

If books could kill: The brutal history behind using popular entertainment as a scapegoat for heinous acts

Is there any definitive agreement today about the effects of violence in entertainment media?

By David Hayes, The National Post, May 19, 2019

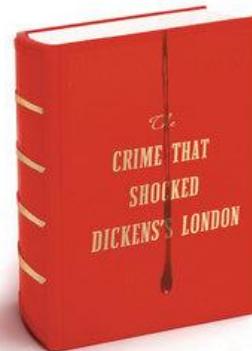
We're all familiar with popular entertainment being blamed for crimes, especially those perpetrated by young people. Violent video games, especially "first-person shooters," are popular targets today. For example, an addiction to Doom was blamed for why Columbine High School students Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 12 of their classmates in April 1999, and an obsession with the Call of Duty franchise was thought to be the reason Adam Lanza killed 27 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012.

TV predated video games. One infamous incident was an Edmonton-based aspiring filmmaker. Mark Twitchell, who, in 2011, lured a man to his home and dismembered him. Twitchell said he had been inspired by fictional forensic analyst Dexter Morgan, who led a double life as a serial killer in the series *Dexter*. In 1977, a 15-year-old who murdered his elderly next-door-neighbour, argued that his daily six to eight hours of TV viewing meant he couldn't tell right from wrong, and investigators noted that the crime resembled one on gritty series *Kojack*, the boy's favourite show.

Movies have supposedly been the source of many crimes, like that of the Beltway snipers: 17-year-old Lee Boyd Malvo and 41-year-old John Allen Muhammad. In 2002, Malvo and Muhammad executed a series of coordinated attacks over eight months in 10 states that killed 17 people and wounded 10 more. Malvo claimed to have watched the cyberpunk/sci-fi movie, *The Matrix*, 100 times and was drawn into its blurred-reality world. (Several other killers adopted "The Matrix Defence," as well.) The list of movies linked to real-life crime sprees is long, including *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Taxi Driver*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Exorcist*, and so on, dating back to gangster films of the 1930s.

Comic books have been singled out for corrupting youth since the medium took off in popularity in the late 1930s (with the publication of Superman in Action Comics #1). In 1948, a 16-year-old committed eight armed robberies and murdered a man because, according to news reports, he "read comic books and listened to gangster stories on the radio all the time when he was at home." In the mid-1950s, U.S. Senate hearings into juvenile delinquency led to a Comics Code Authority, forcing publishers to self-police the contents of comics.

*Murder
by the Book*



CLAIRE HARMAN

Author of Charlotte Brontë: A Fiery Heart

And where do you begin with music? Killers have said they drew inspiration from artists ranging from Tupac Shakur, Eminem, Metallica and Marilyn Manson to Madonna and The Beatles. Today, knifings among young black men in London are blamed on "U.K. drill," a regional subgenre of trap music, which Sam Knight in *The New Yorker* described as "a pared-down, slang-ridden form of London hip-hop."

Books, too, have been connected to real-life crimes. Mark David Chapman was carrying a copy of J. D. Salinger's 1951 coming-of-age novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, when he assassinated John Lennon. (He described his actions as the book's 27th chapter.) Charles Ng and Leonard Lake, who tortured and killed nearly 30 women at a remote cabin in California in 1985, were inspired by John Fowles' 1963 novel, *The Collector*. At four separate times, young men committed murders while crediting Stephen King's 1977 novel, *Rage*, and in 2007, 14-year-old Michael Hernandez stabbed a classmate to death and later said he was imitating the protagonist in Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho*.

And, it turns out, it's to literature where we can trace the origins of entertainment being blamed for inspiring violence in young people.

By early 1840, throughout Britain, technology had made printing cheaper and the demand for books was growing among a newly literate working class, many of them immigrants, which was also agitating for more political representation. (In some cases, mass rallies demanding universal suffrage had turned into bloody riots.) The price of books had dropped to about 20 shillings. Although this was still beyond the spending power of most of the working class, new titles were sold to circulating libraries where a year's subscription was about the cost of a single book. Suddenly, the latest fiction was being discussed not just by the chattering classes, as one newspaper put it, but in "low smoking rooms, the common barbers' shops, the cheap reading places, the private booksellers' and the minor theatres." One critic called it "the literature of rascaldom."

Not surprisingly, the most popular titles among this new mass audience were the most sensational: a genre of criminal romances known as "Newgate novels." Named after the brutal prison in the centre of London, they were tales of both fictional and real criminals, mostly based in the previous century, that glorified the cunning exploits of criminal anti-heroes. Notable examples were Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* (the book that begins, "It was a dark and stormy night..."), Charles Whitehead's *Lives and Exploits of English Highwaymen, Pirates and Robbers*, and a young Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. (In later editions, Dickens dialed down the sensationalism.) But, at this time, the most popular of them all was *Jack Sheppard* by William Harrison Ainsworth. It was a semi-fictionalized account of a notorious criminal who escaped from prison four times before being re-arrested and executed in 1724.

This phenomenon was truly pulp fiction. In addition to official books, one could easily find cheap pirated editions on the streets and attend any of the half dozen theatrical productions on stages around London. Ainsworth himself underscored the quality of the books when he gave his friend, Dickens, this advice: "The truth is, to write for the mob, we must not write too well."

In Claire Harman's *Murder By the Book: The Crime That Shocked Dickens' London* (published last October in the UK and last month in North America), Harman, a biographer of Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen, shows how the "Newgate novels,"

and *Jack Sheppard* in particular, spawned a debate among Britain's cultural commentators, police and politicians about whether reading can influence character, whether the "Newgate novels" were corrupting impressionable young people and inciting them to commit crimes.

Indeed, in this period children, teenagers, and young men who committed crimes were called "a young Jack Sheppard," or "Juvenile Jack Sheppards." Harman quotes one vocal critic, William Makepeace Thackeray who, at the time, was eight years away from writing his best-known work, *Vanity Fair*. He believed "Newgate novels" romanticized crime in an "absurd and unreal" way, and that the public was inexplicably entranced by "a set of ruffians whose occupations are thievery, murder and prostitution."

Harman looks at this phenomenon by focusing on one especially notorious murder.

In the early morning hours of May 6, 1840, an eccentric but harmless old aristocrat, Lord William Russell, was found in bed by his maid with his throat cut so thoroughly that his head was almost severed. As an investigation began, word spread of the gruesome crime, a botched robbery, committed against a well-off gentleman who lived in London's exclusive Mayfair district. It appeared to be an inside job, and soon police arrested Lord Russell's valet, the Swiss-born Francois Courvoisier (his nationality always mentioned since he was an immigrant), with a lingering suspicion that he may have had an accomplice.



A maid discovers the corpse of her employer, Lord William Russell.

"This is really too horrid," wrote Queen Victoria in her diary. Five weeks later, an 18-year-old man fired on her coach as it drove along Constitution Hill, inflaming the idea that there was a dangerous and growing underclass threatening the comfortable classes.

Throughout his trial, Courvoisier maintained his innocence, although there was circumstantial evidence against him (among other things, he was found to have stolen some of Lord Russell's silverware). Then, as his verdict was being delivered,

he confessed, adding that he was inspired by a "perusal of the romance of *Jack Sheppard*."

This was especially significant because in the novel, Ainsworth included a scene in which Sheppard and an accomplice broke into Sheppard's adoptive parent's home and, while robbing it, the accomplice slit the throat of Sheppard's adoptive mother. Confusing matters, in the time between the verdict and Courvoisier's execution he confessed several more times, changing the details each time.

Did Courvoisier do it? Harman is skeptical. The young man had no history of criminal — or even disturbing — behaviour and was spoken of highly by those who knew him. The female servants said he was quiet and pleasant. Since little was taken, robbery doesn't seem to have been a motive. Was he a fabulist eager for the attention his confessions attracted? Was homosexuality involved, a crime of passion? (Lord Russell wore a truss, which had been removed. A man, visiting his mistress across the street the night of the incident, reported seeing the outline of a naked male figure in the bedroom window.) In the mid-1800s, Harman writes, "the pursuit of same-sex attractions would have required considerable discretion," although there were supportive networks of like-minded people and clandestine places available. But, Harman concludes, too little is known about either Courvoisier's or Lord Russell's sex lives to even hazard a guess.

That is one of the weaknesses of an otherwise fascinating book. The murder of Lord William Russell is so inconclusive that it lacks the kind of drama that animates most true crime stories, and in a relatively short 208 pages, Harman leaves herself too little space to thoroughly explore this early debate around popular mass entertainment and criminal behaviour, which persists to this day.

Is there any definitive agreement today about the effects of violence in entertainment media? A 2011 Supreme Court decision in a case brought by the Entertainment Merchants Association to challenge a California law regulating video games suggests the thinking today. The majority opinion stated that video games, like the books, plays, TV shows, and movies that preceded them, are protected by the First Amendment. The decision pointed to fairy tales, like those of the Brothers Grimm, which are regularly given to children to read and "contain no shortage of gore." (Sample: "A man once slaughtered a pig while his children were looking on. When they started playing in the afternoon, one child said to the other: 'You be the little pig, and I'll be the butcher,' whereupon he took an open blade and thrust it into his brother's neck.") The court's decision also concluded there was no "compelling" link between violent video games and its effects on children.

Putting a slightly greater shading of interpretation on it, the late social psychologist Leonard Berkowitz, a specialist in aggression, once said, "I think there are lots of different processes that determine the consequences of observed violence. There is no one factor at work, but one of the things that happens is that people get ideas as well as inclinations, and if their inhibitions happen to be weak at the time, these ideas or inclinations can be translated into open behaviour."

I only wish Berkowitz had been practicing in the mid-1800s and had been given Francois Courvoisier as a subject.