



## Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

### Stephen King and John Odgren

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Stephen King was in the Woburn Courthouse today--not in the flesh, of course, but certainly in name and spirit. John Odgren, currently on trial for murder stemming from the January 19, 2007 stabbing of school mate James Alenson, was, according to those who knew him well, a huge fan of the renowned horror writer.

Odgren had adopted the moniker "Jack," a name drawn from a Stephen King character. The date of the stabbing reflected Odgren's obsession with the number 19, which had a central role in King's series, *The Dark Tower*. On that day, according to testimony, Odgren was especially apprehensive because of a delusional association with King Crimson, the villain in that book series.

After his arrest, Odgren continued to fantasize about his favorite author. He even thought about placing Stephen King on his jailhouse visiting list. And when his mother mentioned that there had been scores of visitors to their home in the wake of the arrest, Odgren asked if there had been any celebrities--King, in particular.

This is not the first time that a school homicide has been inked in some way to Stephen King's work. After the 1996 mass shooting at Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, Washington, the *New York Times* ran a story connecting the 14-year-old shooter, Barry Loukaitis, with the novel *Rage* published by Stephen King under the pseudonym Richard Bachman.

In King's fictional account, high school senior Charles Decker takes his algebra class hostage at gunpoint after fatally shooting two teachers, and then turns class time into an introspective discussion of adolescent identity issues. Loukaitis did indeed own the book and, by virtue of its tattered appearance, had likely read it--even studied it--more than a few times. With a fair degree of planning, the Decker-wannabe entered his fifth period class dressed in a long trench coat inside of which he had concealed two pistols, dozens of rounds of ammunition, and a high-

powered rifle. After turning the classroom into a true "dead zone," Loukaitis exited with a grin, and said dryly "This sure beats algebra, doesn't it?"--a line reportedly lifted straight from the pages of *Rage*.

It was an intriguing story of copycatting--too good to be overlooked, but too good to be true. Although Loukaitis did, according to witnesses, make the remark, no such line appears in King's story. The closest is when Decker quips, "This sure beats panty raids."

It can be tempting to blame media--games, films and even books--for inspiring murderous impulses, but the causal connection may be reverse. Fascination with violent media may be more a reflection of violent tendencies rather than the cause of them. Violent entertainment may impact the type of violent expression, but generally not the motivation.

Notwithstanding his profound psychological struggles, particularly with Asperger's disorder, John Odgren is undeniably a intelligent young man, having a genius-level IQ of about 140. Shortly after his arrest, Odgren insisted that the assault was not the result of any, video game or book--presumably those by Stephen King included. Smart young man, indeed!