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Laurent-Perrier 'Starkweather' Review: Murder in the

33 PRINCE

DISCOVER

Le Prince de Galles, Paris

By Edward Kosner Dec. 19, 2023 at 6:30 pm ET

Nebraska and Wyoming in the late 1950s.

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Revisiting the young couple at the center of a killing rampage through

Heartland







minute "walk of death" in his hometown of Camden, N.J. Nearly a decade later, there was 19-year-old Charles Starkweather and his 14-

year-old girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate. The two killed 11 people—including

Fugate's parents and baby sister—over the course of a rampage through

Bonnie Parker and their trigger-happy robbery gang terrorized the country and

were later immortalized by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in a 1967 movie. In

1949 the Army veteran Howard Unruh killed 13 people with his gun during a 12-

Nebraska and Wyoming. Starkweather and Fugate inspired the American gothic

movie "Badlands" (1973), directed by Terrence Malick and starring Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek. With "Starkweather: The Untold Story of the Killing Spree That Changed America," Harry N. MacLean turns the story of this young couple into an epic. His subtitle may be hyperbolic, but his dense narrative delivers the chilling

Starkweather: The Untold Story of the red hair, a speech impediment and **Killing Spree That Changed America** bad eyesight, he was bullied unmercifully at school in Lincoln, By Harry N. MacLean Neb. Fugate came from a HAT CHANGED AMERICA Counterpoint multigenerational welfare family, We may earn a commission STARKWEATHER with a drunken father and stepfather. when you buy products

was at his side through most of it, but an examination of her culpability forms

HARRY N. MACLEAN

of the case.

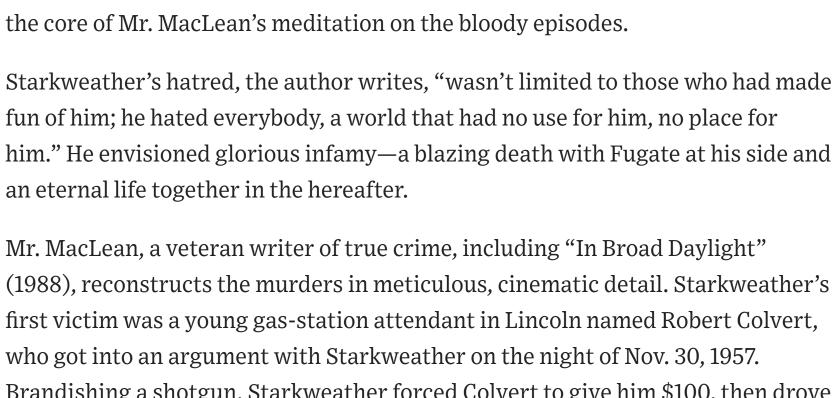
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him out of town and shot him.

(1988), reconstructs the murders in meticulous, cinematic detail. Starkweather's first victim was a young gas-station attendant in Lincoln named Robert Colvert, Brandishing a shotgun, Starkweather forced Colvert to give him \$100, then drove Two months later, Starkweather showed up at Fugate's home, despite having been told by the girl's mother and stepfather to stay away—Velda and Marion Bartlett had been put off by their daughter's flaky beau. Starkweather shot them both with a .22 rifle, used the gun stock and a knife to kill Fugate's 2-year-old stepsister, Betty Jean, then stashed the bodies in the surrounding outbuildings.

The short, freckled son of a carpenter

and a waitress, Charles Starkweather

was a mess. With bandy legs, bright

Starkweather met her when she was

love. Soon enough, he dropped out of

13, and they fell in what passed for

high school and began conjuring a

retaliative run of murders. Fugate

head and order him to drive to an abandoned storm cellar, where Starkweather murdered both Jensen and King. The Nebraska spree ended with a visit to the home of Lauer and Clara Ward in Lincoln, where the Wards, their deaf maid, Lilyan Fencl, and their dog were all killed. Starkweather and Fugate then fled west to Wyoming in the Wards' black Packard. Along the way they came upon Merle Collison, a salesman sleeping in his Buick. They woke him up, killed him and took his car. But Starkweather couldn't get the Buick going. When a passing motorist stopped to help, Starkweather threatened him. As they tussled, a sheriff's deputy arrived. Fugate dashed to the deputy's car, crying, "he's going to kill me. He's crazy. He just killed a man!" Starkweather sped off but was soon captured by three Wyoming lawmen.

The murders terrified the heartland and were sensational news around the

His mental state is central to understanding his depredations. A couchful of

psychiatrists was enlisted to evaluate him and Fugate. However gruesome his

crimes, Starkweather insisted that he was not insane—otherwise his dreams of

glory would be tarnished—and he was tried as a murderer. Deep in the book, Mr.

MacLean describes him as "sociopathic." After he was convicted, his execution

was scheduled for June 25, 1959. "What's the rush?" he asked when the guards

everything so he could seal his fantasy of their shared doom.

came to escort him to the electric chair.

country. Starkweather relished relating his crimes, implicating Fugate in nearly

Starkweather later claimed that Fugate was at home when her parents were

Willingly or not, Fugate undeniably went along for the rest of the ride. The

Starkweather killed Meyer and his dog with a shotgun, then fled with Fugate in

Starkweather's old Ford. When the car got stuck in the mud, the couple got out

and started walking. Two teenagers, Robert Jensen and Carol King, happened to

pass by and offered them a lift—only to have Starkweather put a gun to the boy's

couple stayed in her parents' house for nearly a week, then drove to the

farmhouse of 71-year-old August Meyer, a Starkweather family friend.

slain, which she denied. The conflicting stories would become one of the enigmas

Mr. Maclean devotes the end of the book to defending Fugate, who was charged with complicity because she took \$4 from Jensen's wallet and put it in Starkweather's before the latter killed him. The author points out that Fugate always denied killing anyone and was under duress—had she been tried in a later decade, he surmises, she would likely have been eligible for a "battered woman" defense. The jury convicted Fugate anyway. She served 18 years as a model prisoner, won parole, moved to Michigan, worked as a surgical orderly and married late. The book ends with the author visiting Fugate—by then mute, aged and wheelchair-

bound—in a nursing home. He tells her he believes her when she insists she was

not at home when Starkweather murdered her family—and she beams.

fides, searches for an answer that seems better left to psychiatrists and theologians. Advertisement - Scroll to Continue

Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York

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Appeared in the December 20, 2023, print edition as 'Murder In the Heartland'.

Daily News.

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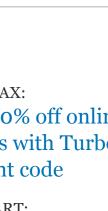
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The abiding fascination with Starkweather and such killers lies not so much in the narrative of their crimes but in the question of why and how such creatures are spawned in America's heartland. Mr. MacLean, for all his true-crime bona

professional wrestlers. Their goal: To

get some respect.

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is planned for Telluride, Colo.

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tightrope on law enforcement, raising its support for local police fighting violent crime without abandoning its longtime goal of curbing misconduct in some departments. Continue To Article

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'The Color Purple' Review: Bright Movie, Big Emotions

Blitz Bazawule directs the latest

version of the Alice Walker classic,

starring Fantasia Barrino, Taraji P.

drawing from the 2004 musical and

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Northcott toted a camera around the

world and shot nearly 1,500 hours of

footage, which has now been edited

into a documentary that keeps the

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