



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Profiting from murder

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It is often said that what goes on in Vegas, stays in Vegas. □ Apparently, this isn't true at the downtown Contemporary Arts Center, where a collection of overpriced and overrated paintings will soon be [exhibited](#) and sold to eccentric collectors wishing to take home for display the work of someone infamous. In this case, the artists infamy comes not from their artistic talent, but from their ruthless crimes.

At the centerpiece of the upcoming exhibit are dozens of watercolors and drawings by serial killer John Wayne Gacy. Before his capture for murdering 33 young men in suburban Chicago, Gacy had been voted "Man of the Year" by the Jaycees, rubbed elbows with local politicians and was even photographed with first lady Rosalynn Carter. It was the curious paradox of a respected man who secretly killed boys that brought Gacy attention.

I must admit that I'm not terribly bothered by auctions of killer arts and crafts. The profits are typically small (at least for the killers, if not the resellers), and there's not much an incarcerated killer can do with the money anyway. Sure, John Wayne Gacy may have earned \$100,000 from his paintings of clowns and Disney characters, but that did him little good once he was executed. More important, most murderers see very little profit, if any certainly nothing close to Gacy's payoff.

My concern is not about the profits occasionally amassed by killers, but over celebrity, a much more powerful reward that these criminals hardly deserve. So who is to blame for promoting killer fame and creating a booming business in murderabilia, especially related to serial murder?

Maybe it's the California company selling serial killer trading cards, or the Denver studio that produces action figures of Jeff Dahmer and Ted Bundy. So what if Charles Manson has two CDs of his "greatest hits"; but why is Amazon.com selling them? And shame on Axl Rose for wearing a Manson T-shirt on his album cover, an album which included a tune written by the notorious murderer. Charlize Theron is a terrific actress, but when accepting an Oscar for her performance in "Monster," was she at all concerned about the sympathetic manner in which she had portrayed serial murderer Aileen Wournos?

Although the market for murderabilia is bigger than ever, no doubt aided by the Internet, it is hardly new. Forty-five years ago, while incarcerated at Walpole as the reputed Boston Strangler, Albert DeSalvo fashioned "Strangler chokers." The jewelry was sold to the public in the prison gift shop, along with more mundane inmate arts and crafts.

For controlling, manipulative, narcissistic serial killers like Gacy, it's not "show me the money" but "show me the fame." Why else would Gacy have inquired after his arrest who would play him in the movie? For the record, it was Brian Dennehy.

Ultimately, of course, the blame for killer fame rests not just with actors, producers and sellers, but with all of us. "The issue is not so much whether murderabilia is a bad thing," notes David Schmid, author of "Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture," "but why it is we care?"