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Judith May Fathallah, **Killer Fandom: Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer**, Bethlehem, PA: mediastudies.press, 2023, 259 pp., $20.00 (paperback), open access[1].

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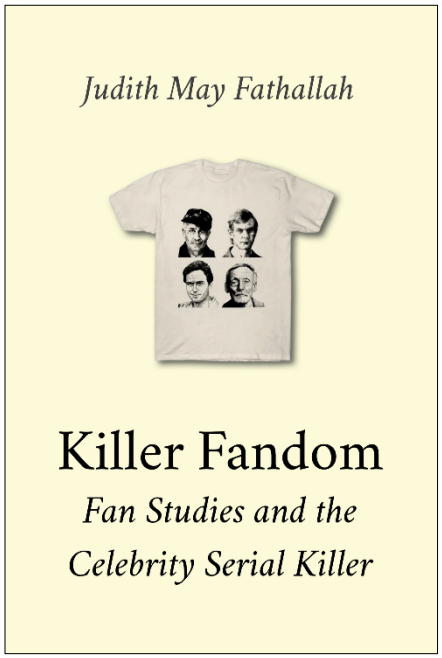

Killer Fandom: Fan Studies and the Celebrity Serial Killer, by Judith May Fathallah, is a provocative and rigorous work that delves into the controversial phenomenon of admiration and fandom surrounding serial killers. What stands out immediately is that, rather than offering a sensationalist or pathologizing perspective, the author applies a methodologically solid and theoretically sophisticated approach, grounded in fan studies, to question the ways in which contemporary digital culture resignifies this type of criminality. Her analysis is built from a critical perspective that interrogates both the media and celebrity culture in the digital era while also incorporating insights on subcultural dimensions, gender issues, the role of affect, and the playful character of these dynamics online.

Following works such as *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts* (Fathallah, 2017) and *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (Fathallah, 2020), Fathallah now presents what can be seen both as a continuation and a culmination of her previous research rooted in the critical tradition of fan studies. Since its founding works, this field has aimed to depathologize the fan subject and legitimize their practices as valid forms of cultural production. Nevertheless, *Killer Fandom* deliberately chooses a fandom that is stigmatized and scarcely studied due to its moral, polemic, and symbolic weight, and subjects it to a rigorous analysis. Its goal is not to romanticize or condemn but to understand. This shift allows Fathallah to dismantle both the media discourses that attack these practices and the overly redemptive readings that have characterized some areas of fan studies.

In this way, the book stands as an important contribution to disciplines such as cultural studies, media studies, and gender studies while also appealing to a broader audience interested in true crime, participatory culture, and the ethical limits of media representation. Its central thesis—that serial killer fandom is not essentially different from more socially acceptable fandoms, such as true crime fandom—challenges normative and moralizing conceptions, opening a space for critical analysis that is indispensable in the era of emotional and affective capitalism.

[1] https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/79407/fathallah-killer-fandom-2023.pdf

In dialogue with scholars such as David Schmid (2005) and Dirk Gibson (2006), Fathallah offers a reading that shifts focus away from the killer as celebrity and toward the individuals who consume, reinterpret, and resignify these narratives. She also clearly distances herself from works like *Why We Love Serial Killers* (Bonn, 2014), criticizing its lack of theoretical rigor and moralizing tone.

The book is structured into five chapters, each exploring a different aspect of the phenomenon through the rigorous use of conceptual frameworks and extensive empirical analysis focused on digital platforms. The first chapter provides a historical and cultural framework for serial killer fandom, tracing its roots back to predigital practices of public fascination with figures like Jack the Ripper and H. H. Holmes. Fathallah shows that practices such as cosplay, collecting symbolic items, and macabre tourism existed long before the digital era and that many current forms of fan culture have precedents from previous centuries.

In the second chapter, the author explores the concept of *textual poaching* (Jenkins, 1992), adapting it to contexts where the objects of devotion are not fictional but real criminals. Using platforms like Wattpad, Tumblr, and TikTok, she shows how fans rework the biographies of these killers not to justify their crimes but as a way to explore complex affects ranging from empathy to desire to irony. These practices include romantic or redemptive fanfictions, visual reinterpretations, and absurd memes that challenge notions of morality, agency, and representation. Fathallah neither defends these practices as inherently subversive nor dismisses them as merely pathological. Instead of analyzing the fan as a destabilizing or morally deviant figure, she focuses on how these parallel narratives reveal both the circulation of dominant discourses and their reappropriation from the margins.

The third chapter focuses on the notion of online fan community, questioning whether this kind of grouping can truly be considered a community in the classical sense proposed by fan studies. Nuancing the idealized portrayals of the fan as a collaborative and supportive subject (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005), the author shows that the forms of relationships in this specific fandom do not always fit that image. Fathallah identifies specific types of bonds among fans, expressed through supportive comments, exchanges of images or fanart, and affective responses to personal confessions related to their interest in killers. She argues that the stigma surrounding this kind of fandom acts as a unifying factor. Knowing that one belongs to a group frowned on by outsiders seems to reinforce internal identification and a sense of belonging. Ultimately, she shows how external stigma acts as a community glue, generating weak yet meaningful forms of belonging, mutual recognition, and emotional support.

In chapter 4, the author addresses fandom through the lens of subcultural capital. Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), Fiske (1992), and Thornton (1995), she analyzes how fans build prestige through specialized knowledge, aesthetic production, and possession of physical objects. On Tumblr, informative and aesthetic content is prized; on TikTok, provocative and humorous performance is celebrated. Fathallah notes that in these spaces, capital adheres more to the content than to the user, destabilizing traditional categories of symbolic capital.

The murderabilia market receives particular attention, as it materializes the fusion of subcultural and economic capital. The sale of objects belonging to real killers (letters, clothes, ashes) shows that fandom can

monetize knowledge and status, creating fan-celebrity figures like Erik Holler or Taylor James. Fathallah points out the ethical implications of this market but avoids simplistic moral condemnation.

The fifth and final chapter introduces the concept of *digital play*, arguing that many practices within serial killer fandom should be understood as forms of ironic and ambivalent play. Rather than seeing them as pure glorification or transgression, the author suggests that these expressions replicate dominant media discourses from a provocatively participatory stance. Here, the notion of ambivalence from Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) is key: memes, humorous videos, roleplays—all generate an ephemeral community based more on affective connection than on conscious critique.

Play, as a form of meaning making, occupies a central place in the analysis. Fathallah draws on Booth (2015) to think about the idea of "coloring inside the lines, or pleasurable engagement with a media text that does not necessarily subvert it or its surrounding culture" (p. 174). This allows her to understand these practices as forms of participation that, although not always subversive, are not passive reproductions either. For example, memes about Jeffrey Dahmer, *shitposts* about Ted Bundy, or absurd TikTok roleplays may seem trivial or even offensive, but in fact they reveal a critical and sophisticated understanding of the media apparatus that produces these figures. These practices, Fathallah argues, are not outside the mainstream discourse but, rather, on its most provocative edge.

Fathallah also distinguishes among different types of play—from absurd humor to serious play—and notes that not all respond to a logic of resistance. The figure of Aileen Wuornos, for instance, is inscribed in a more political and less playful register than her male counterparts, being resignified through feminist or queer discourses. This difference reveals how gender and sexuality not only structure the object of fandom but also the forms of participation.

In sum, this essay proposes that killer fandom is not essentially different from other fandoms; it also produces narratives, establishes emotional connections, exchanges knowledge, and builds forms of community. The difference lies in its object: transgression, crime, taboo. Fathallah suggests that this difference is more moral than structural and that discourses that pathologize these fans merely reproduce a cultural system that, paradoxically, thrives on the same morbid fascination it denounces. Fathallah manages to challenge the reader without moralizing and presents a solid argument: Fans do not make killers famous—culture as a whole does.

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