

Bill Rea ? Mystery of murder

Between mysteries and news reports, murder seems to be a topic that allows for lots of story telling.

There have, for example, been numerous TV shows over the years in which some person gets bumped off, and we're not just thinking about the police series or westerns. Perry Mason spent nine years involved with a murder case every week (not counting the ones he had to deal with in summer reruns). He and Hamilton Burger and Lt. Tragg were kept awfully busy. I noticed Perry seldom defended people accused with embezzlement, unless they also ended up being charged with murdering someone, and that happened a lot.

My family frequently watched the TV series Murder, She Wrote. My father said he was intrigued with the plots, but I think the real reason we were all so interested in the show is my late mother bore a rather striking resemblance to Angela Lansbury.

But that show lasted 12 years and, according to Wikipedia, resulted in more than 260 episodes. That means there were in excess of 260 occasions in which someone got gassed while Jessica Fletcher was nearby. Considering how many people got knocked off when she was around, I would have been inclined to strike her from any guest list I had a say in.

This subject was pushed into my head recently as I watched Rope on TV.

Although it's not generally regarded as being among Alfred Hitchcock's greatest films, Rope has always been something of a favourite of mine. The acting wasn't bad, and I have always loved the mind games that were played therein. I thought John Dall gave a great performance as the lead killer, and I have always wondered why his career never went further. He didn't appear in many other movies, and he didn't give much of a performance in the only other one I remember. He played Laurence Olivier's bumbling protege in the 1960 epic Spartacus.

Rope was inspired by the notorious Leopold and Loeb murder case in Chicago in 1924. Leopold and Loeb were two exceptionally gifted teens who set out to commit the perfect crime as a demonstration of their superior intellect. The victim was a boy named Bobby Franks. According to accounts I have read, he was Loeb's second cousin. Not surprisingly, that was a notorious crime in its day. There were some at the time who called it the "crime of the century."

The subsequent trial was really more of a sentencing hearing. Public opinion was so hot that the boys' lawyer, the one and only Clarence Darrow, knew his two young charges were on a conveyor belt to the gallows and that he didn't have a hope of convincing a jury to spare them. So he entered a guilty plea and focused his attention on a one-on-one appeal to the judge to send them to prison for life. It worked.

The fact is there is a certain public fascination for murderers.

Not too long ago, Charles Manson was facing something of a health crisis, and that drew a lot of media attention. Manson, who is currently 82, can still generate headlines, and I expect that will continue until he dies, if not long after. Surprising, considering the murders in which he was involved took place almost 50 years ago. There are some people who never lose their appeal.

Closer to home, I have written in this spot a number of times that I believe the editors of the Toronto Sun look for excuses to publish pictures of notorious school girl killer Paul Bernardo, simply because people are interested in him. And I predict that will continue for a lot of years to come.

Murder trials do tend to attract the attention of the public, although some more than others. People in this part of the world kept track, to varying extents, of the Bernardo trial. But in terms of pure volume, I would submit that was nothing compared to the attention paid when O.J. Simpson was on trial for murder more than 20 years ago.

Since I was not in a coma at the time, I was aware of the case against O.J. that was being played out for a whole continent to enjoy. It was on TV, and I remember my mother telling me that her sister (my aunt) was an avid viewer of the trial.

Although it was a compelling issue throughout North America, I refused to let myself get wrapped up in it. I did happen to be home one afternoon when the trial was on, and turned on the TV out of curiosity. I quickly became bored, almost longing for the Newlywed Game. Thus I didn't take a position on the case at the time. That fact is I was far too busy at the time earning a living and devoting the rest of my time to the woman who was my girlfriend before becoming my wife and girlfriend to keep track of how O.J.'s trial was progressing.

But I was aware of what was going on, and the fact is I was not too surprised at the verdict.

But that was more than 20 years ago, and I have read enough articles and seen enough documentaries to get a little more interested. I know there are a lot of people out there who believe he got away with two murders.

The subject of murder seems to come up in a lot of conversations, whether they deal with trials or mysteries. Although it might seem morbid, there's really nothing wrong with it. If people can engage in interesting discussion, what's the problem? Besides, there's really no way to stop it. You can't pass a law against talking about murder or reading stories or watching movies about it. There's

already a law against murder, and that hasn't stopped it.

