

The One American Serial Killer Whose Star Won't Stop Rising

**A true crime memoir about sharing a forest with Ted
Kaczynski.**

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Madman in the Woods: Life Next Door to the Unabomber

By Jamie Gehring. Diversion Books.

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To hear Jamie Gehring tell it, if there's one thing that really set her former neighbor Ted Kaczynski off, it was all that *noise* from all the *engines*. Her father's sawmill, the planes in the sky, the motorbikes and snowmobiles she and her family and friends rode around the area, the diesel trucks mining companies deployed—all these industrial roars, powered by fuels sucked up from the ground, that wrecked any chance of finding peace in the wilds of Lincoln, Montana. Scouring the Unabomber's journals, Gehring finds a consistent factor behind the rare moments Kaczynski claimed he was happy: "A very happy day" saw "only a few jets" passing over, and another day that was "quite good" was one when he "heard only 8 jets." These planes, perhaps ironically, rankled Kaczynski more in his Montanan safe space than they would have anywhere else: "Here the noise destroys something wonderful; while in the city there is nothing for the noises to destroy, because one is living in a shit-pile anyway. ... Aircraft noise is an insult, a slap in the face."

The sound of engines, and the way Kaczynski felt taunted by them, is just one of the many details Gehring explores in her book *Madman in the Woods: Life Next Door to the Unabomber*. In this work, just the latest among several recent studies of the Unabomber, Gehring looks back over her childhood sharing the Montana woods with Kaczynski for 16 years, when her father, Butch, leased him the very acres on which the bomber constructed his rudimentary shack and workshop. There are the fond and unpleasant memories she holds (receiving a handmade toy as a gift from Kaczynski, hearing him creep and rummage through her parents' yards), the fond and unpleasant stories from her family (Kaczynski and Butch making the land deal, then the former yelling at the latter for using herbicides on surrounding grasslands), the new perspectives on these anecdotes offered through retrospection, and the dissonance of finding that your former fine-if-kind-of-strange neighbor was one of America's most notorious killers—who had it out for you, too. It all makes for a fascinating, heartfelt, complex reflection.

One of the many pieces of Kaczynski's post-arrest commentary that Gehring quotes in *Madman* calls her father out by name: "A neighbor of mine, Butch Gehring, this guy is a real bastard. He runs a sawmill. ... My intention was to put him out of business once and for all." The Gehring family mill was "evil" to Kaczynski in numerous ways: It ate up the surrounding trees he enjoyed and produced endless noise. The sputtering chainsaws and lumber machines distracted Kaczynski and encroached on his space, as acres developed by the Gehrings were cleared and/or leased to mining companies that brought people to the area with large, humming trucks. Kaczynski was not above working a few hours at the mill to collect some spare change, as Jamie Gehring chronicles, but the entire enterprise had a clear effect on him, as he would journal: "Used to be that I suffered from hardly any tension at all around here. But the area is so fucked

up—now that my old way of life is all shot to hell ... those Gehring jerks are planning to log off the woods all around my cabin here.” The family, inevitably, became aware of Kaczynski’s rage at their business through repeated personal confrontations with the man himself, who showed his displeasure at the mining contracts and new people moving in to the woods. In fact, by the time Butch Gehring started cooperating with the FBI on its hunt, he’d raised the prospect of revving his chainsaw as bait to draw Kaczynski out of his cabin. Still, it was only in recent years that Jamie Gehring would learn, through the miniseries *Unabomber: In His Own Words* (on which she herself appeared as a talking head), that Kaczynski was driven by this rage to pour sand into her father’s sawmill fuel tanks and to vandalize other local mines, bulldozers, and camps.

The most fascinating thing about *Madman* is how Jamie Gehring, even while recounting the ways Kaczynski antagonized her family and damaged their business and town, ventures to find the humanity in her former neighbor—to even, possibly, “feel a trace of compassion” for the misanthropic, unapologetic killer. Kaczynski’s crimes, heartless as they were, had to come from something deeper within him, whether it was personal tragedy or a misguided venture to protect Mother Earth, right?

As Gehring comes to realize, the Unabomber himself, in his writings and actions, negates that point. Those who haven’t gone down the rabbit hole may not realize that, for all his cultural associations with eco-terrorists taking up arms to preserve natural habitats, Ted Kaczynski did not actually do what he did in order to save the planet. Plenty of journal entries and audio transcriptions quoted through the book show Kaczynski repeatedly saying this himself: that his killings were driven by personal “revenge,” that he was more upset about human beings and man-made noises outside his home than anything else, and that he didn’t even consider himself a “nature worshipper,” as he felt free to litter or poach animals. Even though his manifesto outlined a “revolution” against modern society, it stemmed from one core feeling: Kaczynski thought himself entitled to the natural spaces he made home, and it was the noise pollution that disturbed *his* solitude and killed *his* personal favorite trees that drove his rage—not any interest in saving the woods for *other people* and animals.

Still, Gehring does find a means of possibly understanding the Unabomber. In a 1984 journal entry she cites late in the book, Kaczynski expresses “grief” at the construction of new roads on a plateau near Trout Creek, which runs close to Montana’s border with Idaho, and the felled trees that the building of this new infrastructure left behind. Gehring writes that she was sensitive from childhood to the environmental fallout from her father’s timber business, yet “much of the town [of Lincoln] was divided on wilderness versus industry” while environmentalists advocated for preserving the Montana wilds. Gehring perceives just a speck of a way to relate to Kaczynski’s “feelings of overwhelming loss” stemming from such environmental degradation, even as she can never abide his actions, or process the horror of having lived near him while he planned those crimes.

Gehring’s personal journey also connects with the broader revival of Unabomber lore. Since 2017, biopics of the man have been projected on both small and big screens, a multipart docuseries reexamining the case has been released on streaming, and there are now more than a dozen books, the bulk of them published in recent years, offering various new perspectives and uncovered details on the case. This is not so unusual at first blush; Kaczynski is far from the only serial killer to retain name recognition over decades, and the flourishing true crime industry means murders like his will continue to be reexamined and retold for years to come. But it’s not just that the Unabomber remains a person of fascination—he may be a far more influential thought leader now than in any year since the initial publication of his manifesto.

Spend time scouring various corners of the internet, both the grody and glossy, and you’ll find evidence of these reactions throughout our noisy world. Extremely online Instagram teens who weren’t alive for a single bombing unironically embrace Kaczynski’s philosophy in various shitposts, memes, and videos. Right-wing TikTokkers have used the sound of a voice reading the Unabomber Manifesto’s opening line in more than 1,000 videos; the Middle East Media Research Institute discovered a Telegram chat earlier this month featuring an international cross-section of pro-Unabomber students, one of whom wanted to “overthrow his local government.” Tucker Carlson praised the Unabomber Manifesto last year in a conversation with Andrew Yang; a Wake Forest student paper op-ed from 2019 called the manifesto “prophetic”; a high schooler in New Jersey won an essay contest by writing about how she wanted to meet Kaczynski. New York magazine, in 2018, profiled various anarchist collectives that take to Kaczynski’s writings. Meanwhile, terror groups directly inspired by Kaczynski have been carrying out targeted bombings in Europe and South America since 2011.

Modern coverage of Kaczynski’s story takes one of two tacks: plumbing the Unabomber, the pseudonymous serial killer who evaded the law for decades, or grappling with Ted Kaczynski, the reclusive former academic and prolific writer who rejected industrial society about as thoroughly as someone born into it could. There’s the enthusiastic killer, and then the troubled genius who may have “had a point” about how technology ruins the world. To Jamie Gehring, these multiple personas manifested in much more direct and personal forms: the hermit who crafted and gifted her a wooden toy as a toddler, and the nighttime creep who, she later found, sabotaged her family’s sawmill, rummaged through their yards for scrap metal, and had her and her family in mind as a target, too.

The image her book offers is striking, when considering how many of today’s Unabomber fans would likely say they’d love being Kaczynski’s neighbor. Ted Kaczynski has lately found an eager following within both the “post-left” and the right wing; with advocates of direct action and industrial sabotage on one hand, and with the white supremacists behind mass killings in New Zealand and Texas on the other. Kaczynski tends to reject both “leftists” and “fascists” in his writings, but the scattered nature of his crimes ensures a ready audience from all sides. No matter how much he may correspond with his disciples from prison, Kaczynski would likely have never wanted

these crowds of devotees, some of whom call him “Uncle Ted,” to be anywhere near him. It was human encroachment on his space that he’d railed against ever since his Montana move. As Gehring quotes him writing in his journal, “I hate people.”

Meanwhile, decades later, Gehring is still grappling with the simple fact of having lived next to him, still processing the horror of knowing that she and her family could have been killed at any moment. Neither of these things will likely matter much to his current generation of followers. *Madman in the Woods* is being promoted as a “true crime memoir,” but the story behind the Unabomber’s murders has become resistant to truth. Kaczynski has transcended facts, and become an even bigger symbol than before.

Next month, Ted Kaczynski will turn 80. He may now live far from Jamie Gehring, with both now located far from Lincoln, but he never left Gehring’s mind. He won’t leave the country’s psyche anytime again soon, either.

The Ted K Archive

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Slate. <slate.com/culture/2022/04/ted-kaczynski-unabomber-jamie-gehring-madman-in-the-woods.html>

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