



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Depp not right for Bulger role

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The word out of Hollywood is that Johnny Depp has pulled out of his commitment to play mobster Whitey Bulger in the planned film version of Dick Lehr and Gerard O'Neill's book, *Black Mass*. Apparently, the versatile and talented actor was unhappy with a requested \$10 million pay cut for headlining in the struggling project. Too bad Depp's decision was based on money, not an ethical statement concerning whether it is appropriate for a famous film star to pose as an infamous criminal.

Of course, Depp or whatever big name is chosen as his replacement would not be the first Hollywood celebrity to play some notorious murderer, rapist or thief. Few people would know of Depression-era outlaws Bonnie and Clyde were it not for the romance-infused performances of Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway. Actor Tony Curtis enjoyed a significant career boost for his chilling portrayal of Albert DeSalvo in the box office hit, *The Boston Strangler*. The same was true for an up and coming Mark Harmon when cast as serial killer Ted Bundy in the 1986 TV miniseries, *The Deliberate Stranger*. And just a few years ago, the beautiful Charlize Theron won an Oscar for her role as part-time prostitute and other times killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*, and, in the process, winning Wuornos some posthumous measure of sympathy.

I wonder if any of these Hollywood luminaries considered whether their characters were especially deserving of their time and effort, or even how the families of the murdered victims might feel seeing evil graced with celebrity.

I have no complaints when Anthony Hopkins poses as the inimical Hannibal Lector, as this prolific cannibal is purely fictional as are the victims on his dinner menu. Lector can't actually be famous as he doesn't exist. And, I have absolutely no complaints about films that tell the story of true crime but focus more on the victims or the investigation, while relegating the criminal to a secondary role played by some two-bit actor.

The problem is not true crime tales themselves, be they in the form of book, play or film. An ethical line is crossed, however, when famous people play undeserving scoundrels and evildoers. Having glamorous stars cast in the roles of vicious murderers unfortunately infuses these killers with glamour and humanity.

At the end of the day, perhaps it would have been fitting for Johnny Depp to have played Whitey Bulger. After all, someone whose primary consideration is the money would be perfect for the role. But then again, at least Depp didn't respond as Bulger would have to being short-changed.