

# Is entertainment's crime spree making us into monsters?

By Julia Keller  
Tribune cultural critic

Last week the nation was shocked by a violent, mysterious crime involving a prominent Chicago judge, a defenseless family and the suspicion of a revenge hit.

If your first thought was, "My God, that sounds just like an episode of 'Law & Order!' " are you an insensitive clod?

Are you a monster if you found yourself comparing real-life tragedy to a TV show?

There is, like it or not, a deeply held suspicion that fictional representations of violence steadily rub away at our sensibilities, so that

when the real thing comes along — the horrific deaths of Michael Lefkow and Donna Humphrey, husband and mother of U.S. District Judge Joan H. Lefkow — we're too numb and jaded to react as human beings.

The issue is as ancient as creativity itself, but it has lost none of its urgency over the centuries: Just what is the impact of art? Does watching stories about terrible acts desensitize us to the horror of those acts when they actually occur? Do "Law & Order" and "CSI" — and, in an earlier age, "Titus Andronicus" — make us a little slower to recoil from the genuine article?

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U.S. District Judge Joan H. Lefkow found the bodies of her husband and mother last Monday in the Lefkow home (center).

Tribune photo by John Lee

## CRIME: Art reflects life, which reflects art

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Last week featured strange and jarring juxtapositions. The terrible news about the Lefkow family bumped up against Tuesday's episode of "Law & Order: SVU," which dealt with rape and murder. Like millions of other people, I watched it in sweat pants and T-shirt, a bowl of popcorn within easy reach. Thursday, in the midst of the steady accretion of terrible details about the slaying of the judge's kin, came the debut of "Law & Order: Trial by Jury."

Were our reactions to the Lefkow family's tragedy even a fraction less intense, was our repulsion even a shade less vigorous, was our horror tempered ever so slightly, because we see rage and death in our living rooms almost every night, sometimes accompanied by snacks?

The makers of violent video games are eye-rollingly familiar with the question. They've been dealing with it right along, as their graphics get more sophisticated and the death spectacles in which they specialize bloom



Jerry Orbach (left) and Kirk Acevedo star in Thursday's premiere of "Law & Order: Trial by Jury" on NBC.

ever-brighter in bloody verisimilitude.

Yet television and movies can't escape the inquiry either. Shows about violent crime have soaked into the TV schedule like a bloodstain on carpet. Along with the endlessly self-replicating "Law & Order" series, there's the "CSI" franchise, "Without a Trace," "Cold Case" and, until its final episode last week, "NYPD Blue" — and let's not forget all those doctor and lawyer and spy shows that never hesitate to toss in a nice variety of wrenchingly violent deaths. Movies, too, always seem to be on a killing spree, from "The Jacket" to "Hide and Seek."

Despite the occasional hand-

wringing by publicity-seeking senators, though, and despite popular perception, there's nothing new about all this fake mayhem, argues Harold Schechter, author of "Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment" (St. Martin's Press, 2005). "People don't realize how savage and brutal popular culture used to be. But we have this automatic assumption that it's much worse today, which is just not true." Think: public hangings.

Does violent entertainment make us less able to respond to actual atrocities?

"Certain types of images of violence do become clichés after a while," concedes Schechter.

English professor at Queens College. But he adds, "We've become *more* sensitized to violent imagery, not less, as real violence becomes remote from our lives."

The fact that crime stories dominate the TV lineup and the local news is a good thing, he claims. "It's a reflection of how safe and civilized our lives are. After all, we belong to a species that in just a few generations has moved from watching real people being killed and tortured in public to watching zombies be killed in video games."

Most of us will never, thank God, endure the pain and torment that Judge Lefkow's family faced; nor will we know the survivors' piercing grief. But because of what we've seen and read in innumerable crime fictions, we may have an inkling. We can't be everywhere or experience everything. Fiction fills in the gaps. It makes us more, not less, able to be empathetic.

Or maybe that's nonsense. Maybe it doesn't work that way at all, and I'm simply seeking an easy way to justify my passionate fondness for "Law & Order: SVU," for the work of crime novelists such as Henning Mankell and Ian Rankin.

There will always be crime shows, and there will always be crime, and I'd like to believe that patronage of the former doesn't mean indifference to the fathomless agony of the latter. But I just don't know. Do you?

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AMERICAN GIRL: THE ART OF COMMERCE

# Dollmaker shadowboxes with history

By Mara Tapp

In all this fuss over the decidedly anti-urban remarks made by Mexican-American characters in the newest American Girl book, a plain fact seems forgotten: This is hardly the most egregious ut-

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terance by the company. Its take on history is much harder for me to forgive.

For all its corporate patter, American Girl's stance on history might best be described as whitewashed, dumbed down or just plain commercialized.

Years ago I interviewed the founder of the company and the author of American Girl's first book about a black char-

acter. Even then there was controversy because it had taken seven years for the company to introduce a doll of color. She was Addy Walker, described in company literature as "A Courageous Girl of the Civil War" who "escapes from slavery with her mother in 1864. Together they embark on a dan-

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asked. "I don't know," she answered.

For the record, "Kit Kirtledge® is a clever, resourceful girl growing up in Cincinnati in 1934 during America's Great Depression. Many people are losing their jobs, their money, and even their homes. When Kit's dad loses his job, her world gets turned upside down."

It's possible that Kit could teach all this to those girls who become her owners, but the definite emphasis at American Girl Place seems to be on the purchasing rather than the learning. From all my observations, it seems that when it comes to history, the American Girl experience is about sanitizing and commodifying the past. We prefer our history with its ugly edges rubbed off, all neatly packaged so as not to offend.

What the American Girl doll really teach is consumerism. This model is Barbie meets Office Depot.

Then there's the confirmation that American Girls offers the most trite-and-tired stereotypes: the black girl as slave, Mexican as revolutionary ancestor. And let's not ignore the race-and-class issue. American Girl's ubiquitous red shopping bags dot Michigan Avenue almost every day but neither I nor any of my friends has ever seen any non-white individual holding one. While it's hard to determine the purchasers' income levels, the dolls' prices make it unlikely that they make regular appearances in poor homes.

Not that the company is suffering. A spokeswoman put 2000 sales at \$379 million, up from \$350 million the year before. The company doesn't share demographics on customers and she said it has never done any surveys.

From my substitute teaching at Chicago public schools and the rearing of my own daughters, I've learned that children really can swim through the sea of consumerism. Although Barbies were banned from our old daughter's life—though I used one to explain how the laws of physics decreed that it would land her flat on her face one slipped undetected into the pile of presents at her 5th birthday party. Delighted she demanded that it accompany her on a post-party ride on her new tricycle. Her father began the usual Barbie argument but she turned it back and said

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gerous journey to the North, hoping one day to reunite their family. Addy® learns to read and write, makes new friends, and discovers what being free really means."

Since that 1993 interview, I've discussed with many people the issues that surround the American Girl books: Do they really teach history? Is it enough that they get girls to read? Who can afford dolls that start at \$84, and if you can, how many of the accessories can you afford? Isn't this just unabashed marketing masquerading as history?

In 2001, nearly a decade later, I urged my older daughter, then 14, and an anthropologist friend to accompany me on a visit to the three-story complex on Chicago Avenue known as American Girl Place for what might best be described as field work. The historical dolls are housed in the basement—a metaphor I'd rather resist analyzing—just beyond five historical dioramas. These displays lead you to huge cases filled with various dolls outfitted and accessorized. Below are small pads with tiny slips identifying what's on display. You can help yourself to the items in stock, or rip off the slips and take them to a cashier, or if you lack the cash at present, place your bar-coded slips into a "wish book," a pretty little red wallet designed to make certain your consumer dreams eventually come true.

I will never forget our open-mouthed horror at one of Addy's accessories, a tiny Emancipation Proclamation. It led us into lively debate about whether such a purchase would begin a real odyssey into our own troubled history of slavery or merely remain one of Addy's pricey accoutrements.

When the brouhaha erupted over Marisol—a Mexican-American girl whose parents choose Des Plaines over Pilsen, a community they describe as "dangerous" and lacking a "place to play"—I decided it was time for another visit. I set out one afternoon and encountered the following: Addy's owner



Photo for the Tribune by Kevin Tanaka

American Girl lays claim that its dolls teach kids about history, but some ask whether it isn't better at teaching consumerism.

Nationalist flag—is still for sale. But the Emancipation Proclamation is gone and neither salespeople nor company representatives could tell me where or why it went. In fact, no one even recalled such an item. But you can get accessories for Addy's new hairstyle and even a \$20 set that includes a kerchief, a water gourd and a cowrie shell.

There are now many more dolls in the historical line. Josefina Montoya arrived in 1997, a year before Mattel acquired American Girl. Company literature describes her as "a girl of heart and hope growing up in New Mexico in 1824. Ever since her Mamá died, Josefina® and her sisters have bravely met the challenges of the rancho without her. As they watch the new americano traders arrive from the east, they struggle to hold on to their mother's love—and the old ways she taught them. ... She feels lucky to have her family and faith to guide her!"

And 2000 brought Kaya, "A Daring, Adventurous Nez Perce Girl" who "dreams of becoming a courageous leader for her people" and "draws strength from her family, the legends her el-

purchasers. One girl, about 7, arrived breathless with her excited mother and father at the diorama of Kirsten. Her mother pronounced with great drama, "Here she is." The overwhelmed child asked, "Which one?" Her mother explained they were all Kirsten, in her various get-ups. The girl responded by pointing and asking, "How do I get this?"

Here's one for the history books, courtesy of the American Girl Web site: "Kirsten Larson® is a pioneer girl of strength and spirit growing up in Minnesota in 1854. After a long, dangerous voyage with her family from Sweden to America, Kirsten® finds it difficult to get used to a new country and a new way of life. But as she makes friends and discovers what her new land has to offer, she learns the true meaning of home and that love is the same in any language."

Two girls who looked like sisters, perhaps 7 and 9, wandered from diorama to diorama until I asked which doll was their favorite. "They're all pretty," they demurred. I pressed, asking which they would pick. "They didn't know," I pursued, asking, "If I said I would buy you one, which one would it be?" "Kit Kirtledge," they said.

# A selection of books for Harvard's president

By **Katrin Schultheiss and Eric Arnesen**

Harvard University President Lawrence Summers has been on the hot seat since saying in January that, based upon "a fair amount of reading the literature," he thought one of the reasons women are underrepresented in "tenured positions in science and engineering at top universities and research institutions" is that men have a greater "intrinsic aptitude" for science than women—that is, they are genetically predisposed to do better science than women.

Summers' reading must have been narrowly focused, because the scholarship is far richer and more complicated than his remarks would suggest. With spring break approaching, what better way for Summers to spend his time off than to catch up on the abundant research on gender and biology and on women in science? Here are some places he could start:

## Woman: An Intimate Geography

By **Natalie Angler**

Houghton Mifflin (1999)

A Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for The New York Times explores in detail and with good humor the myths and facts of women's biology from conception to menopause. Particularly intriguing are her examination of the roles hormones do and don't play in gendered behavior and her convincing account of the many ways cultural and social influences can alter biological function.

## Sex on the Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men and Women

By **Deborah Blum**

Viking (1997)

A Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist offers a lively, nuanced analysis of recent research on sex difference, suggesting that

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while there are undeniable biological distinctions between men and women, how those differences translate into behavior is difficult to determine.

## Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men

By **Anne Fausto-Sterling**

Basic (1985)

A professor of medical science examines the psychological, biological, genetic and evolutionary data on gender difference and finds little evidence to support stereotypes of innate masculine and feminine abilities. A classic on the role biology plays in determining gender hierarchies.

## The Politics of Women's Biology

By **Ruth Hubbard**

Rutgers University Press (1990)

These essays by the renowned Harvard professor of biology emerita cover such subjects as the history of women's exclusion from academic science and the dubious science behind evolutionary psychologists' assumptions that animal behavior proves that gendered human behavior is the product of natural selection.

## The Mismeasure of Woman

By **Carol Tavris**

Touchstone (1992)

A psychologist shows how evidence of differences between women and men is consistently misused by doctors, lawyers, scientists, sociologists and psychologists to prove women are inferior to men.

## Athena Unbound: The Advancement of Women in Science and Technology

By **Henry Etzkowitz, Carol Kemelgor and Brian Uzzi**

Cambridge University Press (2000)

This carefully researched study explores the myriad institutional, social and cultural obstacles to women's success in science and

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"Grassroots" and "The Meaning of Wife" explore everyday feminist activism and the female matrimonial condition.

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technology.

## The Gender of Science

Edited by **Janet A. Kourany**

Prentice Hall (2002)

A compilation of some of the most important feminist essays on gender, women and science, ranging from empirical analyses of the experiences of female scientists and the barriers to women's success in the field, to more theoretical explorations of gender biases in scientific practice.

## The Science Glass Ceiling: Academic Women Scientists and the Struggle to Succeed

By **Sue V. Rosser**

Routledge (2004)

A dean at the Georgia Institute of Technology and one of the foremost experts on women in the sciences interviews some of the nation's top female academic scientists to illuminate the obstacles to gender equality and propose practical strategies for their elimination.

## The Mind Has No Sex?: Women in the Origins of Modern Science

By **Londa Schiebinger**

Harvard University Press (1989)

A historian of science shows how the institutionalization of scientific research and shifting ideas about the relationship between sex and the intellect squeezed women out of the sciences in the 17th and 18th Centuries.