

Sordid Stories of Scandals, Sex, and Slayings

By Lynsey Grosfield

Newspapers have always treated crime as fodder for a good story rather than a bane on society. Stories of murder, rape, theft, tax evasion, extortion, insider trading and other transgressions are often more thrilling than a drugstore novel to the public that reads them. The phenomenon is similar to that of the media obsession with celebrities; the stories are about a real person and therefore they become all the more intriguing. To a certain degree the public tend to only read the stories that are about crime or negativity: to gain readership the papers sensationalize the stories of crime. The public is comprised of voyeurs; 'persistent observer[s] of misery [and] scandal ...fascinated [by] distressing, sordid, or scandalous events'¹. This, however, is not a new development; it has been going on since papers have been published. Newspaper reporting on crime has not become too sensational; it is the voyeur in us that seeks the sensationalism in what we read.

Three recent high profile cases in Canada have effectively demonstrated that sensationalized portraits of crime sell papers. In the first case the accused has been given a moniker reminiscent of a James Bond Villain; in the second the convicted is described as a sick and deranged serial killer that targets women in the sex industry; and in the last the accused is oft quoted in his most insolent moments, making him appear as though he is utterly without a conscience. The stories read like the inside jacket of a novel, and they comprise the daily news.

Amit Kumar, or "Dr. Horror", is the purported doctor behind a series of illegal

1. Encarta Dictionary North America

kidney “donations” and transplants. The idea of an illegal organ market is so unlike anything that Canada experiences that the public interest and curiosity has been understandably piqued. He and his family resided in Toronto in a suburban area; no doubt the other neighborhood residents were tickled by the idea that such a villain could be their neighbor. His story grabbed front pages in all over the world as he trotted through India and Canada and was arrested in Nepal.

The Toronto Star Reports that: “Kumar apparently asked for a copy of the English daily, which carried a front-page story of the global manhunt for him, then minutes later, returned it to the front desk with the article cut out.”² The public read stories of an international manhunt while murder and crime were going on in their own backyards: this story was much more glamorous because of all of the parties involved.

The faces of twenty-six murdered sex workers were plastered all over front pages when Robert Pickton was arrested. He used a meat grinder to dispose of the bodies. In some cases the largest fragment of a human body that could be found was a finger. It is morbid and disgusting; and it was widely read. Canadians clung to every story of forensic evidence being released as if Horatio Kane of CSI Miami were the investigator. Readers are able to remove themselves from the story because they simply cannot sympathize with a sex worker or a street person. The very fact that a person reads this gruesome tale in the newspaper creates distance; the story has not

caused mourning, it has caused a series of media theories related to local problems such as the cases of over a dozen

2. The Toronto Star online article: **"'Dr. Horror' nabbed"** by Dale Brazao and Noor Javed

murdered women in the Edmonton area.

The papers have jumped on board with this story and are now marketing the Edmonton slayings as "Another Pickton?" The Globe and Mail headlines state: "Mounties finally admit serial killer is prowling Edmonton."³ The language used, such as the use of the word 'prowling', creates an emotional response in the reader. It is structured to deliver a message of fear and intrigue.

Conrad Black skimmed millions off the top; gave up his Canadian citizenship, and has been sentenced to seventy-eight months in prison in the United States. The story in and of itself is sensational; one can picture a feature film starring Robert De Niro as the surly plaintiff. A Canadian history magazine, "The Beaver", recently rated Conrad Black as the tenth worst Canadian in an online poll⁴. Ironically he made his fortune as a newspaper mogul; at one point he owned fifty-five percent of the daily newspapers in Canada⁵. The National Post, which he founded, now runs articles about his downfall. The newspapers, including those he formerly owned, simply exploited the trend of bashing him.

Mr. Black is an exceedingly quotable villain; papers sensationalized his villainy by using his own quotes out of context. Headlines from CBC news online were attention

grabbing, such as: “Unrepentant Conrad Black awaits his sentence”; “Prison would be a 'bore,' Conrad Black says”; “‘I still expect to win,’ Black says”; and “Conrad Black vows he'll be back”⁶. Once the papers had created a particular portrait of Mr. Black they

3. Globe and Mail online article by Katherine Harding
4. Canada’s National History Society website; The Beaver Magazine article is based on a survey of 15 000 online voters to determine the “Worst Canadians”
5. The Toronto Star online article: “A Conrad Black Timeline” compiled by David Olive
6. Headlines from http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/black_conrad

developed his character as any playwright or novelist would. The papers drew on his worst qualities to write stories that would voyeuristically involve the reader in Black’s complex and crime riddled world. Most can only dream of having millions of dollars to steal; Conrad Black had it all, and everyone was there to enjoy his fall from grace.

Although the events of these stories have caused pain for the parties involved; they are still spread across the pages of the Edmonton Journal, The Calgary Herald, and The National Post (much to the pleasure and interest of the readers). Some call the societal fascination with crime “sick”, others call it “natural”: both sides are still buying the papers and reading the stories because newspapers give readers exactly what they want. These news stories offer a real life version of C.S.I., Law and Order, and Cold Case rolled into one. Sensationalism is part of what defines a news story; society demands that the stories are fast-paced and full of sordid details in order to satisfy its fascination with scandal, sex, and slayings.

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