manson's abysmal childhood to weaken his status as chief 20th century American devil.

With these characterizations, we can see Bugliosi choosing sides between the older dispensation of viewing the killer as purely evil, and not trying to understand his actions, and the newer reckoning of mediating factors such as bad childhoods and nasty,

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ill-chosen playmates, which leads into a paralyzing and ineffective morality. Unlike Capote, Bugliosi clearly chooses the former frame, deploying the rhetoric of evil to narrate and understand the causes of these murders. Unable to countenance the ambiguity which Capote deftly presents in *In Cold Blood*, Bugliosi writes for and about a public which also could no longer stand moral ambiguity, and the final convention of true-crime is set. Perhaps because of his role as prosecutor, accustomed to arguing to juries within a moral and legal structure of certainty—right or wrong, guilty or not guilty—Bugliosi possessed and portrayed an authoritative air of moral certainty. From *Helter Skelter* until the present, in the pages of true-crime, murderers are surrounded with an aggressively deployed and unambiguous rhetoric of evil. The moral certainty posited in true-crime disallows any interrogation of the term 'evil,' which in many other public venues is seriously contested. [23]

To Bugliosi, the architect of Helter Skelter lies at the bottom of the slippery slope of moral relativity, which is reflected in his follower's names for him: Jesus Christ, God, Soul, the Devil. In this leveled morality, "God" and "the Devil" are interchangeable, and there is no 'good' and 'evil.' The language of the Family, zen-koan-like phrases such as "no sense makes sense," and "I loved her, and in order for me to kill her I was killing part of myself when I killed her," confirms the reader's worst fears about hippiedom—that it will lead to a moral vacuum which will suck all of Western civilization into a cesspool of violence and annihilation. [24] Manson's followers, those hippie girls/murderous robots, far from being little 1960s California versions of Adolf Eichmann and just following

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[23] For a good examination of contemporary understandings of evil and the way the term is understood, see Lance Morrow's *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

[24] *HS* 114, Susan Atkins describing the murder of Sharon Tate.

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Charlie's orders, are frightening because they're employing familiar words and moral concepts in an entirely new way. The moral relativity of their statements, explanations, and their deeds, is truly threatening, and although they enacted hideous atrocities, the threat contained in their words went beyond murder. They were living an unsustainable, deeply antisocial ethic of no responsibility, no limits, and no rules. Peter Carroll, writing about the 1970s in *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, says that "The fascination with evil in popular culture exposed a haunting ambivalence about the rapid social changes of the past decade." [25] This is why Bugliosi must apply a rigid moral structure to his assessment of these events, and deploy the rhetoric of evil. He sees himself as not simply the crusading prosecuting attorney who put the Manson family away, but as the last and best hope of defending upright, middle-American morality from the warped reaches of the counterculture.

Peter Carroll goes on to say that in the early 1970s, "...the social acceptability of situations of terror, illuminated an incomplete reconciliation to changing sexual values, to the liberation of women and the emergence of homosexuals as significant forces in society. Images of evil arose as psychic reminders of the risk of social upheaval." [26] Such 'images' appeared in 1970s horror fiction, movies, and, most saliently, in the pages of true-crime. The language of evil reappeared in true-crime, and was reinvested with a host of new meanings. No longer defined by a Christian worldview, the term becomes secularized in true-crime and deployed as a signifier of the contemporary incomprehensible. In *Helter Skelter*, Bugliosi used the rhetoric of evil to describe the

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[25] Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982) 313.

[26] Carroll 313.

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utter incomprehensibility of Charles Manson, his control over people, and his twisted plot to induce an apocalyptic race war. But Bugliosi's use of the term 'evil' more profoundly named a host of unspoken fears, and was most deeply felt and experienced in an entirely different register. For the Manson phenomenon came to stand for and embody a host of social changes, which themselves were so rapid as to be incomprehensible. Bugliosi single-handedly revivified a range of rhetoric and images which had not commonly been used to understand and narrate murder for years, and the reading public responded by making *Helter Skelter* the most popular murder narrative in history. The commercial success of *Helter Skelter*, perhaps even more than that of *In Cold Blood*, inspired the copycat volumes, the hundreds of imitators, that we know today as true-crime. Since—and because of—*Helter Skelter*, true-crime has reinvigorated and re-popularized an understanding of murder and murderers which self-consciously uses the rhetoric of evil.

To his credit, Bugliosi doesn't try to explain Manson in his book, nor does he dwell unnecessarily on Manson's character; when he describes him, it is with detachment, genuine bewilderment, and disgust. To Bugliosi, Manson doesn't even warrant curiosity, almost as if trying to understand Manson would invest him with even more power. Yet, Bugliosi still became Manson's mouthpiece, his entrée into a world of sensationalism, pulp journalism, and the power of subversion. In his Afterword, written in 1994, Bugliosi addresses the enduring worldwide fascination with Manson. He writes "The very name 'Manson' has become a metaphor for evil, catapulting him to near mythological proportions. Charles Manson has come to represent the dark and malignant side of humanity." Bugliosi does not see the irony that he had helped to create that metaphor with his book, and was keeping it alive by penning these words. Charlie

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Manson came alive in *Helter Skelter*, for in his book Bugliosi explained and argued for the existence of Manson's deranged belief system. Bugliosi attributed to Manson the power to command people to kill, then encouraged the public to fear Manson because of that very power. *Helter Skelter* was an initial foray in what would become the contemporary debate about the complex relationship between representation and exploitation in journalism. Manson became the first real icon in a new American mass-market celebrity killer industry, a lurid world of ill-gotten fame which would form around such killers as Gary Gilmore, The Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and O.J. Simpson. Just as Manson and his story exploded Vincent Bugliosi's career, Bugliosi and *Helter Skelter* started Manson on the road to fame and fortune. [27]

[27] Charles Manson reportedly makes $250,000 per year in Corcoran State Prison in California, from selling his artwork and photographs and from song lyric royalties. Writer Ed Sanders spoke with a California Department of Corrections spokesman, Russ Heimerich, who said that although there are laws preventing inmates from profiting from their crimes, sometimes people are able to circumvent those laws. *The Family*, 536-537.

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Chapter 6: Norman Mailer's True-Crime Evasion

The Executioner's Song

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) is a significant attempt to narrate and create meaning from murder. In 1976, longtime convict Gary Gilmore was sentenced to death for the murder of two men in Provo, Utah. At that time, there hadn't been an execution in the United States for ten years, since the 1967 Supreme Court ruling in *Furman v. Georgia* that the administration of the death penalty was unconstitutional. Gilmore forced the state of Utah to execute him by refusing to appeal, and his case caused a huge national and international sensation. Gilmore's high-profile truculence mushroomed into a media circus like that surrounding the Manson trial. Several months after Gilmore's execution, Mailer collaborated with Larry Schiller, the true-crime media mogul who got his start with the Manson trial, and with whom Mailer had written his biography of Marilyn Monroe, to write *The Executioner's Song*. The book covers the nine months between Gilmore's parole in April 1976 until his execution in January 1977. It quickly became a bestseller and Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980 for fiction.

By 1979, true-crime was defined by a group of narrative techniques and conventions, and Mailer uses most of them very effectively in *The Executioner's Song*. He skillfully blends fiction with non-fiction, calling his book a "true life novel." Mailer achieves his insider status through his chief researcher Larry Schiller, who was Gilmore's friend/confessor/publicist during the murderer's final days. Mailer expertly contextualizes the Gilmore crimes and ensuing media phenomenon within the late-1970s Western American social and cultural milieu, and very specifically within the Utah Mormon context. The book does not strictly follow the formulaic four-part narrative

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structure, for the narrative does not start with murder; still, *The Executioner's Song* is broken into chronological segments which treat first Gilmore's life and crimes, then his trial and execution. Mailer chose a murderer who fit the usual 1970s true-crime criteria, for Gilmore's murders are both random stranger-killings. Mailer creates a large and powerful sense of the inevitability of murder and the magnetic pull towards evil, as Gilmore is drawn, seemingly against his will, ever-closer to first his crimes, then to his own death. The book is a brilliant murder narrative, at once an insider's view into dysfunctional working-class 1970s American life and a sweeping portrayal of how that life both creates and sustains violence. But *The Executioner's Song* is not true-crime—instead, Mailer's text fits into the other distinct channel of murder narration, literary crime non-fiction.

The sustained narrative style of *The Executioner's Song* is Mailer's chief stylistic innovation, a style which helps bring the text out of the true-crime category. The clipped sentences, seamless mix of first-and-third-person voices in nearly every paragraph, the short choppy paragraphs separated by double-spaces, all combine to produce the book's singular tone. It's the tone of working-class American pragmatism, of the immediacy and simplicity of experience, as in this early passage, the fourth paragraph in the book:

> Gary was kind of quiet. There was one reason they got along. Brenda was always gabbing and he was a good listener. They had a lot of fun. Even at that age he was real polite. If you got into trouble, he'd come back and help you out. [1]

The simple sentence construction and the use of terms such as "kind of," "a lot of," and "real" instead of "really" set this text apart from any other work by Mailer. His

[1] Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979) 5. All following quotes from *The Executioner's Song* will be in-text.

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achievement in *The Executioner's Song* is that he actually *becomes* each of the people he is writing—and so do we. This is how people really talk, and the instant recognition and identification at once pulls the reader in and takes the writer out of the text. Not an insignificant accomplishment for a person who could not resist writing himself in to all his other non-fiction: In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer is "the Novelist"; in *Miami and The Siege of Chicago*, he is "the reporter"; and in *Of A Fire on The Moon*, he is "Aquarius." In *The Executioner's Song*, Norman Mailer is at once absent and present, having overcome (momentarily) his enormous ego for these 1056 pages, and developed the ability to become his characters. It took several tries before he could let go of the self-conscious and shopworn narrative apparatus of appearing in his own books, but we're grateful he could do it, at long last. Perhaps expressing the elation of being able to step outside his book for the first time, Mailer's joy is written as invisibility and a quiet blending into each character. We are the happy recipients of his elation and skill, in passages such as this about Gilmore's cousin and parole officer meeting for the first time:

> Brenda knew her power in conversations like this. She might be that much nearer to thirty-five than thirty, but she hadn't gone into marriage four times without knowing she was pretty attractive on the hoof, and the parole officer, Mont Court, was blond and tall with a husky build. Just an average good-looking American guy, very much on the Mr. Clean side, but all the same, Brenda thought, pretty likable. He was sympathetic to the idea of a second chance, and would flex with you if there was a good reason. If not, he would come down pretty hard. That was how she read him. He seemed just the kind of man for Gary. (9)

Simple stuff, yet with a quiet force which holds the reader for a thousand pages.

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Mailer transforms the most banal and the most dramatic events evenly into a rich everyday fable of the roots of violence, through prose which remains filtered and cool, detached, unemotional, and smooth. Although not a 'character' as in his earlier non-fiction, Mailer is present in this text in a more immediate, felt manner—it is his super-rational voice which narrates everybody's story with equanimity from inside their minds, his eye which surveys the landscape and finds scenes such as this, when Gilmore is taken to his last prison: "Outside the prison, night had come, and the ridge of the mountain came down to the Interstate like a big dark animal laying out its paw." (451) Mailer's narration captures everybody within the same distinctively American prose—hardboiled, with a voice as "flat as the horizon," an "authentic Western voice," first noted by Joan Didion in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review.* [2] Such literary and artistic feats in *The Executioner's Song* help propel the book out of the true-crime gutter, but it remains in deep relationship to that genre. Mailer may have some profound sentiments to express about American violence, and he is able to cloak such statements in a mantle of dignity with his craft, but the tale itself remains sordid and sensational. Mailer ultimately valorizes Gilmore by turning him into a mythical, if pitiable, Western outlaw who single-handedly brought the death penalty back into use in American jurisprudence. The determinism which pulls Gilmore toward murder and execution like a magnet is trumped by the determinism which pulls the American media beast toward his story. Mailer's greatest achievement in this book is how he demonstrates that interpersonal violence in the form of murder sometimes creates and sustains another form of violence, the modern

[2] These quotes are from Joan Didion's *New York Times Book Review* piece on *The Executioner's Song*, October 7, 1979.

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media frenzy. The two halves of *The Executioner's Song* encompass these two great modern American pastimes—murder and its recreation/representation in print and film.

Wendy Lesser, in her book about the representation of murder and execution in contemporary culture, writes that in *The Executioner's Song* "Mailer is purposely comparing different kinds of sinfulness, different kinds of error." [3] Those two kinds of error and sin are reflected in the two neat halves of the book, the two main characters, the twinned series of events. The ascent of action and drama, "Western Voices," is an excruciatingly detailed account of Gary Gilmore's life from the moment of his parole, through his two random murders, until his death sentence is handed down. The descent of action and drama into the denouement, "Eastern Voices," is an excruciatingly detailed account of 'journalist' Larry Schiller's life from the imposition of Gilmore's death sentence until he is shot to death by the state of Utah. In this way, then, Gilmore the murderer is implicitly compared to and drawn against Schiller the murder chronicler. Mailer's even narration of each half of this story makes it difficult to judge which individual is the more reprehensible, the more offensive, the more outrageous, which is the most typically American. Gilmore and Schiller are both shown to be extraordinarily complex men caught within equally complex and weighty circumstances. Schiller is the vulture who resents that appellation, the sensationalist with a conscience; Gilmore is the murderer who resents *that* appellation, the sensitive killer who becomes a victim. Gilmore throughout is portrayed as an artist—shades of Capote's Perry Smith abound—and Schiller is shown enduring crisis of conscience after crisis of conscience. Mailer's preoccupation with violence shades into a preoccupation with the marketing of violence, experienced chiefly through a person whose name—Schiller—reminds one of the

[3] Wendy Lesser, *Pictures at an Execution*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.

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carnival huckster selling overpriced tickets to a non-event, generating interest in human hideosity and sin, and income for himself, the "shill." There could be no better, more fitting prototype of the modern sleaze merchant than Larry Schiller.

Schiller is a stand-in for Mailer, literally and metaphorically. Mailer didn't come onto the project until May 1977, when Gilmore was five months dead, and the two never met. Schiller met, spoke with, interviewed, and was present at the execution of, Gary Gilmore. Schiller did much of the interviewing work, Schiller sweated out the execution and questioned himself about the morality of being so involved, Schiller risked his professional reputation in order to get the story. Norman Mailer used Schiller's work after the fact, thereby keeping himself out of the appalling journalistic fray which surrounded Gilmore in the last three months of his life. Schiller becomes one of the characters in this "true life story," and Mailer acknowledges this in his Afterword:

> ...Schiller stood for his portrait, and drew maps to his faults. He exposed his secrets in the confidence, doubtless, that old methods revealed, he would now be spurred on to more cultivated techniques, and so he not only delivered the stuff of his visions but the logic of his base schemes, and in the months that followed, he did not feel regret, or seem to have second thoughts. If he did, he kept them to himself. Without Schiller, it would not have been feasible to attempt to second half of *The Executioner's Song*. (1053)

Without Schiller, it would not have been feasible to attempt the first half of *The Executioner's Song*, either, because his interviews of Gilmore probably provided many of the details and corroboration of facts which "Western Voices" relies upon. Curiously presaged throughout "Eastern Voices," as Schiller hammers out possible book and movie

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deals and finally strikes a bargain with Gilmore for his story, *Schiller's* Gary Gilmore book never materializes. It may have been a true-crime text, after all, one which was never written. Although clearly not a co-authored work, Schiller now has the role which Mailer himself had taken in his earlier non-fiction, but has abandoned in *The Executioner's Song*: he is the writer-character against whom events are measured, and through whom we understand them. Schiller's mercantile sense of the Gilmore events is foregrounded, as he expertly negotiates with the principals and makes fat financial deals with huge media concerns and major television networks.

In "Eastern Voices," Mailer subtly does what he had always done in his non-fiction, after all: in the words of Morris Dickstein, he "projected his personal quirks into a dialogue with America at one of its defining moments," only this time, he does it through the character of Schiller. [4] Two defining moments in the text illustrate this point. One of the few times in this entire 1050 page text in which we hear the distinctive, conventional Mailer prose occurs in a passage of Schiller's free indirect discourse. This scene occurs soon after Schiller arrives in Salt Lake City and begins to settle in to his story and figure out the lay of the journalistic land. Gary and Nicole have both just tried to commit suicide, he inside prison and she outside. Schiller decides to try to contact Nicole's relatives at the hospital in Provo, where she is recovering. He sits in the hospital waiting room, and Mailer writes that

> Other reporters would be on the phone, checking back to hear what was going down, but Schiller sat and relaxed and let the heat of the room pour over him and the fatigues of twenty-five years perspired slowly, a drop and another drop from

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[4] Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002) 159.

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> the bottomless reservoirs of fatigue, and he sat there quietly thinking, and let his sins and errors wash over him, and reviewed them. He considered it obscene not to learn from experience. (599)

This passage comes from different territory, for this is the Mailer of *Armies* and *Miami/Chicago*. The final sentence could easily begin with "The Novelist" or "the Journalist" instead of "He," and this is where Schiller stands in for Mailer, and stands up within the text. Mailer projects his own 'personal quirks' onto Schiller, thereby projecting them onto the events at hand. He doesn't altogether drop the distancing alter-ego of his earlier non-fiction, which was absent in "Western Voices"; rather, Mailer displaces that persona onto one of his characters, as Schiller speaks for Mailer and about the moral insanity which envelops everybody who becomes involved in selling violence.

In this way, then, Mailer also indicts himself, questions himself, and ultimately finds no answers to the hard ethical questions involved in the true-crime endeavor. Another critical moment of self-presentation occurs when Schiller is negotiating with Bill Moyers to allow him to do a Gilmore story on his weekly news show. Schiller now literally owns the Gilmore story, and he has two conditions for this deal:

"One," said Schiller, "I want a journalistic background when you interview me. I want to be photographed at a typewriter, or on the phone. I need," said Schiller, "such background to give me credibility....The second thing is talk of money matters. That can only be discussed if I'm on the move." "What," asked Moyers, "do you mean by that?" "I have to be moving as I talk," said Schiller, "either walking or driving. I will not discuss money matters sitting down."

"Why not?"

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> "Because," said Schiller, "no matter how you shoot it, I'm overweight. If you take me with a normal lens sitting behind a desk, I look like a money man. Shoot with a wide-angle lens and I'm King Farouk." (812)

This passage betrays, in a humorous and unforgettable way, Schiller's concern with being portrayed as a 'real' journalist, and not as some money-hungry Hollywood ambulance-chaser, which is perhaps closer to the truth. By distancing himself from Schiller, turning him into a character in the text instead of simply using Schiller's research into the story, Mailer is admitting the same self-consciously cynical concerns about image and audience perception. Rather than collaborate openly, and share authorship of the text, Mailer turned Schiller into a character. One biography writes that "Schiller's involvement was well known, and rather than attempt to keep his collaboration in the story's background, Mailer decided to make the journalist a full-fledged character." [5] We see Schiller here putting careful thought into his how his image will be portrayed, just as Mailer had already done in sorting the material and determining the structure of *The Executioner's Song*. He may have been attracted to the Gilmore story at first for financial reasons, but Mailer was careful not to put himself into the same category with Schiller in the public imagination.

When Mailer became interested in writing the Gilmore book, he faced some major difficulties, including having to work with Larry Schiller again. Mailer's relationship with Schiller was, from the very start, one of financial necessity. By the early 1970s, Mailer was in desperate need of cash—at that point he had four ex-wives and seven children to support. In a 1980 interview, Mailer reported that "I've had money

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[5] Mary V. Dearborn, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) 349.

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troubles the last ten years," and "I've become a commercial writer." [6] Lawrence Schiller began his media career as a photographer for *Life* magazine, then began to do "special projects" which centered on buying and selling the stories of such dubious celebrities as Susan Atkins and Jack Ruby. In 1971, Schiller put together a traveling exhibit of Marilyn Monroe photographs, which he wanted to turn into a book. He approached Mailer to write the text, and their collaboration became *Marilyn* (1973), a biographical-novelistic-photographic treatment which helped Mailer pay some bills. The Schiller/Mailer collaboration was often contentious, and by the end of the project, the two were not on speaking terms. But they worked together again on *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974), another Schiller brainchild that he asked Mailer to write text for. By 1976, Schiller was a well-known Hollywood media wheeler-dealer, adept at striking huge financial deals with major publishing houses and television stations. When he bought exclusive rights to the Gary Gilmore story at the end of 1976, Schiller knew that he would have to hire a qualified writer to organize the voluminous material into a book. Having worked with Mailer successfully in the past, Schiller got him on board by asking Mailer to read an interview which he and another writer, Barry Farrell, had done for *Playboy Magazine*. Mailer was hooked, and in May 1977, Schiller began sending transcripts of his Gilmore interviews to Mailer's Brooklyn Heights home.

The story of how Schiller acquired the 'rights' to Gilmore's story is written into *The Executioner's Song* in great detail; indeed, it is one of the central elements of "Eastern Voices." "Western Voices" is Mailer's commentary about true-crime, and

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[6] John W. Aldridge, "An Interview with Norman Mailer," from *Partisan Review*, 47 (July 1980), 174-82. Reprinted in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, edited by J. Michael Lennon (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1988) 262-270.

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"Eastern Voices" is his commentary about the journalism of sensation and the rapidly growing true-crime industry.

Mailer mocks members of his own tribe, journalists, throughout "Eastern Voices," and if he is identified with Schiller, then it is self-mockery as well. Everyone wants a piece of Gilmore, some quite literally—he donated his pituitary gland to his niece, and his eyes to a man who needed a new pair. But he sold his story to the highest bidder, and the journalistic feeding frenzy was vicious and brutal. Schiller was successful because he had the most experience negotiating such slick territory, but he did have some deep misgivings and self-doubt. *The Executioner's Song* adds to the growing self-reflection which appears within murder narratives and true-crime during the 1980s, and Mailer uses the figure of Schiller to remind the reader about previous texts and the issues involved in marketing murder. At one point, Schiller is thinking of his role in the Susan Atkins story, and Mailer writes:

> So, Schiller was brought in to see Susan Atkins between her two Grand Jury appearances, and she confessed the murders in a series of three connected interviews. He did sell it all over the world. Then it was reprinted in America. Suddenly, Susan Atkins was no longer the State's star witness, because she now had a vested interest in her own story. Schiller had destroyed part of the State's case. (600)

This is how Schiller's reputation became tarnished, how he gained his identity as a conscienceless tabloid worm willing to do anything to get and sell a story. Schiller was "sick to the stomach over that," and he vows to "do this Gilmore one differently." Mailer uses Schiller's anguish about the moral and ethical complexities of his profession to

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reflect upon the state of American murder journalism, and to highlight the tensions between violence, justice, and the marketplace.

Many critics have understood Mailer's Gilmore as "an archetype of the displaced American soul of the 1970s," and it's not difficult to understand why. [7] Mailer, often characterized as the archetypal American writer, found Gilmore fascinating because he seemed to embody many of Mailer's themes: violence, why people kill, masculine dignity and self-determination, the life and death of the soul, the enigma of death itself. David Guest, writing about Mailer in his book *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment*, says that "Gilmore's strategy for resisting authority must have seemed familiar to Mailer as it echoed his own writings on crime, art, and the police. Mailer's fascination with hardmen and psychopaths dates at least to the time of 'The White Negro.'" [8] In Gary Gilmore, Mailer found a pet psychopath whom he could dissect with his pen in an attempt to understand the hermeneutics of violence. Mailer does this by turning Gilmore into the embodiment of his 'white negro,' the classic hipster/psychopath, investing Gilmore with a cool detachment and a personal power which grew mightily as Gilmore resisted prison and state authority. Guest writes that "the narrative tailors Gilmore to fit the hipster model," and "Mailer surrounds Gilmore with mystery and makes him seem menacing." [9] Although a 'factual' account of Gilmore's last days, *The Executioner's Song* offers a Gilmore who fit a preconceived mold of the sociopath, a figure recognizable from *In Cold Blood*, *The Onion Field*, and *Helter*

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[7] Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Empire Books, 1982) 432.

[8] David Guest, *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) 148.

[9] *Sentenced to Death*, 155, 156.

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Skelter. With this depiction, Mailer turns the sociopath into a recognizably American type.

In many ways, Lawrence Schiller is as much an American archetype as Gilmore, and *The Executioner's Song* is as much an exploration of the marketing of murder as it is of the act itself. The mystery at the heart of any murder story—why did he or she do it?—is never adequately unraveled in this book. Neither is the equally mysterious phenomenon which surrounds Gilmore once he starts to welcome his coming execution—why are people so interested in this story? Indeed, to posit a larger question implicit in *The Executioner's Song*, why are people so interested in any murder story? This question is never answered, it is simply taken for granted that the 'public,' that huge unseen force lurking behind the press in this book, wants to know as much as it can about Gilmore. Schiller, the prototypical murder journalist, is held up for scrutiny just as Gilmore, the prototypical murderer, is. And just as with his portrayal of Gilmore, Mailer valorizes the psychopath, with his treatment of Schiller, Mailer legitimizes the vocation of murder journalist/shill by devoting such loving attention to the story of the story. Described in the same deadpan, cool, and detached prose, Mailer's Schiller is a real professional, who sees immediately that he's dealing with a bunch of amateurs. Schiller quickly understands the value of the Gilmore story, he grasps that Nicole Baker's signature will be as important as Gilmore's on any contract, and he immediately sets to work befriending and gaining the trust of Gilmore's family. Schiller's sharp-witted professionalism as a murder-mogul lies in his ability to see the big picture, and to craft an audience as well as a consumable narrative for it from the bare bones of a sordid story.

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The relationship between murder and its presentation is one of the larger subjects of this book, which Wendy Lesser astutely summarizes:

> *The Executioner's Song* is exemplary in this respect. It gives us more than we could ever have expected to know about how Gary Gilmore killed his two victims, who he was at the time of the murders as well as before and after them, how he dealt with his own crime and punishment, what his friends and relations thought, and so on. But the book doesn't pin down, in any final way, *why* these murders took place, or even exactly how Gary felt about them; and it lightly mocks the people, such as the jailhouse interviewers, who tried to get answers to those questions. [10]

The people who are trying to get answers are, of course, the journalists, and they are at once mocked and deified, just as Gilmore is at once mocked and deified. Mailer gives us a Gilmore who is both a moral imbecile, a supremely selfish and overgrown bully, and a man who takes dignified control of his own destiny at the very end of his life, and under the most excruciating of circumstances. Schiller is presented as a moral monster who freely examines his own monstrosity, and we hear him calling other journalists "monkeys," and thoughtfully probing his own motivations and actions. Mailer has said that the story of *The Executioner's Song* was like gold to him, that he could never have invented such a good tale, and that he wanted to just present the reality of the events as he found them reflected in court transcripts, documents, interviews, and Schiller's memories.

The concept being able to sell one's criminal story was in 1976 as morally dubious as it is now. But the so-called "Son of Sam" laws, which prevent criminals

[10] *Pictures at an Execution* 143.

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profiting from their crimes, were not enacted until 1978, so Gilmore was able to profit from marketing his story. He sold his story to Schiller for approximately $125,000, primarily because Schiller was able to produce the cash. Schiller recognized that he had to come up with cash because Gilmore wasn't going to be alive for very long, and Schiller wanted his subject to be able to spend the money. In December 1976, Schiller gave Gilmore's uncle, Vern Damico, a check for $52,000; Gilmore, having never had as much money in his life, gave it away like candy. He gave a former cellmate $2000, and a girl in Hawaii who wrote him a sexy letter got $300. The money mattered to Gilmore, in more than symbolic terms, but Mailer uses his generosity to further his hipster/psychopath status. As readers, we see that "the battle over Gilmore's execution is a battle to write Gilmore's biography," and that the money involved symbolizes ownership of the story and freedom to invest meaning into Gilmore's life. [11] One of the meanings which Mailer gave the Gilmore story was that selling one's story is as American as creating a story worthy of sale. This is what Mailer, perhaps inadvertently, offered the new genre of true-crime—a legitimacy with a healthy claim to audience and marketability. True-crime would never be the same.

Mailer called *The Executioner's Song* a "true life novel," and, like Capote, he boasted of not having embellished or enhanced his narrative at all. When asked about the differences between fiction and non-fiction, and in particular why he chose to call *The Executioner's Song* a 'novel,' he has said "To me, nonfiction provides answers and novels illumine questions. I think my book does the latter." [12] Mailer has always mixed and messed with such categories in his non-fiction, often spinning himself as a character,

[11] *Sentenced to Death*, 162.

[12] Tony Schwartz, "Is New Mailer Book Fiction, in Fact?" *New York Times*, October 26, 1979.

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most famously in *Armies of the Night.* And it is true that *The Executioner's Song* raises more questions than it answers. What isn't strictly 'true,' however, is Mailer's presentation of Gilmore, beginning with the famous poetic inscription of the book:

> Deep in my dungeon
> I welcome you here
> Deep in my dungeon
> I worship your fear
> Deep in my dungeon
> I dwell.
> I do not know
> if I wish you well.
>
> --old prison rhyme

This eerie 'rhyme' sets the tone for the entire book, and predisposes us to think of Gilmore as a dramatic figure dwelling in a dungeon, his hatred achieving mythical proportions, and not as the pathetic loser he really was, who spent nearly his entire life in a modern penitentiary, choosing to create violence, to deflect blame, and to evade responsibility. The words "deep," "dungeon," and "fear" create a specific set of carceral images, and cast the experience of prison in terms familiar from film and folk songs—*Cool Hand Luke* comes to mind, with its imagery of the brutal southern workcamp prison; the songs of Johnny Cash express similar sentiments about prison as a place of ancient misery and rotting lives. [13] It is only when we read Mailer's "Afterword" that we learn the truth about this rhyme—Mailer wrote it in the late 1960s for his movie

[13] Gilmore was a huge Johnny Cash fan; knowing this, and having a sincere sympathy for the incarcerated and condemned, Cash called and spoke with Gilmore the night before his execution.

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Maidstone. This punchline undermines and destabilizes our opinion of Gilmore, but the damage has already been done in the preceding 1050 pages.

In fact, the extended insincerity bookends Mailer's text, because the second part of the rhyme appears at the end of the book:

> Deep in my dungeon
>
> I welcome you here
>
> Deep in my dungeon
>
> I worship your fear
>
> Deep in my dungeon,
>
> I dwell.
>
> A bloody kiss
>
> from the wishing well.
>
> --old prison rhyme

The put-on continues to the very end, and the final image is one of the violent death of dreams. Mailer has done his job, casting Gilmore as the dungeon-dwelling killer, steeped in a dark ages-old tradition of fury and vengeance. With this bit of sleight-of-hand, Mailer turns the convict-murderer into a deeply romantic figure, and violence, real or imagined, is equally romanticized. The problem with this depiction is that Mailer himself seems to have believed it, and to have carried it into his real life, inadvertently contributing to a tragic real-life murder. When it came to violence, Mailer seemed unable to separate fact from fiction, life from books, real harm from imagined transgressions.

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The Jack Henry Abbott Affair

Morris Dickstein has written of *The Executioner's Song* that "Whatever fantasies Mailer had once spun around the violent criminal as existential hero are redeemed." [14] It is true that Mailer does not overtly glorify Gilmore's violence; on the other hand, he certainly doesn't indict it. Instead, Mailer spins a different kind of fantasy around Gilmore, one which presents him as a victim of circumstance, but as a man still capable of acting with dignity and self-determination, bloody but unbowed, a real-life expression of Mailer's theoretical psychopath. As he forces the state of Utah's hand by rejecting his right to appeal his death penalty, Gilmore remains an existential hero to Mailer, who doesn't really lose his taste for glamorizing the violent until he encounters the real thing in Jack Henry Abbott. It is no new observation that Mailer is fascinated by, and in a kind of love with, violence. But it is significant to note that Mailer was himself personally involved in two real-life crime "stories," of which he has never written, and has barely spoken. In 1960, he stabbed his second wife, Adele Morales Mailer, in the chest, nearly killing her. She recovered and divorced him in 1961. The murder story he never wrote about was his 1981 entanglement in the Jack Henry Abbott imbroglio. Mailer's interest in violence had limits—and the gritty sensationalism of true-crime was one of them.

While he was writing *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer received a letter from a convict named Jack Henry Abbott, who was then incarcerated in the federal penitentiary at Marion, Illinois. A native of Utah, Abbott had a lot in common with Gilmore—he too had been raised by the state in reform schools and juvenile facilities, and had been incarcerated in many of the same prisons as Gilmore (Gilmore had relatives and deep ties to Utah, although he never actually lived there until 1976). Seduced by Abbott's

[14] *Leopards* 161.

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intelligence, his wide-ranging literary and philosophical knowledge, and by his self-important status as a 'convict,' and not just an 'inmate,' Mailer began a true correspondence with him. Mailer used Abbott's inside information about the culture of prison to inform his understanding of Gilmore, and he acknowledged Abbott in his Afterword to *The Executioner's Song*. In 1981, Mailer helped Abbott to publish *In the Belly of the Beast*, a collection of his prison writings. When in June 1981 Abbott was paroled, Mailer wrote a letter to the parole board promising him a job in New York as his research assistant, and he vouched for the quality of Abbott's literary talent. Abbott was released to a halfway house on the Bowery. He quickly ran into some difficulty, however, and a month later, he stabbed a 22-year-old East Village waiter named Richard Adan to death. Abbott was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Jack Henry Abbott killed himself in prison in February 2002, and Norman Mailer has rarely spoken publicly about his involvement with Abbott.

When he did speak publicly about it at the time, however, he got into trouble. Mailer was subpoenaed to testify at Abbott's trial, and after his testimony he gave a press conference. Easily one of the most contentious of his career, Mailer lost his temper, fought with the journalists from the New York press establishment, and made himself easy prey for misrepresentation. Instead of expressing remorse for Adan's murder, and talking about his own responsibility and guilt for the situation, Mailer lashed out and made statements like "culture is worth a little risk," and "you could throw fifty psychiatrists at Jack Abbott and it wouldn't do any good at all. Jack Abbott and I are cousins in that respect." [15] Naturally, the press interpreted the first statement as condoning Abbott's (and his own) actions, and read Mailer as an unrepentant,

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[15] Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography*, 17-18.

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irresponsible violence-monger. The following day, the New York Post ran a story with the headline "Mailer: I Would Risk Freeing Killer," and Mailer threatened to sue for defamation. [16] As Hilary Mills says, "In trying to explain to a hostile press...that nothing human was alien to him, Mailer lost his way and wound up paying tribute to Abbott's talents as a writer." [17] Unable to admit his sense of responsibility and remorse to a hostile crowd, Mailer ended up defending Abbott and sounding insensitive about the situation.

The misunderstanding, and his inability to express himself adequately about the Abbott affair, belied his true feelings about the matter. In fact, Mailer felt deeply, almost pathologically, responsible for Adan's killing—in 1982, on an interview with Dick Cavett, he said "I'm always going to live with it," and "I have to sit in judgment on myself." [18] In a 2000 interview for the PBS series *American Masters*, Mailer expressed the same sense of remorse, twenty years later. He called it "'one of the most unpleasant episodes of my life', and said he felt 'completely responsible' because Mr. Abbott was entirely unaccustomed to living in the outside world."[19] Strangely, Mailer's guilt was out of proportion to his culpability. Mailer did not actually help Abbott get parole, he just promised him a job when he got out. And after all, championing a prisoner and overseeing his return to society is somewhat of a tradition in literary circles—Mailer's own contemporaries William S. Buckley, Jimmy Breslin, and William Styron had all committed similar errors in judgment, and been similarly burned by their pet cons. Jimmy Breslin tried to comfort Mailer, and told him that he had "gotten several people out, they

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[16] Mills 18.

[17] Mills 35.

[18] "Mailer Feels 'Responsibility' for Slaying.'" *New York Times*, February 22, 1982.

[19] Bernard Weinraub, "Mailer Tells a Lot. Not All, but a Lot." *New York Times*, October 4, 2000, E1.

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always disappoint you, and you've got to expect it." Breslin also "tried to say 'Take the burn, but don't make it a first degree burn,' which I think Norman did." In what could be interpreted as a classical Freudian example of the return of the repressed, Mailer was perhaps feeling the guilt about Abbott/Adan that he had never expressed about nearly killing his second wife, Adele, in 1960. The Abbott affair brought another extremely violent and unpleasant event back to Mailer, an event which he still refuses to speak about in any detail.

Accounts differ as to the circumstances, but there is no doubt that Mailer attacked and stabbed Adele with a penknife after an all-night party in November 1960. One wound nicked the membrane which surrounds the heart, and Adele spent a month in the hospital. In an era before stringent domestic violence legislation, Adele dropped the charges—which, if the attack occurred now, may have included attempted murder—in order to protect her daughters. Mailer received a suspended sentence and three years probation for third-degree assault, and the Mailers separated in March 1961. In February 1961, Mailer gave a poetry reading at the 92nd Street YMCA. In a stunning display of bad taste, bravado, and insensitivity to his situation, Mailer read his poem "Rainy Afternoon with the Wife," which includes the line "So long as you use a knife, there's some love left." The educational director for the Y ordered the curtain down, explaining his actions the next day by saying that Mailer's poems "broke the limits of good taste from any point of view," and "people were laughing the way they do at dirty jokes in smoking cars." Mailer left the stage, asking the audience to leave quietly so as not to cause more trouble for him. [20]

[20] Mills 229-230.

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During this episode and many others, Mailer unconsciously demonstrated what his friends call his naiveté, and what his enemies call willful glamorization, about the connections between his ideas and real violence. Mailer is reticent about his own personal violence, but it is clear that he has always suffered from severe blindness about the relationship between theories of violence and the real thing. Many critics have objected to his defense of personal violence, and his belief that violence can be healthy and necessary. In his 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on The Hipster," Mailer waxes eloquent and philosophical about violence, claiming that "The psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love, his being is frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice." [21] He goes on to describe the imaginary casual murder of a store owner by two teenage hoods, and he praises the figures for their moral courage. "The White Negro" predicted the coming of an ethos of 'cool' violence, and presaged the 1960s and 1970s public preoccupation with casual and random violence as babybooming teenagers, coming full force into their own youth culture, would be demonized for their amorality as never before. Mailer never understood why this description and depiction of youth violence was objectionable, as though valorizing the condition and mindset of the philosophical psychopath could be only an intellectual exercise, separate from reality and never meant to be enacted. But the intellectual feats of "The White Negro" would come to haunt Mailer after he stabbed Adele, for he seemed to be enacting his theory in his real life. "A decade's anger made me do it, after that I felt better," is the most Mailer has ever

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[21] Mailer, "The White Negro," *Advertisements for Myself*, 1959, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 347.

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said about what led him to stab Adele; such a statement reflects his belief in the cathartic and healthful nature of interpersonal violence. [22]

Keeping real and fictional violence separate, and yet recognizing that one is imbricated with the other, is both extremely important and very difficult to do. Jack Abbott discovered this when, during the Adan trial, the prosecution confronted him with his own damaging words about violence. The Adan prosecutors used Abbott's writings from *In The Belly of The Beast* to show that Abbott was a profoundly violent man who held a creed that killing is necessary and excusable, and to prove to the jury that he would kill again if the circumstances were right. In his book, which was understood by Mailer, the publisher, reviewers and readers to be a non-fiction collection of prison writings, Abbott writes voluminously about possessing weapons and using them on other inmates and guards. But when the prosecutor confronted Abbot with his poetic account of killing a fellow inmate, and with a statement he made in *In The Belly of The Beast* that "the killing of oppressors in prison is necessary for an inmate to retain his 'manhood,'" Abbott's response was that his book was fictionalized, that it did not portray his true character or take his moral measure. [23] Abbott had, in fact, been convicted of the murder of another inmate, but the records of that conviction could not be introduced at the Adan trial. So, the prosecuting attorney used Abbott's writing to show his violent tendencies. Abbott maintained that in his book, he was a character, not a real person, and that the political views he put forward in *In The Belly of The Beast* (i.e., his Marxist analysis of state-sponsored violence in prisons, and viewing himself as a victim of the state) were being used against him in the Adan trial. Confusion between the textual Abbott and the

[22] Mills 231.

[23] Paul L. Montgomery, "Abbott Rejects Account of Him As Violent Man," *The New York Times*, date?

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person, Jack Abbott, caused Mailer to champion his cause, and may have contributed to Abbott's conviction in the Adan trial. After the Abbott affair, Mailer never again so publicly confused the real and the literary.

Mailer made a serious error in his judgment of Abbott, but it was not out of character. Consistent with his writing and his own life, Mailer seems to have appreciated Abbott as a first-rate theorist of violence, and to have deeply misjudged Abbott's personality and temperament. The chief detective in the Adan homicide case, William Majeski, has said that "I think what Norman failed to do was make a separation between the man's [Abbott's] literary ability and his personality, his capabilities outside the literary realm." [24] Perhaps because of his own sense of his personal literary power, that famous Mailer ego, he had never been able to make such separations; indeed, when Mailer became involved with Abbott, he was in the midst of enacting the same kind of appropriation of Gary Gilmore. But Gilmore was dead by the time Mailer became interested in him, and so Mailer was able to co-opt Gilmore's character to his own ends with no unforeseen or lasting negative effects. In *The Executioner's Song*, we are given Mailer's Gilmore, not the state's version of Gilmore, and certainly not his victim's Gilmore. Mailer was completely incapable of reading Abbott's reality, even though *In The Belly of The Beast* gives a very clear picture of that reality. Making such distinctions is crucial, especially when dealing with real killers, real victims, and real crimes.

There are true-crime texts from the 1960s and 70s which illustrate this moral principle very well. One from the 1970s is Kenneth Paul Rogers' *For One Sweet Grape* (Playboy Press, 1974), a first-person narrative written by a convicted rapist and murderer. A convoluted pastiche—part memoir, part psychotic memory narrative, part confession—

[24] Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985, 635.

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For One Sweet Grape stands outside both true-crime and literary crime non-fiction traditions, and is one of the only first-person murder narratives from this period. An earlier corollary is the work of convicted murderer Edgar Smith: *Brief Against Death* (1968), in which Smith successfully argued his innocence of the rape-murder of a teenaged girl while serving a life sentence for the crime, and *Getting Out* (1973), a further description of Smith's manipulation of the criminal justice system. [25] These first-person texts are important to the development of true-crime because they suggest a narrative direction which the genre began to take, but ultimately did not pursue. First-person narratives written by killers are extremely rare, probably because most killers are not capable of writing interesting and readable accounts of their lives; more importantly, it is distasteful and disturbing to read the words of an actual killer. The narrative act must be kept separated from the violent act, for once this boundary is crossed, the murder narrative itself becomes complicit in the act, and the reader becomes a voyeur or, even worse, a metaphorical participant in the murder. Although identification with the killer is a crucial aspect of true-crime, the simultaneous distancing is just as important.

By the late 1970s, there were two clearly established tracks for murder narration. The dominant form, true-crime, churned real murder into a quasi-fantasy formula, a genre which created and satisfied reader's fear by portraying killers as evil, inhuman monsters. In the 1970s and 80s, true-crime was most interested in depictions of sadistic sociopaths and the representation of deranged sexual violence against young women, boys, and gay men—certainly not the most common kinds of murder committed in this country, at that

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[25] Edgar Smith was William F. Buckley's "pet convict," and Buckley wrote the preface, called "A Friend in The Death House," for Smith's 1968 *Brief Against Death*. The Smith case is very complex and convoluted; he was probably guilty of the first murder, as determined by his behavior after he was released in 1971. In 1975, Smith kidnapped a woman in California and stabbed her during the struggle; when captured, Smith claimed he was going to rape her. He is still in prison in California.

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time or any other. But serious literary non-fiction about crime continued to be written, and *The Executioner's Song* is a stunning example within that category. The book is in some ways a copycat *In Cold Blood*, albeit much longer, and it adds nothing significant to the stockpile of generic conventions. In fact, Mailer has said that if Capote hadn't written *In Cold Blood*, he might never have written *The Executioner's Song.*[26] Yet, *The Executioner's Song* remains important to understanding the establishment of true-crime. That Mailer was able to use the conventions of true-crime shows that such conventions were well-established and recognized by a range of writers and readers. The generic conventions had to exist in order for Mailer to use them, and they had to be a recognizable form in order for Mailer to subvert them—which he certainly does. The most important aspect of *The Executioner's Song* is that it is one of the first major texts in this period which is about the phenomenon of murder narration itself, and for this reason, it is a meta-text within the formation of the true-crime genre.

There is one major reason why the *The Executioner's Song* isn't true-crime—throughout the book, we're inside the character's minds, and the enormously long and detailed descriptions of characters and events compel the reader into close and unprecedented identification with the killer, and with all the other major characters, as well. But there's no distancing mechanism to balance the intense and painful identification that Mailer creates for the reader, and we're left feeling manipulated and, ultimately, executed right along with Gilmore. The crucial second part of the identification/distancing matrix which true-crime enacts is absent from Mailer's text. We feel close to the killer—we're privy to private thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Gilmore and all those around him, especially his girlfriend Nicole Baker, and the family

[26] Aldridge interview with Mailer in *Conversations with Norman Mailer* 270.

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members who supported him when first paroled; we're made to understand why Gilmore acts as he does, and we sympathize and maybe even empathize. But Mailer doesn't implement the distancing mechanisms which enable the reader ultimately to judge and safely categorize the killer—he doesn't introduce the rhetoric of evil which Bugliosi uses, nor are we ever pulled away from the third-person/first-person omniscient narration which forges such close identification with the characters. In true-crime, murder and murderers are strictly formulated to produce feelings of identification, pity, and understanding, along with distancing, fear, and abhorrence. In Mailer's text, abhorrence for the murders and fear of the murderer are absent, chiefly because Mailer never allows the safe abstraction of emotion and the comfort of castigation and judgment. Without the distancing from violence and the safe and predictable separation from the killer, the narrative does not rise—doesn't sink?—to the level of true-crime.

In one crucial respect, then, *The Executioner's Song* is very different from *In Cold Blood*: the unremitting identification with the murderer. In Mailer's text, that triad of identification between writer-killer-reader is very pronounced. And if in the second part of *The Executioner's Song*, Larry Schiller is a stand-in for Mailer, in the first part, Gilmore plays the same role. In "Western Voices," Mailer metaphorically tries on the psychopath's mental clothing, and the reader is drawn very close to the killer. Before the Jack Abbott mess, Mailer was still playing with violence, trying on different poses, other voices, as well as dabbling with different writing styles as he had always done. A paradox and a cipher, Mailer has been a different person in each of his books, but is always essentially himself. His performance in *The Executioner's Song* is no different, although at first sight it appears to be so. Mailer has said that Gilmore was a "marvelously

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appealing character to me....he appealed to me because he embodied many of the themes I've been living with all my life long before I even thought of doing a book on him." [27] Gilmore embodies themes which Mailer says he was "living with," not simply writing about. The crucial distinction between philosophies of violence and the real thing is blurred in this verbal elision. The distinction between Mailer and Gilmore is similarly blurred in the 500 pages which comprise "Western Voices," as we witness Mailer exploring the killer's mental processes. He doesn't come up with any stunning conclusions or answers to the ultimate mystery of murder, but he does tell a good tale. *For One Sweet Grape* is difficult to read and creates a moral queasiness that approaches disgust. But perhaps the moral queasiness comes about because of the essential artlessness of the tale. If cloaked in sophisticated-enough, elegant-enough, imagistic-enough prose, would the book be any less disgusting? The resemblance between that text and *The Executioner's Song* forces a disturbing conclusion—telling the tale of murder too beautifully may numb any moral concerns which arise from understanding the murderer too well.

Mailer's handling of the murder narrative in *The Executioner's Song* raises a central and extremely complicated moral question, one which has no simple answer: is it 'right,' in a moral sense, to identify so closely with a murderer? Why do we as readers so readily accept that identification, slip into it, sometimes seem to crave it? True-crime written after 1980 is mass-produced and mass-consumed on a level which suggests a reading public hungry for precisely the intense, disturbing identification with killers which Mailer crafts in *The Executioner's Song*. After the Abbott affair, Mailer would never again write of violence, or live with it, in the same way. Mailer once said of Larry

[27] Aldridge interview, 263.

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Schiller that his experience with Gilmore had "deepened him," had somehow made him grow. [28] In this regard, Mailer could have been speaking of himself. Through their first-hand experiences with the real destructive power of violence, Mailer and Schiller may have learned that getting too close to the violent carries a high emotional price. Readers and viewers, perhaps, have yet to learn that lesson.

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[28] Mary Dearborn, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) 345.

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Chapter 7: Ann Rule's True-Crime Revolution

Late 1970s Murder Narratives

After *Helter Skelter*, true-crime was well on the way to becoming an autonomous and fully-formed genre, although not until the 1980s would it achieve recognition and categorization from major mass-market paperback houses such as Ballantine, Dell, Harper, and Pocket (Random House). In the decade from 1970 to 1980, approximately 80 true-crime texts saw publication—defined as contemporary case studies of either single murderers or murder events—about twice as many as during the 1960s. That number doubled again in the decade of the 1980s, with the publication of 145 true-crime texts (as defined above).[1] In the 1980s, it became possible to build an entire writing career upon true-crime, to specialize exclusively in the genre. One writer who has done just that is Ann Rule. Beginning with her treatment of serial killer Ted Bundy, *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), Rule would become the premier American true-crime writer, shaping and re-defining the genre with her work, and building powerful and lucrative "name-brand" recognition for her product. To date, Rule has published twelve single-case texts, nine true-crime collections, and one crime-based novel. At present, she is working on a book about Gary Ridgway (the "Green River" serial killer), narrating his 30-year killing spree into an almost-guaranteed bestseller. Ann Rule has a website, an annual newsletter, and an enormous fan base; her books are regularly reviewed by publications such as The *New York Times* and *Publisher's Weekly*, and at any given time, one of her texts appears on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Ann Rule is a true-crime phenomenon.

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[1] Figures taken from Ben Harrison, *True-crime Narratives, An Annotated Bibliography* (Lanham, M.D.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.,1997).

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Ann Rule's career, and her sizeable body of work, illustrates that popular and mass-market culture can contain multiple and sometimes contradictory messages, and her work acts as a kind of corrective to the glorification of the killer which is present in some representations of violence. She reminds us that true-crime can speak for and about victims as well as killers, an interesting perspective for a woman writing within a male-dominated and misogynist genre (unfortunately, femicide as one of the fine arts—to paraphrase de Quincey—is perfected in the pages of true-crime, with exquisitely destroyed and hideously sexualized female corpses strewn throughout its pages). Rule's writing feminizes the genre by investing it with themes of deviant domesticity, sour heterosexual relationships, bad mothers and dangerous lovers. That she is the most successful, most widely-read practitioner of the genre demonstrates both the appeal of her themes and subjects and the buoyancy and inclusiveness of the genre. She has taken true-crime in a new direction, slightly feminist and certainly feminized, demonstrating the capacity of the mature genre to incorporate varied, more complex topics. Rule writes about ordinary normal-seeming brutes, not serial killers, and her usual subject is the sociopath-next-door.

Vincent Bugliosi presents an interesting counter-figure to Rule, for he too has built a career on writing true-crime, although except for *Helter Skelter*, his work has not had the dramatic and forceful impact on the genre which Rule's has. After the sensation of *Helter Skelter*, Bugliosi continued his writing career, teaming up in 1978 with Ken Hurwitz to publish '*Til Death Us Do Part*, a somewhat dreary story about two 1960s insurance fraud murders in Southern California. Bugliosi's true-crime was popular in the 1980s, although the writing is often thick with over-coverage of minute points of law and

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extended depictions of courtroom battles. As an attorney, he is preoccupied with the machinations of the criminal justice system, and many readers find his work compellingly interesting. Following the model set with *Helter Skelter*, Bugliosi co-authored his true-crime, working with Ken Hurwitz on *Till Death Do Us Part* (1978) and *Shadow of Cain* (1981), William Stadiem for *Lullaby and Goodnight* (1987), and Bruce B. Henderson for *And The Sea Will Tell* (1991), a murder narrative set on the tiny Pacific island of Palmyra. In the 1990s, Bugliosi moved away from true-crime, and his co-authors, and began writing political non-fiction. In 1991 he published *Drugs in America: The Case for Victory, a Citizen's Call to Action* with Michael Fisher; since then, he has solely authored five non-fiction books, with such subjects as the O.J. Simpson case, the Paula Jones/Bill Clinton debacle, the JFK assassination, and the 2000 presidential election. Although he began his career in the true-crime trenches, Bugliosi has steadily moved out of that genre and into straight non-fiction critiques of the American legal system by way of examining specific, sensational cases.

The gulf which separates Rule and Bugliosi is thematic, ideological, and gender-based, and the differences between these two true-crime giants define the genre today. Ann Rule has feminized true-crime, single-handedly changing it into a genre which has, for her work, at the very least, a predominantly female readership, and is concerned with themes of betrayal in love and deviant domesticity. [2] Rule's true-crime is a fun-house mirror image of the Romance genre, as her subjects narrate the dangers, both emotional

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[2] I make this judgment about female readership based on the official Ann Rule website guestbook, where very few of the responses are from men. Rule's readership is either mostly female, or her women readers are more vocal on the site, which is a distinct possibility. Publishers closely guard their sales and demographic figures, so it is difficult to know whether this is true. Rule's website address is http://www.annrules.com.

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and physical, of love-gone-wrong. Bugliosi's true-crime is concerned mainly with jurisprudence, systemic failures of justice, and righting the social order. The inheritors of his tradition—writers such as Jack Olsen, Mark Fuhrman, Joe McGinniss, and Thomas Thompson— are prominent within the genre today, and represent one strand of development which deals with deviant masculinity, jurisprudential issues, and depictions of sexual-sadistic gore. But Rule is the queen of true-crime, and her work both defines and dominates the genre, in terms of sales and of critical and public recognition.

One reason that Rule is such an interesting and powerful figure in the formation of true-crime is her creation and development of a feminine strand of the genre. True-crime could easily have developed into a deeply and exclusively misogynist genre, because it details and (unintentionally) glamorizes and sexualizes the torture, rape, and murder of mostly female victims. But Rule's true-crime valorizes strong women, takes the victimization of women very seriously, and understands that women can be equal to men in carrying out hideous and creative crimes. Although the equal gender distribution of sociopathy and murder certainly doesn't further anybody's feminist agenda, it is a far cry from Bugliosi's characterization of the Manson women in the late 1960s as robotic Barbie dolls. For Ann Rule, murder is an equal-opportunity endeavor. Furthermore, Rule deals with conventionally female-gendered themes—emotions, relationships, betrayal, manipulation, and obsessive attachments dominate the stories she chooses to write, with very little depiction of graphic violence.

The splintering along gendered lines within true-crime began to appear in the late 1970s. During that decade, certain themes, types of killers, and modes of representation became most prominent within the emerging genre, with the serial and sex killer and

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feminized victims—women, children, and homosexuals—garnering the greatest interest. Many 1970s true-crime texts were written by journalists, and they followed the established pattern and conventional structure, including the insider-narrator, the distance from and identification with the killer, thick description of social context, and a blend of fiction with fact. The genre was not dominated by any single author, but it was dominated by male writers. Typical examples include William A. Clark's *The Girl on the Volkswagen Floor* (1971), an unsolved murder narrative which is largely concerned with psychics assisting the police, and John Gurwell's *Mass Murder in Houston* (1974), a small press publication about the Dean Corll homosexual killings of 27 teenaged boys in Houston. John Gilmore's *The Michigan Murders* (1976) is an early serial killer treatment which wonderfully evokes the culture of a late 1960s large university community (Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti). *Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse* (1974) is a berserk-Vietnam-vet tale with political and sociological undertones, a miniature *Helter Skelter.* [3] These texts present victims-as-objects, with details about the discovery of fatally wounded bodies, graphic accounts of violence, and means of death taking hideous precedence. Apprehension and description of the psychopathology of the perpetrator is of secondary concern, and in the 1971 text, the killer is never caught. Forensic science and descriptions of police work also gained prominence within the genre during this period, and the archetype of the strong male detective force battling other, deviant men to avenge female victims became commonplace.

[3] This book was written by Joe Eszterhas, who would later become a Hollywood violence auteur, directing such films as "Jagged Edge," "Basic Instinct," and "Sliver." For more on him, see the February 9, 2004 issue of *The New Yorker*, article by Anthony Lane, pgs. 78-80.

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But the 1970s was also the formative decade of American feminism, and true-crime registered the effects of that social movement, mostly as a deepening interest in the personhood of the murder victim. Two texts in particular interrupted the serial presentation of mutilated female or feminized bodies and presented the murder narrative from the victim's point of view. Judith Rossner's 1975 blockbuster, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and Lacey Fosburgh's *Closing Time: The True Story of the "Goodbar" Murder* (1977) each cover the 1973 murder of Manhattan school teacher Katherine Cleary by a stranger she picked up in a singles bar. [4] Rossner's novel was not true-crime, strictly speaking; rather, she used the crime to depict the desperation of some newly-liberated single women's lives in the early 1970s. *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is a true-crime derivative, the fictionalized crime story. Fosburgh's treatment of the same story is true-crime, although she calls it "interpretive biography."

Many 1970s true-crime texts are cautionary tales for young single women, warnings against prosaic but new female activities such as hitchhiking and picking up strange men in bars. The two Cleary murder treatments bespeak a fear of liberated female sexuality, because the victim enjoyed "rough" sex and the freedom to explore and express her sexuality. Cleary is an example of the perils of women's lib *for women*, as her dreadful encounter with the wrong man ends her search for "Mr. Goodbar," the husband-hunt gone awry because of her willingness to enjoy sex outside marriage. She is portrayed in the two texts alternately as powerful and pathetic, an independent woman who wasn't afraid to hang out at bars by herself with a book if the mood struck her, and as a depressed, self-hating and desperately lonely woman who was seeking her

[4] Lacey Fosburgh, *Closing Time: The True Story of the "Goodbar" Murder* (ew York: Delacorte Press, 1975); Judith Rossner, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

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destruction by picking up strangers for meaningless violent sexual encounters. Commenting on the public fascination with the Cleary case, Fosburgh writes that "I, as a woman, think her drama was one that many women, myself included, have lived. She and the rest of us are pioneers, of sorts, developing our own role models as we go along, with only our own track records to guide us." [5] Both texts reinforce strictures against such pioneerism by illustrating what can happen if one is too sexual, too liberated, too free.

However, these texts also illustrate a growing interest, on the part of writers and readers, in the life and experience of the victims. Cleary/Theresa (her name in Rossner's text) is the heroine, the moral center, and the focal point of both texts, and her status in these books shifts from that of a named, yet still anonymous, female victim into that of the center of interest in the text. These two murder narratives endow the victim with an individuality which previous true-crime texts, in their focus on the act of murder and the behavior or psychology of the murderer, had lacked. In *Mr. Goodbar*, the actual murder occurs in the very last paragraph of the text, in a description conspicuously lacking sensationalism and gore. The previous 370 pages had been a third-person omniscient story of a young woman's journey into adulthood. The murder ends the life of the heroine and the text simultaneously, underscoring that this is the victim's story, and that without her, there is no narrative. We meet the killer only at the very beginning, in the short section called "The Confession," and then again when Theresa meets him, at the end of the book. This startles, because we know what she does not, and the moment of suspense and horror as we see Theresa innocently walking home with her killer is exquisite. Because she is writing fiction, Rossner can take such liberties and give us such thrills. As

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[5] *Closing Time* xi.

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true-crime, Fosburgh's text gives a more balanced depiction of both sides of the story—the killer's and the victim's. She devotes more time to portrayals of the killer, but still presents a victim who is more present in the text and more fully realized than the usual female 'characters' in 1970s true-crime, who appear only either dead, haplessly walking into their deaths, or frozen in idealized and stale descriptions of who they were. Fosburgh gestures towards a different textual treatment of the victim, one which Ann Rule would make an integral part of her murder narratives.

Ann Rule's True Crime

Ann Rule began her writing career penning stories for her local Sunday newspaper magazine in the mid-1960s. She quickly moved on to write for pulp magazines such as *True Detective*, and continued that work throughout the 1970s and 80s, with special jurisdiction over crime stories in the Northwestern states. Rule had been a Seattle policewoman in the mid-1950s (working in the juvenile division), and so she had the 'insider' status necessary to get stories and details about crimes directly from the source. Rule came from a law-enforcement family—her grandfather and uncle were both small-town sheriffs, one cousin was a criminal prosecutor, and another uncle was a Medical Examiner. Rule's native respect for and understanding of the unique culture of law-enforcement has undoubtedly served her well in gaining the trust of scores of detectives, police personnel, attorneys, judges, and jailers. Being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated world may also have given her something of an edge, particularly when she turned to writing full-time. Divorced in 1972, Rule suddenly found herself the sole supporter of four children. She says that during this period, "The detectives began to trust me and because they knew I was supporting the kids they helped

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me, gave me information." [6] From the very beginning of her career, Rule has shown a kind of pragmatic feminism by using her potentially degraded status—that of a poor, single, divorced mother in the early 1970s—to her advantage. Rule does not consider herself a feminist, but her career, and the personal circumstances which have shaped it, bespeak the power of subverting expectations of gender and genre. As she has grown as a writer, Rule has dramatically altered the concerns and themes of true-crime, feminizing a genre which has been dominated by men since its inception.

The body of Rule criticism, such as it is (at this point consisting only of reviews in trade publishing journals and the *New York Times*) suggests that reviewers find Rule lacking a thorough or satisfying analysis of her killers. Reviewers have written that "David Brown remains a black hole at the center of his own story," "There is another book yet to be written on Bundy's shadowy life," and "Ms. Rule doesn't pursue the stranger inside Diane Downs." [7] Such assessments suggest that Rule's treatment of these killers is inadequate, that it leaves the reader with too many unanswered questions about the motivations and the psychologies of major characters. It is true that Rule stops short of risky or too probative explanations of her killers, and she deploys the sociopath/psychopath designation as a stopper against messy or ambiguous endings. But Rule's true-crime isn't about why killers kill, it's about how people live their lives. She piles detail upon detail about the interior surfaces of these murder narratives—of homes, of relationships, of fragile psyches and of her own emotions. Rule's true-crime values

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[6] Interview in Robert Lindsey, "How a Writer Became a Murder Expert," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1984.

[7] All quotations taken from *The New York Times Book Review*: Maggie Paley, "Taking the Rap for Dad" (May 26, 1991), Thomas Thompson, "The Women Disappeared," (August 24, 1980), and Ann Jones, "'As Simple as Good Against Evil'," (June 14, 1987).

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and dramatizes female experience, fears, and desires (albeit usually twisted ones). She refuses to allow male writers to narrate female horror, and she insists that murder victims, usually young women, be given the dignity of a fuller accounting of their lives. Rule's work, like that of contemporary Romance writers, allows female readers to experience vicariously the inner, emotional lives of other women (and men). Rule is fascinated by ordinary people who do extraordinarily bad things to their lovers, spouses, children, and friends; she has found that her readers, ordinary themselves, are too.

Rule began writing true-crime full-time in 1969, but she didn't publish a book until *The Stranger Beside Me*, in 1980. She would publish single-case histories for the next twenty years, producing twelve such texts to date. *True Detective* magazine insisted that Rule use a pseudonym, "Andy Stack," and after her first book, she published the next three under that name. Rule has said that in the 1960s and 70s, *True Detective* "thought nobody would want to read a crime story written by a female," and her decision to publish books as a male suggests that she agreed. [8] By the mid-1980s, however, the popularity of her writing made it unnecessary to hide behind the male name, and she has published under her own name since 1987. In the mid-1990s, Rule began to compile collections of cases, called "Ann Rule's Crime Files," and she has published nine volumes these collections to date. Rule has also become a well-respected expert on violent crime, particularly serial killers. She regularly gives lectures and presentations to law-enforcement gatherings and conferences, including the FBI Training Academy at Quantico, Virginia. She has testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee, and in the 1990s she served on the Justice Department task force which created the FBI's

[8] Interview in Lindsey, "How a Writer Became a Murder Expert."

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Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), which gathers information and helps agents track and apprehend serial killers. Rule is not simply a writer of pulp serial killer books—she is a respected professional whose work has had real and lasting ramifications in law-enforcement. She is active in victims-rights organizations, and has always been sensitive to the difficult issues involved in representing victims of violence in her texts.

Beginnings: *The Stranger Beside Me*

At its core, all of Rule's work concerns interpersonal betrayal, violent and (usually) deadly. She is deeply interested in presenting and examining relationships—between husbands and wives, lovers, friends, parents and children, even relationships between strangers and their victims. Her first book was an exploration of such betrayal, experienced on a very personal level. The story behind *The Stranger Beside Me* almost defies belief. In 1971, Rule began volunteering one night a week at the Seattle Crisis Clinic, a local suicide-prevention hotline. While there, she met and became friends with a co-worker named Ted Bundy. During the next decade, she and Bundy kept in touch and socialized intermittently. In 1976 Rule was assigned by *True Detective Magazine* to cover a series of abduction-murders of young women throughout the Northwest. Eventually, it became clear that her friend, Ted Bundy, was responsible for the serial murders, for which he was tried and convicted (and executed by the state of Florida in 1989). Ann Rule had been handed "the story of a lifetime," because she knew Bundy personally and would be able to narrate his life and crimes as nobody else could. [9] Ted Bundy would become infamous as one of the most prolific and hideous American serial killers (one detective who worked on the case estimates that he killed 100 women over

[9] Ann Rule, *The Stranger Beside Me* (New York: Signet/New American Library/Penguin Putnam, 1980) Preface, xi. All subsequent quotes from this book will be in-text.

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his lifetime), and Rule's book became a best-selling blockbuster, the first in a long line. The Bundy case has shaped the trajectory of her career, and *Stranger* is her best-known and best-liked book. Rule's relationship to Bundy has never really ended, even long after his execution. In the April 2000 "Update" to *Stranger*, Rule writes that

> I have long since accepted that I will be answering questions about him until the end of my days. Not long ago, I lay in the operating room as an anesthesiologist prepared to put me to sleep before surgery. One of the OR nurses leaned toward me and spoke to me in a soft, concerned voice, "Ann?" she began.
>
> "Yes?" I thought she was asking if I was comfortable.
>
> "Tell me," she continued, "What was Ted Bundy *really* like?" (542)

Such an experience shows that Rule is imbricated with Ted Bundy in a strange and lasting way, and that her readers recognize the special power which resides in having been emotionally intimate with such a killer.

The Stranger Beside Me is an outstanding—and innovative—contribution to true-crime because it transcends the simple story of a psychopath and his obscenely destructive acts. The most powerful and interesting storyline concerns Rule's own relationship to Bundy—her growing realization that he truly is a killer, the painful understanding of his betrayal of her, and the difficult decisions she must make to betray *him*, in a sense, by writing a book about him. In the *New York Times* review of *Stranger*, Thomas Thompson wrote that "The power of the book she [Rule] finally wrote is in the disbelief that slowly, reluctantly changes into the anguish of betrayal. Ted Bundy manipulated Ann Rule as easily as all his victims." [10] Rule skillfully shows the very slow

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[10] Thomas Thompson, "The Women Disappeared," *The New York Times Book Review*, August 24, 1980.

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growth of that disbelief and sense of betrayal, and much of the suspense of the story resides in our anticipation of Rule's realization of the truth. There's never any real question about her being in danger—she wasn't Bundy's "type"—but the question, in her mind, of Bundy's guilt or innocence is as palpably dramatic as any physical confrontation with him could be.

Rule narrates the anguish of seesawing between belief in Bundy's innocence and acceptance of his guilt. Involved personally in the story, as Capote, Wambaugh, and Bugliosi were not in theirs, Rule's book is equal parts murder narrative and real-life psychological thriller. [11] The first-person narration adds immediacy and intimacy to the story, as she leads us into her journey of discovering that "the stranger at the very vortex of an ever-spreading police probe was not a stranger at all: he was my friend." (Preface ix) This supremely personal dimension to the Bundy story adds something to Rule's writing not normally associated with true-crime: real care for the killer as well as for the victims, and an unprecedented level of identification with the *victims* of the crimes. The personal connection between writer and subject creates a stunning sense of identification with both killer and victim, sharpening and changing an important true-crime convention.

Rule refines the dizzying sense of simultaneous distance and identification with the killer, transmitted through the writer to the reader. Because of her friendship with him, Rule deeply identifies with Bundy while telling his story, especially before she has become convinced of his guilt. Midway through the text, Bundy has been convicted of

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[11] Capote, although he was very personally involved with Perry Smith (some claim that the two fell in love with each other), did not know Smith before his crimes. Smith was also not a serial killer, and he didn't target any particular type of victim, unlike Bundy. These elements alter and intensify the quality of Rule's relationship to Bundy, and make the relationship unique within the genre.

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kidnapping a woman in Utah, and he is being held for arraignment in Colorado. He escapes from jail, fleeing into the mountains outside Aspen, and Rule is very worried about him. She writes, "Wherever Ted was, he was undoubtedly cold. I slept restlessly, dreaming that *I* had gone camping and discovered that I'd forgotten to bring blankets or a sleeping bag." (253) At these moments, through Rule's identification and sympathy with Bundy, we also become sympathetic, identifying with his human aspects and ignoring those which seem less-than-human. The identification with Bundy throughout the text is so strong that if Rule were a less skilled writer, the book could portray too much sympathy with the killer. But she sustains a knife's-edge tension between identification with Bundy and distance from who he really is, alternately pulling back and sharing her growing fears about his hidden destructive impulses. In the passage above, Rule alternates between worrying about Bundy and worrying about herself, and what she would do if he attempts to contact her for help. When Bundy is captured, Rule is relieved, and she even jokes with him about the escape in their subsequent telephone conversations and letters. At the same time, when he presses her to explain her "feelings about his guilt or innocence," she equivocates, ultimately answering that she "could not fully believe in his innocence." (258) Rule's rhetorical and emotional dance between the poles of believing in his guilt or his innocence continues, but as the story progresses and the evidence against Bundy mounts, the music slows to a dirge, and Rule begins to confront and accept the truth.

The reader experiences the same hideous sense of betrayal and revelation that Rule does, as the bright, clever, funny, handsome and charming Bundy of the start of *Stranger* slowly and inexorably becomes the loathsome and incomprehensible monster of

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the latter part of the text. This powerful and puzzling metamorphosis takes place before our very eyes. The force of Bundy's intelligence is great, his charm legendary, his friendly and gregarious nature inspiring the trust of nearly everyone he meets—victims, jailers, and judges alike. The extent of Bundy's manipulative ability is truly unbelievable: when he is finally, at long last, sentenced to die in Florida's electric chair, he exchanges these words with the judge:

> At that moment, it was clear that Cowart [the judge] would have wished that things might have been different. He looked at Ted and said softly, "Take care of yourself, young man."
>
> "Thank you."
>
> "I say that to you sincerely; take care of yourself. It's a tragedy for this court to see such a total waste of humanity....You'd have made a good lawyer, and I'd have loved to have you practice in front of me—but you went another way, partner. Take care of yourself. I don't have any animosity to you. I want you to know that."
>
> "Thank you."
>
> "Take care of yourself."
>
> "Thank you." (424)

This is an incredible exchange, with the judge who had just sentenced Bundy to death urging him to 'take care,' and using the euphemism 'you went another way' to describe Bundy's actions—in this case, the savage murder of a twelve-year-old girl. The judge was not a foolish or callous man, but he had come under Bundy's considerable sway during the long preceding trial. Rule says the judge's words contain a "chilling

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incongruity," a phrase which accurately sums up the enigma of Bundy's entire personality. He is at once an intensely likeable personality and a man who perpetrates atrocities which are hard to fathom. The physical evidence which convicted him was a deep bite mark on the buttocks of twelve-year-old Kimberly Leach, evidence which was the *only* physical connection between Bundy and any of his crimes. Because of his extreme intelligence and wit, Ted Bundy very nearly escaped conviction.

Details about Bundy's atrocities don't appear until the very end of Rule's book, when all hope of his innocence has vanished. As his crimes are exposed, through the trials, the endless arguments, and the slowly gathering evidence, the hidden Bundy is revealed, and Rule begins to comprehend who he is and what he has done. Her description of the hidden Bundy occurs in the extraordinary last numbered chapter of the text, in which Rule juxtaposes her deep regard for her friend alongside a forensic diagnosis of his disturbed psyche, and a thoughtfully presented, deeply sad accounting of his victims. She begins the chapter by saying that "The knowledge that he is undoubtedly guilty of the grotesque crimes attributed to him is as painful to me as if he were my son, the brother I lost, a man as close to me in many ways as anyone I have ever known. There will never be a time in my life when I will not think of him." (425) This statement allows us access to the writer's psyche in an unprecedented manner within a true-crime text. Rule had a brother who killed himself, and she had revealed earlier in the text her barely conscious identification of Bundy with her brother, allowing us to share her very personal pain and to understand the depth of the emotional bond she felt with Bundy.

Rule goes even further into self-revelation when she speaks about her emotional life at the moment she met Bundy. In 1971, when they met at the Seattle Crisis Clinic,

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she was struggling with a failing marriage. She would divorce in 1972, and begin supporting herself with her true-crime writing. In this same chapter, she writes that

> Ted came into my life, however peripherally, at a time when all the beliefs I had held smugly for many years had been shattered. True love, marriage, fidelity, selfless motherhood, blind trust—all those marvelous truths were suddenly only wisps of smoke blowing away in a totally unforeseen gust of wind....He [Bundy] was, in 1971, a decisive factor in the verification that I was a person of worth, a woman who still had a great deal to give and to reap. He was most assuredly not a predatory male eager to "hit on" a newly divorced woman. He was simply *there*, listening, reassuring, giving credibility to what I was trying to become. Such a friend is not easy to turn one's back on. (426)

Rule became close to Bundy just as she was undergoing tremendous personal upheaval, when she was rearranging and reevaluating her entire life, and painfully assessing her former expectations about how her life would be. Like many American women raised in the 1940s and 50s, Rule had organized her life around a set of gender-based assumptions, ideas about the salvational power and longevity of "true love, marriage, fidelity, motherhood, blind trust." Having those notions blasted away by the failure of her marriage, she needed to replace them with newer ideas about her identity, which her young male friend helped her to gain. Although they never had a sexual relationship, Rule admits she relished the attention of such a young and attractive man, and she acknowledges that his friendship helped build her eroded self-esteem. Rule's independence and, perhaps, her sense of self-worth, would grow out of her success as a writer, success that her book about Bundy helped her to attain. Bundy's failure as a

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human being would become wedded to Rule's personal, emotional, and financial success, and her relationship to him would come to define the themes and preoccupations of her writing. Since her first book, Rule's writing has been inextricably bound with the painful and life-altering experience of knowing—and loving—a serial murderer. With *Stranger*, Rule set an emotional template for the shape of her career by introducing the themes which would demarcate and dominate her body of work: betrayal, the twin poles of female vulnerability and strength, and hidden deviancy.

Rule has continued to write about Bundy, adding material to *Stranger* so that the book has changed form in the past twenty years. She added an Afterword in 1986, a section called "The Last Chapter—1989" the year Bundy was executed, and an "Update" in 2000, so that the "Updated 20th Anniversary Edition" of her text is a very different book from the first edition. The sustained continuation of her murder narratives is another innovation which Rule has introduced to true-crime, and which counters the timeless and frozen quality of previous true-crime. In an implicit acknowledgement of the ongoing and real effects of murder, Rule regularly updates her texts with information about survivors and victims, and with details about the killer's lives in prison. Even more current updates appear on her website and in her annual newsletter. Sometimes, as in Bundy's case, she writes about execution, and about seeing a case through to its often bitter conclusion. Rule's texts become living, changeable documents which affirm the lives of surviving victims and confirm the containment of evil. In the Afterword to *Stranger*, Rule writes forcefully about Bundy's victims, and about her own interactions with them, saying that since the book was published,

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> I have met a hundred people—more—who knew the victims. As I bend my head to autograph a book, someone murmurs, "I knew her—Georgeann...or Lynda...or Denise." Once someone said, "That was my sister," and twice, "She was my daughter...."
>
> I did not know what to say to them. (473)

Who could possibly know what to say to the mother of a murdered daughter? Rule, with great sensitivity and compassion, keeps silent, at least in her account of such exchanges. But by adding updates to her books, and including passages like the one above, she allows the victims an insistent presence in her texts which reminds the reader not to forget that murder ends lives and alters others, hideously and permanently.

True-crime as Bad Romance

After *Stranger*, Rule wrote her next three books— *The Want-Ad Killer* (1983), *Lust Killer* (1983), and *The I-5 Killer* (1984)—using the old pseudonym Andy Stack. These three texts lack the power of *Stranger*, and in them, Rule doesn't explore any of the themes which would define her later, more developed work. These texts concern serial killers, a subject Rule would drop in all her subsequent texts, not returning to it again to until 2004. The three texts are true-crime writing exercises, where Rule would hone her skills of description, suspense-building, and narration, and learn how to best employ the conventions of the genre. In these books, Rule is not yet herself, she hasn't yet found her voice or her subject; victims are secondary to the killers, and there are none of the unifying themes of her later work. After these three, Rule's next book was *Small Sacrifices* (1987), a story about Oregon child-killer Diane Downs, who shot her three young children in May 1983, killing one and seriously wounding the others. With this

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book, Rule finds one of the subjects which she would continue to write about for the rest of her career—that of a strain of deviant domesticity, in this case of mothering-gone-terribly-wrong. With *Small Sacrifices*, Rule launches her sustained pattern of narrating bad mothers, devious boyfriends, controlling husbands and bitchy women. Rule would continue throughout her career to transcend the sordid and sensational dimension of her topics to explore gender roles and to craft a unique and sustained exploration of normative female behavior.

The Diane Downs story is rife with squalor and sadness. In Rule's portrayal of her, Downs was an abusive and neglectful mother, concerned only with fulfilling her own sexual and emotional needs by serially dating married, unavailable, or inappropriate men. Emotionally obsessive, possessive, narcissistic and brutal, Downs was convicted of murdering her seven-year-old daughter and trying to kill her other two children, aged eight and two, in a manic attempt to win back the attentions of a married man she'd just concluded an affair with, who didn't want any children. In *Small Sacrifices*, Rule continues exploring the theme of betrayal, which she'd found in writing *Stranger*. All murder is a kind of betrayal—the murderer by definition breaks bonds of civility and humanity which one takes for granted—but surely, infanticide is an extreme form of betrayal, as the one who has given life and should therefore protect it chooses to end it with violence. Downs blamed the shootings of her children on an attempted carjacking by a "bushy-haired stranger," a figure infamous among detectives since the 1955 Sam Shepard case as a bogeyman invented to cover one's own murderous deeds. [12] As Rule

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[12] In 1955, Dr. Sam Shepard, who would become infamous as the model for the 1960s television program "The Fugitive," claimed that a bushy-haired stranger had entered his home and killed his wife. In one of the most notorious courtroom proceedings of the era, Shepard was convicted of the crime. His conviction was

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writes, in this passage of inflated rhetoric, "It would take a modern day Medea—a monstrous excuse for a mother—not only to shoot the three children of her womb, but to continue to play the martyred mother, to portray herself as a long-suffering victim and not a killer." [13]

Rule's Diane Downs *is* a modern-day-Medea, a terrible mother whose behavior is dictated not by the needs of her young children, but by her selfish obsessions with men and her own emotional needs. When the male detectives search Downs' home after the shootings, they find abundant evidence of negative mothering: "The place was almost empty; it looked as if someone had moved in only a day or so before, leaving boxes to be unpacked after a good night's sleep." (49) Downs and her children had lived there for two months. In the living room there is only a single chair and a television set, with photographs of Downs and her latest boyfriend (not, as in most 'normal' homes, of her children) on top of the console. Her refrigerator contains no food, just some moldy open cans, and "Most of the kitchen utensils and staples were still packed." (50) Surveyed and assessed by two male detectives, Downs' housekeeping skills are figured as critically and woefully inadequate in this passage. The state of her home—her skill at interior decoration, providing meals for her family, and the requisite display of her children's, and not her own, photographs—is used as narrative evidence that she is a bad mother. Her non-normative femininity is used to indict her throughout the text, and Rule's

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later overturned, and considerable suspicion has since been cast on a convicted rapist and felon named Richard Eberley, although Shepard has never been officially exonerated.

[13] Ann Rule, *Small Sacrifices* (New York: Signet/Penguin, 1987) 391. All following quotes from this book will be in-text.

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depiction of Downs portrays a negative mirror image of the idealized contemporary female psyche.

Downs is a compulsive communicator, constantly talking, keeping journals, writing love letters and taping her own conversations. But her conversations are obsessive monologues, her journals are artificial accounts of her devotion to her children, written to prove her mothering skills to the nosy detectives, and her love letters consist of empty platitudes directed toward interchangeable masculine subjects, not individual objects of true regard. The feminine 'trait' of communicative ability is twisted in Downs, as she uses communication as a weapon. Downs had become a surrogate mother before moving to Oregon, having a baby for a childless couple, an act which is figured in this book as perverse and even sinister. Eight months pregnant during her trial, Rule remarks that the trial may have to be postponed for her to give birth. But the defense lawyer "pointed out that Diane had a history of returning to work the day after delivery. She sounded as hardy as a peasant woman who squats to give birth in the fields and then slings the infant on her back, continuing to chop sugar cane or pick rice." (318) In this class- and race-biased statement, Rule infers that Downs is a baby-machine, more brood-mare than woman. Downs is a model for bad female behavior and negligent, even criminal, mothering.

As in much of her writing, Rule depicts heroic male detectives and prosecutors working against her female murderers. In texts with a male murderer, she shows her (usually) male cops and lawyers as avenging wronged female victims; this is one of Rule's most hackneyed and hardened conventions. Indeed, in *Small Sacrifices* the chief prosecutor, Fred Hugi, ends up adopting Downs' two surviving children, and the text

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ends with this neat summation of safety and a return to proper domesticity: "Christie and Danny share a home today with two people who love them and are committed to giving them a serene and happy future. Since the summer of 1986, they have lived with Joanne and Fred Hugi." (463) In her *New York Times* review of *Small Sacrifices*, Ann Jones finds that although Rule's book "verges on more," ultimately she "falls back to a simpler scenario in which 'nice guys' are manipulated by a scheming woman, an incurable sociopath, an 'enigma' with 'talon nails.'" [14] This narrative mode is prominent in Rule's work, and she ultimately does not explain why Downs acts the way she does. Relying on the idea of the sociopath/psychopath, Rule fits Downs into that rhetorical box, adding that "More than one rational forensic psychiatrist has said flatly, 'Some children are simply born evil. They start out evil, and they remain evil.'" (445) Rule's true-crime doesn't offer a new understanding of killers, and she falls back on the shop-worn dead-end final assessment of Downs as an evil sociopath. Instead of offering answers to the problem of evil, Rule's true-crime is a minute examination of lives badly lived and hideously ended; the most she can offer is a warning to men and women alike, about the perils of loving the wrong person. For this reason, the conventional 'good vs. evil,' detectives vs. killers structure of her stories does not weaken the power and importance of Rule's larger project.

Evidence of this larger project appears in Rule's own statements about why she writes. On her website, in her newsletters, in her forewords and epilogues, and in the texts themselves, Rule continually speaks about the need for women (and men) to be vigilant about their own emotional and physical safety. Rule is an expert in the language

[14] Ann Jones, "'As Simple as Good Against Evil'," *New York Times Book Review*, June 14, 1987.

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of deadly romance, able to understand the subtle, potentially fatal, warning signs of obsession and control. A survey of her titles shows a preoccupation with the ways in which romance can go wrong: *If You Really Loved Me* (1991), *Everything She Ever Wanted* (1992), *Dead by Sunset* (1995), *Possession* (1996), *Bitter Harvest* (1997), *...And Never Let Her Go* (1999), *Every Breath You Take* (2001), and *Heart Full of Lies* (2003). The titles of her true-crime collections, marketed as "Ann Rule's Crime Files," (these are shorter stories, usually developed from her magazine writing in the 1960s and 70s) are equally suggestive: *A Rose for Her Grave* (1993), *You Belong to Me* (1994), *A Fever in the Heart* (1996), *In the Name of Love* (1998), *The End of the Dream* (1999), *A Rage to Kill* (1999), *Empty Promises* (2001), and *Last Dance, Last Chance* (2003). Men and women are equally dangerous in her stories, suggesting that deviant domesticity is gender-neutral territory.

Many of Rule's texts narrate murder among the rich and powerful, and explore the lives of men and women who seem to "have it all." On her website, Rule writes about the kinds of subjects which interest her most:

> If a person has all those things that most of us long for—physical beauty, wealth, charm, intelligence, talent, love—and still wants more and more. . .and more, he (or she) may be an antisocial personality, someone who has no empathy for other human beings at all. These people, who often wear a perfect mask, make the best book subjects for me. [15]

Rule narrated the emotional underside of the 1980s and 90s, decades of soaring American divorce rates and huge economic losses and gains, of hidden unhappiness amid wealth

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[15] <http://www.annrules.com/news.htm>, May 5, 2004.

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and fortune. Rule doesn't write about "sickening torture or dismemberment," finding her true subject instead in the hidden, ravaged, perverse domesticity of broken marriages and failed families. Perhaps in response to the fear-generating stranger-murders of earlier true-crime in the 1960s and 70s, Rule's texts offer a fearful return to the traditional site of domestic disturbance and violence, the home. Rule's subjects are more reflective of 1990s crime statistics, which showed a steady and sometimes dramatic decline in murder rates nationwide. [16] Rule's soap-operatic storylines include a female firebug who burns two of her children to death rather than see her estranged husband get custody; a classically bad jealous boyfriend who kills his former lover when she spurns him for another man; a husband who murders his wife and then frames his step-daughter for the crime; a rich and disaffected Southern belle who murders her in-laws and blames her husband; and a pre-O.J. wife-murderer who, like that most famous probable-killer, is only brought to justice by a civil suit.

Rule has always admitted her vulnerability to her readers, trusting that they won't judge her too harshly, that they will understand and empathize with her emotional connection to the people she writes about. She has followed this narrative mode in all her books after dropping the male pen name, always beginning her texts with an address to the readers in which she shares personal details about her life. Invariably, she begins her books by thanking the people who have helped her write the book, and by explaining her special interest in the story. Rule readily admits to her readers that she is emotionally and personally invested in these stories, in various ways. Often, she dedicates her books to the

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[16] For more on the recent precipitous decline in crime rates, see Andrew Karman's *New York Murder Mystery* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) and *The Crime Drop in America*, edited by Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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victim she writes about, such as this dedication from her 1999 text, *...And Never Let Her Go,* about the murder of a woman named Anne Marie Fahey: "For Anne Marie Fahey, who was not perfect, but who was better than most, with no little regret that to bring her justice I have to tell the secrets that she held so dear." [17] In the nearly 700-page volume which follows that dedication, Rule uncovers Fahey's secret, hidden, emotional life, and portrays a woman who is at once vulnerable and filled with self-loathing, anorexic and insecure, but also vibrant, accomplished (she was a secretary for the governor of Delaware), and emotionally resilient, confronting her psychological difficulties in therapy and growing into a mature and self-confident woman. Rule presents Fahey as a multi-faceted person, not simply as a 'murder victim,' idealized through a still portrait of her interrupted life. Fahey is no match for her killer, the manipulative and possessive Thomas Capano, who ultimately murders Fahey when she attempts to end their illicit relationship; but Rule's portrayal of the victim brings to true-crime an unacknowledged feminism which refuses to allow killers to silence their victims textually.

Rule's practical feminism appears in this concern for the equal representation of victims. She has written that she hopes her books can warn vulnerable women about the dangers of loving the wrong person, or of taking a ride in the wrong car. In the most practical of terms, Rule sees herself as writing antidotes to the violence inflicted on women, from domestic abuse to murder. In a personal correspondence with this writer, Rule replied to a question about her longstanding and sincere concern for the victims she writes about:

[17] Ann Rule, *...And Never Let Her Go* (New York: Pocket Books, 1999) dedication.

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> I've never thought of myself as a feminist per se, but I do believe that all crime victims deserve a chance to "speak" if only through my telling their stories. This is particularly true in this book [the book she's writing now, on the Green River serial killer] as other works on the subject (which took 22 years to solve) tend to present the victims' mug shot pictures and their names, and that's all. I've researched who they REALLY were rather than focus the whole book on the killer. I do believe I speak for victims. And I do believe that women are superior to men in that we seem to understand psychological motivations better than the male—or maybe it's because we just more interested in why people do the things they do. But I really like men, too, so I'm not a card-carrying "feminist." I'm lucky that I'm in a profession where I get paid just as much as any male author, and usually a lot more! [18]

Rule evinces the common contemporary apprehension about calling oneself a 'feminist,' even as she presents a contradictory justification of her position (that women are "superior" to men, although not a common feminist belief, is often taken for one). It is clear, from much of what she says and from the themes and preoccupations of her writing, that Rule sees herself as speaking to, for, and about women. Although she is just one voice among many writing contemporary true-crime, hers is strong and clear; Ann Rule, still writing a book a year at age seventy, continues to ensure that the genre doesn't reside in a misogynist gutter.

[18] Email correspondence with author, April 9, 2004.

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Conclusion: The Sociopath as American Icon

One of the functions of true-crime, the writers of it would say, is to inform the public about the existence of hideous acts of evil, particularly murder, so that (ostensibly) people would know what a killer is, and therefore be more equipped to avoid him. Another function is to make transparent the workings of the criminal justice system, so that citizens can know that 1) murder *will* out, and 2) ghastly criminality *is* appropriately punished. With *Helter Skelter*, and in true-crime thereafter, a linguistic structure is set up to both deploy fear and arrest it, to show that random violence does occur, but that the randomly violent do not go unpunished. Paradoxically, the Manson family crimes were not, strictly speaking, random acts of violence—Manson and other family members had visited the Tate residence before the murders, and they had been to the house next to the LaBiancas. Both sites were chosen, probably by Manson, because they were known, and the Tate house was very remote. But this fact goes unnoticed, because it doesn't fit into the conception of 'random' violence which true-crime puts forward.

One puzzle of true-crime is that, from its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it has always narrated almost exclusively murders committed by white male offenders. Why, when racial violence exploded in American cities and on television screens, would a form of non-fiction crime writing almost entirely removed from current events attain status as a genre, quickly dominate the field, and be known as "true"? One answer is that there's not much that's 'true' about true-crime. It is a genre which, although it narrates real events, produces and assuages fantasy and fear about crime. It wouldn't have served the purposes of reader manipulation to deal with real social problems during the 1970s, and it doesn't suit the genre now. Serious non-fiction deals

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with current events, subjects such as terrorism, hate crimes, and racism; true-crime is a peculiar kind of non-fiction which has no interest in social criticism, discussion of current events, or cultural critique. After all, it is much easier, emotionally, to deal with the vaunted serial killer, whom we know, on some level, that we'll probably never encounter, than it is to face the lived realities of racial discord, poverty, economic inequalities, sexism, and a host of other American social ills. True-crime after *Helter Skelter* becomes an escape, and its preoccupation with serial killers signals its disinterest in the commonplaces and sometimes frightening difficulties of life in the United States.

True-crime became invested in manufacturing and capitalizing upon fear, and writers have often portrayed particularly hideous acts of murder as being more common than they actually are, through dramatizing and making such acts more prominent and accessible to large numbers of readers/consumers. In the 1980s, a particularly sadistic and frightening kind of murder, that committed by the sexual psychopath or serial killer, became a true-crime and mass media staple. Serial killers are a rare breed, but you wouldn't know that from perusing the shelves of a modern mega-bookstore, where true-crime has its own, usually quite large, section. Quantitative data about serial killers and killings is in fact hotly contested by criminologists and law enforcement agencies, but throughout the 1980s and 90s the mass media helped create the perception that serial killers, and murderers in general, were a rapidly increasing threat. [1] Sociologist Barry Glassner says that "between 1990 and 1998, when the nation's murder rate declined by

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[1] For more on serial killers, see Steven Egger, *Serial Murder: An Elusive Phenomenon* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990); Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Sara L. Knox, *Murder: A Tale of Modern American Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: A. de Gruyter, 1994). Jenkins is particularly good at discussing certain mythic elements about serial killers.

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20 percent, the number of murder stories on network newscasts increased 600 percent (*not* counting stories about O.J. Simpson)."[2] Given the topics and subjects of true-crime, during the 1980s it seemed that American women were in such danger from marauding serial killers that we should all have bought guns and stayed locked inside our homes. Maybe that's part of the point of true-crime, to act as a kind of social corrective to women's growing independence and presence in the workplace, in public and political life, and away from the home, throughout the 1970s and 80s. Ted Bundy certainly posed that kind of threat, and in true-crime depictions such as *The Stranger Beside Me*, his powers to kill and evade capture appeared to approach the superhuman.

In addition to giving Rule her first subject, Bundy embodied a theory about the deviant human personality which would dominate true-crime writing in the 1980s and 90s—the notion of the sociopathic personality. The sociopath, anti-social personality, and the psychopath (the sociopath's crazier cousin) have become familiar figures in the popular media landscape of crime and horror. Joseph Wambaugh developed the idea and introduced it as a true-crime staple in *The Onion Field*; the father of the term and the concept, Dr. Hervey Cleckley (see Chapter 1 for more on this), was among Ted Bundy's court-appointed psychiatrists during one of his pre-trial hearings to establish competency. In a way, Bundy and Rule together brought the socio/psychopath into mass or popular consciousness, because Bundy was one of the most devastatingly deceptive killers of true-crime's formative period, and Rule's book highlighted this aspect of his character. Bundy, as Rule says, has become the "poster boy for serial murder." (*Stranger* 541) His ability to mimic human emotions, to appear psychologically 'normal,' to uphold a façade

[2] Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus, 1999) introduction xxi.

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of ordinariness, has fascinated the public and professionals alike. For many years after the publication of *Stranger*, Rule traveled the country giving slide-show presentations about Bundy to law-enforcement and criminology professionals. Her knowledge about the sociopath has helped to legitimize her work, and she has become a widely-respected authority on serial killers. Partly because of her contribution to this body of practical knowledge, Rule is not viewed as a 'pulp' writer, nor is her work seen as exploitative or sensational. She is instead appreciated by her readers, reviewers, and by criminology professionals as an expert and a professional in her own right; far from being a Hawthornian "scribbling woman," Rule is a female writer who has contributed unique and valuable insights within a male-dominated field of endeavor. That Bundy helped propel her in that direction is one irony among many in her story.

Rule's description of Bundy-as-sociopath is classic, and the insights she discovered through him form the basis of contemporary understandings about killers:

> Ted could—and did—rub elbows with the governor, travel in circles that most young men could never hope to enter, but he could never feel good about himself. On the surface Ted Bundy was the very epitome of a successful man. Inside, it was all ashes.
>
> For Ted has gone through life terribly crippled, like a man who is deaf, or blind, or paralyzed. Ted has no conscience. (*Stranger* 427)

In this figuration, the conscience has an almost physical quality, the absence of which cripples like a physical disability. One is reminded of Mark Twain's short story, "Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," about a man whose conscience is embodied and lives outside himself; after the man literally kills his

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conscience, he goes on a guilt-free crime spree. Rule attributes Bundy's murderous core to his lack of a conscience, and this notion has gained great currency in true-crime and in popular understandings of what makes people kill. In the contemporary popular discourse about killers, portrayed in the pages of true-crime, on TV documentaries/docudramas and talk shows, and in films, the idea that simply lacking a conscience *in itself* makes one a killer is emphasized to the exclusion of all other theories, and is used to 'scientifically' explain behavior which has no rational explanation. It is clear that Ted Bundy had a woefully undeveloped conscience; it is also clear that many killers lack the ability to empathize with others. But it is equally clear in the psychological literature that not all sociopaths become serial killers. Similar to the abused-child explanation for such deeply anti-social behavior, one can easily make the argument that not every sociopath, not every hideously abused child, grows up to become a killer. There remains some other element, some unknown quantity or quality which pushes some over the edge of humanity and into territory formerly inhabited by the Devil.

The sociopath-dogma ultimately does very little to explain the atrocities perpetrated by Bundy and his ilk; rather, it allows the reader and consumer of true-crime access to what appears to be a more psychologically sophisticated means of understanding why such people commit such acts. Beginning with Bundy, Ann Rule invented a rhetoric of sociopathy, a means for ordinary readers to identify actions and behavior, with the tools of forensic psychology, which would formerly have been deemed 'evil.' Unlike Bugliosi, Rule doesn't rely on a rhetoric of evil to explain her killers; rather, she introduces a seemingly more subtle and interesting—and so, more appealing to an increasingly crime-savvy reading public—way of understanding such people. Using

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words and concepts which would become common knowledge in following years, the received wisdom of modern murder, Rule writes this about the sociopath:

> The antisocial personality does not evince the thought disorder patterns that are more easily discerned; there are few signs of anxiety, phobias, or delusions. He is, in essence, an emotional robot, programmed by himself to reflect the responses that he has found society demands. And, because that programming is often so cunning, this personality is extremely hard to diagnose. Nor can it be healed. (*Stranger* 434)

Hidden, horrifying, and un-healable—this contemporary understanding of the psychology of the killer betrays an emptiness and a hopelessness which stops any further conversation or discourse about redemption or rehabilitation. The sociopath label can be wielded in the same way that the 'evil' label often is—that is, calling a person a sociopath can end any meaningful comprehension about their actions, because sociopathy/psychopathy cannot be healed. Of course, the terms can also begin conversations about causes, connections, and therapies. [3] But such terms quickly become over-used, particularly in popular discourse, and because they signify psychological complexities that aren't readily understood, they are drained of meaning. The terms become catch-all containers, metaphorical and literal, for a range of unacceptable, anti-social, and entrenched behaviors.

The sociopath has appeared in earlier true-crime, specifically the books I've examined as exemplars of the genre. Perry Smith was a sociopath, and probably Dick

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[3] Beginning with the thesis of sociopathy, meaningful work is now being done on the neurology and brain-functions of convicted murderers. See Jonathan H. Pincus, *Base Instincts: What Makes Killers Kill?*(New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) for a good overview of this subject, with case histories.

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Hickock as well, although Capote never overtly said that Smith lacked a conscience and Hickock was figured as a rather conventional demonic figure. Interestingly, Albert DeSalvo is presented as monstrous, but as possessing a conscience. Hunter Thompson may have been sociopathic—or even psychotic—at times, and under the influence of various substances. Gregory Powell was certainly a sociopath, and maybe even a psychopath. His sidekick, Jimmy Smith, was a hapless and heedless killer, with a warped conscience. The Manson "girls" were guided into sociopathy by Manson, a true psychopath. Gary Gilmore was probably a sociopath, or at the very least a fractured personality, by the time he murdered; Ted Bundy was the sociopath par excellence, and all Rule's subsequent killers have been sociopathic as well. As the genre has solidified and become a body of texts capable of generic classification (and able to support a sustained critical study such as this), the primacy of the sociopath has gained ground. From a barely articulated concept of sociopathy in Capote and Wambaugh, through a rhetoric of evil, as posited by Vincent Bugliosi in *Helter Skelter*, and finally into a popular rhetoric of sociopathy as written by Rule, the popular understanding of killers has been shaped by the idea of the sociopath.

Through its use in true-crime, the notion of the sociopath has become a useful metaphorical tool, a way of first familiarizing and then separating the strange, the frightening, the disturbing. In his text entitled *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide*, Philip Jenkins writes about popular representations of serial killers:

> The cultural imagery applied to serial killers from the late 1970s had decisively shifted toward portrayals of monsters, savage animalistic beings at war with society. As such, they had come to represent an evil force that was at best

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> difficult to comprehend, and that could be dealt with only by forceful policing and constant vigilance. They were depicted as the purest conceivable examples of moral evil, and as such could be employed as a powerful recurrent theme in contemporary social and political rhetoric. [4]

One dramatic and powerful way of placing killers in a different moral category is to represent them as lacking one of the qualities which is often popularly understood as separating humans from animals—the conscience. Most of us can readily understand what a conscience is because most of us have the ability to sympathize and empathize, and we can agree that this emotional faculty helps us live peacefully with one another. Conscience—its presence and absence—has become an ordering principle, a way of separating the good from the bad, the benignly mad from the dangerously so. The idea that having a conscience in good working order separates the human from the inhuman has risen to prominence dramatically since the 1970s, in true-crime, criminological literature, and popular consciousness alike.

The belief that American society has become increasingly rootless, transient, and mobile has also become commonplace within discourse about crime. [5] Having the appropriate amount of regard and care for others is perceived as an antidote to sociopathy, which itself is a result of modern ways of living. True-crime tells its readers that having a conscience is more important now than ever, because we need such tools to

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[4] Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994) 120.

[5] Popular and scholarly works alike emphasize the perceived transience and "rootlessness" of contemporary American life (since the 1960s) as a factor in murder and murder rates—see Steven Egger, *The Need to Kill: Inside the World of the Serial Killer* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003); Steven Egger, *Serial Murder: An Elusive Phenomenon* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990); Roger Lane, *Murder In America: A History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997); Robert K. Ressler and Tom Schachtman, *Whoever Fights Monsters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

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successfully navigate a society of strangers. Seen as just one more ill within a 'sick society,' serial murder is thus understood an outcome of an extreme lack of conscience, itself brought about by too-rapid changes in modern life. Jenkins writes that in popular murder narratives, homicide is "presented as a manifestation of the callous and depersonalized nature of the present age, which is contrasted with the supposed harmony and tranquility of bygone days. In this view, we have become a society of strangers." [6] Stranger-killings are much more likely to occur within such a society, and the increase in such crimes appears to bear out the theory.

One aspect of this phenomenon is that the current American 'car culture' consistently appears as a factor within descriptions or explanations of serial and other types of stranger-killings, and the easy mobility of driving has been blamed for the difficulty of apprehending such criminals. In the 1980s, during a period which Philip Jenkins calls the "serial killer panic of 1983 to 1985," police and FBI agents reported widely on the increasing difficulty to track such killers and see the patterns of their crimes, because the easy ability to travel quickly and anonymously through jurisdictions enabled killers to strike randomly and variously. [7] Programs like VICAP were developed and funded, enabling different agencies and jurisdictions to track similar crimes in various geographical locations. [8] Although it is true that the refinement of the modern

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[6] Jenkins 123.

[7] This is Philip Jenkins' term, from a paper in the *Criminal Justice Research Bulletin* (1988). Cited in Ressler, 202.

[8] VICAP, or "Violent Criminal Apprehension Program," is an FBI program which was developed by legendary homicide detective Pierce Brooks in the early 1980s, and became operational in 1985. Robert Ressler consulted with Brooks in the creation of the program. Brooks is an interesting figure in true-crime—and in real crime as well. Brooks was a detective, consultant, and a homicide expert from the 1950s to the 1990s. Incredibly, Brooks was involved in the onion field, Manson (peripherally), Ted Bundy, and Diane Downs cases, as well as many other well-known high-profile murders. Like Wambaugh, Brooks also

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American highway system and the mass production of affordable automobiles has coincided with an increase in the amount of stranger-killings (from the data collected and analyzed annually by the FBI, the Uniform Crime Reports), there is no quantitative evidence which suggests that more driving necessarily equals more serial killing. In fact, the increase in homicide between strangers can be accounted for by more mundane, and therefore less sexy and compelling, phenomena such as drug- and gang-related murder. Qualitative and anecdotal 'evidence' was used, however, to further the political aims and funding for law enforcement agencies.

The statistics on serial killing vary widely according to who is reporting them (the news media, the FBI, various victims rights organizations, or individual police agencies), and the quantitative data remains difficult to understand and interpret. One of the biggest 'scandals' in the collection and interpretation of data on serial killing occurred around the apprehension and 'confessions' of Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Elwood Toole. When first apprehended in Texas in 1983, Lucas claimed to have killed hundreds of victims across the country, and many police agencies, including the Texas Rangers, believed him. The Lucas case was used successfully to lobby for the creation of the VICAP program; later investigations have proven that Lucas' confessions were largely fabrications, told "in order to have fun, and to show up what he termed the stupidity of the police." [9] The Lucas/Toole case took many years to be ironed out and understood more realistically. It is now thought that Lucas and Toole probably killed less than 10 people—awful, but far from the hundreds claimed initially.

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consulted for television, most notably for *Dragnet* and *Dragnet 1969*. He became a close friend of Ann Rule's, and he figures prominently in several of her books. Brooks died in 1998.

[9] Robert K. Ressler, *Whoever Fights Monsters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 199-202.

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Robert Ressler, widely recognized as the father of the term 'serial killer,' admits that his agency was responsible for stirring up fear. He writes that

> There was somewhat of a media feeding frenzy, if not a panic, over this issue in the mid-1980s, and we at the FBI and other people involved in urging the formation of VICAP did add to the general impression that there was a big problem and that something needed to be done about it....In feeding the frenzy [about serial killing], we were using an old tactic in Washington, playing up the problem as a way of getting Congress and the higher-ups in the executive branch to pay attention to it. [10]

As Jenkins points out, in the 1980s, it was "alleged that the typical [serial] killer wandered freely across the country, killing in ten or twenty states....This assertion was made chiefly in order to justify increased federal involvement in the problem, but it is questionable." [11] Although claims about large numbers of serial killers roaming the country have quieted down in recent years, the 'society of strangers' idea has become linked with an increase in murder in the popular imagination, even as murder rates have plummeted through the 1990s.

Bundy was one of the first serial killers whose mobility was linked to his crimes, and the requisite middle-of-the-book photographs in true-crime texts often show the killer's cars. Circumstantial evidence used to convict Bundy on some charges included his credit card receipts for purchasing gasoline, which showed that he had been in an area where several murders were committed. As Rule wrote, "Wherever Ted Bundy went, there was soon a lovely young woman, or two, or three, missing...," linking his crimes

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[10] Ressler 203.

[11] Jenkins 45.

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inexorably with his mobility. (187) As Bundy's crimes—and many others, sadly, in the 1970s—became more known, young people, particularly young women, were discouraged from hitchhiking, as being vulnerable and alone on the road was sometimes a precursor to being murdered. Ted Bundy is quite possibly responsible for single-handedly ending the formerly widespread practice of hitchhiking in America. Cars are crucial in each of seminal true-crime texts I've looked at: all the killers drive to the scenes of their crimes, two transport their victims by car (*The Onion Field*), and one (Hunter Thompson) wouldn't have had any stories to tell if not for his vehicles. Killers use their cars to hunt for victims, to transport bodies, to get to the lonely places where they'll enact their horrors. Cars and killers are linked inexorably in the pages of true-crime.

The "sick society" theory has been promulgated and expounded heavily by television media, and documentaries such as *America's Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries, Forensic Files*, and *Cold Case Files* have gained enormous popularity. Fiction television treatments of murder and its consequences, from *Columbo* and *Quincy M.E.* to *Crime Scene Investigation* (*CSI*), and various police procedural series such as *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and the many incarnations of *Law & Order*, have flourished since the 1970s. Popular textual treatments have informed television murder narratives, and the conventions of true-crime texts are commonly used in the numerous true-crime documentary shows. Dramatic re-enactments, inside information given by law enforcement agents, quick cutting to generate action, and constructing crime, murder, and evil as inevitable, all are integral to television murder narration. Most of the murder narratives I've written about here have been turned into films or television movies—as I write this, another TV movie version of *Helter Skelter* is about to air (May 16, 2004).

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Textual and visual murder narratives, done well, are guaranteed money-makers for television and movie studios and publishers; they also posit a version of contemporary America as a dangerous and perverse place, with normal-looking lunatics and crafty serial killers lurking behind every tree. The true-crime worldview is paranoid, suspicious, and obsessed with the imminence of danger and the elusiveness of safety. [12]

The contemporary obsession with safety has grown alongside true-crime; from Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* (1965), which revolutionized consumerism as well as the car industry, to the modern habit of insisting on helmets and safety gear in a range of formerly freer activities, to child-proof caps on medicines and safety seals on almost everything consumable, we've become a dangerphobic (and even more litigious) culture. Fear as a product has been peddled in various forms for many years (just think about the relatively recent phenomenon of selling insurance), but never before has there been such an efficient way of manufacturing and disseminating it, in texts and in graphic modes. True-crime, although reflecting certain realities—an increasing murder rate in the 1970s, for example—has always been preoccupied with fear, and consumed by a public which craves ideals of safety and danger-free living. Like those who love to feel the hideous stomach-churning thrill of a carnival ride, readers (and viewers) of true-crime seem to love to scare themselves, to live vicariously through the experience of both victim and killer, and to emerge unscathed in the end.

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[12] Although television dramas, documentaries, and films do contribute to the cultural work of true-crime, the focus of my study has been on the texts. I have found that field more than rich enough for a single dedicated study. Textual and visual true-crime, although sharing some conventions, partake of different types of media and means of production, differences which have shaped each mode uniquely. Perhaps this study will provide the catalyst, or even the basis, for another scholar to investigate and critique visual true-crime systematically.

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At its heart, true-crime talks about evil, and is one site in mass culture where the term is taken seriously. The popular epistemology of evil—that is, ideas promulgated within and through popular culture about the location and genesis of evil—can be gauged by looking at popular representations of acts of human evil. The true-crime murder narrative is an excellent place to isolate and examine beliefs about evil, for it is in these texts that real, singular actions become shaped and accrue meanings for the larger culture. Looking at the ways the story of murder is told provides a glimpse into how a society conceptualizes evil. In a book entitled *Evil: An Investigation*, Lance Morrow writes that "Evil is not an abstraction. It is always a story." [13] And so it is—evil doesn't exist outside a narrative, whether it is a true-crime text, a work of religion or philosophy, a history book, a newspaper article. The rise of true-crime during the period from Capote to the present points to a popular understanding of human evil as more complicated, subtle, and insidious than previous murder narratives would have it. This shift in popular ideas about evil was both reflected within and reinforced by a new way of treating murder and killers in narrative form, the genre of true-crime. Born in the 1960s, true-crime reminds us, via the figure of the sociopath, of the inescapability and the mutability of evil. Set against the hopeful 1960s counterculture beliefs that evil could be mediated or eliminated, true-crime countered those ideals and represented the emergence of a new popular understanding of evil. True-crime says that violence persists and that evil is inevitable, a grim message which it continues to give.

[13] Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 94.

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