

Book Review: The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer

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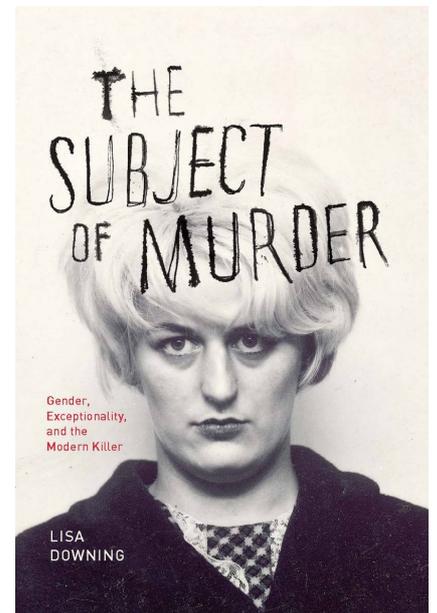
In *The Subject of Murder*, **Lisa Downing** explores the ways in which the figure of the murderer has been made to signify a specific kind of social subject in Western modernity. Drawing on the work of Foucault in her studies of the lives and crimes of killers in Europe and the United States, Downing interrogates the meanings of media and texts produced about and by murderers. **Emma Smith** finds an eloquently presented and well-researched range of case studies, charting the crimes, treatment of, and public responses to several murderers throughout history.



The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer. Lisa Downing. University of Chicago Press. April 2013.

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In her latest text, [Lisa Downing](#) sets out to bring our perception of the murderer into critical focus. Observing that murderers are overwhelmingly depicted as exceptional, or otherwise differentiated from normative society, Downing attempts to overturn the popular (mis?)conceptions of murderers as beasts; 'others' who can be separated, morally and emotionally from mainstream society, or conversely, individuals, not greatly unlike the society whose values they have seemingly transgressed. This dichotomy is explored in some detail, through extensive case studies encompassing key 19th-20th century murderers, and results in a fundamental, academic challenge to current thought on murderers.



Few female killers have been associated with as much monstrosity and notoriety as Myra Hindley; the subject of one of Downing's most extensive case studies. In keeping with the overall aim, Downing interrogates the notion of exceptionality, examining the aspects of Hindley's police investigations, imprisonment, and her portrayal in media and other cultural forms that were pertinent in the often subjective reading and cultivation of Hindley's public identity. Gender (and to a lesser extent, class) is a focus in this attempt by the author to understand and facilitate a possible re-conceptualisation of the identity ascribed to Hindley.

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Downing first examines how Hindley and her partner Ian Brady were subject to unequal questioning and treatment. Hindley, unlike Brady, was made to provide an extensive explanation of her attitudes towards children; a justification, not only for her tolerance of violence and cruelty towards children, but perhaps more crucially for her apparent lack of maternal instinct. Similarly, Hindley's motives were questioned, on account of her dissidence from the societal (female) ideals of marriage and raising a family. Hindley's non-traditional upbringing is also shown to have been a subject of focus; her failure to live with and be brought up by her mother deemed suspicious. By comparison, Brady's failure to marry and raise a family was rarely interrogated to the same degree. Unrelated, but also suggestive of the degree to which Hindley was a product of her society, is the focus drawn towards Hindley's physical appearance, often considered transgressive and out of the ordinary compared to contemporary feminine beauty ideals.

Downing's nuanced reading of Hindley's profile reveals much more than the nature of Hindley's crimes and the resulting impact on creating the 'other'. Rather, Downing invites the reader to consider in more detail why Hindley was/is so exceptional. Deconstructing the various elements that led to and underpinned the 'otherness' image of Hindley, Downing indicates that Hindley, unlike her male counterpart, was doubly transgressive: Hindley not only deviates from the moral and legal codes that are adhered to by most in society, but crucially, from her preconditioned, social, gendered role of a woman. Hindley was judged on her rejection of the feminine ideals of maternity, child rearing and its associated qualities of care and compassion, suggesting that Hindley's identity as murderer may have been as much a product of the world she was socialised into, as a source of rejection by that world.

Downing draws attention to another contentious case area in her chapter on child murder, involving children themselves as the perpetrators. Analysis primarily focuses on Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, killers in the James Bulger murder case, and the Columbine High School killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. In attempting to understand children who kill, Downing identifies several difficulties largely related to changing conceptualisations of childhood over time, which have seen children now viewed as those who must be subject to some degree of surveillance. In this context, Downing examines the influence of such conceptualisations, and the resulting potential for us to question and even fear the concept of childhood; in the wake of the Bulger murder in particular, fears amassed as to the idea that childhood may actually be more violent, or prone to evil than once thought. Bulger's killers thus came to signify a monstrous opposite to that of the innocent child ideal represented by Bulger, and invoked in parents a fear that their own child could be harboring similar, murderous tendencies, or in the case of Harris and Klebold, that other innocent children could be exposed and affected by the violence and cruelty of a minority of children.

Like the case of Hindley, various cultural and environmental factors were examined in attempting to better understand the motives of Venables and Thompson; the boys' socio-economic position was considered, amongst other factors, with an overarching tendency to draw upon the maternal parenting of the boys. Downing notes that there is overwhelmingly a cultural tendency to attribute women's sexuality to men's (sex-based) killings. According to this model, a dominant mother and absent or passive father – as both Venables and Thompson had – represents inappropriate feminine behaviour and may be a factor in their child's subsequent delinquency. Implicitly, this seems to suggest the prevalence of fear surrounding the disintegration of the nuclear family, and a lack of passivity/normativity in women. Downing builds on these ideas in order to develop our understanding of children who kill, arguing that the child killer, as with the female killer, is very much a phenomenon in our society. By means of comparison, Downing considers the terms used to describe the activities of male killers; 'randomness' and 'motionless' (p. 192) being two examples, terms rarely used for females or children who kill, highlighting the degree to which the latter groups are distinguished from male killers, with children typically viewed as deviating from the ideology of the innocent child and the ideals of their environment. This would suggest the exceptionality ascribed to child killers, as with female killers. As Downing argues however, perhaps child killers are less exceptional than previously thought; sharing a sense of oppression with women, child killers may similarly be considered a product of their society, their position and identity vilified and made exceptional by their apparent failure, or lack of willingness to conform to their expected social roles and behaviour as dictated by societal norms.

Downing eloquently presents a well-researched range of case studies, charting the crimes, treatment of, and public responses to several murderers throughout history. Downing also makes a substantial literary contribution in that she invites us to consider a new means of conceptualising the figure of the murderer. Suggesting that killers may not in fact constitute such exceptional 'others' and may conversely be considered to be shaped by – and thereby be – products of their society, Downing makes some significant and original observations. For this reason, Downing's text is highly recommended.

Emma Smith is a PhD student within the Department of Applied Social Science at the University of Stirling. Her PhD explores victim and statutory/voluntary agency responses to violence against sex workers. Other research interests include: health, policing, equality, sociology and research methods, particularly qualitative based methods. She has a MA Hons in History and Sociology from the University of Glasgow, a PGDip in Social Research from Glasgow Caledonian University, and an MSc in Applied Social Research from the University of Stirling. [Read more reviews by Emma.](#)