

Winnipeg Free Press

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Canada

'Not all evil:' New true crime book dives into minds of notorious killers

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Posted: **04/15/2016 7:01 AM**

TORONTO - The headlines are lurid. The trials sensational. The crimes beyond horrific. A passenger beheaded and cannibalized on a bus. A student dismembered and sexually defiled. Children snatched, sexually assaulted and murdered. Sex workers stalked and killed.

Now, a new anthology takes a deep dive into the darkest, sometimes ugly, recesses of the minds of those whose deeds fill communities with shock, fear and revulsion.

In "Shrunk: Crime and Disorders of the Mind," forensic psychiatrists and psychologists write about trying to fathom what drove an accused to commit unfathomable acts of violence and, if possible, explain it to the rest of us.

Their assessments — at times academically presented — are not just of academic interest: Their conclusions can mean the difference between living and dying behind bars and a finding of not criminally responsible — perhaps the least understood verdict in Canadian justice — in which an accused can, after appropriate treatment, return to their communities in relatively short order.

Sorting out the truly ill from the evil, the genuine from the fake, is a daunting responsibility that can profoundly affect the assessors.

"I agonized for days," writes Dr. Joel Watts, now with the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, who evaluated Luka Magnotta, convicted in the killing and dismemberment of Jun Lin in Montreal in 2012.

"I ruminated at night about being dragged by lynch mobs to a public stockade to be tarred and feathered by angry colleagues, furious at me for dragging our profession even further down in the muck of public opinion."

Magnotta, who mailed Lin's limbs to schools and the offices of federal political parties, was convicted of first-degree murder. Yet Watts, who spent hours with him before and after his conviction, believes his notorious client was psychotic when he killed Lin.

"I remained convinced that he did not kill Jun Lin because he was a callous and cold-blooded killer seeking fame and notoriety," Watts writes.

A contrasting outcome is seen in the account of Dr. Jeffrey Waldman about Vince Li, who was found not criminally responsible for his calm decapitation and cannibalization of fellow passenger Tim McLean on a Greyhound bus in Manitoba in July 2008. He was released to a group home in May 2015 and, earlier this year, won the right to live alone.

Li, an otherwise mild-mannered and engaging individual, was in the throes of a profound psychotic episode — he believed God was telling him to kill his evil seatmate — when he killed McLean.

For Waldman, a forensic psychiatrist and assistant psychiatry professor at the University of Manitoba, Li's case

demonstrates the crying lack of understanding of mental illness.

"The most frightening aspect to the horrible Greyhound bus event is that the response to this tragedy has gone towards developing legislation that punishes those who get sick rather than creating a system that educates the public about severe mental illness and facilitates access to treatment," Waldman writes.

"It could be argued that the real injustice is that we learned nothing from this tragedy, and have done nothing to ensure that it is any less likely to happen in the future."

Other chapters in "Shrunk," co-edited by Thomas Dalby and Lorene Shyba, focus on such infamous killers as sexually sadistic Clifford Olson as well on the lesser known, such as the man whose bizarre sexual perversions included being aroused by feces, animals and corpses. Authors discuss the cases and how they came up with their assessments.

The book, to be published by Calgary-based Durvile Publications on May 5, includes a charming account by a Toronto judge who presides over mental health court, but also reaches beyond Canada's borders. Those cases include a "peace-loving" South African policewoman, who calmly shot her husband in their living room as guests watched in horror, and one of Australia's most notorious serial killers.

While "Shrunk" provides a unique perspective on the intersection of mental illness and the criminal justice system, it also highlights an unsettling truth:

"Disturbing acts of violence are sometimes not easily explained at all, even by experts," Watts writes. "It is often impossible to predict in advance who is likely to commit heinous acts of violence."