Murder News as Cultural Event in Victorian England

L. Perry Curtis Jr.

The following excerpt from the introduction to L. Perry Curtis Jr.'s book Jack the Ripper and the London Press evaluates media coverage of Jack the Ripper, a serial killer whose crimes against five prostitutes terrorized the East End of London in 1888.

Curtis maintains that the way the press covered the crimes reflected the fears and concerns of Victorian society. Mass circulation daily newspapers, themselves an emerging phenomenon in late nineteenth-century London, played a role in shaping public opinion. By engaging in graphically detailed reporting that fascinated the public, some newspapers served to inform as well as to sermonize about the "danger to law and order" the Ripper murders presented. According to Curtis, other papers sensationalized the case as a means of commenting on social conditions in the East End of London. Curtis concludes that because much remained unknown about the unsolved Ripper case, newspapers filled in the blanks with speculation and editorial asides.

Curtis is professor Emeritus of History and Modern Media and Culture at Brown University. He is the author of two books and numerous articles on Victorian history and culture.

My study of murder news is . . . concerned with "them"—namely, the Victorians who wrote and read all those lurid articles about the Whitechapel horrors and who felt the panics, shocks, and thrills arising therefrom. The core chapters herein deal with newspaper texts as though they were ideologically charged and fragmented images of events that had

passed through the filters of witnesses, reporters, editors, and, of course, readers, all of whom carried their own preconceptions. The distorting effects of all this filtering prevent us from ever attaining a complete grasp of the original events, despite the apparent authority of each newspaper account. Equally important, reporters often devoted some time and space to their own surmises and rumors gleaned from contacts or witnesses. In other words, all the unknowns in these murders created a thousand and one openings for imaginations to run riot. Whether by means of feature articles, leaders, or letters to the editor (and the police). Jack’s contemporaries contributed much to the night-marish story he inscribed with his knife on the bodies of his victims.

Murder News as Cultural Event

If murder is a social (as well as antisocial) act, then its telling and selling by the press are significant cultural events that reveal much about what journalists think the public wants or needs to know. Murder news by definition both whets and feeds an appetite that disapproving critics deem perverse or voyeuristic. Why, we may well ask, are so many of us drawn to images of violence that frighten or disgust us? What is the source of our ambivalent response to scenes or images of horror in films, on television, and in newspapers? (Why do we slow down and stare at a car crash while driving along the highway when we have no intention of helping any of the victims?) Some tentative answers to these questions lie scattered through the following pages. For the present we need but allude to [Women’s Studies Scholar] Cynthia Freeland’s observation that pornography and the horror film share in common not only multiple participants and body parts, but also “the embodiment of humans” or “intimacies of the flesh.” Murder news, then, is not just about extreme violence inflicted on someone else. As [author Richard] Tithecott points out, it is also about our own fantasies and the culture out of