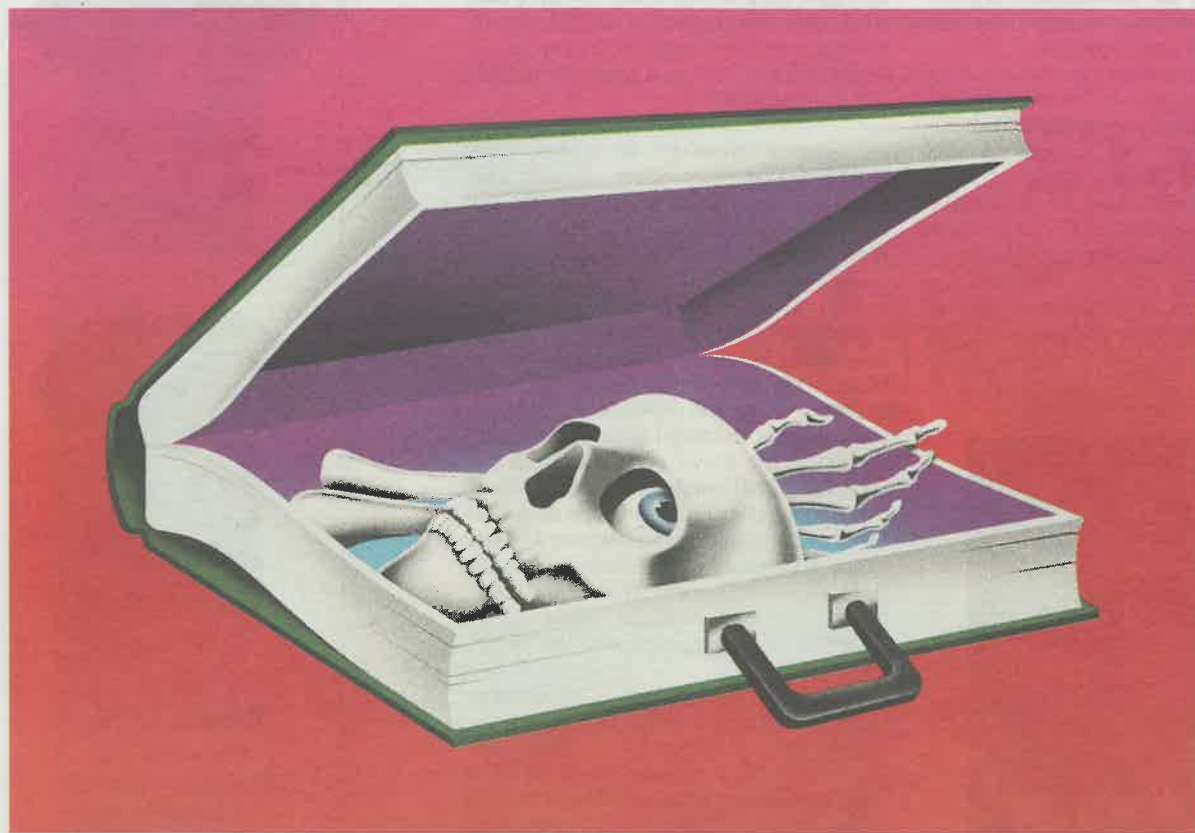


True Crime

BY MARILYN STASIO



LA BOCA

PUT A PILE OF ANYTHING in front of me — shoes, seashells, books — and I'll robotically start organizing them into categories. It soothes my mind to separate, say, con artists from gangsters, and it makes a jumble of true-crime books on a variety of topics easier to tackle. But since the ones right in front of me are about serial killers, let's start with those.

Peter Vronsky's **SONS OF CAIN: A History of Serial Killers From the Stone Age to the Present** (Berkley, paper, \$17) creeps off to a start with a chapter on "The Stone Age Reptilian Zombie Serial-Killer Triune Brain," slithers through "The Dawn of the Less-Dead: Serial Killers and Modernity" and slinks to an end with a section called "The New Age of Monsters: The Rise of the Modern Serial Killer." Vronsky's purplish prose is at its lip-smacking best in "The Rippers Before Jack: The Rise of Modern Serial Killers in Europe, 1800-1887." Splashed across his broad canvas are fabled butchers like Andreas Bichel, known as "the girl slaughterer" of Germany; Vincenzo Verzeni, "the vampire of Bergamo"; and Louis-Joseph Philippe, "the terror of Paris," whose grisly handiwork anticipated that of London's famed slasher by more than 20 years.

Vronsky has an alarming theory about the "enormous glut" of American serial murderers who came of age during World War II and the postwar baby boom. He observes that the offenders who made their first kill during the peak years of "the golden age" of serial killers, between 1950 and 2000, "all lived in the wake of a receding shock wave of humanity's biggest, most viciously primitive and most lethal war." In lurid prose, he points out that some of these golden-agers were the offspring of the 16.5 million Americans mobilized during World War II. Although these veterans were conditioned to kill in combat, Vronsky could find

no record that any of them returned as multiple murderers, but some of them fathered the serial killers of the next two generations.

Those serial killers, in turn, have inspired the obsessive interest of crime writers. To research **THE KILL JAR: Obsession, Descent, and a Hunt for Detroit's Most Notorious Serial Killer** (Gallery, \$24.99), the screenwriter and private investigator J. Reuben Appelman spent what seems like a lifetime (10 years, actually) digging into the unsolved case of the Oakland County Child Killer, also known as "The Babysitter" for the care he took in tending and dressing the corpses of his victims. Over more than a year, in the late 1970s, this meticulous monster kidnapped four children, two boys and two girls between the ages of 10 and 12, and held them captive before killing them and dumping their bodies in plain view.

Appelman grew up under the heavy hand of an abusive father and when he was 7 years old a man with "greasy brown" hair, "like motor oil," tried to snatch him off the street and into his car. Throughout the book, Appelman conflates scenes like this, from his own childhood dramas, with those from the lives of the murdered children. He especially identifies with 11-year-old Timothy King, "whom I've come to see as my boyhood self somehow." While these abundant self-references diminish the impact of the victims' ordeals, that personal factor appears to have motivated Appelman to undertake his project. So I guess the self-dramatizing was worth it.

Jeffrey L. Rinek, who retired after 30 years with the F.B.I., has a different perspective on victimized children. The voice that narrates in **THE NAME OF THE CHILDREN: An F.B.I. Agent's Relentless Pursuit of the Nation's Worst Predators** (BenBella Books, paper, \$16.95), which Rinek wrote with the journalist Marilee Strong, sounds warm and humane, qualities missing from much crime writing. Their book is a

professional job, filled with illuminating details about the day-to-day operations of the bureau. Particularly interesting are the regular interviews agents are granted with sex offenders who are about to be paroled by the California Department of Corrections. "Only in this unique setting could we ask them about how they found their victims," Rinek explains, "how they groomed kids, how they outfitted their homes to make them places that would attract children." They had to answer every question or their parole would be denied.

Rinek's voice softens when he speaks of victims like 8-year-old Michael Lyons, "savagely tortured, mutilated and thrown away like trash," whose grave the agent visited for many years, and 6-year-old Danny Hohenstein, who had a miserable childhood and whose disappearance was one of Rinek's first cold cases. During the five years that Danny was missing, Rinek and his partner often visited the boy's mother and sister; when Danny's remains were finally found and laid to rest, the partners found one of the child's few surviving photographs, taken when a dentist had repaired his rotting teeth, and had it framed for his family.

Not everyone is as kind and caring as Jeffrey Rinek, but true-crime writers do tend to identify to some degree with their subjects. In **A TALE OF TWO MURDERS: Guilt, Innocence, and the Execution of Edith Thompson** (Pegasus Crime, \$28.95), Laura Thompson earnestly champions the lost cause of Edith Thompson (no, she's no relation), a woman caught in an awkward moment of history. If the year had been 1923, Edith might have simply divorced her inconvenient husband, Percy, and married her handsome young lover, Frederick Bywaters. But it was 1922, a year before the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act that would make divorce a less onerous procedure — so murder seemed the swiftest option.

A well-read woman, Edith wrote her lover many passionate letters, which were used against her at trial and which the author wisely quotes at length. (Freddy's epistolary style was banal, if not boring.) As their love affair intensified ("What erotic power this woman had!" Thompson marvels), Percy became even more of an encumbrance, and Edith's clumsy attempt to poison him only raised his suspicions. In the end, Freddy did the deed — with a knife. Edith was with Percy when he expired on a dark street in suburban London, and as the police escorted her back home, she said, presciently, "They will blame me for this." Indeed they did, and so did the public, in whose eyes she became "the very emblem of decadence," as much for her sin of adultery as for her complicity in the crime of murder.

Had Edith Thompson had access to **THE ROYAL ART OF POISON: Filthy Palaces, Fatal Cosmetics, Deadly Medicine, and Murder Most Foul** (St. Martin's, \$27.99), by Eleanor Herman, she might have had more success in disposing of her husband. Herman takes a scholarly approach to her subject, but her tone is morbidly witty. (In an appendix called "The Poison Hall of Fame," she identifies arsenic as "the biggest stomach blaster" and says long-term mercury exposure results in the "most disgusting symptoms," including stinking black saliva and oozing sores.) To heighten the entertainment value of her study, Herman keeps the focus on the follies of the upper classes, who seemed to make a hobby out of poisoning their peers and whose creative personal application of "lead face paint, mercury enemas and arsenic skin lotions" constituted suicide by vanity.

Among the chapters packed with information on the appalling health habits of past generations, my favorite is "Putrid Palaces," which contains this priceless 1660 entry about a cesspool, from Samuel Pepys's diary: "When go-