

Popular Culture Sets Sights on Unabomber

Trip Gabriel

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NOW that the F.B.I. has emptied the cabin of Theodore J. Kaczynski and is moving toward his likely indictment as the Unabomber, America can do what it habitually does with highly publicized crimes: look for its meaning in the blender of popular culture.

Already, the story of Mr. Kaczynski, his squalid homestead and his relationship with his brother, David, have become grist for instant books — the first is heading for stores this week — and for television docudramas: an Amy Fisher-style three-network movie battle is in the making.

But that is just the beginning. The larger question is, to what extent will the Unabomber's mad obsessions and 17-year chess match with authorities find a long-term place in the national psyche, becoming part of America's cultural preoccupations?

That is, in the language of the entertainment media, to which he is rapidly being consigned, will the Unabomber have legs?

Chances are that he will, if for no other reason than that these are flush times for serial killers, both in fact and in fiction. The nerve first touched by the Oscar-winning "Silence of the Lambs" is still exposed, still tingling. In Hollywood, where serial killers are the trend of the day, recent examples of the genre have included "Seven," "Copycat" and "Natural Born Killers."

Serial killers have stalked through novels like "The Alienist" by Caleb Carr, "In the Cut" by Susanna Moore and the best-selling "Intensity" by Dean Koontz. A subindustry of serial-killer merchandise offers trading cards and calendars, featuring the likes of John Wayne Gacy, the clown-costumed killer of 33 boys and young men, who was executed last year in Illinois. Given that the threat of being victimized by a serial killer is infinitesimal, why has this figure assumed such stature?

"The serial killer works as this mythic incarnation of anxieties that are very intense right now in the culture," said Harold Schechter, a professor of English at Queens College, who wrote "The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers," to be published by Pocket Books in the fall.

He identified the anxieties as the fear of random violence, the disintegration of the family and sundry sexual terrors.

"Who could ask for a better story about going to bed with the wrong guy than Ted Bundy?" Mr. Schechter said, referring to the smooth former law student who murdered young women in Washington, Florida and elsewhere.

The Unabomber, who attacked through the mail, at first seems to have little in common with sexual psychopaths like Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer, whose sadistic murders were committed at close range. But many experts, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation serial crime unit that tracked the Unabomber for years, consider him a member of the fold.

"Most serial killers torture their victims to achieve a sense of power and dominance," said Jack Levin, a professor of sociology and criminology at Northeastern University in Boston. "The Unabomber, I believe, has exactly the same motivation. The difference between the Unabomber and Ted Bundy is the Unabomber has a higher I.Q. and a

better education. He has the talent for building bombs. If Ted Bundy had gone to Harvard, he might have sent a 35,000-word manifesto, too.”

Mr. Kaczynski exhibits many of the personality traits, by now familiar to the point of cliché, shared by serial killers: polite, meticulous, unthreatening to his neighbors.

Mr. Schechter noted that acts of sensational violence are committed often, but that only a limited number of crimes burrow into a nation’s psyche. “The criminals who tend to live on are ones who conform to some mythic, archetypal pattern,” he said. “In some ways Kaczynski seems like this pure product of America, a guy who goes west to the wilderness to lead a life that is celebrated in texts like ‘Walden’ and ends up descending into madness.”

By contrast, the Oklahoma City bombing, whose first anniversary was Friday, although it will be long remembered, seems unlikely to ripple through the culture. It has not inspired ballads, T-shirts or novels. Perhaps some tragedies are too horrible to work as metaphor.

A very random survey of film makers and novelists who have portrayed serial killers — meant to gauge the Unabomber’s potential cultural longevity — got mixed results. Some artistic imaginations were engaged, some were not.

James Patterson, whose best-selling novels “Kiss the Girls” and “Along Came a Spider” involved serial killers, was intrigued by Mr. Kaczynski’s seeming harmlessness. “What I’m trying to do is deal with shared nightmares we have,” Mr. Patterson said, “and a nightmare a lot of people have is the fact that this guy doesn’t seem to have shown any signs that he could have been a murderer.”

Joyce Carol Oates, whose “Zombie,” a 1995 novel, focused on a sexual psychopath, doesn’t think the Unabomber is a serial killer in that classic sense. But she is intrigued by his resemblance to fanatic ideologues like John Brown, the abolitionist who murdered supporters of slavery in the 1850’s.

“I think of him as a misguided, very quixotic romantic figure of another era, who thinks that by these gestures he can change history,” Ms. Oates said. “It’s not that I’m sympathetic. I just feel I understand him, and he is in this very American tradition of using violence for some ideal.”

The very espousal of ideology, as manifested in the Unabomber’s anti-technology diatribe and his targeting of computer-science professors, is met with deep indifference by other authors. “I don’t consider him a serial killer, because he’s politically motivated,” said Dean Koontz, whose fascination with slasher-type killers has sustained several novels. “As soon as he begins to have an agenda, and it’s political, it becomes tedious to me.

“The Unabomber is more like classic loners who become mass murderers or terrorists.”

On another cultural front, much has been made of the Internet’s fascination with the Unabomber. He has been nominated for President, given his own theme song and held up as a kind of hero for advocating a return to “wild nature.”

The black humor mostly reflects the Net's ambivalence about its own much-hyped role in transforming modern life. But if the Unabomber leaves no other cultural footprint, he has at least inspired an outpouring of Net haiku, more than 400 verses submitted to the entertainment news site Mr. Showbiz, including this typical example:

*The world was all mine,
For 17 years, that is.
I hate my brother.*

The Ted K Archive

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