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OTHER

	Online Magazine ∴ ∨	Events ∴	About ∴ ∨	Q	
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Articles

Staircase Murders

by Avery Carmichael



What is it about murder that intrigues so many people? You may not know it if you're not an avid reader of *Murderpedia*, or those seemingly endless Jon Benet

Ramsey Reddit threads, but a lot of people on this planet are obsessed with murder. Seriously. Comments upon comments, links upon links. People devote hours to unearthing old news clippings, videos and audio recordings. There are hundreds of podcasts, television shows and films devoted to this topic, so whether or not it appeals to you, someone you know is definitely a closeted "Murderino." In fact, it's been said that one out of every nine people is a little more interested in murder than might be considered 'normal.' (I made this statistic up, but it sounds reasonable to me...)

If I were to dissect my own fascination, I'd say it stems from the general, pressing sense of anxiety I carry with me on a day-to-day basis. There's something about exposing myself to every last detail of a situation that lessens my fear of the potential unknown. For example, if I read up on as many murders as possible, doesn't it mean I'm less likely to be murdered? There's something about the cruel irony of that possibility that even Alanis Morissette wouldn't sing about. "Don't ya think?" I say this all to distance a little bit of the weird, creepiness from myself. It's sort of like a subtle attempt at claiming, "I'm not weird. I promise."

A *really* good murder, to a Murderino, is layered with intrigue and mystery. Who did it and why are the most important questions. The details of the murder, if gory, are gratuitous, crass and distracting. Accepting that someone, a real human being, was killed humanizes the situation to a point that, instead of quelling my anxiety, seems to agitate it. What makes this fascination so compelling, that of being a Murderino, is that it balances precariously on the edge of reality and fantasy. Too much of an emotional connection to the victim puts things into a perspective that I don't want to address.

With that in mind, I've recently discovered a particularly interesting murder that hits home in more ways than one. First, it's the perfect combination of psychological wackiness and mystery. Second, it's all on film. And third, it took place in my college town: Durham, North Carolina. If you're a fellow Murderino, you might know which one I'm talking about... That's right! The Durham Staircase Murders! Starring, none other than Michael Iver Peterson, acclaimed author of three Vietnam War-centered novels, and former candidate for Durham mayor. He lost.

After graduating from my own Alma Mater, Duke University, Michael went on to work in the defense industry for several decades. He married a young, intelligent woman, Patricia, moved to Germany, and went on to have two boys with her. The couple divorced in 1987, and Michael headed back to Durham—the up-and-coming, foodie-heaven that I call home, with his sons. While in Durham, Michael became acquainted with Kathleen Atwater, a high-powered Nortel Executive. The

pair moved in with one another in 1989 and were married in 1997. Life was normal. Actually, it was better than normal, to paraphrase most true crime shows.

Living off of Kathleen's Nortel salary, as well as the proceeds from his novels, Michael settled right into his 9,200 square foot home. Michael's two sons, as well as his two adopted daughters, joined him. I forgot to mention that following the death of a close friend in Germany, Michael benevolently offered to take the woman's children in. Their names are Margaret and Martha. Kathleen also came to the marriage with a child, and the family easily blended together, having nightly family dinners and taking adventuresome family trips.

And yet, in 2001, on December 9th, Michael frantically called the Durham Police Department. "My wife had an accident! She's still breathing! ...She fell down the stairs! ...Please come!" Claiming to have found his wife at the foot of their staircase in a pool of blood, Michael was quickly considered to be a prime suspect. Sure, there was a chance that Kathleen had fallen, but all that blood? It didn't seem reasonable. Although his family vehemently defended him, even Kathleen's biological daughter, information slowly began to trickle out that called his actions into question.

Before going any further, it's important to note that around this time, Michael let a documentary crew into his home to film the investigation, as well as the following trial. With an all access pass into Michael's defense strategy, Jean-Xavier de Lestrade's resulting miniseries, "The Staircase," is the original "Making a Murderer." There's this incredible sense of moral uncertainty in the filmmaking as if the director knows a truth he's unwilling to fully admit to himself or his audience. It's one of those especially prescient documentaries in that Lestrade seriously had no idea about the treasure trove of an investigation he'd stumbled upon. An accident or murder? One of the key questions surrounding the case.

All physical evidence seemed to paint Michael into a desperately unstable corner. An autopsy revealed scalp lacerations, avulsions and contusions consistent with "multiple blunt force impacts to the head." (What's an avulsion? Anyone?) The coroner's conclusion was that such impacts could not possibly have been caused by head to stairs contact. In Lestrade's miniseries, Michael's children continued to stand by their father's innocence, in spite of mounting evidence against him. In one-on-one interviews, they detail how wonderful their father's relationship with Kathleen was—a house full of laughter, light and love.

Doesn't it seem to be that cases suddenly take sharp left-hand turns in most crime documentaries? Like, everything starts off peachy keen for the defendant, and then,

suddenly, out of nowhere, this entire barrage of secrets is unleashed! If you need a memory trigger, just think of Steven Avery of "Making a Murderer." That dude was shit out of luck. Well, in the celebrated vein of past crime stories, Lestrade hit it big when he started "The Staircase." Because guess what? Michael had a seriously shady past.

First, a motive. The Durham Police Department tore apart Michael's house and discovered incriminating emails between Michael and male escorts. The fairly graphic emails are available online, for your viewing pleasure. In one exchange, Michael schedules a meet up with a military-esque male escort in the Raleigh-Durham area. However, Michael makes sure to note that he is "Very happily married with a dynamite wife...very bi and that's all there is to it." So, on the one hand, Michael loves his wife, but on the other, he's secretly having affairs with men. Some questions: Did Michael tell his wife? Either that he was bisexual or that he was cheating on her? Had she found out? And as a result, did he kill her?

Second, in the most shocking twist of all, do you remember Margaret and Martha? If you recall, their mother died in Germany and left her two daughters to Michael. But what the public didn't know? Elizabeth Ratliff, Margaret and Martha's mother, had died of a brain aneurysm. On her staircase... (This is when you would hear some major "dun dun dun's.") Opinions of the circumstances of Elizabeth's death vary, according to the women who found Elizabeth, including Elizabeth's best friend and Michael's former wife, Patricia. One thing all the women can agree on? Elizabeth was found, slumped over, in a massive pool of blood, just like Kathleen had been.

At this point in Lestrade's miniseries, things start to go seriously nuts. Since Michael denied his extracurricular activities with men, until the evidence was placed directly under his nose, his credibility was shot. Who's going to believe a man who so comfortably lied to his lawyers and a private investigator? After all, these are the people paid to help him! Upon his lawyer's arrival in Germany, it's clear that things are looking mighty bad. So bad, in fact, that Durham Prosecutors have chosen to exhume Elizabeth's body, transporting her from a grave in Texas to the Durham Forensics office. Imagine being Margaret or Martha. Gosh. Just like the forensic assessment of Kathleen's death, Elizabeth's death was ruled equally suspicious, and a likely homicide. In the end, after two lengthy trials and a prison sentence, Michael is set to stand trial again, in May of this year.

It's a bit surreal to think that this case has not yet been put to rest. It's especially surreal to think that this case has not yet been put to rest because of what has come to be known as 'the Owl Theory.' Theoretically, and I mean seriously theoretically, people have postulated that a rare, often aggressive breed of owl had found its way into Kathleen and Michael's home, and attacked Kathleen. It's one of

those things that's so mildly possible that it's hard for me to take seriously as a theory. Nonetheless, try using that excuse next time you want to miss work!

To the general public, Michael's guilt is often in question. As much as I think he is guilty, there's a part of me that doesn't want to believe it. What Lestrade's series offers that I can't possibly convey is how much Michael *does* appear to be a good guy. He's jocular and kind, incredibly smart and very articulate. He's also handsome, approachable and an advocate for social justice. Could a guy like that be a murderer? Maybe this is all some giant misunderstanding? Sure, you see him lying to the camera about his bisexuality, but isn't that just because he's afraid of the reaction? I don't know. Do you?

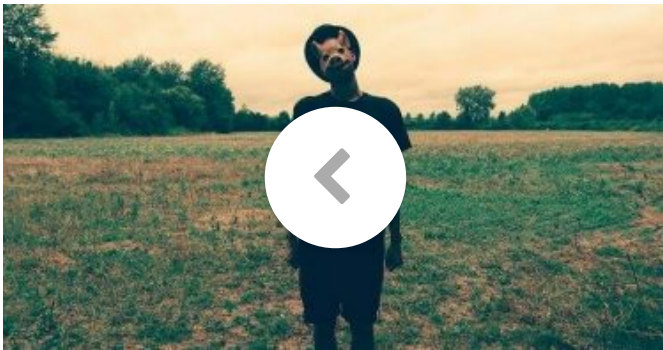
Living in Durham, I don't see any far-reaching impact from this murder or its two subsequent trials. Asking fellow Duke students, there is basically zero familiarity with the case. Ellen Herd, a senior from Columbus, Ohio, told me, "I'd never heard of this murder before. It doesn't sound real to me." She's not wrong—it seems pretty absurd. The only person I've talked to who remembered the case was one of my Professors. He spoke of the strange appeal Michael had to some of his colleagues. Many staff members were thrilled to be invited to dinner with an alleged murderer. Although my Professor didn't fully relate to their attraction to Michael, he understood the fascination people, like myself, have with murder.

Everyone picks their poison when it comes to coping mechanisms. I know that it's hard to relate to, but sometimes the psychological intrigue of a twisted murderer helps put my life into perspective. Especially now, with the current state of information dissemination, and the rise of Netflix and Amazon-produced series, I really believe we'll see more and more niche documentaries. That said, if you haven't watched "The Staircase," I suggest you check it out ASAP. I promise you I haven't ruined the show! The latter half is a deep look into the criminal justice system.

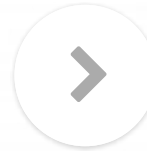
Beyond that, if you are a Murderino, I'd like to recommend a few podcasts: For something funny, listen to "Last Podcast on the Left" or "My Favorite Murder." For something super informative and accurate, check out "Sword and Scale." In terms of the best crime documentaries? Give "The Jinx" a watch, as well as the ever topical "Making a Murderer," and "The Thin Blue Line." Even if you're not as far gone as I am, these programs offer insight into the criminal mind, the penal system and the injustices faced by innocent men and women unjustly accused and tried for crimes they did not commit.

I am, however, willing to admit something seriously weird: in the midst of immersing myself in the murder, I ended up driving to Michael's former home. It was a rainy, cold winter's night, and I have never been more creeped out than I was then. I went with my best friend after we both watched "The Staircase," and it was beyond bizarre. Everything looked just like it did on television. From the imposing white columns to the long, sloping driveway, the house hasn't changed a bit. It makes me want to travel to Manitowoc one day and see what I can find.

Image by the impeccable Euan Roberts



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