

Second-String Sociopaths

Harold Schechter profiles America's forgotten, but no less fiendish killers in *Psycho USA*—and philosophizes on our cultural fascination with crime

by Vince Darcangelo

Gacy, Gein, Bundy, Berkowitz. Manson, Dahmer, Fish, Menendez. Zodiac, Green River Killer, Night Stalker, the Hillside Stranglers. These names are etched into the American psyche—haunted us, fascinated us. I would wager that most people could name more mass murderers than they could players on their favorite baseball team.

If so, then the above list is the psychopath equivalent of the '27 Yankees.

But in the past two decades, rampage violence and episodes of mass or random murder, such as school shootings and terrorism, have eclipsed serial murder as our national anxiety. In this new landscape, it is no longer names, but places that evoke horror within us: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Waco, Ground Zero.

Add to that list Aurora, Colo., where on July 20, a gunman turned a cineplex into a charnel house during the premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

As of press time, the shooting has killed 12 and left dozens more in hospital—and delivered a shock to the American psyche.

Well, perhaps not everybody's shocked.

"Nothing in terms of human depravity surprises me much anymore," says Harold Schechter, bestselling author and professor of American literature at Queens College at the City University of New York.

Schechter has written and edited books in various genres: academia

(*New Gods: Psyche and Symbol in Popular Art*); cultural studies (*American Voices: A Thematic/Rhetorical Reader*); and mystery fiction (*Outcry*).

But Schechter is best known for his work as America's foremost true-crime historian. He has penned the definitive accounts of grisly serial killers, mass murderers and cannibals such as Ed Gein, Albert Fish and H.H. Holmes. He was chosen by the Library of America to edit the genre's ultimate omnibus of atrocities, *True Crime: An American Anthology*, in 2008.



It was the latter project that inspired his new book, ***Psycho USA: Famous American Killers You Never Heard Of***, which will be published on Aug. 7.

"I came across these very sensational murders going all the way back to the late 18th century that generated a lot of publicity and public fascination at the time, but had faded into obscurity," Schechter says.

As a historian, he wanted to delve deeper into these cases, exploring both murderer and milieu with a full-book treatment. There was one stumbling block, he says: "I realized I wasn't going to live long enough to write all of them."

Dramatis Daemonic

Psycho USA is a gallery of ghouls, such as Andrew Kehoe, architect of the Bath School Disaster. In 1927, Kehoe blew up a public school in Michigan (where he had once served on the school board) and set off a car

bomb, killing 45—38 of whom were elementary schoolchildren.

William Edward Hickman: Kidnapped a banker's daughter and returned her—to collect the ransom—dismembered, disemboweled, and with her eyes wired open to appear to be alive until the money had changed hands.

“The Mad Sculptor” Robert George Irwin: A celebrated if troubled artist prior to committing triple-murder on Easter weekend 1937. He had become obsessed with his landlady's daughter, and when she married another man, he killed the landlady, another of her daughters—who modeled for pulp magazines—and a random boarder.

Then there's the 1873 Smutty-nose Murder, where two New England women were strangled to death while their husbands were on a fishing expedition. This outrage was documented by famed poet Celia Thaxter, who lived on a neighboring island and knew both the victims and the murderer. Schechter considers her account, “A Memorable Murder,” which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875, as the first piece of true crime writing.

“It predates *In Cold Blood by

80 years,” he says.

Why do some crimes become part of the collective conscious and others fade into history? It's something that's perplexed Schechter.

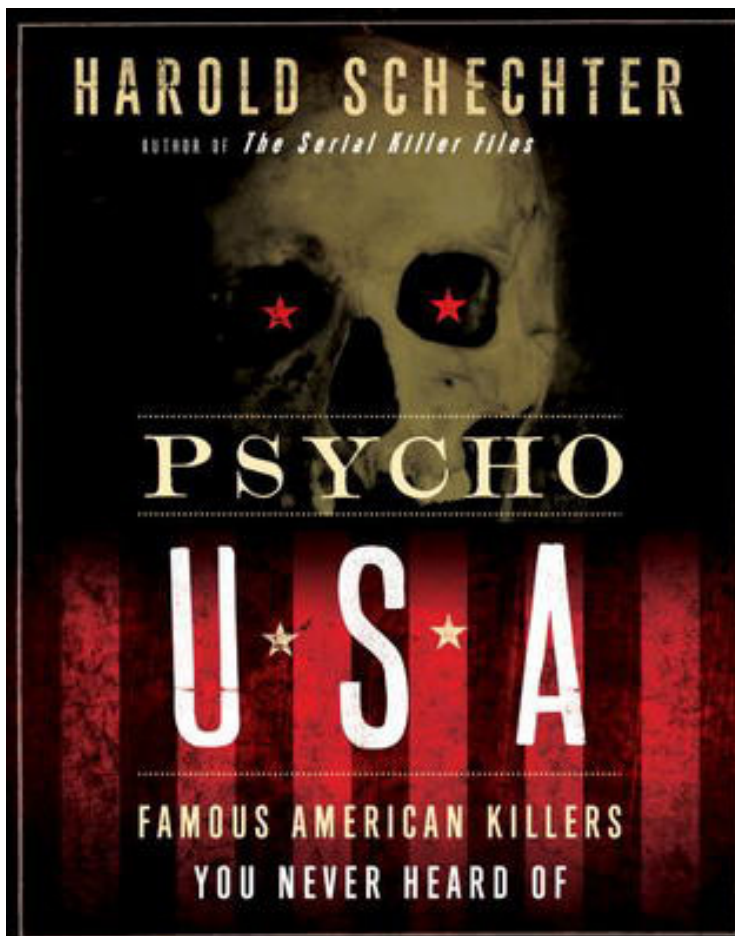
“Years ago, I was doing some research into 19th century dime museums, and I came across an advertising flyer for one Bowery dime museum that was advertising the amputated right arm of Anton Probst,” he says.

Probst was a German immigrant who methodically butchered eight people on a Philadelphia farmhouse in 1866—murdering all but one member of the Dearing family, “including a little baby in its cradle,” Schechter says. “It's every bit as heinous as the Charles Manson murders.”

Yet, while Manson has been a household name for more than four decades, Probst's atrocities were relegated to dime-museum novelty in his own century.

Cultural Carnage

Though most of Schechter's books have been about crime, his works are as much history as horror. “I've always been very aware that I



a deep communal chord, symbolize the particular cultural anxieties of the moment.”

In the 1920s, poisonings captured the public’s attention (“My theory is there was so little regulation of food and medicine,” Schechter says). In the ’60s and ’70s, Charles Manson “personified fears of sex, drugs, hippies.”

When Schechter published his first true-crime book, *Deviant*, in 1989, serial killers were a cultural touchstone—feared, reviled, lionized.

The Satanic Panic of the ’80s paved the way for the killer next door. It was the era of Adam Walsh and *America’s Most Wanted*. *Cops* and *Jerry Springer* and the birth of cable news. If you wanted to attract viewers, the serial killer was your go-to ghoul.

“That figure personified certain anxieties that were particular to that moment,” Schechter says. “Middle-class fears of crime and sexual anxieties having to do with the AIDS epidemic.”

By the early ’90s, serial killers were celebrities—trading cards, comic books, T-shirts and other so-called murderabilia. But since

was also writing cultural history, not just lurid sensationalism, which I have nothing against,” he says. “It’s not my field per se. I’m a literature professor. But I seem to have somehow segued into a historian.”

He discovered that—like fashion trends, political views and social mores—crime is subject to the whims of the zeitgeist.

“You can certainly learn as much about a society by which crimes people are obsessed with at a particular time,” he says. “I think, in a general way, the crimes that become national obsessions, that strike

this high-water mark, “that cultural obsession with serial murder has diminished,” Schechter says.

It has been replaced with fears of terrorism and rampage violence. Understandably so. The proliferation of school shootings, spree killings and mass murders over the past two decades is more disturbing than anything in *The Silence of the Lambs*. In the '90s, each school shooting seemed worse than the last, reaching a nadir with Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

“In many of these cases, the perpetrators are people who have been made to feel utterly powerless. Feelings of extreme impotence, and being nothing and nobody, are really key to these crimes,” Schechter says. “They’re going to go out with a bang and show that they are powerful people.”

While shooting rampages are nothing new—it’s been nearly a half-century since Charles Whitman killed 16 and wounded 49 at the University of Texas at Austin—their proliferation is part of an ongoing trend, where killers get branded with nicknames and calling cards. Instant celebrity.

Now, media influence can’t cre-

ate a serial killer, but it may resonate with a disempowered young man contemplating suicide.

“I haven’t totally worked this out in my mind, but we live in an age where attracting attention to yourself has become such a huge thing, especially to younger people, and people’s lives unravel. They feel that they’re nothing and nobody to the core. This becomes a way of achieving some kind of prominence,” Schechter says. “For a lot of serial killers in the past, media celebrity was a fringe benefit... Now it seems to be a driving force.

“Unfortunately, I think, it’s kind of a phenomenon that’s not going to fade anytime soon.”

Technology has also had an impact. A century ago, the limitations of machinery kept kill counts low. Modern weaponry, as well as larger and denser populations, has increased the capacity for carnage.

“People did commit mass murder in those days, but there’s only so many people you can kill with an axe,” Schechter says.

In earlier times, “someone might pull out a Colt revolver and shoot some people, but obviously you can do more damage with an AK-47.”

Post-Mortem

Perhaps the clearest, if not cheeriest, takeaway from this is that rampage violence is not a modern invention. We've struggled with it for centuries.

Thus far, a solution has proved elusive, and the Aurora shootings reinforce the need for progress in this area.

Nevertheless, "existing approaches to violence research do not fit well with efforts to reduce rampage violence."

This commentary, penned by Drs. John M. and Robin B. Harris in the article "Rampage Violence Requires a New Type of Research," appeared in the June issue of the peer-reviewed *American Journal of Public Health*.

That's June 2012.

Just weeks before the July 20 massacre in Colorado, and a month or so before the deadly attack on a Sikh in Wisconsin, which underscore the Harris' argument.

But ultimately, even with the best science and public policy, we won't be able to prevent every attack. One can be singled out at random, anywhere, anytime. That's what gives rampage violence its

power.

Like terrorism, it haunts us with its unpredictability, and its impact ripples far beyond the initial event. Be it the recluse with the letter-bomb. The zealot with the shrapnel vest. The grad student with a grudge and designs on a grand exit.

One man with murderous intent—and an automatic weapon or two—can garner instant notoriety. Satellites transmit the carnage around the globe in real time and administer mass PTSD.

Schechter offers a dab of balm for our anxieties.

Through his work, we can experience these crimes from a thoughtful distance, and while time can never undo the impact of tragedy on the individual actors and their loved ones, it can offer the rest of us the comfort of perspective.

It's a reminder that we have experienced tragedy before. And we have persevered.

As James Baldwin wrote, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read."

Read more of Vince Darcangelo's fiction and nonfiction at www.vince-darcangelo.com.

KILLER READS

The Harold Schechter Hit List

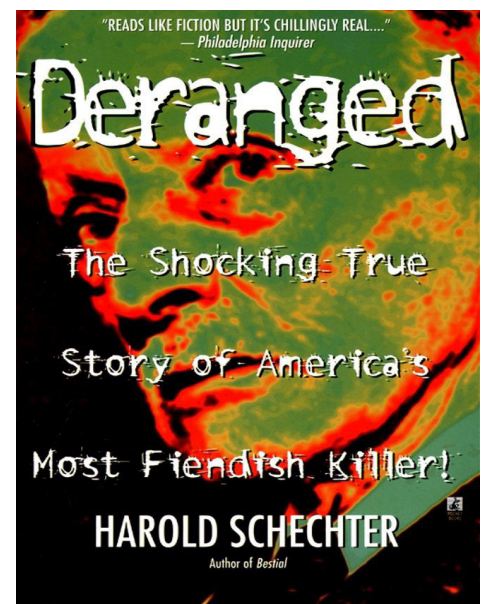
Sure, Harold Schechter is a great historian and has a nose for interesting subjects. But what makes his writing so compelling is his flair for storytelling. “The challenge I set myself is to transform thousands of pages of dry documents into a compelling narrative.”

No surprise. He is, after all, a literature professor. Great writing is also a family affair. He is married to the poet Kimiko Hahn and the father of YA author Lauren Oliver.

Schechter is currently taking a sabbatical to focus on his next book, a full-length treatment of Robert George Irwin, “The Mad Sculptor.” Meantime, readers can dig into *Psycho USA*, and newcomers would be wise to explore his earlier works as well. These are narratives that dissect our cultural history to the marrow. Profiles that reveal insights about our species usually reserved for psychology texts. Harrowing tales that horrify, inform and stay with the reader long after the final line.

Deranged

This was my introduction to Schechter’s writing—and the fiendish Albert Fish. The narrative is as gripping as Fish’s actions are nauseating. Pedophilia, murder, cannibalism. This is a must-read for anyone—just not after a heavy dinner. Here,



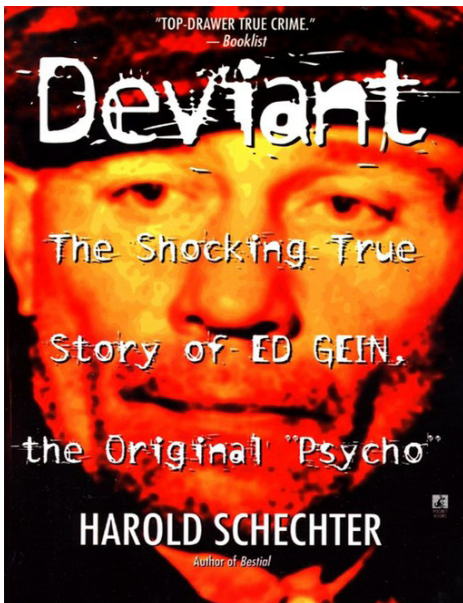
you will learn where the tastiest part of the human anatomy is. You'll learn about the perineum—and its functionality as a pin cushion. You'll also encounter the man who took on the electric chair—and won.

Sort of.

Most of all, you'll get a glimpse of American culture as the Roaring '20s segued into the Great Depression; taste the deadly cultural cocktail of naivety and anonymity that allowed a child-murderer to flourish; and mine the depths of religion and pathology.

Deviant

Ed Gein was a mild-mannered grave robber in rural Wisconsin in the 1950s. Nobody back then could have imagined the impact he would have on Hollywood. Gein has served as the inspiration for three successful book and film franchises: *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Silence of the Lambs*.



A bio like that would typically earn one a Hollywood star.

It earned Gein a life sentence in a mental institution.

We don't want to give away too much of the good stuff. Let's just say you wouldn't want to hire Gein as your interior decorator—unless you're really into “organic” lampshades.

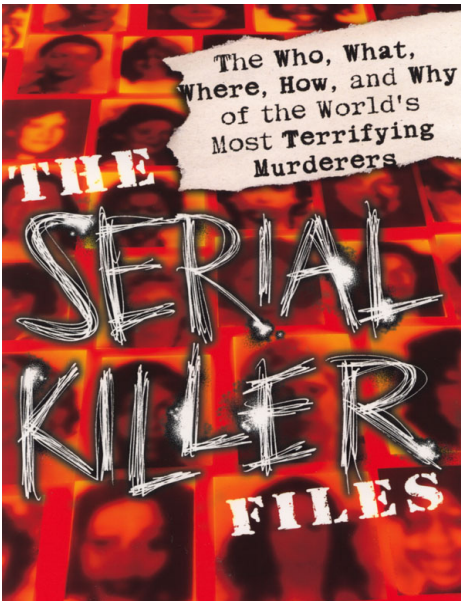
Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment

Violence in the media is nothing new, and Schechter dispels the nostalgia of “innocent” times when kids weren't exposed to violence.

Because those times never existed.

Schechter chronicles humanity's obsession with violence through the centuries. An informative and fascinating book.

The Serial Killer Files



It was a toss-up between this and *The A-Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*. I was inclined to blurb the *Encyclopedia* for nostalgic reasons, as 1997 was a hell of a year—and that was one hell of a book.

It also garnered more buzz as it was in step with the times (think *The Profiler*). *The Serial Killer Files* came out post-9/11, and serial killers weren't the bogeymen they'd once been (think 24).

However, this compendium is the ultimate roadmap to the darker shadows of our species. And it makes a great conversation piece on your bookshelf.

The Whole Death Catalog

2009's tour-de-force of final breaths will leave you... well, breathless. It's *Lonely Planet* meets Last Rites. What more can you say about a book that markets itself as leaving "no gravestone left unturned"?

To explore more of Schechter's books, visit www.haroldschechter.com.

