TRUE CRIME

The Streets Look So Empty': How a Child Killer Haunted My First Novel

The still-unsolved Oakland County Child Killer case lodged in the author Megan Abbott's psyche, even if she didn't know it at the time.

By Megan Abbott

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"Is this based on the Oakland County Child Killer case?" a man asked me, holding up a copy of my novel "The End of Everything."

It was 2011 and I was on book tour, giving a talk at a Borders in suburban Detroit. He was the first person to ask me that question, but not the last — both that night and in emails I received afterward. The truth was, at the time, I had never heard of the Oakland County Child Killer. Or rather, I didn't think I had.

In 1994, my first year out of college, I began writing what I hoped would become my first novel: the story of a 13-year-old girl, Lizzie, whose best friend disappears from their suburban neighborhood. I managed only 40 or 50 pages before abandoning it. Yet the idea lingered with me. More than 15 years and four novels later, I returned to that original file and began again. The result became "The End of Everything."

Despite an initial plan to set the story in the present day, my instincts kept drawing me toward the hazy suburbia of my childhood in the late '70s and early '80s, a world before cellphones and home computers, before Amber Alerts and Megan's Law. After her friend goes missing, my narrator Lizzie's placid suburb feels newly poisonous. Recess is canceled. Dark and lurid rumors buzz behind curled hands. Children are stiffly chaperoned to and from school.

"The streets look so empty, like it's Christmas," Lizzie tells us, waiting anxiously for her brother to pick her up. "All those packs of raucous kids gone, all that rabid energy. I picture all of them in their family rooms, their dens, staring at TV screens, their parents lurking in the door frame, standing guard."

As I tried to conjure an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, I kept experiencing an uncanny feeling of having been here before. It all felt so familiar, calling to mind persistent feelings I'd had as a child — of crouching menace, mysterious threats that could not be named, of nervous parents and a general aura of dread. I started recalling long-forgotten school assemblies focused on "strangers" in cars, in vans, lurking on the edge of schoolyards, waiting. Whispers or allusions to "white slavery," child pornography networks — worse, the whiff of molestation.

That feeling, that atmosphere of dread, feels eerily reminiscent of our current moment. Lately, as I see my neighbors' kids in their masks, their faces hidden, I find myself wondering what today's pandemic will mean for children in the months and years to come. The fear I felt as a child was real but, ultimately, misplaced. But today, the fear is real, and earned, and everywhere. And so is the danger.

Back then, it all found its way into the book.

Between January 1976 and March 1977, two boys and two girls ages 10 to 12 were kidnapped in the quiet suburbs of Oakland County, on the west side of Detroit. The boys were molested, and all four were murdered, their bodies found several days later, neatly posed in the snow. Some newspapers began calling the perpetrator the Babysitter Killer after it was reported the children were found washed and groomed, their clothes meticulously put back on (one even with her backpack). One — Timothy King — had apparently been given his favorite meal, fried chicken, before his death. His body was still warm when authorities found him.

A witness came forward in the King case, saying she saw a boy she believed to be Timothy talking to a man about 25 to 35 years old, with shaggy hair and sideburns and driving a blue AMC Gremlin with white striping. About 20,000 tips came in and, though strong suspects have emerged over the years, the case remains open.

A police sketch of a suspect sought in the killings of Timothy King and three other children.
AP Photo/Police Handout

It seems impossible that I had never read or heard about a series of crimes that received extensive local and even national media attention and occurred less than 15 miles from my childhood home — four children just a handful of years older than me abducted on a walk to the 7-Eleven or a bike ride to the local hobby store.

At the Borders event, I had fumbled with the man's question, explaining that I wasn't familiar with the case. Besides, my novel was about a single kidnapping, not multiple murders. But afterward, a former classmate approached me. "You really don't remember?" she said. "But how about the signs in the window and all that?"

It all came back. Of course I remembered the signs: white cardboard placards that parents could place in their front windows — a fluorescent orange "E" for emergency — that were meant to indicate it was a safe house. If someone was following us, if someone was trying to interfere with us, we should run into the nearest house with the "E" sign. (The logic of this continues to baffle me. If one wanted to harm a child, wouldn't the first thing they would do is put one of those signs in their window?)

And even if I didn't remember the murders themselves — I was only 4 when the first occurred — what I do recall, vividly, is the feeling that danger was always lurking just beyond the schoolyard, one's front lawn. Like the victims of the Oakland County killer, we too might be approached by a stranger seeking to entice us with candy, to lure us into a basement, to take naughty pictures of us, to do things too terrible to say aloud.

The feeling that those signs in the window still summon in me — anxiety, distrust, paranoia, dread — are central to my novels. But I'd seldom pondered the source. If asked, I usually pointed to my early interest in true crime. I still remember, at age 10 or so, sneaking peeks inside a yellowing paperback of "Helter Skelter" at the used bookstore and finding myself transfixed. It led to a lifelong fascination with true crime in all its forms. But now I wonder if my precocious enthrallment with true crime was not the origin story but instead my earliest attempt to make sense of a fear and fascination that was already there.

In recent years, the mid-'70s through the mid-'80s have come to be characterized as the age of "Stranger Danger," a moral panic driven, perhaps, by a '60s hangover, reflecting Reagan-era cultural fears of collapse of the family and decline in law and order. Throughout the culture — in movies and after-school specials, in school assemblies and, increasingly, in the national media — the message was clear: No child was safe. Molesters and murderers were waiting in every shadow.

Shock and Fear Grip a Detroit Suburb as 7th Child Is Found Slain

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS

A police car at the home of Timothy King in Birmingham, Mich., yesterday. The boy's bicycle is in the driveway.

Murders Involved Oakland County

Marian King, Timothy's mother, with a police officer after she identified her son's body yesterday.

Before the late 1970s, missing child cases seldom received national attention. But the media coverage of a few key cases changed all that. First, the disappearance of Etan Patz in 1979 in New York City, which was followed by the case of Adam Walsh, whose abduction and murder in Florida in 1981 were chronicled in a widely watched TV movie. That case brought John Walsh, anguished father-turned-advocate, into the public eye (he would go on to create and host "America's Most Wanted"). A few years later, the milk carton campaign began after the disappearance of two Iowa paperboys.

Like all moral panics, "Stranger Danger" proved dangerous all on its own. There was no missing child epidemic. And yet a generation or more of children was pressed to be hypervigilant of the risks from those they did not know when the statistics were always clear: most violence toward children comes from someone they *do* know. A family member, a teacher, a coach, a neighbor. The danger was within all along. *The calls are coming from inside the house*, as the movie cliché goes.

When I asked my mother recently about her own recollections of the Oakland County Child Killer, she said she didn't remember much about the case. "It seemed far enough away," she said, adding that this was before the completion of Interstate 696, which made driving much faster between Detroit's east and west sides. It was, in so many ways, a different time. Your neighborhood, even in the suburbs, was your whole world.

The next day, however, my mother remembered more, recalling how, when the dismissal bell rang, she would come to meet my brother and me at the corner of our street, a mere 150 feet from the schoolyard's edge. As she said it, I remembered too, though I had never known the impetus.

You never think your childhood is specific, tethered in ways seen and unseen to its era, shaped by its historical context. With these years of distance, I can look back on my childhood and dismiss all those nebulous fears and the contagion of fear from parents to children, from schools to the community. Behind the fear of "strangers" lay the fear of cultural change, the perennial fear of difference — shameful and corrosive fears that we can all now dismiss, disavow.

I have one memory — very hazy — from early childhood that has never left me. It was likely a few years past the heat of the Oakland County killings because I was walking the block from school alone, my mother no longer appearing at the schoolyard's edge to retrieve me. The day was gray under the white sky of a Michigan winter. For reasons I don't remember, I was late and the schoolyard was empty.

Until it wasn't. Far off on the other side of the graveled expanse, I spotted a stranger. He was a young man, tall with long sideburns — like the Oakland County Child Killer — wearing glasses, a sheepskin parka flapping open in the breeze. I remember how large he looked, and strange. It was the way his body moved, lurching slightly to one side. And how he was smiling as if he were saying hello.

He was calling out to me, a kind of taunt, or something else. A noise he was making, almost a squawk, like a trapped bird.

I remember arriving at home breathlessly. I remember that night my beloved dad, who died last year, brought home bear claws for dessert and I remember eating them with him over the wax paper and how safe I felt, how protected. Nothing could hurt me, or my loved ones. I remember that feeling and wonder how you ever get it back.

Megan Abbott is the author of nine books, including, most recently, "Give Me Your Hand" and "Dare Me," which was adapted into a TV series.