

On the Shelf

Confessions of a True Crime Book Fiend

Tom Cardamone

Every personal library has that special mantle for stray titles or the odd bottom shelf where the outliers collect cobwebs. Woven into the teetering stacks that threaten to turn my humble studio apartment into an Ozmandias-like string of ruins are numerous true crime books: the bloody back alley abortions of literature. Often featuring bad prose, hastily written to cash in on garish headlines, these tabloid grotesqueries have littered grocery store checkout lanes and airport newsstands for decades. Yet they belong to a long, historical tradition in American culture: crime reportage. As a queer book reader, I've cobbled together a gruesome assortment of a subgenre rarely dissected: gay crime. Such books can be carved into two categories: catalogues concerning victims and perpetrator portfolios.

Full confession: I'm an obscure. For the most part, the true crime books I've read and collected contain examples of both, but the contrariness of my reading tastes means I've circumnavigated some rather large bogymen. I've not read a word about Dahmer or Gacy. These two serial killers have certainly produced their share of pulp, but none of the titles have called to me (though a friend is currently reading Joyce Carol Oates' novel, *Zombie*, inspired by Dahmer, which I've put on my reading list and, quite randomly, I'd like to note that my files contain an old photo of John Wayne Gacy posing with then first lady Jocelyn Carter at a Democrat Party event). Nor have I gotten around to Leopold and Loeb, those young killer queens whose attempt at a perfect murder led to a Hitchcock movie, a novel, several plays, and too many books for me to know which one suits my tastes (their attorney, Clarence Darrow, was equally famous for defending these fiends as he was evolution. His successful

role in the Scopes "Monkey" Trial provided the grist for Spencer Tracy's character in the film, *Inherit the Wind*). Somehow I bypassed these monsters. Possibly they were eclipsed by the progenitor of my criminal fascination: Charles Manson.

As a teenager I was obsessed with forbidden knowledge, the occult, horror films, anything that seemingly mirrored the perceived darkness of my secret: homosexuality. The linkage isn't as obvious nowadays, but in the early 80's the criminality and otherness of homosexuality remained strong: no positive images existed in the media. The swirling specter of AIDS was a growing, undefined dark cloud. I'd long sought answers and escape in books, and was given privileged permission to search the attic of a favorite used bookstore for comic books. It was there that I read as much of *Helter Skelter* as I could. I'd long been attracted to the allure of true crime books but rarely got

my hands on them. Flipping through the book, I was astonished and electrified by the dispassionate reporting that Manson had had sex with boys. Something inside of me clicked; sex and crime became a charged, binary force. As the store's manager mounted the stairs to check up on me, I shifted from view. In seeking further shadows a

distinctive darkness unfolded across a lifetime of reading. The overwrought, sophomoric link between sex and death has long been over-cooked and served up in countless dissertations. Pain and pleasure are literature and film's sullen twins. But my quest for the queer within crime had a slow burn; insatiably curious about sex, I only needed to draw inky blood once a year.



Targeted gay reading, however, was a long way off. Queer content was a bonus, if you will—an additional and thrilling pink organ among the assorted entrails left by the Zodiac and the Boston Strangler. An early, scandalous favorite was *Savage Grace* by Natalie Robins about socialite Barbara Baekeland and her son Brooks. Written from a unique point of view: observations from the famous socialites who knew and mingled with the doomed family, the book reads like an hallucinogenic *Vanity Fair* article. I wonder how well it sold. Americans love microwaved Greek drama: the rich, New York City, a gay son grappling with an incestuous mom. Most other books have been gristlier and decidedly down market: *Angel of Darkness: The True Story of Randy Kraft and the Most Heinous Murder Spree* by Dennis McDougal about the serial killer who killed male hitchhikers and patrons of gay bars is just brutal. This tour of 70's California serial killing is a tough haul, triply so as solving the minutely-detailed murders are made doubly difficult as similar killers were working the same stretch of coast. *Abandoned Prayers* by Gregg Olsen is equally vile. Ineloquently constructed, it's centered on the abuse and murder of a child by his psychopath, formerly Amish, gay dad.

Bag of Toys is unique in that the author, David France, is a gay journalist. The lurid tale of shady Manhattan art dealer Andrew Crispo is a genuine rags to riches tale meets 80's excess. The sometimes choppy delivery never gets in the way of the story (the author's first, he's since gone on to document sexual abuse in the Catholic church as well as co-author former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey's autobiography). Any book that features Meat Packing District sex clubs, Debbie Harry, Liberace, and buckets of cocaine is aces, as far as I'm concerned.

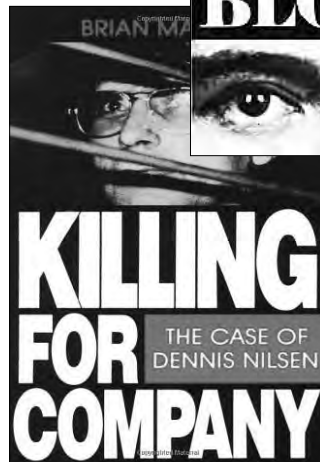
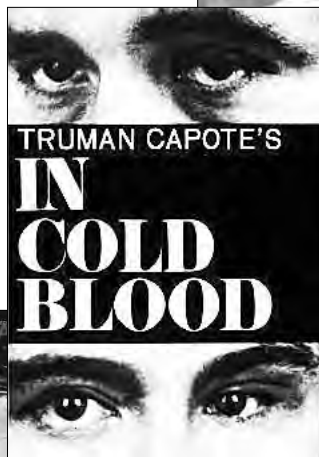
As a queer writer, Gary Indiana is in a class of his own. His crime fiction is fascinating and delves deep into cultural causes and media obsessions. That his novelization of the Andrew Cunanan affair, *Three Month Fever*, is often shelved with nonfiction is proof of its scorching success. Cunanan is fully realized and Versace's Miami murder is a career

pinnacle for Indiana, one that has overshadowed the fact that it's part of a trilogy examining American crime. The novel *Resentment* offers an insanely entertaining take on the crimes and trial of the Mendez brothers, while *Depraved Indifference* follows real life mom and son grifters Sante and Kenneth Kimes and is as creepy as it is an addictive read.

Averaging one book a year means two things: I've collected more titles than I can digest as well as stalked numerous other tomes. *The Man With Candy* by Jack Olsen, a prolific crime writer, details the sexual sadism of a Texas serial killer who lured his victims to their doom with the help of two teen assistants, one of whom ended up killing him. As a mild anglophile, I grabbed *Killing For Company* about the crimes of British serial killer Dennis Nilsen (the author, Brian

Masters, has also written a book about Dahmer), but have yet to crack its spine. I've seen a documentary on Robert Berdella, who raped, tortured, and killed six young men in Kansas City in the 1980's, but haven't acquired the book on his crimes, *Rites of Burial* by Tom Jackman and Troy Cole. Same with *Where The Bodies Are Buried* by Fannie Weinstein and Melinda Wilson. I haven't read the book but saw a gripping exposé on serial killer Herb Baumeister on cable one night. He staged mannequins around his indoor pool and, like Gacy, was married.

Some books focus on gay victims—its true criminal prejudiced politics. I've only dipped into the *The Boys of Boise* by John Gerassi, which explores the hysteria and persecution in the 1950's that led to mass arrests in that Idaho town. (This book, like *Bag of Toys*, has an updated version while I've only accessed the original.) I've been meaning to pick up *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* by David K. Johnson for awhile, but have read Robert C. Reinhart's out of print fictional account of gay life during the McCarthy era, *A History of Shadows*. I own a copy of *Harvard's Secret Court: The Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals* by William Wright and, having just seen the powerful, intimate Off Broadway play, *Unnatural Acts*, which also concerns this frightening bit of nearly forgotten history, I am interested



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BELDAN SEZEN

in researching this topic further (as I believe it was a much more common occurrence than we know; another such “purge” at Stetson University in the 1950’s is detailed in the Anthony Perkins biography by Charles Winecoff, *Split Image*).

This article doesn’t cover all of the titles I’ve come across, and more books are on the way: David McConnell’s *Gay Panic* is forthcoming. *Cobra Killer: Gay Porn, Murder, and the Manhunt to Bring the Killers to Justice* by Peter A. Conway will be out next year from Magnus books. I just ordered *Manuel* by Christopher Jackson, a book from 1964 about a Chilean hustler who kills his john. Rummaging around at The Strand Bookstore recently, I discovered *Closing Time: The True Story of the “Goodbar” Murder* by Lacey Fosburgh. I know of, but haven’t seen, the Diane Keaton, Richard Gere film, *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, and was surprised to learn that the killer was Times Square trade with a gay lover. Needless to say, I bought the book.

So my bookshelves runneth over. And have for awhile now. In college I studied psychology and wrote a paper on serial killers. I was lucky enough to have first been exposed to Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* in a class on detective fiction. It’s one of the very few books I’ve read twice. (On a side note, Capote ecstatically blurbed the aforementioned *Closing Time*). When it comes to my bookshelves, he’s like Leopold and Loeb’s naughty literary uncle. So much has been written about him that, not knowing where to start, I simply haven’t. Yet I’ve spent so much time babysitting his demonic progeny. This darkest obsession among my reading habits hasn’t been the easiest to share with other writers, and tends only to elicit a raised eyebrow and fewer dinner invitations. I don’t drool over death or get excited by explicit scenes, and though I am not particularly compelled to offer disclaimers here, I do sense something deeper than morbid curiosity. It all goes back to that attic, the revelation in my hands and the footsteps on the stairs.

Tom Cardamone is the editor of *The Lost Library: Gay Fiction Rediscovered*, and author of the erotic fantasy novel, *The Werewolves of Central Park*. His short story collection, *Pumpkin Teeth*, was nominated for a Black Quill Award and was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. His fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, some of which can be read on his website: www.pumpkinteeth.net.

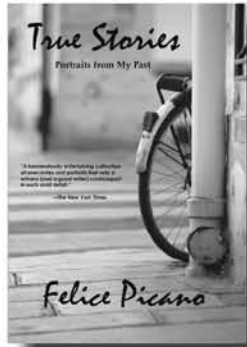
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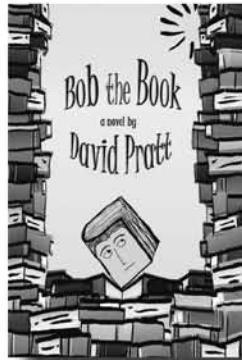
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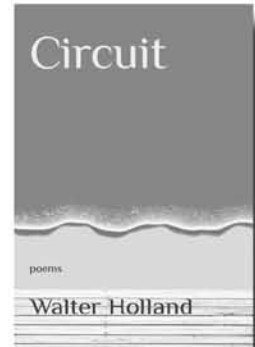
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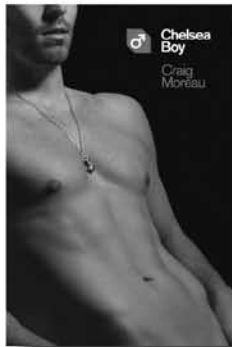
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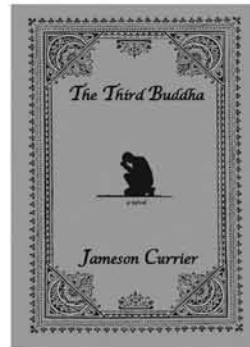
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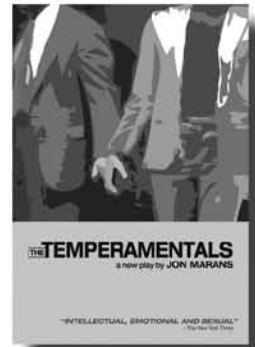
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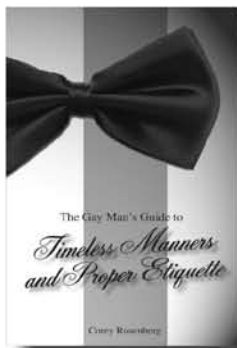
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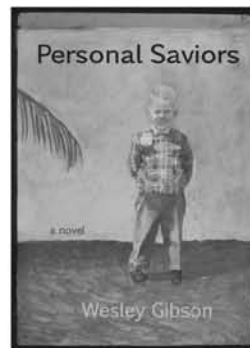
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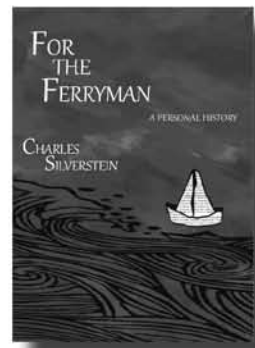
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