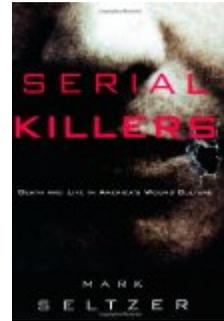




Mark Seltzer. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1998. ix + 302 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-91481-9; \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-91480-2.

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Always the Same and Always Different: The Serial Killer as Cultural Icon

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks identifies “ambition” as one of the driving forces of narrative. The self, Brooks writes, “creates a circle...mainly in front of itself, attempting ever to move forward to the circumference of that circle and to widen it, to cast the nets of the self ever further” (p. 40). Considering that Brooks thinks of plot as a combination of repetition and variation, driven by complex and intense desires, it would be appropriate, in more than one way, to think of Mark Seltzer’s new book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* as ambitious. With great sophistication and virtuosity, Seltzer’s study of popular culture widens the circle of inquiry on the subject of serial murder—theoretically, historically, and rhetorically.

First, Seltzer’s ambition is to capture contemporary culture as a vast and complex system, structured by ideologies that often fragment into impossible oppositions and maddening ambiguities. Obviously, this project requires a wide range of reference points, the most crucial and typical of which are the figure of the serial killer and the spectacle of serial murder. “Serial killing,” Seltzer writes, “has its place in a culture in which addictive violence has become a collective spectacle, one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross” (p. 253). As prominently as the serial killer might figure in the book’s title, he is but a specific symptom of the general breakdown of boundaries, albeit on the extreme outward boundary of human behavior. In negotiating a sense of identity in this destabilized social environment, the serial killer sets the precedent for the rest

of us. Tragically, however, he fabricates the self through the endlessly repeated violent enactment of what makes the culture, according to Seltzer, so toxic in the first place. In him, we see cultural forces converge and cultural boundaries erected, erased, and redrawn. Public and private, individual and collective, self and other, and bodies and machines—they all merge into what Seltzer calls “the pathological public sphere.”

In the spirit of transgression, Seltzer touches on a wide variety of phenomena, which he reads as indicative of what he calls America’s “wound culture,” a culture that provides identity through the “convening of the public around scenes of violence...the milling around the point of impact...the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (1). As symptoms of this culture Seltzer calls on examples like the zombified demeanor of fashion models on contemporary runways, the infamous “Holmes Castle” in the Chicago of the 1893 World Exposition, Lew McCreary’s underrated novel *The Minus Man*, the writing of, among many others, Stephen Crane and Horatio Alger, and the 1996 national election, which Seltzer characterizes sardonically as a “contest about trauma and wounds; the shattered and already posthumous war veteran—dead man talking—and the make-love-not-warrior whose tag line is ‘I feel your pain’ ” (22). Equally acerbic and strikingly acute insights are reserved for the nation’s current TV favorite, *ER*, which is “pure wound culture: the world, half-meat and half-machinery, in a perpetual state of emergency...an

endless series of torn and opened bodies and an endless series of emotionally torn and exposed bio-technicians“ (22). Given the range of these reference points, the serial killer serves more as a focal point for their energies than as the object of analysis in the strict conventional sense.

Second, Seltzer’s book is ambitious since it constitutes the latest, and so far theoretically most sophisticated, account of the significance of serial murder in contemporary American culture. Seltzer succeeds not only in casting “the nets of the self ever further,” developing and expanding his own previous work, especially in *Bodies and Machines* (1992), which he frequently refers back to. He also casts the nets of inquiry further than his predecessors, most notably Richard Tithecott’s recent *Of Men and Monsters* (1997), which covers much of the same territory but presents a more conventionally sociological perspective on its subject. Together with Tithecott, Seltzer has arrived at the point where it can be taken for granted that public perception of serial murder, skewed and distorted as it might be, is actually a far more rewarding object of study than the empirical reality behind it. In this respect, Seltzer and Tithecott constitute the “second wave” of serial killer studies, going beyond and refining groundbreaking earlier work by such scholars as Philip Jenkins, Jane Caputi, or Cameron and Frazier.

Finally, Seltzer’s ambition is to integrate the tenets of his argument—the logic of repetition compulsion and the diagnosis of the breakdown of traditional boundaries—into his own rhetoric. As the index to

the book illustrates, terms like “statistical persons,” “stranger-intimacy,” “anonymity,” “addictive violence,” “substitution-maniacs,” or “public violence,” which constitute the staples of the book’s analytical and descriptive vocabulary, are repeated over and over. Their tireless repetition has, to return to Peter Brooks, the effect of “attempting ever to move forward to the circumference of [the] circle and to widen it, to cast the nets of the self ever further.” Clearly, the excessiveness, dogged consistency, and repetitiveness of Seltzer’s style are intended to draw the reader into complicity with the book’s subject. The play on self-referentiality, which engages us in the same kind of “compulsive over-identification” (106) the serial killer suffers from, eloquently makes the point that the killer is merely the most extreme proponent of the same cultural imperatives we are all implicated in, whether we like it or not. Nobody, Seltzer suggests, is exempt—a provocation directed against the author’s own critical distance toward his subject matter. The cultural prerogative of the critic, Seltzer insinuates, must itself be dismantled as “one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross.” A daring and provocative move in a study that dares us “to cast the nets of the self ever further,” a dare that pays off in more than one way. Repeated reading is suggested.

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