

## Murder! Mayhem! Social Order!

“True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism” by Joy Wiltenburg, in *The American Historical Review* (Dec. 2004), American Historical Association, 400 A St., S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003-3889.

“SLASHER KILLS FIVE” is the sort of gruesome headline that makes us sigh not just in sadness but in vexation with the cheap sensationalism of so much of modern journalism. Yet sensationalism has an honorable history, says Wiltenburg, a historian at Rowen University in New Jersey, and it still serves some of the same functions its inventors intended.

One of the earliest sensationalist works was a German pamphlet describing the horrific hatchet murders of four children by their mother (and her immediate suicide), written by Lutheran minister Burkard Waldis in 1551:

She first went for the eldest son  
Attempting to cut off his head;  
He quickly to the window sped  
To try if he could creep outside:  
By the leg she pulled him back inside  
And threw him down onto the ground  
[and though the boy pleaded for his life]  
She struck him with the self-same dread  
As if it were a cabbage head.

Waldis’s tract established several hallmarks of the genre: language of extreme pathos designed to arouse the reader’s senses (hence sensational), a breakdown of the family unit (providing an opportunity for a lesson on maintaining a strong, church-centered morality), and a relaxed attitude toward factuality.

Sensationalism was born in a time and a place (mid-16th-century Germany) in which the printing press made possible the widespread distribution of pamphlets and broadsheets. According to Wiltenburg, such accounts were “produced and probably purchased mainly by the literate upper levels of early modern society.” Many were written by established clerics and educated burghers. They fancied themselves authors of the “*warhafftige neue Zeitung*” (truthful new report), but they didn’t let a few missing facts stand in the way of dramatizing a “deeper moral truth.” Their different faiths produced alternative takes on events. A 17th-century Cath-



### Anne Vallens Lamentation,

For the Murthering of her husband *John Wallen* a Turner in Cow-lane neere Smithfield; done by his owne wife, on faterday the 23 of Iune. 1616. who was burnt in Smithfield the first of Iuly following. To the tune of Fortune my foe.



The murderess Anne Wallens was the subject of this illustrated 1616 English ballad. The accompanying “dolefull tale” is shot through with regret: Though imagining her husband’s “soule in heaven doth dwell,” she fears that her own “without God’s mercy linkes to hell.”

olic pamphlet, for instance, used a man's murder of his family to discuss the inevitable punishment of sin, while Protestant authors "could use similar content to stress the power of God's word to redeem even the worst sinners through faith." But sensationalism also served important secular purposes. In an era when rudimentary, state-sponsored criminal justice systems were starting to emerge, sensationalist writings stirred crucial "right-thinking people" to support them.

Sensationalism has shifted form and focus over the centuries. In 17th-century England, ballads "fixed their gaze squarely on the criminal," and increasing attention was paid to the motive behind the deed. Murderers were seen as having transgressed more against the state

(by violating laws) than against God (by sinning), a change of perspective that moved the implied causes of criminal violence in a decidedly more secular direction.

Today's blood-soaked sensationalist crime reports may have strayed far from their religiously oriented, morally straitening roots, but they still "exert substantial political and cultural power." Studies suggest that they promote an exaggerated sense of the incidence of crime and of an individual's perception that he or she is likely to be a victim of crime. As Wiltenburg points out, such fears can affect a broad range of choices and attitudes about our society, from where we choose to live to "what punitive governmental actions to support."

## PRESS & MEDIA

### *Queen of Days*

"Imperial Soap Opera" by Les White, in *The Common Review* (Spring 2005),  
35 E. Wacker Dr., Ste. 2300, Chicago, Ill. 60601-2298.

Ever feel that if you've seen one soap opera, you've seen them all? That's because many were the brainchild of one woman, Irna Phillips, mother of *Another World*, *As the World Turns*, *Days of Our Lives*, and the world's longest-running show today, *The Guiding Light*. The shows live on, but Phillips died in obscurity in 1973 after a career as turbulent as any of her creations. Her gender was one handicap; her personality and her independence by turns helped and hobbled her.

Born in Chicago in 1901 into a large, poor, Jewish family, Phillips took the rare step—for a woman—of attending college, where a theater teacher said she had more talent than looks. Then came a series of dramatic plot twists. After graduation, an affair with a married doctor left her pregnant and syphilitic, and a botched abortion made her sterile, says White, a Chicago writer and clinical psychologist.

She volunteered at *Chicago Tribune*-owned radio station WGN, and station manager Henry Selinger hired her to write and act in his "playlet" *Painted Dreams*, a generation-gap-themed drama aimed at housewives. Selinger, the creator of the hot evening show *Amos 'n' Andy*, hoped to du-

plicate his success with daytime audiences, but left for another job shortly after *Painted Dreams* premiered in 1930.

Phillips wrote six 10-minute *Painted Dreams* episodes a week. In the process, she developed the three (seemingly autobiographical) plot lines she would recycle throughout her career: (1) the love triangle, in which a career-minded heroine involved with a married man loses out; (2) single motherhood, in which a heroine risks community scorn to raise a child out of wedlock; and (3) obscure identity, in which a hero or heroine searches for family roots. Phillips never married, but reputedly had a thing for doctors and lawyers, which may explain why they continue to populate daytime screens.

Just when *Painted Dreams* finally began to succeed, WGN and Phillips crossed swords, and she was fired. Meanwhile, *Chicago Tribune* ad man Frank Hummert took notice of *Painted Dreams*' success and began churning out knockoffs, and he, rather than Phillips, became known as the creator of the soap opera.

Phillips finally began making money with *Today's Children*, a *Painted Dreams*-esque serial that first aired on Chicago's NBC af-