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Richard Tithecott. *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. xiii + 192 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-15684-8.

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Policing Our Dreams: Deconstructing the Serial Killer

Richard Tithecott's insightful study *Of Men and Monsters* provides a provocative glimpse into the public's fascination with serial killers. Taking the Jeffrey Dahmer case as his prime example, Tithecott follows the process in which several different discourses–medical, legal, sociological, criminological, and historical–contribute toward a popular perception of the serial killer which elevates him to mythical status. Throughout all stages of the Dahmer case, we witness this intricate process of social construction: his murders, his apprehension by the police, the uncovering of gruesome evidence in his apartment, the public trial, complicated by the question about the defendant's sanity, his sentencing and incarceration, and, finally, Dahmer's violent death in prison. In tracing the development of the case, Tithecott outlines the social roles that the serial killer can be made to play; alternatingly, he can appear as animal, chivalric knight, aristocrat, crazed homosexual, charismatic loner, or insidious infection of the social body. Tithecott's basic assumption throughout his analysis is that "serial killing should not be explained away as 'something else,' but that the serial killer is 'doing what he wants to do,' making his fantasies come tragically true" (p. 59). The book's two major segments, one entitled "Policing the Serial Killer," the other "Dreaming the Serial Killer," suggest that these fantasies the killer lives out are shared by the culture that produces him, as visions of subversion we need to control and suppress, but also as visions of liberation and excess we need to acknowledge as parts of our personal and cultural selves. Serial murder, Tithecott suggests, is a cultural construct that polices social boundaries, an argument that goes against the consensus that the killer is a monstrous other, a force so alien that we never need to face the possibility that violence–committed by white, heterosexual males against non-whites, women, or homosexuals–is part and parcel of our culture. "Figured as extratextual, and almost extraterrestrial, beyond the reach of normal man," Tithecott writes, the serial killer "exists in a world of unspeakableness, an immaterial world beyond the (female) body of language and the text" (p. 161).

Though work by Jane Caputi, Cameron and Frazier, and Joel Black has paved the way for a critical assessment of serial murder, Tithecott's book is most deeply indebted to Philip Jenkins' study *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (1994). Jenkins argues that serial killers hardly ever conform to their popular stereotype. The social construction of serial murder is consistently at odds with criminological and sociological research because it is controlled by law enforcement and special interest groups, which all pursue their own respective self-serving pragmatic and ideological agenda. Against the stereotype of the white male who has suffered from abuse during his childhood, Jenkins poses a more highly differentiated and heterogeneous image, which acknowledges that serial murder is committed by a wide variety of culprits.

While Tithecott embarks on the same endeavor of dismantling the stereotype and debunking the serial killer as a figure of myth, he clearly goes beyond Jenkins when he asserts that the "myth of the serial killer is maintained with the help of fantasies that we ascribe to the serial killer being inextricably implicated in and interpenetrated by the dreams of 'normal' society" (p. 178). This Foucaultian bend in Tithecott's argument, which is quite unlike Jenkins' concentration of sociology and criminology, makes *Of Men and Monsters* a welcome addition to the increasing number of critical studies of serial murder, perhaps even more so because Tithecott manages to discuss the more complex theoretical aspects of his topic in a straightforward, accessible language. Where Jenkins sees the FBI as the primary "author" of the discourse on serial murder, Tithecott delves into the flow of postmodern culture, abandoning the notion of a single, accountable author and instead indicting us, the readers, for our complicity in the myth. Where Jenkins makes

pragmatic suggestions for improving law enforcement techniques, Tithecott acknowledges our tendency to naturalize power in order to gloss over social difference and injustice. With its broader critical scope and ambition, as well as its sophisticated reading of popular culture, *Of Men and Monsters* ultimately aims at empowering its readers to disentangle themselves from the cultural imperatives of alterity.

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