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The Dark Market Of 'Murderabilia'

Online Memento Traders Turn People's Fascination With Killers Into a Questionable Livelihood

By Neely Tucker
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There is a reason we have prisons. One of them is to keep people like Hadden Clark far, far away from the rest of us.

You *do* remember Hadden Clark, don't you?

Clark was the cross-dressing schizophrenic from [Bethesda](#) who killed 6-year-old Michele Dorr with a butcher knife on May 31, 1986. When he finally took police to the body 13 1/2 years later in [Montgomery County's](#) Paint Branch Park, it made national news. He was a serial killer (he also killed 23-year-old Laura Houghteling of Bethesda, and possibly many others) and claimed to be a blood-drinking cannibal. There was a book, lots of television.

He's locked up for life, but he hasn't forgotten his fans.

From his prison cell in Jessup, Clark peddles drawings of little girls, [Bugs Bunny](#) and his prison smock on Web sites that cater to people who want talismans from the murderous, the sadistic and the truly sick. When The Post wrote Clark to ask him how much he made in the business, he wrote back asking for a [Girl Scout](#) calendar and pictures of the reporter "when you were a little girl in dresses . . . I love girls."

And Lee Malvo. You didn't think Washington sniper [Lee Boyd Malvo](#) would just go away, did you? His self-portrait and letters are a hit on a Web site called Daisy Seven, motto: "Where Crime Pays. Every Day." It promotes him as "Our favorite sniper kid" and "Our Beltway buddy." His stuff goes for about \$30 a pop but is sold out at the moment.

The trade in crime memorabilia -- a letter from Charlie Manson, a sketch by [John Wayne Gacy](#), a postcard from [Ted Bundy](#) -- has become a dark part of the fascination with violence and celebrity. Most of the goods are created by serial killers in prison and peddled by dealers outside bars for modest profit.

Critics call it "murderabilia." It has risen and flourished and been banished from mainstream Web sites and been hatcheted by outraged state legislation and risen again, and now Congress is trying to punish it on a federal level. There are many rooms in the house of American culture, and the trade in the trinkets and baubles of killers is the indelible grease stain on the garage floor. It's wet and oily and it smells nasty and it's not going away.

"It's all-American style entertainment," writes [David Berkowitz](#), the now-remorseful serial killer, in a recent letter that described his dismay with the crime memorabilia trade and the public fascination with



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homicidal violence.

"I was John Wayne Gacy's mule," says Rick Staton, the legendary collector, by phone from his home in [Baton Rouge](#), La. He's describing how he became the exclusive art dealer for the man who killed more than 30 young males in [Chicago](#) and how they evaded the [Illinois](#) law set up to stop Gacy from selling his paintings. "It was a brush with deviant celebrity. It was unique. I had him do a portrait of my 2-year-old son. It's something to tell your grandkids about."

Pause.

"Well, at least *my* grandkids. They may be different from yours."

Gross Sales

H.H. Holmes. [Albert Fish](#). Leopold and Loeb. Richard Speck, Charlie Manson, Ted Bundy, Gacy, Dahmer. The Zodiac Killer, the Green River Killer, the Hillside Strangler(s). The BTK Killer.

There is a small subculture of people -- nobody really knows how many -- who are so fascinated by the actions of these and other notorious murderers that they want to buy, sell or trade things they have created. People have been into this ever since [Jack the Ripper](#) became a sensation in 1888 [London](#). Landlords charged admission to murder sites. Vendors sold little sword sticks, like knives used in the slayings.

Pop culture, celebrity, violence, the young and tragically dead. The 20th century: Popular media goes from screening out bad behavior to sensationalizing it. Bad news about famous people becomes all the rage. The nihilistic serial killer becomes the symbol of postmodern American alienation at its most extreme.

See that there on the shelf? It's a postcard from [Ed Gein](#). Ed Gein ? Man, he's the dude "Psycho" was based on, *and* that freak in "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre," and that freak in "The Silence of the Lambs." Made himself a suit out of female skin, no lie.

In 1958, the year after Gein was arrested in his home town of [Plainfield, Wis.](#), someone bought his car and took it to county fairs around the state, touting it as "The Car That Hauled the Dead From Their Graves." People were knocking chips off his gravestone for souvenirs until it was stolen about seven years ago. It turned up in [Seattle](#), where the promoter of a group called Angry White Males was selling rubbings from the stone for \$50 a pop.

It was returned to Plainfield, and the Waushara County Sheriff's Department has kept it in its basement ever since.

"To put it back would put someone else in position to take it," said Ronald Thurley, the agency's chief deputy. "I don't think people would leave it alone."

A few weeks ago, on a site called Murderauction.com, there was a letter for sale purported to be from

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the BTK Killer, the [Kansas](#) man who once killed an 11-year-old girl after he'd killed her parents, then masturbated over her corpse.

"One of the sickest killers ever, thanks, good luck bidding," went the pitch.

Laws Without Teeth

Before we go any further, let's say right here that in real life murder is not very entertaining.

"My only memorabilia, unfortunately, is image after image of dead bodies."

This is U.S. Rep. [Dave Reichert](#) (R-Wash.) talking in his office on the Hill. It's not every member of Congress who can hold forth on pulling corpses from rivers, but for years Reichert was the lead detective in the hunt for the Green River Killer. The killer turned out to be a nondescript truck-painter by the name of Gary Ridgeway. He confessed to killing 48 prostitutes in the 1980s and 1990s in Washington state before his 2001 arrest and subsequent life sentence.

Reichert is one of two sponsors of a bill that seeks to all but end the trade in true crime memorabilia. Introduced last fall with Sen. [John Cornyn](#) (R-Tex.), the Stop the Sale of Murderabilia to Protect the Dignity of Crime Victims Act would make it a three-to-10-year felony for inmates to mail almost anything for "interstate or foreign commerce" and allows for any profits to be seized. It assesses no penalty to private citizens who sell or buy such material. It would complement laws in five states that go further, by seizing any proceeds earned by inmates "or their designee," which would be dealers.

This is what is known as a feel-good bill. It's in committee and, even if enacted tomorrow, seems highly unlikely to end the trade. It's just so easy to evade, as we shall see.

Larry Traylor, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Corrections, says he was aware of Malvo's material being sold, but since it didn't constitute running a business, or profit directly from his sniper days (such as selling a book about it), there wasn't much the state could do.

"We're very focused on what comes into the institution -- we open all of that -- but not so much on what goes out," he says.

Let's go to a famous name in the field for insight. Let's talk to the man once known as the ".44 Caliber Killer," or "The Son of Sam." Let's talk to Berkowitz.

He's now an inmate at Sullivan Correctional Facility in [New York](#). While still at large, back in the mid-1970s, he wrote a very famous letter to the very famous Jimmy Breslin, then a columnist at the [New York Daily News](#). It began: "Hello from the gutters of N.Y.C., which are filled with dog manure, vomit, stale wine, urine and blood."

After his arrest, there was talk of his estate collecting a six-figure book deal, which led to the creation of "Son of Sam" laws that prevent criminals from collecting money from big-ticket sources like books and films. Many were struck down as unconstitutional, but many are still on the books in some form.

"The irony is that I have never tried to profit from my crimes," Berkowitz wrote in response to an inquiry about crime memorabilia. He says the confusion about the book deal was caused by lawyers handling his estate, which, he said, he did not have access to, and has never collected from.

He is highly sought after by collectors, but does not participate in the trade. He won't even sign his name to most things -- to prevent them from being resold. He works with Andy Kahan, the victims'-rights advocate in the [Houston](#) mayor's office who's led the national effort to stamp out the murderabilia trade.

"I have tremendous sorrow and remorse for the crimes I committed," Berkowitz wrote. "I've brought so much pain to people as well as to my own family and to myself." Murderabilia, he says, "is not illegal. But I'm sure it causes my victims pain when something makes the news. It certainly bothers me."

And here's the rub: The Son of Sam laws (Berkowitz says he "hates that evil moniker" but supports the laws' purposes) primarily target high-end projects like books and movies. The loophole is nickel-and-dime profits from small handicrafts, like drawings and poems, that killers put together after they have been incarcerated.

There have been high-profile campaigns to stamp out this kind of thing before. Kahan went on something like a crusade to persuade [eBay](#) to stop selling the stuff a few years ago. He won -- and then the trade just moved to other venues.

"The main benefit of the federal bill is not the extra few years it will tack on to their sentences, but that it will restrict their ability to mail things out, which puts a dent in the dealers' business," says Kahan. "If they can't get the items, they can't sell them."

Families of murdered victims certainly hope so.

"Once a child is murdered, you have no control over anything," says Nancy Ruhe, executive director of Parents of Murdered Children, a national advocacy group based in [Cincinnati](#). "But these murderers, they make money, they become famous, kids look up to them. It's incredible."

She makes the point that Americans hold murder up as a uniquely entertaining crime. Manson masks for Halloween, Ted Bundy action figures.

David Schmid, a professor of English at the [State University of New York at Buffalo](#) and author of "Natural Born Celebrities," a study of serial killer popularity, agrees. But, he says, it's pretty rich for a nation that regards [Truman Capote's](#) "In Cold Blood" as a work of art and that treated the [O.J. Simpson](#) case as a soap opera to then turn on collectors of crime memorabilia as if they were, well, criminals.

'Very Evil Sociopaths'

Todd Bohannon is on the phone.

He runs Murderauction.com from his home in Cornelia, Ga. He says he's in his 30s and that he teaches kindergarten as a day job. He says he's been collecting things from high-profile killers ever since Manson sent him a poem 17 years ago. He's one of the few collectors who talks to reporters, but he sounds sullen. He says he got 300 death threats after one news story about him and it left a bad taste.

It didn't put him off the trade.

"You got to man up. You got to be who you are. You can't let people's negative feelings affect you."

He's saying there's really no money in the crime memorabilia industry. He says there's no reason for a bill to be pending in Congress that makes it a crime for inmates to sell the stuff. He doesn't like, for

obvious reasons, the laws in five states that seize profits from dealers. He points out a Gainesville Sun story from a few months ago showing that the highest amount an inmate in [Florida](#) had received from crime collectors was about \$350 over a two-year period.

"See? There's just nothing there. I don't know why they want to make a law about this. I don't feel that I'm really bothering anybody."

[Louisiana's](#) Staton is recognized as one of the guys who made crime memorabilia a business. In the late 1980s he started writing "famous" killers, getting them to send drawings and poems, and then selling them for a few bucks. His day job was working as an undertaker.

"It was really great for a while -- Manson and [Richard] Ramirez would call and leave messages on the answering machine. Gacy called about 80 times a day . . . but in the end, they're losers who live in a little cell and try to titillate guys like me on the outside. They're game-players, very evil sociopaths."

And here, how easy the law is to beat: When the state of Illinois stopped Gacy from mailing Staton his clown drawings, Staton simply drove up to the institution, accepted paintings as "gifts" from Gacy, resold them and happened to make a "gift" to Gacy's inmate account weeks later.

"I got a third of the profit and Gacy got the rest," he says. "I guess I made about \$3,500, all put together." He says there's no doubt that some killers are 20th century American pop-culture icons, just like [Andy Warhol](#) and James Dean, and thus as worthwhile as anything else to collect.

"Manson's image, his name, is right up there with Coca-Cola and Hershey bars."

The Bazaar

The trade is almost all online now.

Web sites: Serial Killer Central, Murder Auction, Death Row Collectibles, Daisy Seven. The goods: Hadden Clark's handprints, autographed, \$45. Daniel Siebert, a serial killer on [Alabama's](#) death row, has an "8 1/2 x 11 artwork of a topless woman with her dragon on a leash," offered at \$75. A one-page letter from [John Hinckley Jr.](#), \$395. An 8-by-11 glossy of Mark David Chapman praying, signed by the killer of [John Lennon](#) himself, offered at \$150.

It is a trade that does not like outsiders.

"You have been denied access to this site."

This is on the computer screen.

It popped up less than two minutes after a [Washington Post](#) reporter created a user account on Daisyseven.com to monitor online bidding for Malvo's artwork.

There is no phone number listed on the Web site, which purports to be run by seven women. The Web site says someone named Robert Newsome deals with the media. A request for an interview lingered for two weeks before Newsome replied, "No comment."

[Tampa's](#) Ken Karnig, who runs Supernaught.com, did not return calls or e-mails and was hostile when a television crew conducted an ambush interview several years ago.

"We are not interested in entertaining those individuals who manipulate the facts, knowingly mislead the public, deliberately take things out of context and are only looking for sensationalism," he writes on his Web site, explaining his aversion to reporters.

A computerized records search shows that a Ken Karnig at his address has a criminal record for distributing drugs and a misdemeanor count of domestic battery.

His Web site has a lot of pornographic drawings by men who kill women.

He accepts most major credit cards.

Haunted to This Day

You know what people don't collect?

Pain. Suffering. Loss.

No one collects signed pictures of a mother weeping at her murdered child's grave on a sunlit Christmas afternoon, flowers going brittle in the cold. No one wants artwork from the dead Clutter children, the ones who were killed in "In Cold Blood."

Staton knows this. He says he's retired from active trading. He says he's a dad, unemployed, happily married, plays the bass for his church's choir.

"Victims' families must think I'm the worst creature who ever breathed air, and maybe in that sense I am. I am not ashamed of it nor am I proud of [collecting]. But I certainly wouldn't do it again. I remain haunted about it to this day."

But not so haunted that he doesn't still have about 1,500 pieces in his collection. One of which is Ken Bianchi's very own high school yearbook. The kid who would grow up to be one of the Hillside Stranglers was a hit with girls back then. "Dear Ken, you're the sweetest guy . . ." begins a typical entry.

Staton describes the irony as "kind of a hoot."

"People come in my house and they're disgusted and revolted, but damn . . . they sure do want to see what I've got."

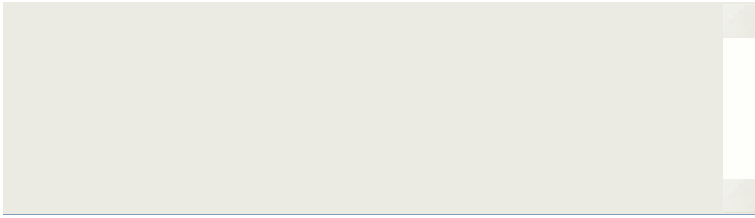
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