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Book Review: 'Kitty Genovese' by Kevin Cook

A woman was stabbed and raped steps from her door. Did no one call the police?

By **Edward Kosner**
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

The Kitty Genovese myth has turned out to be as enduring an urban legend as the tale of alligators prowling the New York sewers. In March 1964 the young Queens bar manager was stabbed to death at three in the morning outside her Kew Gardens apartment while 38 neighbors watched from their windows and did nothing to save her—or so the tale has gone for the past half-century.

In fact, hardly anything about the Genovese story is what it first appeared to be, although it has calcified into a metaphor of urban alienation and prompted research into a psychological phenomenon that has come to be known as the “Genovese syndrome.” As Kevin Cook writes in his heavily padded but provocative new book, “Kitty Genovese: The Murder, the Bystanders, the Crime That Changed America,” the tale is as much about the alchemy of journalism as urban pathology.

KITTY GENOVESE

By **Kevin Cook**
Norton, 242 pages, \$25.95



The alley behind Kitty Genovese’s Queens apartment building, to which she fled after Winston Moseley’s initial attack.

TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGE

As the story emerges from Mr. Cook’s work, the real impresario of the Kitty Genovese extravaganza was A.M. Rosenthal, a gifted, ambitious foreign correspondent for the [New York Times](#) who had just taken over as metropolitan—no longer merely city—editor of the paper. (He would ultimately run the Times as executive editor.)

Rosenthal, as it happens, was the youngest child of an immigrant Jewish family that settled in the Bronx in the 1930s. He had five sisters, all of whom perished, one of them having sickened and died after fleeing a mile in raw weather from a pervert who exposed himself to her in the street. So he had a special sensitivity to the death of a young woman at the hands of a criminal.

Soon after Rosenthal took the metropolitan editor’s chair he had lunch with Michael Murphy, the city’s new police commissioner. Toward the end of the meal, the commissioner mentioned the Genovese case. The Times and other papers had printed squibs about her fatal stabbing two weeks before, but now the commissioner told Rosenthal that there was an untold dimension to the case: Thirty-eight witnesses were aware of the attack on the young woman—heard her cries—and yet no one bothered to call the police. Rosenthal was galvanized. He was determined to energize his paper’s stodgy local coverage with stories that carried an emotional punch, and now one had dropped in his lap.

Murphy had Rosenthal ferried back to the Times in a squad car, and the editor summoned a reporter named Martin Gansberg and dispatched him to Queens to flesh out the story that Rosenthal already had. Gansberg spent the next several days in Kew Gardens and returned with the yarn. On March 27, 1964, his story appeared on page one, beginning: “For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens.” The headline, though, read: “37 Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police.”

That number reflected the headline writer’s recognition of the story’s 14th paragraph reporting that one neighbor had called the cops at 3:50 a.m., a half-hour after the attack began. But “38 Witnesses” became the indelible label for the story. If the Internet had existed in 1964, the story would have gone viral. Instead, more slowly, it embedded itself in the public mind and, eventually, in academe, where it spawned a whole school of studies of supposed urban anomie.

Mr. Cook suggests that Rosenthal rewrote—and punched up—Gansberg’s lead. That may well be so, but the real problem is that, as his book documents, none of the premises of the original Times story turn out to be true. Indeed, one Kew Gardens partisan who has obsessively scrutinized the case claims to have identified six errors in the article’s first two paragraphs.

Some of the elements of the story are beyond dispute. The victim was a 28-year-old woman who had graduated from high school in Brooklyn. After her family moved to New Canaan, Conn., she stayed in the city and ended up in Queens, where she worked as a barmaid and soon got a job as manager of Ev’s 11th Hour saloon in Hollis. She lived with her lover, Mary Ann Zielonko, who worked in a bar nearby.

The killer was a bright black man named Winston Moseley, 29, who worked as a punch-card operator, the precursor of a computer technician, for a company named Raygram in Mount Vernon, N.Y., north of the Bronx. Moseley, once divorced, was married to a nurse, had a son and owned his own home in South Ozone Park, where he kept five German shepherds. He had a weird family life: His mother had deserted her husband and child only to return 20 years later; the man he knew as his father hadn’t actually sired him, though he raised him. Ostensibly a model citizen, Moseley moonlighted as a petty burglar, stealing TVs and small appliances that he gave to his father to sell from his TV repair shop.

Moseley was also what is now known as a serial killer. He began by sneaking out of his home, hunting women in his white Chevy Corvair and raping them. In time, he became a murderer with a taste for necrophilia.

Restless on the night of Friday, March 13, 1964, he jumped in his car and drove around central Queens looking for a white woman to attack. By chance, he glimpsed Genovese’s sporty red Fiat and tailed her to Kew Gardens, where the victim parked and locked her car in the Long Island Rail Road station’s parking lot next to her second-floor flat on Austin Street.

Moseley stabbed the woman in the back, and she screamed. When a neighbor shouted out the window, “Leave that girl alone,” the attacker dashed off and moved his car farther out of sight. He changed his hat and returned a few moments later. By now, Kitty Genovese had staggered around to the back of her building, facing the LIRR tracks, where the entrance to her apartment was located. Moseley found her and stabbed her again repeatedly and tried to have sex with the mortally wounded victim. Then he left her, drove home and went off to work a few hours later as if nothing had happened.

The police did eventually arrive. Moseley was fortuitously collared during another burglary and eventually confessed without emotion to Genovese’s killing and two others. His insanity plea was dismissed by the jury at trial, and he is now the longest-serving inmate in the New York state prison system.

In the inevitable official and amateur investigations that followed, the sensational account of the 38 witnesses evaporated. Because the victim fled behind the building, few actually saw the attack. Many neighbors heard her screams, but most of them thought it was just another drunken domestic fight spilling out from a gin mill on the corner. The assistant superintendent in a building across the street glimpsed the attack but chose to do nothing. One neighbor was reluctant to call police and fobbed off the task on others. Alerted by his son, Samuel Hoffman did phone the police dispatcher, but cops later insisted there was no record of the call.

The one person who indisputably saw the attack and knew what was going on was Karl Ross, a dog groomer and drinking buddy of Genovese’s lover. He opened his second-floor door and saw Moseley savaging his victim at the bottom of the staircase. Terrified and drunk, Ross cravenly shut the door and did nothing.

So, as it turns out, only a few neighbors understood the attack for what it was and failed to respond. It was pure chance that Moseley encountered Genovese, and the episode could have happened anywhere. It was no more an indictment of the callousness of the citizens of Kew Gardens than of nearby South Ozone Park, where Moseley lived, or Hollis or Forest Hills or a dozen other Queens hamlets. Mr. Cook is hardly the first to deconstruct the Genovese case, but his account is industriously comprehensive, even if larded with extraneous detail about everything from the geology of Manhattan to Donald Trump’s father.

Social science embraced the faux narrative, prompting decades of experiments seeking to explain the cowardly indifference of bystanders. The most intriguing research posited that individuals feel personal responsibility in inverse proportion to the number of people available to help, which may, in fact, be a useful insight in human psychology.


Mr. Cook reports that Rosenthal, who published a quickie book about the affair and died at 84 in 2006, stuck to his story to the end.

Journalism is a blunt instrument, and allowances must be made. Even so, it’s plain that the original story was more hype than first draft of history. The fable of the “38 Witnesses” resonated because it matched the fears of an edgy society experiencing the angst of a dawning age of political assassinations, race riots and the Vietnam War. “The killing of Kitty Genovese tapped wells of feeling in millions, young and old,” writes Mr. Cook. “It filled them with pity and terror.” A newspaper story called “3 Witnesses” could never have done the trick.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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