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Tim Dougherty

Sex and Murder in the City-19th Century Style

She was remarkably sophisticated by the standards of her day, plying her trade with courtly letters, gift exchanges, and other improbable trappings of romantic love. Still more atypical was the sensationalism that greeted her death and the trial of her accused murderer. It would become one of the country's defining cultural moments.

More than a century and a half before the murder trial of O.J. Simpson captivated the nation and touched off a seemingly unprecedented media circus, there was Helen Jewett, the New York prostitute whose brutal slaying in 1836 occasioned American journalism's original feeding frenzy.

"Historians of journalism have long heralded the Jewett murder as the event that inaugurated a sex-and-death sensationalism in news reporting, a style of journalism that is utterly familiar to us now in the late 20th century," said UC Santa Barbara historian Patricia Cline Cohen, author of the fascinating new book "The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York" (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

"What's especially interesting about the case, however, is the person of Helen Jewett. She seemed mysterious because of her many aliases and, more importantly, the half dozen competing newspaper stories about who she really was. It turns out Jewett herself was the source of every story, that she fabricated versions of her early life to suit her circumstances and build her clientele. Self-invention was her stock in

trade, and imaginary romance was what she sold for a living."

Like thousands of other young women who sold their bodies in the teeming cities of 1830s America, Jewett came from humble circumstances. She was very different from her contemporaries, however, in that she had managed to acquire a good education. She read a great deal and incorporated the romantic fantasy of her reading into her working relationships with clients.

"She maintained a select clientele and solicited her patrons by engaging in a literary correspondence with many of them, writing genteel letters of emotion and sometimes relatively frank sexual assertiveness. She offered---maybe insisted is the better word---that her clients play a game of love and romance with her. Instead of sex without obligation---as commercial sex can often be---Jewett strung along her young men with letters of courtship, gifts, and shared emotional intimacy, and she demanded strict fidelity from them," said Cohen.

All that changed on the unseasonably cool night of April 9, 1836, when someone---likely one of her "suitors"---viciously slashed Jewett to death and set her Manhattan brothel room ablaze. The case generated immediate excitement across the country, in part because it was a classic who-done-it. A new brand of journalism also fanned public interest.

"Up until the 1830s, most standard newspapers were very low key about crime reporting, considering it to be beneath newsworthiness or else too local to put into print. But a new kind of newspaper had emerged by mid-decade, the penny press, a humorous, irreverent, and cheap daily paper that claimed crime as news. There were three or four such papers in competition with each other in New York City in 1836, and they latched onto the Jewett murder, taking different views of it as a way to pump up circulation figures. They succeeded wildly," Cohen said.

Moreover, she believes the case was instantly popular because it spoke to some of the era's deepest concerns: women's independence and autonomy; the changing face of sexuality; unsupervised youth and big cities; and the place of wealth, privilege, gender, and sexual sin in the administration of justice. (A young man from a prominent family was ultimately tried in the case.)

Whatever the reasons, the Jewett case quickly transcended the attention normally afforded the murder of a big-city prostitute. In fact, the story sustained itself for decades after the trial as a noteworthy moment in the annals of crime. Twenty years

after Jewett's death, the New York Times ran a front page story on it, recapitulating the case for new readers but assuming that most people would remember the details. Clearly, Cohen says, the case touched a nerve in American culture.

"This case has been fictionalized a number of times, so it's a good story all by itself. I came to it as a social historian working as a detective, on a cold trail to be sure, but one that still yields a lot of new information. I had a lot of fun doing the research and writing, and I think the end product will interest both professional historians and the larger reading public," she said.

Cohen relied extensively on newspaper archives when researching "The Murder of Helen Jewett." She also had access to approximately 90 letters to and from Jewett's clients that were found in her room and confiscated by police. Only one was made public at the celebrated trial.

A professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, Cohen is also the author of "A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America" (University of Chicago Press, 1983) and co-author of "The American Promise" (Bedford Books, 1998). She will discuss and sign copies of "The Murder of Helen Jewett" at 4 p.m. Oct. 7 in the conference room of UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center.

About UC Santa Barbara

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