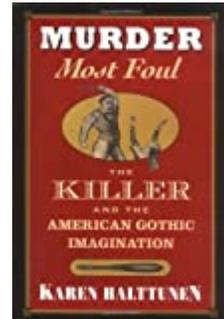




**Karen Halttunen.** *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. xiv + 322 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-58855-4.



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## Making Sense of Murder and Murderers in America

As local newspapers here in Colorado debate the meaning of the killings at Columbine High School—the symbolism of the black trench coats, the child-rearing practices of the parents, the mental health of the killers, the impact on the shooters of gothic role-playing games, graphically violent video games and song lyrics, and hate literature—it is useful to contemplate Karen Halttunen’s new book, *Murder Most Foul*. With the incisive analysis, conceptual clarity, and jargon-free, well-crafted prose that she previously brought to her study of nineteenth-century, urban, middle-class culture, Halttunen looks at the late eighteenth-century emergence of a new cultural strategy to confront murder, gothic horror.[1] As has been evident in the coverage of Littleton, and in the bold black and red *Rocky Mountain News* headline “Extra! Horror” which announced the event, that strategy continues to shape our American understanding of murder and murderers today.[2]

In line with scholars who have explored the impact of the gothic on antislavery and reform literature, Halttunen argues that the cultural construction of murder shifted from a sacred to a gothic narrative in the early re-

public. The colonial sacred narrative was based on an understanding of human nature as being innately depraved; of murder as being a sin linked to all other sins by their progressive nature; and of murderers as having more in common with other members of the community than not. Halttunen describes three forms taken by this narrative: the picaresque tale of criminality, a loosely structured, amoral, escapist story capturing the roguish life of the pirate or highwayman; the spiritual biography of the criminal as sinner, a tightly structured moral tale of sin, confession, repentance, conversion, and judicial death; and the execution sermon. The latter predominated as the prevailing crime genre in America until late in the eighteenth century. Preached just prior to the condemned murderer’s execution, the sermon took the usual form in which a minister chose a biblical text; articulated the doctrine rooted in the text; subdivided that doctrine into propositions; and explored the ways in which the congregation might bring these propositions to bear on their own lives. Execution sermons served to reconcile the sinner with the community by holding up the repentance of the murderer and his or her search for God’s forgiveness as a model for others, sinners all.

The murder narrative changed in the early republic as lawyers, alienists, and doctors challenged the cultural and political authority of the clergy. Influenced by new medical and legal discourses, and by sentimental ideals of manliness, womanliness, marriage and domesticity, new forms of crime literature appeared. These drew upon gothic conventions of horror and mystery for their power. Horror used inflated language and graphic treatment of violence to shock the reader into an emotional state that mingled fear, hatred, and disgust. The purpose of horror was not to provide a prurient rush of excitement or a salacious thrill, but rather to render the reader speechless in the face of the crime, unable to attribute any meaning to the extraordinary event. Mystery used incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives (influenced by the trial process in which both prosecution and defense went over the same ground from different perspectives and witnesses gave piecemeal and contradictory evidence) to impress upon readers the impossibility of knowing everything about the crime and, therefore, of understanding it. In the gothic murder narrative, the reading public sought answers to new questions about the nature of violence that arose in the cultural vacuum left by the decline in religion's explanatory power. Readers wanted to know the details of the crime (when, where and how it took place), the murderer's motivation, the process by which the criminal was brought to justice, and the meting out of punishment. Gothic narratives tried to answer these questions but failed, according to Halttunen. Ultimately, she asserts, the gothic narrative had the effect of affirming only the incomprehensibility of murder.

Halttunen analyzes how the gothic conventions shaped three new kinds of murder stories that emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century: the domestic murder, the sexual murder, and the insane murder. Domestic murder tales drew their power from the transition in American domesticity away from the patriarchal family, with its concerns for economic productivity and hierarchical order, toward the modern sentimental family, with its valuing of emotional intimacy and affection. These stories of spousal murder (most often wife murder), child murder, and familicide (slaughter of the entire family by its head) demonstrated the contested nature of this transition. Domestic murder tales allowed readers to explore the limits of patriarchal "correction" of family members, the boundaries of patriarchal authority, the perils of sentimental domesticity and romantic love, and the strains caused by married women's expanding rights to seek separation and divorce. These stories reflected

the influence of sentimental novels and drew upon the conventions of gothic horror and mystery by breaching the privacy of the home to reveal the dreadful secrets of hidden violence and coercion within.

Tales of sexual murder, like those of domestic murder, were new in American culture. These focused attention on the sexual relations of men and women, and on the sexual motives for their crimes. The stories explored the vulnerability of women through such subjects as rape, abortion, sexual commerce, sexual jealousy, seduction, family honor, and sexual experimentation. Like the domestic murder stories, the sexual murder tales reflected conflict over social change. In this case, it was a transition in sexual practices and their meanings that fueled interest in these stories. The family-centered, reproductive sexual system of the colonial period was giving way in the new republic to a more romantic, intimate and deeply conflicted sexuality. It emerged as communal and religious oversight of sexual behavior was undermined by migration, and as the ideal of romantic love raised expectations for emotional intimacy and erotic stimulation. However, the sexual murder stories focused not on the sexuality of the (predominantly) male murderers, but rather upon the sexual histories and physiology of their female victims. Emphasizing women's difference from men and the victim's distance from the ideal of female passionlessness, these tales constructed female murder victims as sexual aliens. For their power they drew upon a new, eighteenth-century sexual discourse that redefined sexuality as a matter of human nature (moral, mental, and physiological) not of specific acts. This discourse attributed tremendous causal power to human sexuality and, therefore, great potential for its pathological dysfunction. The testimony of physicians, particularly those in the new fields of obstetrics and gynecology, played a crucial role in these crime stories, which partook of gothic horror and mystery through the graphic autopsy reports that explored what physicians saw as the disgusting nature of female physiology, and through detailed descriptions of the terrible wounds inflicted upon the victim's body by both murderer and pathologist.

Tales of the homicidal maniac constructed the murderer as moral alien, a monstrous aberration from the human norm. These stories drew upon the testimony of alienists who transformed the language of criminal guilt from sin to disease. Mental illness was viewed as a temporary, partial or complete dysfunction of one or more of three faculties: mental, moral or volitional. The alienists told stories about the causes of insanity—the somatic disorders or "moral" circumstances (abuse or destitution, for

example) that gave rise to (and sometimes reflected) the defendant's condition. The figure of the mad killer relied upon the peculiar nature of these crimes for their gothic horror and mystery. These murders had no motive, were committed "out of character," or were particularly depraved, violent or monstrous. The construction of the murderer as madman reinforced the public's sense of the great divide between madness and normalcy, and underscored the inexplicable nature of human evil. Halttunen's discussion of the insane murderer would have been enriched by greater attention to the gendered construction of the homicidal maniac, for alienists understood the moral, volitional and mental faculties to function differently in men and women.[3]

One of Halttunen's most interesting conclusions has to do with the dialectical relationship between the public's attraction to increasingly graphic portrayals of human violence in the gothic murder stories and the humanitarian sensibility that in the eighteenth century was shaping various movements to prevent suffering and generating a broader cultural aversion to violence, pain and death. In a chapter entitled "The Pornography of Violence," Halttunen takes on historians who have viewed the appeal of sensationalism as undergirding the growing popularity of early nineteenth-century crime narratives. She notes that after 1800, murder literature in all its forms used body-horror to arouse both the reader's repugnance and excitement in the face of violent death. Primarily, body-horror was elicited through a detailed enumeration of the state of the corpse, and prolonged by additional information from the postmortem dissection. Rather than turning genteel readers away from these images of gore, putrefaction, dismemberment, and disembowelment—as Americans turned their eyes from cemeteries, carving meat at table, and the evacuation of bodily waste—these narratives riveted those who prided themselves on their "delicacy" of feeling. Halttunen argues that readers sought out these horrific experiences not for the pleasure of sensationalist feeling, but rather because the images of pain, violence, suffering and brutality allowed readers to triumph over what had newly become forbidden impulses. Over and over again, readers read these gothic murder narratives in order to suppress the taboo images over which they lingered, and to reassert their conscious mind over their darker impulses. The reading of horror literature "helped enforce the rising levels of repression demanded by the growing humanitarian sanctions against violent impulses and actions" (p. 82).

According to Halttunen, the ideological work done

by the Gothic murder narrative through its cultural construction of the murderer as a radically different being was to protect the Enlightenment understanding of human nature as rational, self-governing, and basically good. Modern murder accounts tried to explain human evil by blaming it upon environmental causes (such as the murderer's childhood experiences), motives drawn from the misapplication of reason, and ungovernable passions. However, such liberal explanations of crime could not satisfy readers who noted that some killed despite good religious upbringing and proper child-rearing, without motive, or coolly and dispassionately. While their monstrous acts were increasingly well documented and widely followed in court and trial report, murderers and their natures remained elusive and the meaning of their acts was inadequately explained by the new gothic crime narrative.

Halttunen's book is but the most recent contribution to the growing field of homicide studies, a subset of the vast study of violence in American culture. The field is represented by a new journal, *Homicide Studies*, by college and university classes on the film and literature of murder, by a series of outstanding analyses of specific murders, and by scholarly explorations of various kinds of murder throughout American history.[4] But Halttunen owes her greatest scholarly debt (and foil) to Daniel A. Cohen's 1991 study of literary genres and crime narratives, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*. [5] Rooted in many of the same documents and covering the same time period and region, both authors address the transition that occurred in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century murder literature. While Cohen discusses illustrative trial narratives in some depth, looks at the influence of genre on the forms of murder tales, and explores the epistemological shifts that transformed crime literature, Halttunen focuses on narrative conventions. While Cohen argues for the impact of commercial culture, the lure of sensationalism, and the rise of the penny press as causal, Halttunen attributes the change to the rise of secular humanism and a shift in Americans' basic understanding of human nature. Where Cohen emphasizes the emergence of ideological and genre pluralism in the crime stories of the early republic, Halttunen sees Gothic coherence. To Cohen's discussion of the impact of judges and lawyers on the crime narrative, Halttunen adds those of the physician, pathologist, and alienist.

*Murder Most Foul* poses the problem of murder in modern American culture as one having to do with why good people do terrible things. Even today, at the end

of the twentieth century, she says, we lack a systematic and satisfactory explanation for evil. Mystery novels and detective fiction are among the most popular and best-selling genres. We remain riveted by “true crime” stories in literature, television and film. In her “Epilogue,” Halttunen comments on two recent films, the horror film “Seven” and the “true crime” film “Dead Man Walking.” Halttunen sees in these films a small revisionist challenge to the Gothic narrative. Two characters in these films both condemn the crimes and warn against an easy categorization of even the serial killer as monstrous or sub-human. Such a recognition allows Detective Somerset and Sister Prejean to ascribe to a sense of the universality of evil. While Halttunen’s study does not (cannot) offer us a new way to come to terms with the presence of evil in our world, it certainly provides us with an understanding of the role played by the Gothic in contemporary culture. Rather than fearing and condemning its popularity among teenagers and young adult readers, film-goers, and gamers, her work suggests that we understand the work it does and address the underlying concern to which it speaks, the problem of evil.

The school killings of the past year have raised the visibility of this problem to new heights. I note that recently the Secret Service has offered its expertise to American schools, employers, and police.[6] After years of interviewing political assassins and attempted assassins, the Secret Service has formed the National Threat Assessment Center to train police and others in determining who among us presents a potential homicidal danger. The Center urges officials to reject cultural stereotypes of the murderer as different—lunatic, loner, or hater. In the experience of the Secret Service, killers are not mentally ill, socially isolated, or even male. Those who bear the responsibility of protecting public officials in America have discarded the view that people are of two opposite kinds—those who are capable of violence and those who are not. They have come to believe that everyone is more or less violent depending on the circumstances. It is too early for their view to have an impact on the assessment of danger from potential killers in the American school or workplace, but one suspects that it will take a long, long time to undermine the gothic construction of murder in American popular culture.

#### Notes

[1]. Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

[2]. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 20, 1999.

[3]. This issue is addressed to differing degrees in Catherine Ross Nickerson, “‘The Deftness of Her Sex’: Innocence, Guilt, and Gender in the Trial of Lizzie Borden”; Paula K. Hinton, “‘The Unspeakable Mrs. Gunness’: The Deviant Woman in Early-Twentieth-Century America”; and Lee Chambers-Schiller, “Seduced, Betrayed, and Revenged: The Murder Trial of Mary Harris,” in Michael A. Bellesiles, ed., *Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 261-281, 327-351, 185-209. Also in Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), pp. 169-172; Nancy Tomes, *A Generous Confidence: Thomas Story Kirkbride and the Art of Asylum-Keeping, 1840-1883* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry, *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); and Jeffrey L. Geller and Maxine Harris, eds., *Women of the Asylum: Voices >From Behind the Walls, 1840-1945* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

[4]. Recent works examining particular nineteenth-century murders include: David R. Kasserian, *Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); George Cooper, *Lost Love: A True Story of Passion, Murder, and Justice in Old New York* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998). Scholarly studies of murder in American history include: Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Ballantine, 1980); Peter C. Hoffer and N. E. H. Hull, *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England, 1558-1803* (New York: New York University Press, 1981); David Brion Davis, *From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (New York: New York University Press, 1987); and Roger Lane, *Murder in America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997).

[5]. Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and its Origins in American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[6]. *New York Times*, June 22, 1999.

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