

Of Monsters and Mangione

For a window into the motive of UnitedHealthcare killer
Luigi Mangione, one biographer delved deep into the world of
Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's admirers

John H. Richardson

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Shortly after the UnitedHealthcare killing, evidence emerged that Luigi Mangione, *right*, had not only read but reviewed the Unabomber manifesto, by Ted Kaczynski, *left*.

Early in my correspondence with Ted Kaczynski, which went on for years while he was behind bars, I asked him about a group of Latin American eco-terrorists known in English as Individuals with a Tendency to the Wild, or I.T.S.

His response? Don't ever mention I.T.S. again. The warden might cut off his mail.

Then he added a theory: “Hypothesis: I.T.S. is instigated by some country’s security services—probably Mexico. Their real task is to spread hopelessness, because where there is no hope, there is no serious resistance.”

Kaczynski had been in prison for 20 years by then, sentenced to life without parole for sending mail bombs to scientists, university professors, and various people in technology-adjacent fields, which is why his F.B.I. case name was the “Unabomber.” He was easily annoyed, so I dropped the subject of I.T.S. and moved on to other topics, looking for a better way to get him talking.

Six years after that letter, and a year after Kaczynski died, a young man named Luigi Mangione burst into the news, accused by police of a shocking act of political violence—the very well-organized, assassination-style killing of Brian Thompson, the C.E.O. of UnitedHealthcare. And very shortly after that, evidence emerged that Mangione had not only read but reviewed Kaczynski’s most famous work, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, better known as the “Unabomber manifesto.” Mangione gave the book four out of five stars on the Web site Goodreads, writing, “It’s simply impossible to ignore how prescient many of his predictions about modern society turned out.”

Boy, did that sound familiar. Young guys like Mangione were the reason I’d started writing to Kaczynski in the first place. I met the first one way back in 2004 during a “direct action” by some members of the radical environmental-advocacy group Earth First, who were trying to stop forest rangers from killing mountain lions in Arizona, but I thought he was one of a kind. Then I met another, and another: earnest idealists who had stumbled across Kaczynski’s manifesto in their early 20s and were blown away by both its analysis (that technological civilization is headed for collapse) and its ruthless conclusion (that the most helpful response is a revolution to destroy it before it gets any bigger). They called Kaczynski “Uncle Ted.”

And they weren’t the only ones, as I soon discovered—in a perfect irony of our Internet era, the Unabomber had developed quite the online following.

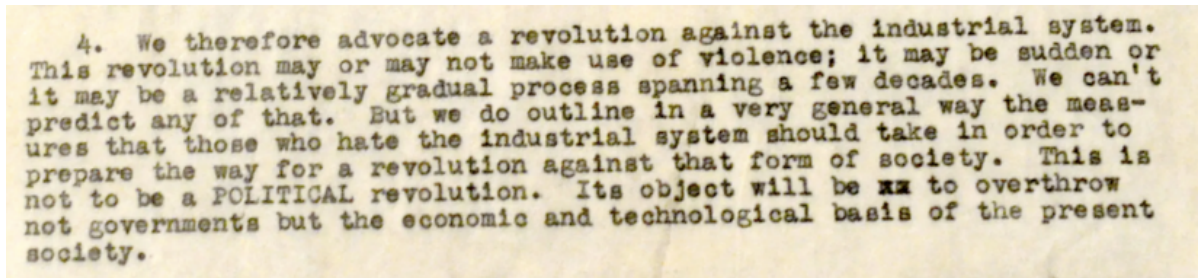
The reason seemed obvious: with a thousand apocalyptic possibilities echoing in their ears all their lives, from climate change to collapsing birth rates to the coming A.I. end times, the new generation had the bad luck of being born into peak doom and gloom. A dark prophet had finally met his moment.

But there was something deeper at work, too. As I dug into Mangione’s online history to research my new book, *Luigi: The Making and the Meaning*, the most striking thing was his relentless positivism. He let out a few bitter remarks about the health-care system, but usually he was digging into solutions. Lab-grown meat! Nuclear power!

He read a lot of sociology and personal development, a lot of explanatory cultural analysis such as *The Ape That Understood the Universe: How the Mind and Culture Evolve*. Books on physical fitness locked elbows with *What’s Our Problem? A Self-Help Book for Societies*. He was interested in manosphere celebrities like Jordan Peterson, a cultural conservative known for his concerns about the “crisis of masculinity.” He



Mangione ahead of his arrest.



Detail from the Unabomber manifesto.

was always looking for answers, for ways to de-bug the system. His overall tone was optimistic.

How does a guy that positive-minded suddenly end up facing charges in a political assassination? It made no sense. Shouldn't there be *some* evidence of distress, or at least anger?

At some point, Kaczynski's I.T.S. hypothesis came back to me: *Their real task is to spread hopelessness, because where there is no hope, there is no serious resistance.* Kaczynski always seemed weirdly cheerful for someone with a vision so dark, but the line didn't really register with me the first time.

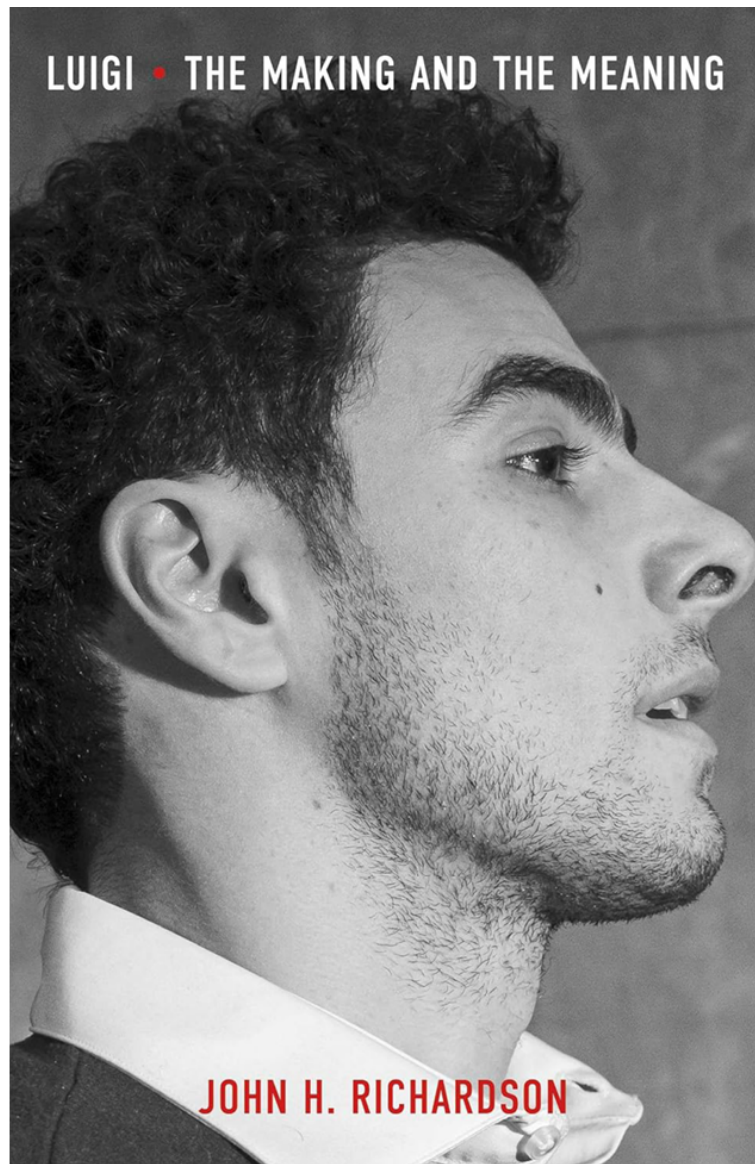
I was raised on Greek tragedy and Russian novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *Apocalypse Now*, on the idea that man's downfall is caused by hubris—that's actually the primary theme of the entire Western canon, which is basically just one long cautionary tale about man's destructive ambitions. My hopes for human glory were never all that high. It turned out that those other young Kaczynski admirers I met gave up on their causes because they had high hopes, whether in the revolution or in themselves or both, and lost them in one way or another. They got older. One had kids. Maybe hope was the secret ingredient. And fear, hope's shadow.

In the months before the shooting, one of the last books Mangione read warned him not to wait too long because laws are made "for, and by, old men," and that sooner or later you get trapped in the system.

Now, I keep thinking about some of the last additions to his online reading list, which he posted just before he went dark: *Catch 22*, *Walden*, and *Moby Dick*. *Moby Dick*! The utterly hopeless and bleak Great American Novel where you're not only trapped in the system but shipwrecked and washed ashore barely alive.

If Mangione had spent a few years reading books like that, old books that give no answers, might he have appreciated the wisdom of his elders and accepted the failure of his youthful dreams as a lifestyle? Have become an adult, defeated but wise, the way adults used to be defined? That might have saved Thompson's life. But the image of a graying Luigi Mangione with a broken heart and a beer belly, zoned out in front of the TV like Leonardo DiCaprio's stoner dad in *One Battle After Another*? It's enough to send you back to those old Russian novels.

BUY THE BOOK



Luigi: The Making and the Meaning, by John H. Richardson

\$29

Simon & Schuster

*John H. Richardson was previously a writer at large for Esquire and a staff writer at New York magazine. He is the author of *My Father the Spy*, *In the Little World*, and *The Vipers' Club**

Photos: Michael Macor/*The San Francisco Chronicle* via Getty Images (Kaczynski); Michael Nagle/Bloomberg/Getty Images (Mangione)

The Ted K Archive

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