



WOMEN

WHO KILL

ANN JONES

WITH PREVIOUSLY

UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL ON THE "BATTERED WOMEN'S SYNDROME"

"STUNNING, REVEALING, PROVOKING. . . . A POWERFUL BOOK, NOT ONLY ABOUT WOMEN WHO MURDER, BUT ALSO ABOUT HOW WOMEN HAVE BEEN PERCEIVED." — VOGUE

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In memory of my mother,
Berenice Rufsvold Slagsvol,
and of Bunny,
who was killed.

*O race of Adam, blench not lest you find
In the sun's bubbling bowl anonymous death,
Or lost in whistling space without a mind
To monstrous Nothing yield your little breath:
You shall achieve destruction where you stand,
In intimate conflict, at your brother's hand.*

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

*There are no new arguments to be made
on human rights. . . .*

—Elizabeth Cady Stanton

*Pray for the dead,
but fight like hell for the living.*

—Mother Jones

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FOREWORD

Five years ago in a women's literature seminar, a student depressed by reading *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Bell Jar*, complained: "Isn't there anything a woman can do but kill herself?" To lighten the mood I quipped, "She can always kill somebody else," and realized in the instant that it was true. I have been working on this book ever since.

It has caused embarrassment. Tell people you're writing a book about women who commit murder and they make some joke about "lady-killers" or walk away muttering "weird." For both the killer and the killed, murder is one of the few human acts that cannot be ameliorated or revoked; yet no one seems to take it seriously. Books about murder (with the exception of some serious attempts at understanding, such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*) fall mainly into two categories: bone-dry academic criminology aimed at diagramming criminal patterns, and presumably helping to prevent crime; and grimly amusing homicidal anecdotes in the vein popularized in this country by Edmund Lester Pearson. For the most part, academic criminologists ignore women while the popular crime writers describe "murderesses" in books with snappy titles like *Fatal Femmes* and *The Deadlier Species*. Yet almost anyone who stops to think about it realizes that women's homicides are "different." Unlike men, who are apt to stab a total stranger in a drunken brawl or run amok with a high-powered rifle, we women usu-

ally kill our intimates: we kill our children, our husbands, our lovers. This fact is not amusing. But that these homicidal patterns might be shadows of profound cultural deformities—and thus worthy of serious consideration—seems not to have occurred to many.

But joking, you will say, is merely a psychological defense against the undeniable fact that people—you and I—are capable of murdering and of being murdered. We laugh because we are afraid. True enough. And this book is mostly about fear: the fears of men who, even as they shape society, are desperately afraid of women, and so have fashioned a world in which women come and go only in certain rooms; and about the fears of those women who, finding the rooms too narrow and the door still locked, lie in wait or set the place afire.

But are such women a fit subject for serious historical (or herstorical) study? Historians often assume that women have not significantly acted, but have been acted upon. Women are history's great blob of putty. So we have books—accurate and valuable books—on how women have been defrauded and oppressed by medicine, psychology, capitalism, the law, the universities, and our own mothers. Other historians, believing that some women did act, and from enlightened self-interest at that, have given us women in the antislavery movement, in the suffrage movement, in the labor movement: women like the Grimké, Anthony, Cady Stanton, Goldman, Eastman, Mother Jones, who have said and done great things on behalf of themselves and others. Yet our great women are few. This year more women will kill their children than will be appointed to the judicial bench. More women will kill their husbands than will sit in the halls of Congress. A baby girl born tomorrow stands a chance of growing up to stick a kitchen knife into an assaultive husband; but her chances of becoming President are too slim to be statistically significant. The story of women who kill is the story of women.

This book does not proceed in a straight line. It consists of a series of studies, mostly historical, approaching the subject of women and murder from different angles. They are intended to dispel some false notions and to examine the connections among women, society, and killing. My aim has not been to get through the topic but to get at it.

I have not sought out obscure cases since they are often fascinating in their own right but reveal little about their times. Instead, I write mostly about prominent cases that obviously hit a social nerve. I

recount some individual cases such as the Borden parricide because they are historical landmarks or (like the cases of Ruth Snyder and Alice Crimmins) representative of broad social concerns; and I discuss groups of cases that cluster about a single prominent issue, such as infanticide in the colonial era or woman's self-defense in our own.

In presenting cases I have had to mediate between my sources and my readers. That has been complicated because where murder is concerned people not only forget things and misunderstand—as all of us do in the best of circumstances—but they also lie a lot. I compared as many different accounts as I could lay hands on and produced a version as close to the truth as I could get, though it is only fair to say that I have read and retold history as a feminist. Where circumstances make it impossible to penetrate to the “truth” I have said so. And I have made up nothing. Indeed, because murder can so easily be sensationalized or sentimentalized, I have taken some pains to stick to the bare facts.

Some definitions are necessary. I use the term *feminists* throughout the book to refer to women who identified themselves with and spoke on behalf of women's rights. Feminism encompasses a broad range of opinion, but usually I found it neither necessary nor useful to make distinctions since the general public tends to lump all feminists together. When I cite a viewpoint of a particular group or spokesperson, I name the group or person; but for the most part the term feminists should be taken to apply to women who supported or were thought to support women's rights. Often I use the term *social fathers* in the same broad way: to suggest those people (mostly male) in positions of power and influence within society who, acting individually or in concert, shape public attitudes and policy. I do not imply that society is run by a handful of powerful men; I use the term for rhetorical convenience and to suggest that certain social institutions—notably the law—are indeed largely determined by the influence of an upper-class, predominately white male, elite.

In reading recent books on women's history, I notice that it is the fashion, particularly among academic historians and literary historians, to disclaim any notion of male conspiracy in the oppression of women. It seems to be incumbent upon the author to say that readers who gain from the book the impression that men as a group have done something unpleasant to women as a group are entirely mistaken, for the author never intended any such thing. “For my part,” I must say with William Lloyd Garrison, “I am not prepared to respect that phi-

losophy. I believe in sin, therefore in a sinner; in theft, therefore in a thief; in slavery, therefore in a slaveholder; in wrong, therefore in a wrong-doer; and unless the men of this nation are made by women to see that they have been guilty of usurpation, and cruel usurpation, I believe very little progress will be made." If this book leaves the impression that men have conspired to keep women down, that is exactly the impression I mean to convey; for I believe that men could not have succeeded as well as they have without concerted effort.

A.J.

New York, New York.

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INTRODUCTION

Peachie was small enough to hide behind a potted plant. She could cover the patrons in the bank with her .22, and she couldn't be seen from the street. But she couldn't see the street either, so when she heard the door open she had to wait for George Morelock to walk to the center of the lobby into her line of vision. "Stop right there," she said, and poked the gun at him when he turned and noticed her. But Morelock was hard of hearing and didn't seem to understand. He started toward her, and she warned him again; but he kept coming and she pulled the trigger, again and again. Some of the patrons screamed. Peachie and one of her accomplices ran out of the bank and into an off-duty policeman who had stopped by to make a deposit. They forced him to stretch out in the street as they fled, but the encounter delayed them. In a panic, the driver stalled the getaway car, and by the time they transferred to their second car, scattering money behind them, the police were in pursuit. A police bullet shattered the rear

window; the car went out of control, caromed off a parked car, and crashed through a plate-glass window. The police picked up Peachie Wiggins and her two male companions and \$70,157. All three bank robbers were charged with murder. They were convicted and in 1969 sentenced to die in the Pennsylvania electric chair. Peachie Wiggins was seventeen years old.

She spent two years confined alone, first in maximum security, then in the prison infirmary, because Pennsylvania had no death cell for a woman. Then, in a new trial, she and her friends were given life sentences; and Peachie joined the general prison population. Since then she has come up for commutation of her sentence twice, and both times it has been denied. She has escaped twice, returning once of her own volition, once when she was recaptured after three years of freedom. And each escape has brought a sentence of additional time. She is now serving sentences of life imprisonment for murder, indeterminate to twenty years for robbery, indeterminate to three years for conspiracy, indeterminate to two years for violation of the firearms act, indeterminate to five years for one escape, and indeterminate to two years for another. That adds up to a maximum term of life plus thirty-two years, and her chances for parole are slim. She is young. She is black. In the course of an armed robbery she killed a man. And she has repeatedly escaped from prison. She seems to be one of those women we've heard more and more about in recent years: one of the so-called new breed of violent female criminals.

In recent years, the female crime wave and its violent women have been alarmingly described in articles and books; but they were first widely publicized in 1975 through a book called *Sisters in Crime* by Freda Adler, a criminologist who rose to prominence on the strength of a logical fallacy. Noticing that a renewed women's movement paralleled apparently phenomenal increases in crimes by women, Adler mistakenly concluded that one trend caused the other. The rapid rise in crimes by women, she said, was merely the "shady aspect of liberation"; and as more and more "libbers" rushed to emulate the criminal example of men—the only "full human beings"—we would be awash in a sea of emancipated crime.

While some prisons planned new facilities for the expected influx of violent women, feminists in criminology and the criminal-justice system were quick to respond to Adler with convincing arguments. They maintained, and rightly, that Adler's figures were misleading precisely because women commit so few crimes. When the number of

crimes is small, only a few more may account for a large percentage increase; but Adler cited those alarming percentage increases without recording the low absolute numbers. She pointed to a shocking rise of 277 percent in arrests of women for robbery between 1960 and 1972; but the 1973 *Uniform Crime Reports* of the FBI reported only 5,700 women arrested for robbery that year, compared with almost 95,000 men. Across the board women were arrested in 1973 for about 15.3 percent of all crimes committed—not a high rate, and certainly not an alarming one, for a group that makes up more than half the population. Adler's critics also noted that there has been *no* demonstrable increase in crimes of violence committed by women. The greatest increases in women's crimes have been in larceny and fraud, particularly welfare fraud; and these are not violent crimes but economic ones, easily attributable to the growing financial needs of poor women, most of whom have children to support. Other critics pointed to evidence that spreading drug addiction has increased economic crimes for women and men alike. In any case, the so-called new woman criminal was likely to be—like the old woman criminal—young, poor, and black or Hispanic.

Adler was quite right that the two phenomena—the women's movement and female criminality—go together, but not as she supposed in terms of cause and effect. It is simply that the presence of one prompts fear of the other. Agitation for women's rights always sparks enormous anxiety, among women and men alike, about the proper place of women in society, and because "take" in one element of society seems to mean "give" in another, about the safety of the whole social order. That anxiety manifests itself in many ways: in the fear that women are "unsexing themselves," which in turn produces campaigns to outlaw bloomers, to elevate a regressive "femininity" to "total womanhood," and to make abortion a criminal offense; in the fear that the family is disintegrating, which results in virulent attacks upon women's colleges, divorce, homosexuality, women in the work force, federally funded day care, and unisex bathrooms; and in the fear that women, released from some traditional restraints, will turn to unbridled evil, mayhem, and murder. Even the traditionally macho skin magazine *Oui* observed in 1975, "Women criminals today seem to spark a special fear, fantasy and overreaction in male society."

That overreaction to an imaginary wave of criminality is likely to take shape as a wave of law enforcement. It happens all the time. Every so often the law cracks down on bootleggers or prostitutes or gam-

blers or drivers who park in towaway zones. The crackdown is simply a wave of law enforcement, but it may appear to have been occasioned by a wave of crime. The classic example of a wave of law enforcement in American history is the Salem witch trials. Since we are no longer troubled by witches, we can easily see that the dark affliction of Salem grew from a profound cultural neurosis, a "group panic." At the time Salem had good political and economic reasons to be concerned for the safety of the established social order; but we, having lost the theological habit of mind, can see that Salem suffered more from the fear of witches than from witches themselves. Still, we have not lost the disposition that finds a simple scapegoat for the incalculable complex of factors—social, political, economic—that may rise against us, threatening change or destruction. That anxiety about the social order is profound and abiding, and it surfaces from time to time in American society in the same form it took at Salem: sudden notice of the crimes of women.

That, it seems, is what is happening today. In absolute terms, crimes by women are increasing roughly on a par with crimes by men. Crimes of violence committed by women—about 10 percent of all violent crimes—have not increased significantly in the last twenty years; according to some estimates they are declining. The rate of murders committed by women has remained steady at 15 percent of all murders for as long as anyone has kept records anywhere. But the rate of arrests for all crimes between 1967 and 1976 rose 15 percent for men and 64 percent for women. Among juvenile women, arrests increased 68 percent. Methods of keeping criminal statistics are so inconsistent and misleading that the actual "criminality" of women is impossible to calculate; yet the law has been cracking down. And that crackdown certainly has a good deal to do with the women's movement. Researchers for the National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union reported in 1979 that although there "clearly . . . is not a 'new breed' of violent woman . . . there is almost certainly a new attitude toward women within the criminal justice system." As law-enforcement officials repeatedly told criminologist Rita Simon: "If it's equality these women want, we'll see that they get it."

To spare us the panic, criminology should be able to provide some helpful information about women and crime; but in fact criminology knows next to nothing about women, since it has concentrated all