

Brief Review

By June Pulliam

Ketchum, Jack. *The Lost*. New York: Leisure, 2001. 394p.

Jack Ketchum's latest novel, *The Lost*, is more thoughtful than the usual serial killer narrative. It has to be since the real life inspiration for its protagonist isn't much of a blood thirsty lunatic by today's exacting standards. *The Lost* is loosely based on the exploits of 1960s serial killer Charles Schmid's, famously fictionalized by Joyce Carol Oates in her short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Schmid's killed only three people, the minimum number of victims necessary for someone to be classified as a serial killer by the FBI, and a fairly puny body count to a reading public that has seen what lay beneath in John Wayne Gacy's basement or what constituted the contents of Jeffrey Dahmer's freezer. But careful development of characters, the killer, his murder victims, and others who've had their lives torn about by the protagonist's violence, make *The Lost* chilling reading.

Ketchum more closely follows the details of Schmid's criminal career¹ than did Oates in her fictionalization of him. *The Lost's* protagonist, Ray Pye, suffers from an extreme version of Little Man Syndrome and compensates for his shortcomings by stuffing crushed beer cans in his boots to increase his height and by playing the bully at every opportunity. In spite of his diminutive stature, he is not without a certain physical charm, which he secretly heightens by the skillful, secret application of cosmetics. And his animal magnetism allows him to attract a nearly unlimited number of willing sexual partners, all of whom he bullies and manipulates in much the same way he does his male friends. Such controlling people often never really like themselves, and sometimes express their insecurities through violence. This is the case with Ray Pye. Any woman who dares to reject him, even by merely seeming to be unavailable, will be killed.

Don't let the plot summary mislead you though: this isn't the typical serial killer tale of an angry young loner whose actions may be cheered by the more conservative elements in our culture who believe that his victims got what they deserved. Ketchum's careful development of characters make this novel a cut above the usual slice 'em/dice 'em serial killer tale. Given Ketchum's dated subject matter, and given the limitations of his subject, for as I mentioned earlier, by modern standards, Schmid's isn't much of a serial killer -- he didn't even murder his victims in "interesting" ways the way someone like Jack the Ripper did—careful character development is absolutely necessary in order to make an interesting story.

Regardless, Ray Pye's relatively small number of victims doesn't make him any less frightening as a killer. Pye's victims are introduced to the reader as nice girls, including his first victim, someone he shot from afar to gratify his curiosity about taking a human life. While this victim is an anonymous object to Ray, to the reader she's a sympathetic character. In the brief time we see her, Ketchum gives her a personality, and we can't help but be disturbed when her life is snuffed out for no reason. Ketchum also illustrates how violent crime creates many uncounted victims. Pye's first victim had a family. After the first murder, we flash forward to see those people several years later, unable to put their lives back together after the unthinkable happened to their child.

The setting of the novel makes Pye's murders even more disturbing. Such things weren't supposed to happen in small town America in the relatively innocent 1960s. But Ketchum's small town America isn't the one we've had represented to us as "our history." Instead his small town America is a place where older men have scandalous relationships with women young enough to be their daughters, where there's so little economic opportunity that high school kids consider themselves fortunate to be gainfully employed in the most menial of occupations, and where bad ass kids get in pretty much the same trouble as they would in a big city.

Of course, Ray Pye's crime spree comes as a shock to the residents, who live in a state and time of relative innocence. But his crime spree is also shocking to the considerably more jaded reader who sees the story through a 40 year lens of time. After all this time, we're not offered any reason for Pye's/Schmid's behavior. At least, Ketchum never supplies one. Pye's mother and father won't win parent of the year award—they are distant and practice a policy of benign neglect towards their son—but he's also not exactly raised by Margaret White or Mrs. Bates. Other people are raised by less than loving, perfect parents and are vertically challenged, yet they don't grow up to become natural born killers.

Perhaps most disturbing of all is that after approximately 150 years of psychology and criminology, we still can't predict who will go postal and who will simply be resigned to living a life of quiet desperation.

¹ See *The Crime Library*: <http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial2/schmid/bib.html>

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