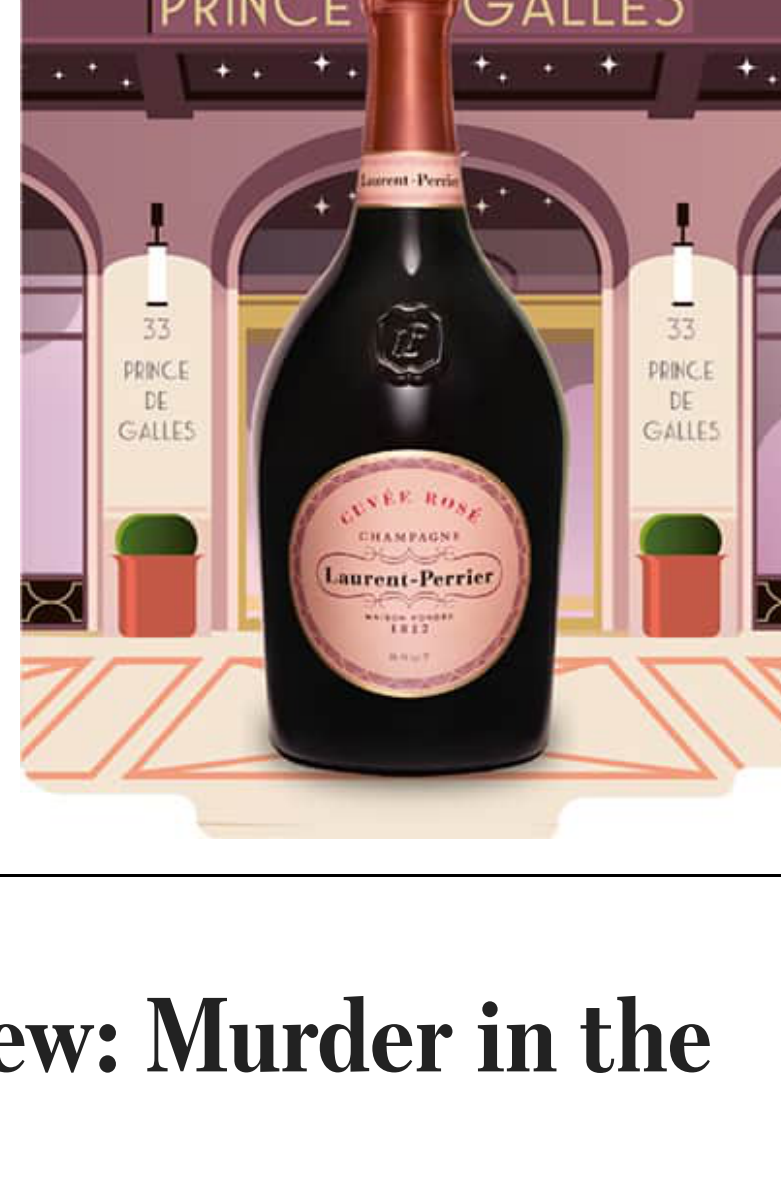


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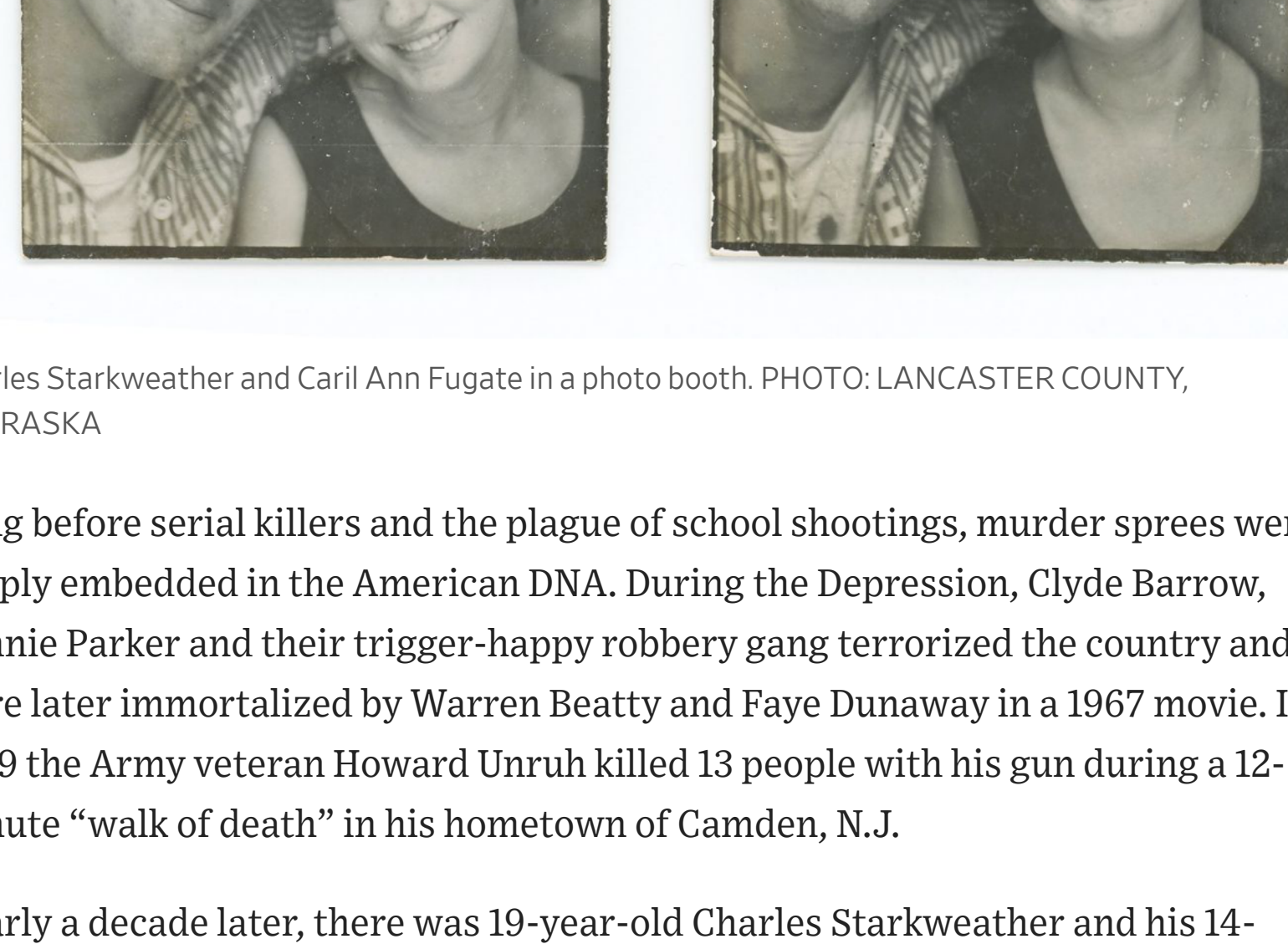
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'Starkweather' Review: Murder in the Heartland

Revisiting the young couple at the center of a killing rampage through Nebraska and Wyoming in the late 1950s.

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

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Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate in a photo booth. PHOTO: LANCASTER COUNTY, NEBRASKA

Long before serial killers and the plague of school shootings, murder sprees were deeply embedded in the American DNA.

Nearly a decade later, there was 19-year-old Charles Starkweather and his 14-year-old girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate.

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.

The short, freckled son of a carpenter and a waitress, Charles Starkweather was a mess.

Starkweather's hatred, the author writes, "wasn't limited to those who had made fun of him; he hated everybody, a world that had no use for him, no place for him."

Mr. MacLean, a veteran writer of true crime, including "In Broad Daylight" (1988), reconstructs the murders in meticulous, cinematic detail.

Two months later, Starkweather showed up at Fugate's home, despite having been told by the girl's mother and stepfather to stay away.

Willingly or not, Fugate undeniably went along for the rest of the ride. The couple stayed in her parents' house for nearly a week, then drove to the farmhouse of 71-year-old August Meyer.

The Nebraska spree ended with a visit to the home of Lauer and Clara Ward in Lincoln, where the Wards, their deaf maid, Lilyan Fencel, and their dog were all killed.

The murders terrified the heartland and were sensational news around the country. Starkweather relished relating his crimes, implicating Fugate in nearly everything so he could seal his fantasy of their shared doom.

His mental state is central to understanding his depredations. A couchful of psychiatrists was enlisted to evaluate him and Fugate.

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

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

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