



Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment

By Harold Schechter

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Does violence in movies, on television and in comic strips and cartoons rot our children's brains and make zombies—or worse, criminals—of adults at the fringes? In this cogent, well-researched book, American pop-culture expert Harold Schechter argues that exactly the opposite is true: a basic human need is given an outlet through violent images in popular media.

Moving from an exploration of early broadsheet engravings showing torture and the atrocities of war, to the depictions of crime in "penny dreadfuls," to scenes of violence in today's movies and video games, Schechter not only traces the history of disturbing images but details the outrage that has inevitably accompanied them. By the twentieth century, the culture vultures were out in full force, demonizing comic books and setting up a pattern of equating testosterone-fueled entertainment with aggression. According to Schechter, nothing could be further from the truth. He also blasts those who bemoan the alleged increased violence in media today, and who conveniently scapegoat popular entertainment for a variety of cultural ills, including increased crime and real-life violence. Though American pop culture is far more technologically sophisticated today, Schechter shows that it is far less brutal than the entertainments of previous generations.

Savage Pastimes is a rich, eye-opening brief history that will make you rethink your assumptions about what we watch and how it affects us all.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

"We belong to an innately violent species," argues Schechter. Violent entertainment is popular, he says, because it's natural to indulge in "taboo fantasies" and "escape into realms of forbidden experience." Indeed, from the crucifixions of the Romans to the guillotines of the French Revolution, from wax museums' torture dioramas to P.T. Barnum's sideshows, people have flocked to spectacles of gore and suffering. Motion pictures became popular, Schechter explains, partly by delivering realistic violence (the first special effect in cinema history was the simulated beheading of Mary, Queen of Scots in an 1895 feature). Crime fiction, from the penny dreadfuls to today's bestsellers, has always sold big, but even literary classics, like Poe's stories, continue to enthrall partly because they speak to the violent imagination. As far as Schechter, a Queens College literature professor and author of several true crime books on serial killers, is concerned, today's entertainment is far less violent than yesteryear's; special effects may make films and video games more graphic, but everything's simulated. While Schechter makes an engaging argument for the bloodthirsty tastes of our ancestors, he rather quickly dismisses contemporary sociological research on the effects of media violence on youth. This entertaining, provocative, not entirely convincing work will be a treat for literate readers who can't register for the professor's classes. Illus.

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From Booklist

Ace serial-killer biographer Schechter doesn't buy the yap about movie/TV/video-game violence being worse than all previous gruesome entertainment and inspiring worse behavior. Violent crime rates are declining even if video games are getting gorier. Moreover, the history of violent entertainment suggests that humanity is kinder, gentler, and more squeamish than ever. As recently as the famously wholesome 1950s, shoot-'em-up westerns dominated TV, producing more corpses per half-hour during after-school and prime-time viewing hours than ever since: where are the westerns now? Farther back and for centuries, thousands mobbed public executions now considered appallingly sadistic, buying the likes of miniature guillotines (to decapitate birds and mice for children's amusement) as souvenirs. Only late in the nineteenth century did violent amusement become strictly representational, and the epicenter of theatrical gore, Paris' Theatre du Grand Guignol, closed in the 1960s. Nowadays action movies may be louder than ever, but onscreen mayhem is minimal. Of course, this history and its copious pictorial record make for great browsing as well as straight reading--but no moral trepidation allowed! *Ray Olson*

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Review

"Entertaining, provocative...a treat for literate readers." -- *Publishers Weekly*

"How smart and enlivening his argument is...A bloddy fine riposte to those who would censor with clouded hindsight and muddy reasoning." -- *Kirkus Reviews*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kathleen Bosarge:

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Joseph Cosgrove:

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Carlie Manson:

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