

Jack The Ripper

Summary:

Someone in London murdered and mutilated a number of prostitutes during the autumn of 1888; the press went into a frenzy, politicians pointed the finger at each other, hoaxers polluted the investigation and one of several nicknames stuck: Jack the Ripper. Over a century later Jack's identity has never been wholly proven (there isn't even a leading suspect), most aspects of the case are still debated and the Ripper is an infamous cultural bogeyman.

The Enduring Mystery:

The Ripper's identity has never been established and people have never stopped looking: the publishing rate's average is a new book a year since 1888. Unfortunately, the wealth of Ripper source material - letters, reports, diaries and photographs – provides enough depth for detailed and fascinating research, but too few facts for any incontrovertible conclusions; just about everything about Jack the Ripper is open to debate and the best you can get is a consensus. There is no better mystery.

The Crimes:

Traditionally, Jack the Ripper is considered to have killed five women, all London prostitutes, during 1888: Mary Ann 'Polly' Nichols on August 31, Annie Chapman on September 8, Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes on September 30 and Mary Jane (Marie Jeanette) Kelly on November 9. In practice there is no agreed list: the most popular change is to discount Stride and/or Kelly, sometimes adding Martha Tabram, killed August 7th. Authors naming more than eight have achieved very little consensus.

The Ripper generally killed by strangling his victims, then laying them down and cutting the arteries in their throats; this was followed by a varied process of mutilation, during which parts of the body were removed and kept. Because Jack did this quickly, often in the dark, and because he seemed to have great anatomical knowledge, people have assumed the Ripper had a doctor's or surgeon's training. As with much of the case, there is no consensus: a contemporary thought him simply a blunderer.

The Letters and Nicknames:

During the autumn and winter of 1888/89 a number of letters circulated among the police and newspapers, all claiming to be from the Whitechapel murderer; these include the 'From Hell' letter and one accompanied by part of a kidney. Ripperologists consider most, if not all, of the letters to be hoaxes, but their impact at the time was considerable, if only because one contained the first use of 'Jack the Ripper', a nickname the papers swiftly adopted and which is now synonymous.

Horror, Media and Culture:

The Ripper killings were neither obscure nor ignored at the time. There was gossip and fear in the streets, questions at high levels of government, offers of rewards and resignations when nobody was caught. Political reformers used the Ripper in arguments and policemen

struggled with the limited techniques of the time. Indeed, the Ripper case remained high profile enough for many of the police involved to write private accounts years later. However, it was the media who made 'Jack the Ripper'.

By 1888 literacy was common amongst the crowded citizens of London and newspapers reacted to the Whitechapel Murderer, whom they initially christened 'Leather Apron', with the frenzy we expect from modern tabloids, stirring opinions, fact and theory – along with the probably hoaxed Ripper letters – together to create a legend which seeped into popular culture. From the very start, Jack doubled as a figure from the horror genre, a bogeyman to scare your kids.

A century later, Jack the Ripper is still hugely famous world over, an unknown criminal at the centre of a global manhunt. But he is more than that, he's the focus of novels, films, musicals and even a six inch high model plastic figure. Jack the Ripper was the first serial killer adopted by the modern media age and he's been at the forefront ever since, mirroring the evolution of western culture.

Will The Mystery Be Solved?:

It's extremely unlikely anyone will be able to use the existing evidence to prove, beyond all reasonable doubt, who Jack the Ripper was and, while people are still uncovering material, the discovery of something unarguable has to be regarded as a long-shot. Fortunately, the mystery is so fascinating because you can do your own reading, draw your own conclusions and, with some critical thinking, generally have as much chance of being right as everyone else!

