

Searching for Ted Kaczynski

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I've often dreamed of retiring to a cabin in the Rockies with several million dollars and a deep freeze full of Tombstone pizzas. I would spend my days enjoying scenic hikes, reading, writing, and studying the landscape. Aside from contemplative leisure and freedom, this lifestyle offers a certain social (or anti-social) appeal. Imagine being free of society, free to bury oneself, to cut oneself off from technology and all the attendant chatter and hysteria. Imagine the peace and quiet.

The neo-luddite wilderness fantasy is an old theme, explored by a variety of writers and real-life loners. Rousseau's *Emile* comes to mind as an early entry in the genre. There's also Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* and people like Richard Proenneke and Christopher McCandless. And Ted Kaczynski.

Most readers will remember the 1996 arrest of Ted Kaczynski, the domestic terrorist extraordinaire who waged a decades-long campaign of ideologically motivated bombings from a one-room cabin in rural Montana. Chances are most of us haven't thought of him much since the conclusion of his trial in 1998, when he pled guilty to all charges. This summer, the Discovery Channel revisited his story in *Manhunt: Unabomber*, an eight-part drama about the FBI's search for the man behind the longest-running bombing campaign in U.S. history. Distanced from the mania of the mid-90s news cycle, the miniseries is able to look at Kaczynski's story with a calmer, fresher gaze.

Manhunt: Unabomber is surprisingly nuanced. The lead performances are engrossing, and the writing does a decent job of engaging the intellectual questions (evidentiary, psychological, and philosophical) important to each side of the story. What's most surprising about the series, however, is the extent to which the writers have chosen to sympathize with Ted Kaczynski, both personally and philosophically.

To be clear, we are not led to sympathize with Kaczynski's bombing campaign. We see horrific glimpses of the damage done to victims, ranging from the murder of PR executive Thomas Mosser to the maiming of Yale professor (and First Things author) David Gelernter. The bombings are portrayed as desperate and cold-blooded, the work of a lonely and alienated man.

But in this telling, terrorism is not the heart of the Unabomber story. The series is studded with lengthy voiceover monologues taken from Kaczynski's neo-luddite manifesto, which Paul Bettany performs with gusto. Over time, we get to know Theodore J. Kaczynski as "Ted," a psychologically tortured man who helps out at the local library and is incapable of trusting others. We come to view him as an academic genius, a social prophet, a victim of unethical experimentation, and a criminal mastermind of the Hannibal Lector variety. The writers exploit the dramatic aspects of Kaczynski's life to great effect, and he becomes, much more than his FBI counterpart, the hero and victim of his own story.

Unfortunately, the drama of Ted's ideas and psychological issues doesn't mesh well with the drama on the "manhunt" side of things. In the FBI's portion of the story, the main tensions relate to work-life balance, class anxiety, stolen glory, and the development of the dubious science of "forensic linguistics." From a theologian's perspective, "forensic linguistics" might be interesting, since many of the methods and problems

encountered during the quest to incriminate Kaczynski are familiar to modern practitioners of “source criticism”—the identification and distinction of various authors of Scripture. However, it has little to do with Kaczynski’s luddite philosophy, which is presented as the spiritual heart of the show.

The writers of *Manhunt: Unabomber* try to make us feel invested in the fight over forensic linguistics by tying it to the family and career struggles of James Fitzgerald (Sam Worthington), a depressive, monomaniacal FBI rookie with a previous career as a Philly beat cop. On the whole, Fitzgerald’s part in the story feels like an overdramatized composite sketch. He is the lone voice of truth against the politicized, bureaucratic inefficiency of the Unabomb Task Force. His wife leaves him, his superiors mock him, and so on. He is present for too much of the action and credited with too many breakthroughs to be believable as a historical figure. Too many details in his story come across as conveniences devised to bolster a character arc.

In an early episode, Fitzgerald tells us he was converted to Kaczynski’s ideas after solving the case, but this fact is never sufficiently explored. A more effective and interesting fictionalization would have portrayed Fitzgerald as one of the pathological types Kaczynski describes in his manifesto: consumed with “surrogate activities,” oversocialized, politically liberal, and guilt-ridden. Instead, Fitzgerald becomes a mirror image of Kaczynski—alienated, resentful, obsessive, and yet (they hammer home to us) different from Kaczynski in that he is capable of empathy and love. His empathy enables him to beat Ted in a duel of wits over his plea bargain. It’s a lame ending to the FBI’s side of the story.

Ted’s story, however, ends on a much stronger (and harsher) note. He is betrayed by his defense attorneys, his brother, and even the judge at his trial. Threatened with forced psychological treatment, he pleads guilty to the charges brought against him, receives multiple life sentences, and takes up residence in a solitary, windowless cinderblock cell in a maximum-security prison. The writers really want us to feel for Ted. They don’t shrink from the horror of his crimes or the pain felt by his victims, but they don’t want us to think he was insane or simply evil. The ultimate suggestion (confirmed by the show’s closing shot) is that Ted Kaczynski was right about the disordered and oppressive nature of the modern technological world, but also that his criminality was a byproduct of a lifetime of betrayal, alienation, and loneliness.

It’s hard to know what to make of *Manhunt: Unabomber*. It was audacious of the show’s creators to take such a positive attitude toward the most prolific domestic terrorist in American history. They didn’t simply turn him into an evil genius or elusive madman. Watching the show made me want to sit down and read through Kaczynski’s manifesto, *Industrial Society and its Future*. What I found in the text, and in letters written by Kaczynski since his incarceration, was a man with a large number of astute (even prophetic) insights into American political life and culture. Much of his thinking would be at home in the pages of *First Things*.

Ultimately, I do sympathize with Ted Kaczynski. I feel bad for him, in part because of the moral derangement behind his long campaign of death and destruction, but

also because he perceived something true about our society, its political imperatives, and our newly emerging technological way of life. *Manhunt: Unabomber* and *Industrial Society and its Future* make two more worthwhile entries in the literature of ludditism and wilderness living. Though by no means great philosophy or great television, they're both worthy of some thought.

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The Ted K Archive

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