

The killings that made mass murder an American obsession

Harry N. MacLean's 'Starkweather' revisits a notorious midcentury crime and finally gives one woman the justice she deserves

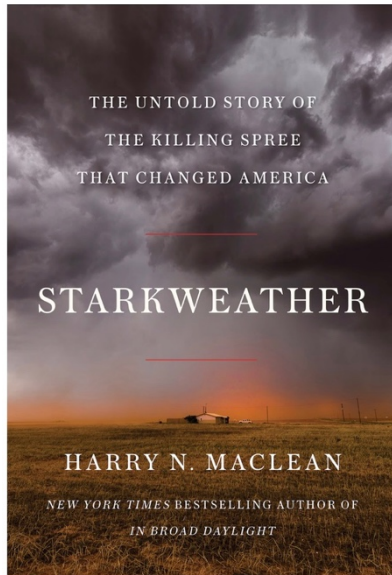
Review by Carl Hoffman
November 30, 2023 at 10:30 a.m. EST



Charles Starkweather, 19, who committed 11 murders, is led away by a sheriff after being sentenced to death in Lincoln, Neb., in May 1958. (AP)



In film, TV and song, murderous crime sprees often carry a manic joy, jacked-up Bonnies and Clydes hammering along the highway, reveling in transgressive freedom. Sick, a little bit crazy, yeah, but there's still something enviable in that dopamine orgy. "At least for a little while, sir, me and her we had us some fun," is the way Bruce Springsteen puts it in the title song of his 1982 album, "Nebraska," which recounts the eight-day killing rampage by Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate, in Nebraska in 1958.



(Counterpoint)

Harry N. MacLean's "Starkweather: The Untold Story of the Killing Spree That Changed America" slams the brakes on the romance. In his relentless, methodical investigation of the murders, there's not one iota of fun anywhere, beyond the satisfaction of reading his surgical, spare writing. In MacLean's telling, the week that Starkweather — and Fugate, according to the conventional narrative — shot, stabbed and mutilated 10 people, including most of Fugate's family, was singularly joyless: aimless days watching TV, scrounging for bad food, driving back and forth down desolate roads, sleeping in cars and getting stuck in muddy ditches, interspersed with bursts of horrific and random violence amid the frozen Nebraska winter. The exact details of that week — who did what, when — matter, and what has been long portrayed as a straightforward rampage, with Fugate as gung-ho accomplice, changes and shifts as MacLean repeatedly stops the story and starts it again, over and over, each time with new details that cancel previous, official versions.

Poor Charlie Starkweather, though, at least at first. Growing up in Lincoln in the 1950s, he was bowlegged and myopic, a flaming red-haired runt topping out at 5-foot-5, the butt of jokes and relentless bullying. Which is no excuse, of course. By the time he was a 19-year-old garbage collector sporting a leather jacket and dangling cigarette, he was a sociopath with a hair trigger and a waiflike 14-year-old girlfriend. Chicken or egg applies here — he'd already killed a gas station attendant weeks prior, a crime for which the police had no leads — but when Fugate broke up with him one Sunday afternoon, Starkweather's "days as a garbage man were over," writes MacLean. "His days of fighting with his fists were over. He needed a gun." Two days later, upon his

return to Fugate's house, she allegedly watched as he shot her stepfather in the head, shot her mother in the mouth, repeatedly stabbed them and crushed their skulls with the rifle butt, and stabbed 2-year-old Betty Jean in the throat. He and Fugate cleaned the blood, as the conventional story goes, and then spent the next five days sitting on the sofa, watching the tube, the bodies of her parents and sister stuffed in various places outside.

You get the idea.

Their luck ran out in Wyoming, after eight days of more of the same, with Fugate at various times supposedly toting a .410 shotgun and doing some of the killing herself. She was the most "trigger-happy person I ever seen," Starkweather said in one of many confessions. They were famous, their rampage "kick[ing] off a blaze of storytelling far beyond what he, or anyone else for that matter, could ever have imagined," including 12 books, one major film (Terrence Malick's "Badlands"), three documentaries, one TV miniseries and numerous mentions in song, including by Springsteen and Billy Joel. After separate trials, Starkweather died in the electric chair in 1959 and Fugate got life.



Caril Ann Fugate, 14, smiles from the back seat of a car in January 1958 as she arrives in Lincoln, Neb., after her arrest in Wyoming. (William P. Straeter/AP)

So why yet another book about this horrific mess? Because Fugate was innocent, which MacLean's dogged reporting goes further than any previous account in proving. When state troopers finally caught up to them, Fugate fled from Starkweather, leaped into a trooper's car, said Charlie was going to kill her and asked if her family was okay. Within hours of hearing that her family was dead, the eighth-grader underwent a series of lengthy interrogations over multiple days while heavily drugged by prison authorities, without an attorney present. There were neither witnesses nor physical evidence directly linking her to any of the killings. She became the youngest girl in the United States to stand trial for first-degree murder: a 14-year-old child, herself a victim of parental abuse, in the company of an armed and violent adult man, who said she feared for her life throughout his rampage. Starkweather's fantasy from the beginning, MacLean compellingly argues, was to die in a blaze of glory and to take his love with him so they could be forever together, preferably with Fugate perched on his lap. His increasingly detailed confessions — in one he asserted that Fugate had killed six all by herself — combined with inconsistencies in her long interrogations and, among other details, the fact that she'd had sex with Starkweather during the rampage ultimately led to her conviction. But as MacLean, a former trial attorney, shows, she cannot have been culpable. That she was present for her family's murders doesn't hold up, for one thing; she was in school when Starkweather killed them and stashed the bodies. Even at the time, the case against her was so weak that she was tried in only two of the killings, and as an accomplice.

"Starkweather" is a story about a different time in a different America. "Fugate was never evaluated by a psychologist or psychiatrist," MacLean writes, "or even interviewed by a social worker or counselor prior to her trial." There was little understanding of abuse and its effects in this era, long before Patty Hearst or Elizabeth Smart, who, like Fugate, had numerous opportunities to escape their captors but never did.



Harry N. MacLean. (Lisa Christianson)

Television, MacLean argues, created a new kind of American celebrity, “the first modern day mass killer.” Starkweather’s arrest and trial were carried daily on prime-time national TV for 18 months straight. “The world had never seen anything like it,” he writes, describing it as the “beginning of the love affair between television and violent crime,” in which a disaffected nobody could pick up a gun and become “a somebody.” It was TV that rendered Fugate guilty in the minds of every watcher, long before her trial, and it was TV that created a new American cultural disease: mass killings. Starkweather’s was the only mass murder in 1958, a fact that seems almost quaint now, considering that, by MacLean’s tally, “from 2006 through 2020, there was a total of 448 mass killings, involving 567 offenders, 2,357 victims killed, and 1,693 injured.”

It is a grim statistic in a grim story, and that grimness is the paradoxical joy of reading MacLean — the raw chill creeping through your veins that feels authentic to the place and the crimes, the lean and vivid sentences rivaling Capote’s *“In Cold Blood”* and Mailer’s *“The Executioner’s Song.”* Here, though, there’s an exception that differentiates this book from those earlier ones. In “Starkweather,” something good does finally happen when Fugate gets paroled in 1976, after serving 18 years, at the age of 33, the beginning of a long and normal life that included marriage and work as a nanny. Justice is served, but so is redemption, a moment that feels like the first cloudless day after an exceptionally grueling, bitter, high-plains winter.

Carl Hoffman is the author of five books, including “Liar’s Circus,” “The Last Wild Men of Borneo” and “Savage Harvest.”

Starkweather: The Untold Story of the Killing Spree That Changed America

By Harry N. MacLean
Counterpoint. 413 pp. \$30