



# Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination

By Karen Halttunen

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Confronting murder in the newspaper, on screen, and in sensational trials, we often feel the killer is fundamentally incomprehensible and morally alien. But this was not always the popular response to murder. In *Murder Most Foul*, Karen Halttunen explores the changing view of murder from early New England sermons read at the public execution of murderers, through the nineteenth century, when secular and sensational accounts replaced the sacred treatment of the crime, to today's true crime literature and tabloid reports.

The early narratives were shaped by a strong belief in original sin and spiritual redemption, by the idea that all murders were natural manifestations of the innate depravity of humankind. In a dramatic departure from that view, the Gothic imagination--with its central conventions of the fundamental horror and mystery of the crime--seized upon the murderer as a moral monster, separated from the normal majority by an impassable gulf. Halttunen shows how this perception helped shape the modern response to criminal transgression, mandating criminal incarceration, and informing a social-scientific model of criminal deviance.

The Gothic expression of horror and inhumanity is the predominant response to radical evil today; it has provided a set of conventions surrounding tales of murder that appear to be natural and instinctive, when in fact they are rooted in the nineteenth century. Halttunen's penetrating insight into her extraordinary treasure trove of creepy popular crime literature reveals how our stories have failed to make sense of the killer and how that failure has constrained our understanding and treatment of criminality today.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

In this absorbing piece of cultural history and analysis, Halttunen (history, Univ. of California at Davis) looks at depictions of murder in American 18th- and 19th-century popular writings. She argues that the killer in literature is a projection of our socially constructed conception of evil. When Esther Rodgers killed her infant child in colonial Maine, the printed account of her crime described her as a common sinner who went too far. Two centuries later, perpetrators of lesser crimes were portrayed as inhuman monsters in the gory horror novelettes of the time. By tracing changes in American literary representations of the killer, Halttunen chronicles a change in the way we, as a culture, come to terms with violent death. In doing so, she maps the evolution of the moral and religious beliefs of our society. Meticulously researched and compellingly argued, this book represents a solid addition to any American literature collection. AMike Benediktsson, "Library Journal"

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### Review

The invention of [true-crime] detective stories is often ascribed to Edgar Allan Poe, particularly in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, published in 1841. In *Murder Most Foul*, Karen Halttunen demonstrates that a longer view is required. Her book is a spirited and lively account, generously sprinkled with compelling anecdotes of grisly yet intriguing murders, murder sites and executions, accompanied by explicit contemporary illustrations. Beginning in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, she traces how accounts of murders changed from being seen as evidence of sin and evil to a more imaginatively complex perception of the murderer as a monster of Gothic terror...[Her] argument has a wide and expansive force. (Markman Ellis *Times Literary Supplement*)

[*Murder Most Foul*] analyzes three centuries of American murder narratives, from execution sermons delivered in colonial America to the recent movies *Seven* and *Dead Man Walking*. Halttunen makes a convincing argument that how we view murder depends very much on how we view murderers--and ourselves...This is a thorough, scholarly, well-written work, intelligently argued and full of juicy examples of over-the-top Victorian journalism, on which Halttunen draws for her accounts of certain notorious murders and for contemporaneous reaction to the crimes. Halttunen amply demonstrates that current American culture's avid interest in murder has important cultural and spiritual antecedents. Weaving examples and analysis together into a very readable whole, Halttunen manages neither to condemn nor to condone the various moralities she writes about, leaving readers free to make up their own minds about the usefulness of a murder-saturated popular imagination--a valuable achievement indeed. (Ellen McGarrah *San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*)

This is a bold and imaginative study of what the jacket describes as a "treasure trove of creepy popular crime literature." Halttunen's book is based on her close study of brochures, pamphlets, and narrative accounts of murders and murder trials in the United States, from the colonial period roughly to the middle of the 19th century...As you can imagine, this book is fun to read; and it is genuinely enlightening. It is, in many ways, cultural history at its best. Halttunen is a brilliant reader of texts...[and her] imagination, her interpretive skills, are enormously fruitful...[*Murder Most Foul*] is excellent and enlightening (like all of Halttunen's work); and my basic complaint is that I wanted more. In any event, I recommend it highly to everyone interested in the history of law, crime, and the American soul. (Lawrence M. Friedman *Law and Politics Book Review*)

[This is an] absorbing piece of cultural history and analysis...By tracing changes in American literary representations of the killer, Halttunen chronicles a change in the way we, as a culture, come to terms with violent death. In doing so, she maps the evolution of the moral and religious beliefs of our society. Meticulously researched and compellingly argued, this book represents a solid addition to any American literature collection. (Mike Benediktsson *Library Journal*)

An involving account of the shifting social constructions and understandings of murder in pre-20th century America. Drawing on a wealth of sources, including confessions, trial accounts, and court documents, historian Halttunen traces how the burgeoning romantic movement--and particularly its most extreme manifestation, the gothic--utterly transformed the Puritan conception of crime and punishment. She holds that the Puritan belief in predestination meant that "the early American murderer was regarded as a moral representative of all sinful humanity, and was granted an important spiritual role"...With the arrival of the gothic/romantic, Halttunen convincingly argues, murder came to be seen as a monstrous aberration, something outside the pale of ordinary humanity...[*Murder Most Foul*] is formidably researched and well argued. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

By focusing on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American crime literature, Halttunen explores how the popular view of murder underwent a major transformation during the period, in particular the changing attitudes toward the meaning of human evil in an increasingly secular society. The predominant response to radical evil was shaped by Gothic conventions of horror and inhumanity, a legacy that, Halttunen persuasively argues, still informs our response to killers and their crimes today. (*Nineteenth-Century Literature*)

Contrary to conventional opinion, Halttunen insists it is a mistake to read the Gothic imagination as an "irrational reaction against an excess of Enlightenment rationalism." Instead, she urges her readers to view the "cult of horror" as an indispensable complement to Enlightenment liberalism, the innocence of which it protects by constructing evil as outside the bounds of human understanding...For what distinguishes *Murder Most Foul* is the careful way in which Halttunen documents her thesis, drawing on a rich tradition of execution sermons, trial reports, circulars, and penny dreadfuls culled from the archives...she advances her thesis with such thoughtfulness and insight that one cannot help but see otherwise conventional links between the Gothic imagination and Enlightenment liberalism afresh. (Jonathan Veitch *American Quarterly*)

#### From the Back Cover

Karen Halttunen explores the changing view of murder from early New England sermons read at public executions, through the nineteenth century, when secular and sensational accounts replaced the religious treatment of the crime, to today's fascination with socio-psychological anatomies of murder. Halttunen's penetrating insight into her extraordinary treasure trove of popular crime literature reveals how our modern stories have failed to make sense of the killer and how that failure has constrained our understanding and treatment of criminality today.

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#### **Russell Howell:**

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