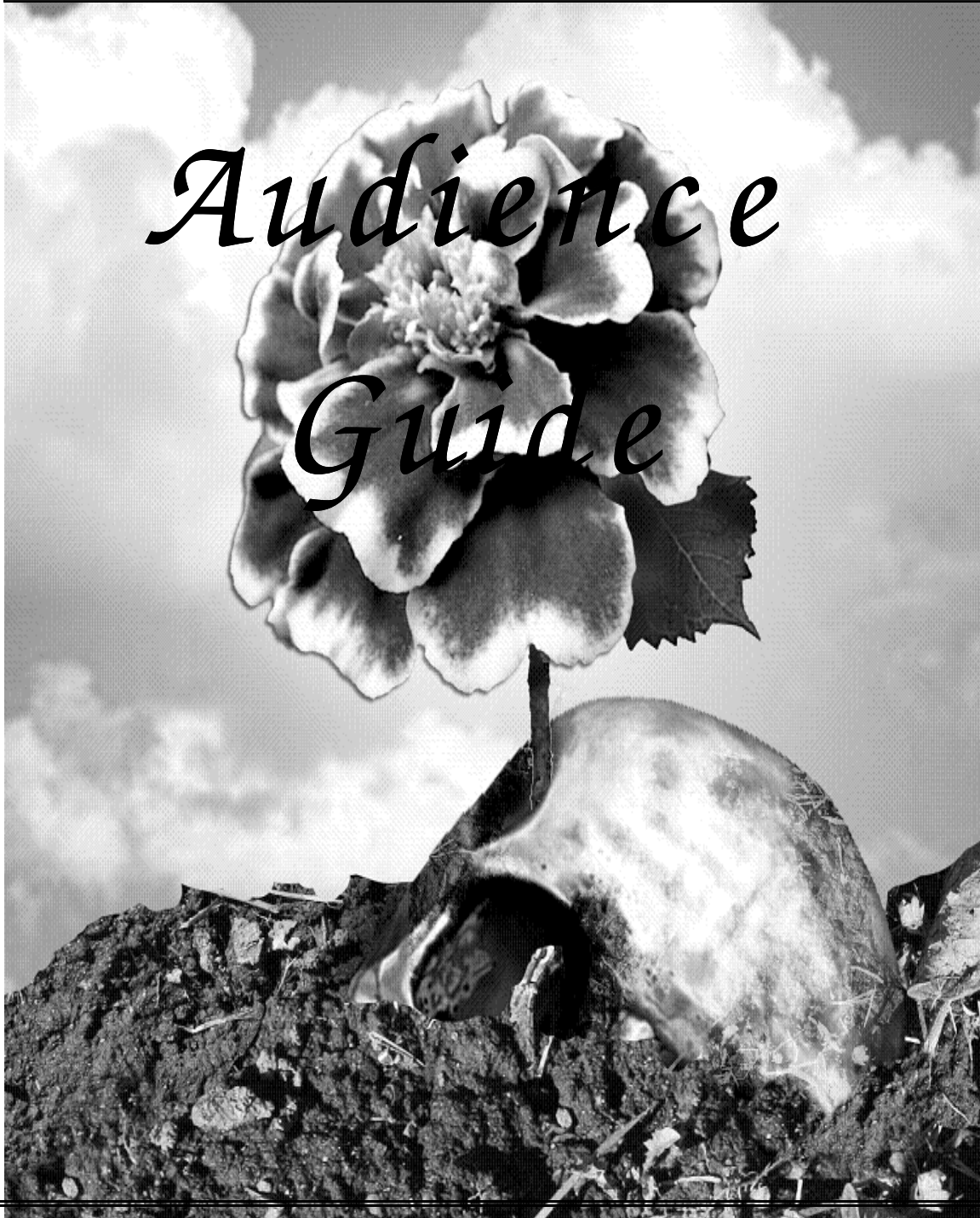


The American Century Theater Presents
Ira Levin's
Dr Cook's Garden

*Audience
Guide*



September 9–October 4, 2008

Edited by Jack Marshall

ABOUT THE AMERICAN CENTURY THEATER

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American plays of the Twentieth Century... what Henry Luce called "*the American Century.*"

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These study guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.



Table of Contents

Ira Levin

4

By David McCourt

Dr. Cook's Ethics

8

By Jack Marshall

The Killer Doctors

15

By Jack Marshall

Master of Suspense

22

By Pradeep Sebastian

The American Century Theater Season

24

Ira Levin

By David McCourt

In 2003, the Mystery Writers of America honored novelist-playwright Ira Levin by awarding him its Grand Masters Award. It suited him well.

He was born August 27, 1929 in the Bronx. His father, Charles Levin, was a successful toy importer. When Ira was thirteen, his family moved to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and the style and flavor of this part of New York radiates through much of his work. Just as Damon Runyon provided an insider's view of the characters and misfits that populated Broadway, Ira Levin introduced the actors, the playwrights, the wannabes, and the people who make Broadway tick.

Ira was a solitary child, preferring to spend his time indoors, and preferring academic endeavors to socializing. According to an interview in *People Magazine*, at age twelve Ira became fascinated by the magicians that frequented Tannen's Magic Shop in Times Square. It is possible that the foundations of Levin's mastery of mystery and suspense were laid at this early age, as he learned the joy of concealing reality behind illusion. It was also at about this time that Charles and Beatrice Levin took their son to see his first Broadway play, *Charlie's Aunt*. Young Ira quickly developed a love for the theater. He also liked detective stories and began to acquire a collection of mystery books. And he became fond of anagrams, which would later play major roles in his novels *Rosemary's Baby* and *Son of Rosemary*.

Ira Levin attended the prestigious Horace Mann School and went on to attend Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, for two years. He then transferred to New York University where he majored in English and Philosophy and received an A.B. When Ira was in his final year at NYU, the CBS television network had a screenplay-writing contest for college seniors. Ira's entry was, significantly, a mystery thriller called *The Old Woman*, a half-hour teleplay about a young man and a nurse who conspire to do away with the young man's 103-year-old great grand-aunt. Levin didn't win the contest, but he got a \$200 runner-up prize. NBC offered him \$400 for the script and turned it into an episode of their *Lights Out* television show, based on the old radio horror anthology.

After Ira graduated, he and his father agreed that the family would subsidize him for two years as he tried to become a professional writer. If Ira did not succeed in that time, he would acquiesce to his father's wishes and join him in the toy business. Levin did not fail to make good use of his father's support. His first novel, *A Kiss Before Dying* was published in 1953, and promptly won the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America as the year's best mystery.

Drafted into the army that same year, Levin served with the Signal Corps while still managing to work as a writer. He was stationed in Queens, NY, and he took advantage of his location to sell more scripts to the fast-growing TV market.

Fate was then kind to Ira Levin, as it must be to any successful artist. Mac Hyman had just scored a big hit with his comic novel, *No Time For Sergeants*, and Levin won the job of writing the TV adaptation. Actor Maurice Evans, the owner of the stage rights, saw the TV version and decided that Levin should also write the stage play.

No Time For Sergeants ran for 796 performances and Ira Levin, in his mid-20's, became the latest "toast of Broadway." But Levin's next play, *Interlock*, folded after only four performances. *Critic's Choice*, starring Henry Fonda, did a bit better, lasting three months. And the downward trend continued: *General Seeger*, produced and directed by George C. Scott, closed after only two performances. Next was *Drat! The Cat*, Levin's only musical. He had worked for ten years on it, writing both the book and the lyrics. Though it has and had many admirers (including Levin, who believed it to contain some of his best work), a number of production misfortunes conspired to undermine the show's chances of success, and it closed after eight performances.

Dr. Cook's Garden was next on Broadway for Levin, opening in 1967. It too ran into production conflicts, including an attack of artistic temperament by director George C. Scott and an oddly dispassionate

performance from star Burl Ives, and lasted a little more than a week. After this long string of disappointments, Levin decided it was time to take a break from Broadway, and returned to writing novels.

On August 20, 1960, Levin had married Gabrielle Aronsohn. They had three children – Adam, Jared, and Nicholas – and divorced in January of 1968. His family experiences helped inspire two of his most successful novels.

Gabrielle's pregnancy and Levin's reflections on the process of childbearing led to his creation of *Rosemary's Baby*. Understandably, Levin wouldn't let his wife read the book while she was pregnant. The novel, about a woman forced by a Manhattan-based Satanic cult into bearing the child of the Devil, sold over five million paperback copies in the U.S. alone. *Rosemary's Baby* was an instant horror classic, and spawned a new surge in horror fiction that got even stronger with the acclaimed film version of the novel, directed by Roman Polanski and

starring Mia Farrow. Books and movies dealing with Satan, demonic possession and devil worship became a staple of the genre.

Levin's next novel was *This Perfect Day*, which received mixed reviews and tepid sales. But then came *The Stepford Wives*, published in 1972. Again Levin's personal life may have played a part, as he wrote the book while going through his divorce. Levin had recently read the best-seller *Future Shock* and was fascinated by its discussion of domestic robots. He was also inspired, he later told interviewers, by the life-like but somehow creepy audio-animatrons in the Hall of Presidents at Disneyland and Walt Disney World.

In 1972 the Women's Movement was at its loudest and most controversial, and Levin's new book touched a nerve in the American culture. *The Stepford Wives* became his second mega-best-seller, and the success emboldened him to try Broadway again. In 1973 he gave the theater world its first necrophilia-thriller, *Veronica's Room*. It was not a great success, but the dark, rather repellent play found a permanent market with college groups and community theaters. Then Levin's run of Broadway disappointment resumed: *Break a Leg*, Levin's next effort, ran only one night.

Around this time Levin read an article on cloning that included pictures of Mozart and Hitler. He had considered doing a story about Nazis for years, and had always been intrigued by murderous doctors, as in his earlier play, *Dr. Cook's Garden*. (His first TV script, you will recall, involved a murderous nurse.) Levin decided to develop a story about the infamous and then still-missing Nazi physician Josef Mengele cloning Hitler in the present day. Like *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*, the resulting novel, *The Boys From Brazil*, became a runaway best seller and a successful movie, giving Gregory Peck his last film success.

Levin's Broadway slump finally came to a smashing end in 1978. *Deathtrap*, a mystery thriller with a good supply of laughs, starring John Wood, ran for 1,792 consecutive performances, a record for the genre on Broadway. It became the fifth-longest-running non-musical in the history of the Great White Way. Once again, Levin had conquered Broadway.

In 1979 Levin married Phyllis Finkel. They divorced in 1981; it was his last marriage. He wrote less frequently. A play, *Cantorial*, dealt with the ghost of a cantor who plagued a yuppie couple; it was produced off-Broadway in 1988. Levin produced a novel, his first in fifteen years, in 1991's *Sliver*. While not a huge success, it was quite well received by critics, and made into a film starring Sharon Stone. Although his next and final novel, a sequel to *Rosemary's Baby*, *Son of Rosemary*, did not fare as well with reviewers, it was still enjoyed by his legions of fans.

It may be that resorting to old territory signaled that Levin had exhausted his creative resources. For the rest of his life, the public heard Levin's name mostly in connection with movie remakes and TV adaptations of his novels, and many were dreadful. "Look What's Happened to Rosemary's Baby." "Revenge of the Stepford Wives." "The Stepford Children." "The Stepford Husbands." Levin's brand was steadily diluted by shoddy knock-offs. In 2004, Nicole Kidman starred in a major re-make of "The Stepford Wives" that was more satire than horror, and not particularly good satire either. Levin, who didn't like the original all that much, must have hated it, but he was a gentleman and doubtlessly grateful for the check.

When he died of natural causes last year, at his home in Manhattan, Ira Levin was 78. He will be remembered as one of the very few American writers to have epic success on the Best Seller lists, on Broadway, and on the silver screen.

And he scared the hell out of millions of people in the process.

Dr. Cook's Ethics

By Jack Marshall

It is tempting to pigeon-hole Ira Levin's Dr. Cook as a typical serial killer and madman, but that would be unfair to Levin, Dr. Cook, and perhaps serial killers as well. For while most serial killers in history, including those with medical degrees, have simply enjoyed killing people because of some underlying rage, Dr. Cook's murders are based on an ethical rationale, though a profoundly flawed one. In its broadest expression, the ethical principle he espouses is this: *The few must die so the many can live better*. His young friend and protégé Jimmy argues in horror that this philosophy is obviously wrong. "You know it's wrong!" he says. But Jimmy's arguments are surprisingly weak; he has a difficult time explaining why what Dr. Cook does is so "wrong."

One reason it is difficult for Jimmy is that Dr. Cook is a philosophically versatile killer who employs a wide variety of utilitarian arguments to support his homicides. He is a believer in euthanasia, putting "out of their misery" severely deformed, disabled and mentally deficient children. More than we like to admit, society has intermittently tolerated and in some cases explicitly approved actions near to this on the ethical spectrum. Some hospitals allow badly deformed children—the so-called "monsters"—to die, on the theory that taking extreme measures to prolong their lives just ensures misery for them and their families. But who decides what constitutes a "monster"? Dr. Cook includes hunchbacked children in that definition. He asserts that one victim was a "vegetable," rather than a child, not deserving human rights. And how much misery is so excessive that it can justify murder? In the musical *Sweeney Todd*, the title character justifies killing everyone because it saves them from the misery of life.

In this attitude, Dr. Cook has a disciple of sorts in Peter Singer, the Princeton University professor whose support of infant euthanasia up to 28 days after birth has made him a lightning rod for controversy and passionate attacks from both the political Right and Left. In a debate at Princeton entitled "Ethics, Health Care and Disability," and a follow-up interview, Singer sometimes seemed to be channeling Ira Levin's fictional doctor in several statements:

- "I do not think it is always wrong to kill an innocent human being. Simply killing an infant is never equivalent to killing a person."
- "I've had letters from people who say: 'When our baby was born something was wrong with it. The doctor wanted to operate, and now, three years later, the baby has constant seizures, is unable to walk or talk.' It's a disaster. It would have been better if the baby had died. There's nothing clinical about those letters; they're tragic. But they are saying: Not all human life is sacred. Sometimes it's better if the baby dies."
- "I would suspect there is actually even more ending of patients' lives without their consent in this country than there is in Holland. We did an anonymous survey in Australia, and found that a lot of doctors were ending people's lives. Sometimes they would say, "I'm giving morphine; I know it will shorten the patient's life, but I'm treating the patient's pain." Sort of a double effect. Many were prepared to admit to us that the primary intention of what they were doing was to end a patient's life. There was another, smaller survey in California with

similar results, and one in Belgium. It's not totally surprising, because if it's illegal to actively end someone's life, it's hard to openly discuss it with him or her."

- "Some people might want to select [which babies are allowed to live] according to characteristics that are in the interests of themselves and their children, but are not in the interests of society as a whole. One thing that could easily happen under a *laissez faire* system is that people would select for height. You already see ads asking for eggs from girls who are over 5 feet 8 inches tall. The reason is that parents want their child to be slightly taller than average. There is some evidence that taller than average people do significantly better. But of course if everyone selects on that criterion, you get a race to the ceiling and that's not

good for anyone. Because we need more resources and so forth. But if everyone had the opportunity to avoid having an ugly child, I don't think I would have a problem."

Singer—and Cook—appear to be correct that some American doctors are practicing infanticide. Recently there have been news reports of unsuccessfully aborted infants being allowed to die. But Dr. Cook's ethical net is much wider than Singer's. That is the nature of such nets: they tend to fill up with unanticipated catches, and get wider each time they are cast.

Dr. Cook is also a practitioner of radical social engineering. His human "garden" will not include the human equivalents of weeds or poison ivy, people who impede progress or who just spoil the ambiance. A citizen who is "bad" for Greenfield has to be "removed." This is a step that Singer and others have emphatically rejected, and they strongly resent those who lump their advocacy of controlled infanticide with the genocide of Nazi Germany. Dr. Cook, however, is not so far removed from the Nazi way.

As explained in Henry Friedlander's excellent monograph The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution [Chapel Hill and London: The North Carolina University Press, 1995], "Euthanasia was not simply a prologue but the first chapter of Nazi genocide."

The ideological justification for the annihilation of the handicapped, Jews and Gypsies as well as the mass killings of Slavic populations in German-occupied Eastern Europe was based on widely accepted theories of the inequality of races, and the resulting conclusion that the world's "garden" could be improved by "removing" inferior, unattractive, "trouble-making," or burdensome occupants. Long before the Nazis came to power in Germany, many members of the medical establishment and scientific community in the United States supported compulsory sterilization of those population groups that were deemed racially and socially inferior.

The eugenic movement in the United States lost its impetus over time. But the bureaucracy in Nazi Germany and scholarly exponents of racial hygiene entered into a deadly partnership, with the scientists providing definitions of what kinds of human beings were expendable, and public officials formulating decrees and laws based

the on the writings of these “experts” who had only the best interests of society at heart.

Dr. Cook was a one-man band, but his process was similar. Greenfield was a small town: his undesirables and trouble-makers were individuals rather than groups and races. A nation is a much bigger garden, and requires more “gardeners.”

The enthusiastic cooperation between scientists, scholars and Nazi officials began with a program of forced sterilization. From 1934 to 1945, German and Austrian physicians sterilized an estimated 375,000 women and men against their will, because they had been diagnosed with a "hereditary disease." In addition to the handicapped, many Austrian and German Gypsies fell victim to compulsory sterilization.

The first human beings who became victims of organized mass killings were handicapped children. Between 1939 and 1945, some 5,000 infants, children and juveniles fell victim to Nazi Germany's first killing operation. In more than thirty children's wards in state hospitals and nursing homes in Austria and Germany, doctors murdered their young victims by administering lethal doses of medication or by starvation.

In August of 1939, Hitler began planning for the logical next step in his societal “pruning,” adult euthanasia. The actual killings took place in six state hospitals and nursing homes specially-equipped with gas chambers. The definition of those murdered was officially “life not worthy of life.” That description was easily adapted to races and nationalities that had been designated as “inferior”—weeds in “Dr. Hitler’s garden.”

But Dr. Cook’s ethical slippery slope, we learn, had a different origin than Nazi Germany’s path. His first murder, he reveals, was undertaken to protect an abused child from a brutal father. Here, as in Dr. Cook’s other murders, he seems to discount the medical and legal doctrine of minimal harm: was there no way to protect the child other than “removing” the father by killing him? True, it was 1967, and administrative protections and laws later put in place to protect abused children didn’t yet exist. But accepted ethical norms of civilization have dictated for most of the 20th Century that deadly

force must always be a last resort, if one is willing to concede that it is an option at all. Dr. Cook did not seek or attempt any other solution to the persistent child abuse he observed. Killing the perpetrator was the simplest and quickest solution, but it was only the best solution if one discounts a large number of ethical considerations, such as...

- Breaking the law
- Taking a human life
- Engaging in a cover-up (dishonesty)
- Failing the duty of candor (a patient has the right to know that his or her doctor kills people)
- Violating autonomy (taking a life without consent)
- Showing a lack of respect and loyalty to the community, which has the right to determine how it chooses to deal with social problems and disputes and has not designated him as the one holding responsibility
- Abuse of power, position and trust

Dr. Cook is also guilty of violating numerous AMA medical ethics principles, such as...

- “A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical care, with compassion and respect for human dignity and rights.”
- “A physician shall uphold the standards of professionalism, be honest in all professional interactions...”
- “A physician shall respect the law and also recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements which are contrary to the best interests of the patient.”
- “A physician shall respect the rights of patients, colleagues, and other health professionals, and shall safeguard patient confidences and privacy within the constraints of the law.”
- “A physician shall, while caring for a patient, regard responsibility to the patient as paramount.”
- “A physician shall support access to medical care for all people.”

Once he puts all of these aside, it is no wonder that Dr. Cook can embrace deadly force as a *first* resort. And having concluded that murder is a legitimate tool of social preservation (that is, that this is a case in which the end justifies the means) he begins using it indiscriminately. The adage is “If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” Although Dr. Cook denies it, vengeance and retribution also seem to enter into his calculations, non-ethical motivations cloaked in ethical rationalizations. He didn’t just determine that an abusive father’s removal would benefit Greenfield; his words make it clear that he also believes that he deserved to die. Having added this justification to his social engineering goals, it is not hard for him to expand the justifications further. Thus Dr. Cook manages to excuse killing even those he would describe as “good” occupants of the “garden” when they pose a threat to his grand plan. He says he is joking when he comments that he will have to kill some random, good citizens to make the murders of the others less obvious.

Don’t be so sure.

From an ethics perspective, Dr. Cook illustrates the danger of using only one ethical system to address complex problems. Utilitarianism, the doctrine that smaller wrongs and injustices can legitimately be used in pursuit of a greater good, is not always invalid, but it is affirmatively dangerous without constant checks using competing ethical standards, such as Reciprocity (“The Golden Rule”), and Absolutism (as in philosopher Emmanuel Kant’s prohibition against ever using a human life as a mean to an end). No ethical system “works” all the time, but carefully examining a planned action according to multiple ethical systems ensures that a proposed action that would violate a valid ethical principle will not be adopted casually, automatically, or easily. Dr. Cook, who boasts that he never takes a life “in anger or in haste,” decides to kill a long-time friend in a matter of minutes. He obviously is no longer questioning the ethical basis for his actions.

Even if he did, however, it probably wouldn’t stop Dr. Cook, because he has character deficits that make ethical decision-making virtually impossible. He lacks empathy, modesty and respect for others. He is a narcissist, and thus assumes absolute authority based on his

excessively high regard for his own wisdom and judgment, a condition ethicists call “self-validating virtue.” Ira Levin, who made Nazi doctor Josef Mengele the primary villain in his novel The Boys from Brazil, and cast sinister physicians as key conspirators in the evil plots at the centers of both his novels Rosemary’s Baby and The Stepford Wives, seemed to think that this condition is an occupational hazard of the medical profession.

Let us hope he was wrong about that.

The Killer Doctors

By Jack Marshall

We place so much trust in doctors. The idea that one could be determined to kill us is profoundly disturbing. If you can’t trust your doctor, whom can you trust?

Ira Levin was well aware of the visceral horror that a killer doctor could evoke, and evil doctors (and nurses) populate many of his works. Most are still less terrifying than history’s killer doctors, of which, unfortunately there are many. “Arguably, medicine has thrown up more serial killers than all other professions put together,” bluntly

states an article in the December 2000 issue of the British Medical Journal. It could be true.

Here are three notable examples of killer physicians in history:

Dr. Thomas Neill Cream

He was a contemporary of Jack the Ripper, and like him, had a hatred of women and prostitutes. But Cream killed quite a few more than his more infamous rival. Dr. Cream's favorite method of killing his victims was with strychnine tablets; he told his prostitute victims that the pills would prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Strychnine poisoning is a terrible way to die: victims succumb to wracking convulsions while they gasp for oxygen as their throat swells shut. "The first symptoms are feelings of apprehension and terror followed by muscle stiffness, twitching of the face, and finally titanic convulsions," writes Angus McLaren in A Prescription for Murder. "The body relaxes, and then the spasms strike again. You have a sense of being suffocated. Indeed, death is actually caused by anoxia—lack of oxygen due to contraction of the lungs. . . . Death occurs in one to two hours, the face fixed in a macabre grin."

Handsome, debonair Thomas Neill Cream graduated from medical school at McGill University in Montreal in 1876 and immediately set his sights on London. The United Kingdom boasted some of the finest medical institutions in the world at this time, such as the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons. England also was in great need of doctors.

Cream studied at St. Thomas' Hospital in South London, where Thomas Lister and Florence Nightingale had worked. Cream enjoyed life in London and all of its temptations—from dancing and drinking in music halls and vaudeville theaters to romancing both society women and prostitutes. Cream found himself a bachelor after his wife mysteriously died in 1877. She had become seriously ill shortly after her wedding. When her doctor asked her if she had taken any medications for her illness, she mentioned taking some pills her husband had sent her.

Hmmmmm...

It wasn't long before another mysterious death occurred. In 1879, a young pregnant woman was found dead from chloroform poisoning in a shed behind Cream's office. He avoided murder charges, but his reputation was ruined in Edinburgh. So Cream decided to move to Chicago. He passed the state board of health examination and set up his practice not far from the city's red-light district. Police quickly suspected that he was performing abortions, and Cream, who was probably addicted to cocaine and morphine, narrowly escaped murder charges when two prostitutes died after receiving abortions from him. One simply bled to death, but the other was given "antipregnancy pills" ... strychnine, naturally. But that was discovered later.

Cream's downfall in Chicago occurred after he broke with his usual pattern and poisoned a man. Around the time that he killed the two prostitutes, Cream had been marketing a phony elixir for epilepsy. One of his patients, Daniel Stott, swore by the medication and would regularly send his wife to Cream's office for the pills. Cream began an affair with the wife, and when Stott became suspicious, Cream added a little strychnine to Stott's medication. Cream was eventually found guilty of murder and sentenced to Joliet State Penitentiary for life.

But he only served ten years of his life sentence. He was set free in 1891 after he bribed Illinois politicians to grant him a pardon. Upon his release, he set sail for a return to London, and posed as a resident doctor at a hospital, signing his name "Thomas Neill, MD". He was soon happily killing again.

After four more prostitutes were found dead from strychnine poisoning, Scotland Yard took notice. Cream's arrogance was his undoing. He had befriended a former New York City detective named John Haynes, who was living in London trying to get a position in Scotland Yard. Because Haynes was a former detective, he was naturally engrossed in the prostitute murders that everyone in London was talking about; and he was surprised to hear how much his new friend Dr. Neill (Cream) knew about the details of the deaths. After the men had supper one night, Cream actually took Haynes on a tour of the murder sites and talked at length about each of the victims, including a woman named "Lou Harvey". When Haynes asked Cream how he knew so much about the murders, Cream claimed he had just been following the cases closely in the newspapers. But so had

Haynes, and he hadn't read anything in the papers about a victim named Lou Harvey.

Haynes immediately contacted a friend at Scotland Yard. Following Haynes' account, authorities soon discovered that Cream had forged passport paperwork claiming he was Thomas Neill. Soon police were trailing Cream around the clock, in addition to trying to solve the mystery of Lou Harvey. Many prostitutes gave police accounts of being approached by someone fitting Cream's description (the prostitutes were eager to cooperate with authorities by this time—they were still haunted by Jack the Ripper's murders four years earlier).

With mounting evidence against him, Cream was arrested on June 3, 1892. He was convicted of murdering four women, and sentenced to death by hanging. Right as the trap door sprung, Cream reportedly shouted, "I am Jack...arrrggg!" He wasn't Jack the Ripper, of course, because he was serving his jail sentence in Illinois when those murders occurred in London. Cream was a killer, but at least he enjoyed a good joke.

Dr. Harold Shipman

Dr. Harold Shipman—England's "Dr. Death"—was sentenced to life in prison in January of 2000, after he was found guilty of murdering fifteen of his elderly patients by administering lethal doses of morphine. A public inquiry later opened to examine evidence of more than 400 other cases in which Dr. Shipman was suspected of murder. It determined that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that Shipman had killed at least 215 people, about 80 percent of them female.

Fred, as he was known, was reportedly a confident and clever child, adored by his mother, who openly favored him over her other two children. She died in 1963 from lung cancer at the age of 43; Harold was just 17. It has been speculated that her painful death spawned his life-time killing spree, as he couldn't bear to see others suffer as she had.

Shipman graduated from Leeds School of Medicine in 1970 and took his first position as a general practitioner in West Yorkshire. Ultimately he became a general practitioner at the Donneybrook Medical Centre in Hyde, Greater Manchester, in 1977. Shipman continued working throughout the 1980s and founded a surgery clinic of his own in 1993, becoming a respected member of the medical community. In March 1998, concerns about the high death rate among Shipman's patients prompted an official inquiry. Authorities were especially concerned about the large number of cremation forms for elderly women. The matter was brought to the attention of the police, who were unable to find sufficient evidence to bring charges. Between the time the investigation was abandoned on April 17, 1998 and Shipman's eventual arrest, he killed at least another three people. His last victim was Kathleen Grundy, a former Mayor of Hyde, who was found dead at her home on June 24, 1998. The last person to see her alive had been Shipman, who later signed her death certificate, recording "old age" as the cause of death.

Grundy's daughter, a lawyer, became suspicious when she was informed that a will had been made, apparently by her mother, which excluded her and her children entirely and left 386,000 pounds to... Dr. Shipman. She went to the police, who began an investigation.

Grundy's body was exhumed and examined. It contained traces of morphine. A search of his residence showed that Shipman owned the typewriter used to make the forged will. He was arrested on September 7, 1998.

The police then investigated other deaths Shipman had certified and created a list of 15 specimen cases to investigate. They found a pattern: he administered lethal overdoses of morphine, signed patients' death certificates, and then forged medical records to indicate they had been in poor health.

The trial judge sentenced Dr. Shipman to 15 concurrent life sentences and recommended that he should never be released. (He was also convicted of forging the will of Kathleen Grundy, and was awarded a further four-year prison sentence for that.)

Shipman hanged himself in his cell at Wakefield Prison on January 13, 2004, on the eve of his 58th birthday.

Dr. Michael Swango

Swango, born October 21, 1954 in Tacoma, Washington, was a physician and surgeon who poisoned at least 30 of his patients and colleagues. He was perhaps the craziest killer doctor of all.

He was raised in **Illinois**, served in the **Marine Corps**, and was accepted into **Southern Illinois University Medical School**. There he displayed an unseemly fascination with dying patients. He was also known for being lazy, and was nearly expelled after being caught faking checkups during his **obstetrics and gynecology** rotation.

Despite a very poor evaluation, Swango got a surgical internship at Ohio State University in 1983. Nurses began noticing that apparently healthy patients on floors where Swango worked were dying with alarming frequency. One nurse caught him injecting some "medicine" into a patient who later became ill. The nurses reported their concerns to the administrators, but were met with skepticism and inaction. This became a pattern that followed Dr. Swango's entire murderous career: nobody chose to see what should have been readily apparent. Swango was cleared by a perfunctory investigation, but he resigned and left the University.

Dr. Swango returned to Illinois and began working with a team of paramedics, who seemed to get along with him. Feeling comfortable, he reportedly told them his ultimate fantasy:

It's like this. Picture a school bus crammed with kids smashing head-on with a trailer truck loaded down with gasoline. We're summoned. We get there in a jiffy just as another gasoline truck rams the bus. Up in flames it goes! Kids are hurled through the air, everywhere, on telephone poles, on the street, especially along an old barbed wire fence along the road. All burning!

Not surprisingly, this admission convinced many of the paramedics that Swango was not quite right. They had no idea how right they were. But they learned.

One day Swango brought in a box of doughnuts, and four of his fellow workers who ate some of them got severely ill. He offered soft drinks to two other colleagues on another occasion, and they also became sick. Swango was poisoning them. In October of that year, Swango was arrested by the Quincy, Illinois Police Department, who found arsenic and other poisons in his possession. He was convicted of aggravated battery for poisoning his co-workers, and was sentenced to five years imprisonment.

Swango, like most poisoners, was fairly predictable. With non-patients, such as his co-workers at the paramedic service, his poison of choice was usually arsenic, slipping it into foods and beverages. With patients, he usually administered an overdose of whatever drug the patient had been prescribed. Occasionally he wrote false prescriptions for dangerous drugs that he knew would kill his patients.

What was odd about his case was how open he was and how obvious it should have been that he was killing people or attempting to do so. On several occasions someone saw him with a syringe, and several poisoned patients who recovered indicated that it was the nice blond doctor who had injected them before they lost the ability to feel and move.

In 1989, Swango worked as a Laboratory Technician in Newport News, Virginia at a division of CITA Logistics. As before, several employees in his place of work sought medical attention with complaints of persistent and increasing pains in the stomach. He was employed until 1991, then forged several legal documents which he used to reestablish himself as a doctor. He began working at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota but made the absurd mistake of attempting to join the American Medical Association. The AMA did a more thorough background check than the medical center, and discovered his poisoning conviction. The AMA informed the medical center, which discharged Swango...and let him go look for another place to do his killing.

He managed to get employed at the residency program at the Northport Veterans Administration Medical Center, affiliated with the State University of New York at Stony Brook School of Medicine, posing as a psychiatry resident. Once again, his patients began dying.

Four months later, the dean at Sioux Falls finally learned that Swango had moved to New York, and sent a warning about Swango to over 125 medical schools and over one thousand teaching hospitals across the nation.

With his past now thoroughly exposed in the U.S., Swango had no choice but to try to practice in another country. In November 1994 he traveled to Zimbabwe and got a job at a hospital there, where again his patients began dropping dead. It was not for another year that these poisonings were traced to him. Dr. Swango finally was arrested in Zimbabwe for murder, but he escaped before his trial date. A year and a half later, in March 1997, he applied for a job at a hospital in Saudi Arabia, using a false resumé.

While attempting to fly a complex route from Africa to Saudi Arabia, he was arrested by United States federal authorities during a layover at O'Hare Airport. When Swango was finally stopped by the FBI, he had been poisoning people for almost two decades, in seven different hospitals and at least three countries. He was finally tried for three of his many murders, and on July 11, 2000, Swango pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. It is estimated that Dr. Swango killed between 30 and 60 people.

Ira Levin: Master of Suspense

by Pradeep Sebastian

[Pradeep Sebastian is a literary and arts critic who has written frequently about the work of Ira Levin]

Ira Levin is, to me, the greatest writer of suspense. I'm fond of saying that he is the Alfred Hitchcock of suspense fiction... like Hitchcock, his name should be synonymous with suspense. He has a genius for

it; his is the only brand of suspense I know in fiction that is so palpable, you can feel it on your skin. It is the almost comic suspense that results from paranoia. Levin escalates his suspense by keeping the proceedings as eerily ambiguous to the reader as they are to his characters. This dizzy seesawing between the real and the imagined creates the jittery, compelling mood of paranoia in his novels and plays.

"Ira Levin", said Stephen King once, "is the Swiss watchmaker of the suspense novel; in terms of plot, he makes what the rest of us do look like those five dollar watches you can buy in those discount drugstores."

A Kiss Before Dying, his first book, written when Levin was only 22, is a virtual textbook in the craft of suspense. It may be the only suspense novel that makes good on clichés like "nail-biting" and "edge-of-the-seat-excitement". The book contains surprises that really surprise, and it is impervious to that really nasty, unworthy trick that some readers resort to — turning to the last page to see "whodunit." That revelation is neatly tucked away about one hundred pages into the novel.

Levin is best known for his masterful, influential supernatural thriller, Rosemary's Baby, which Roman Polanski brought faithfully to the screen. Polanski was able to accurately tune into Levin's style, not to aim the camera squarely at the horror but rather letting the audience

spot it for themselves off at the side of the screen. It is not just the most perfectly crafted suspense-horror film, though it is...the film is one of the most perfectly crafted Hollywood films, period. Polanski gets all the spooky nuances and the comic undertones of Ira Levin's novel just right. "Rosemary's Baby" isn't gross-out horror — it is subtle, eerie, sly, witty, indirect, ironic. And like the novel, it is constructed as neatly as an elegant house of cards.

But all of Levin's novels are a marvel of plotting: from This Perfect Day, The Stepford Wives, The Boys from Brazil and Sliver to his latest — the long awaited sequel, Son of Rosemary. (Levin is also the author of the play *Deathtrap*, the longest running thriller in Broadway history). Son of Rosemary was made for suspense addicts like myself who like to take their poison straight. It is vintage Ira Levin and

though it may not match Rosemary's Baby, it still is, as contemporary thrillers go, in a class by itself. ...a tantalizing read — shot through with those dark glints of humour that only Levin seems to know how to find.

Levin's use of satire does not deflate the horror in his works, but enhances it. In The Stepford Wives, for instance, he uses wit and irony to tweak the horror. He takes that old wonderful "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" idea of duplicates and gives it a neat, contemporary feminist twist. In the tranquil town of Stepford there is no crime, no drugs... only the Stepford wives who cook and clean with not a hair out of place. Katherine comes to the tranquil town of Stepford and finds that the women are all housewives and they take their roles unusually seriously. It's not long before she sees her best friend change into a "Stepford Wife," and begins to fear that she too, somehow, will change as well.

"The Stepford wife" has now entered into pop culture myth and refers to any woman who has transformed into something banal and horrible, a domestic zombie, a passive toy for men to play with. In his brilliantly suggestive way, Levin leaves the conclusion of the book open-ended, a trick he was fond of in his plays as well. One of the pleasures of reading Levin is that his books are not long and overwritten (like King's); they are seldom more than 250 pages, and the prose is spare, straightforward, cinematic, and precise. He showed us why suspense is superior to surprise. He made suspense an emotion you could actually experience. He turned it into art.



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