

HOMICIDE

by the Rich and Famous

A Century of Prominent Killers

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Introduction

Today the world of the rich and famous is more fascinating than ever. Not only do hordes of photographers report on their doings, but also recent films such as *Rich Kids* and TV shows such as Robin Leach's *Life of Luxury*; MTV's *Rich Girls*; Fox's *The Simple Life*, featuring Paris Hilton and in which Beverly Hills meets rural America; and NBC's *The Apprentice* with Donald Trump celebrate this world. However they acquire their fortunes, the rich and famous have become part of a modern-day royalty based on celebrity.

Now, more than ever, this fascination has been extended to the homicides committed by the rich and famous. This interest is deep rooted because the public has long been intrigued by the crimes and trials of the high and mighty, particularly since the advent of the penny press in the United States and Western Europe in the 1830s. Then, with the arrival of mass-produced photography and yellow journalism in the 1880s and 1890s, the news of such crimes made even more lurid and titillating reading; and today, the Internet, cable TV, investigative TV programming, along with the print media, have turned the homicides of the rich and famous into a form of popular entertainment. The O. J. Simpson case in 1994, dubbed by some "The Trial of the Century," was only the beginning of this modern explosion of interest.

Part of this fascination arises simply because of the wealth and fame of the victims and the accused. Another reason is that murder by the wealthy is much rarer than murder by members of other social classes, so it gets more coverage and attention because the news emphasizes what's new and different. Coverage of these homicides also opens up the lives of the wealthy and famous in an even more intimate way, and it reveals the personal vulnerabilities and problems in relationships that are normally kept concealed.

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Then, too, people are fascinated by these murders for a reason especially emphasized in this book: because they are often very different from the murders committed by others. As one chronicler of the wealthy, F. Scott Fitzgerald, once said, "The rich are different from you and me"; and Ernest Hemingway responded, "Yes, they have more money."

Likewise, the rich are different from the rest of us when it comes to homicide. They kill for some of the same reasons but in different ways. The crimes they commit often remain officially unsolved because the increased public attention is more likely to interfere with the usual police procedures and make the cases more difficult to solve or prove. Then, too, the rich often lawyer up, protecting themselves from being more intensively investigated or charged, even if the police have their suspicions. Although many street and gang killings also remain unsolved or uncharged, the reason is different: Commonly, people fear to say anything about what they know, so they don't come forward, thus leading the case to a dead end; it is not because public curiosity and media coverage have trampled through and disturbed the crime scene or because the prime suspect brings in his or her lawyers. Furthermore, should a case end up in court, rich suspects are more likely to be acquitted or serve less time, though the public might be convinced they are guilty.

Cases involving the rich and famous are also more likely to become the subject of media attention, whether the charges are murder or other serious crimes—witness the media frenzy drawn to the Phil Spector case after a former B-list actress and lounge hostess Lana Clark was found shot in the head in his house. Also consider the excitement surrounding the Michael Jackson child molestation accusations or the Kobe Bryant rape charges. One reason for the added attention is because the suspects are already in the public eye. But even if relatively unknown before, their involvement quickly draws the press, like flies to savory meat, such as when the eccentric Robert Durst, living as a woman in a seamy neighborhood, though a member of a very wealthy family, was accused of killing and chop-ping up a neighbor. The case was weird enough that it might have gained media attention anyway. But add in a super wealthy heir to a fortune, and the story becomes even juicier.

Then, too, these cases compel attention because many of them are like intriguing mystery stories that are more complex and more difficult to solve. The mystery is intensified because the rich and famous often use more complicated, hard-to-detect methods or have other people commit the crime or provide alibis or protection for them. Adding to the complexity is the help they often get from their families and high-powered lawyers; in addition, they have more resources to hire investigators. Consequently, they are better able to deflect suspicion to other suspects or make it more difficult to obtain evidence against them. The trial often becomes a drama, too.

What also fascinates about these cases is the way these homicides differ

in style, methods, motives, and other characteristics, reflecting the different lifestyle, and culture, of the rich and famous. For example, these murders often involve more quiet, genteel methods, along with planning to execute and cover up the killing. The killers frequently use covert methods, such as poisoning or creating the appearance of an accident or burglary that results in death. Plus, these killers are more apt to have help, from having the funds to hire a hit man to calling on a friend or associate to take the victim away or provide an alibi.

Another difference is that the rich and famous are unlikely to be serial killers or mass murderers. Although these are both rare occurrences, a growing number of murders in America, especially since the 1970s, do involve serial killers or multiple rage killings. But these types of crimes are usually committed by someone who kills to show power and control over a victim or are due to an act of anger or revenge by someone who has felt mistreated or exploited. But the rich and famous generally already feel powerful, so they don't have the motive to kill a large number of victims to gain that power or take revenge. Certainly, they may kill to show their power at times, but then their act is usually up close and personal. It is directed against a particular person who has threatened their power—say by leaving a relationship or threatening to do so—not against a generalized victim to help them feel good.

Most commonly, killings by the upper classes and celebrities tend to arise out of the classic motives for homicide, which are very personal—money, jealousy, failed relationships, the difficulty of getting a rejected partner to leave, and feelings of being trapped in a loveless marriage, with no other desirable way out. Yet these classic motives are shaped by wealth, since it takes a much greater amount of money to motivate a person to kill than is the case for people who have less money, where a much smaller amount—a few thousand, a hundred, or even less—may lead to murder. Thus, these homicides are generally not killings by strangers; instead, they are very personal, emotional killings, such as those involving spouses, lovers, parents, children, siblings, other relatives, friends, and business rivals. Yet, even with these personal connections, the killings may be difficult to solve, especially when the rich hire others to commit the crime, bring in their lawyers to protect them, or the evidence gets trampled or mishandled in the ensuing media circus.

Then, after the crime is committed, the investigation to solve the crime and try the suspect is often especially difficult. One reason is the investigators often have to get testimony from witnesses and unravel complicated paper trails; in addition, high-tech and scientific methods, like analyzing DNA and trace evidence, may be required because rich and famous killers often know their victims. Another difficulty is the seal of protection that often surrounds wealthy and celebrity killers, which includes a bevy of lawyers who tell their clients not to talk and friends and family who clam

up, making it harder to both investigate and prosecute. Also, many high-profile killings attract a ravenous press eager for details—and more recently, parties and witnesses eager for book deals, which interfere with the investigation and court process.

Homicide by the Rich and Famous highlights such notable cases in the United States from the nineteenth century to the present, focusing on what makes these cases different. In selecting these cases, I have chosen only those where the perpetrator can be described as rich and powerful, whether he or she became rich by being born into wealth, earning it, or marrying into it. I have also limited the cases to those where the perpetrator has been charged and prosecuted for committing at least one murder (or attempted murder in the case of one victim as good as dead in a permanent coma). However, the perpetrator may not necessarily be convicted or might win an appeal after a first conviction, since in many cases, the rich and powerful do get off through good lawyering and the problems with the police investigation and crime scene that result from media coverage, as well as from the special consideration sometimes given to the wealthy charged with crimes. I have not included such cases where the suspected killer isn't actually charged. I have additionally left out any discussion of victims of murder who are rich and powerful where the perpetrator was neither; these cases typically involve robbery, burglary, kidnapping, or other schemes to acquire money and do not follow the same pattern as murders committed by the rich and powerful. Finally, I have excluded the killings involving organized crime, which might be the topic for a book by itself.

I have focused each chapter on one of the major themes that characterize these homicides. After a brief discussion of that theme, each chapter points out how these cases reflect that theme using one or usually two cases to illustrate. For each profiled case, I describe what happened; the motive; how the police, FBI, or other detectives investigated the case; and what occurred in court. In addition, many of the most recent cases feature high-lights from the examinations of psychologists and psychiatrists into the minds of the killers. I have drawn the stories from book, newspaper, and magazine accounts about individual cases.

Although many of these cases illustrate multiple themes—for example, a wealthy man accused of hiring others to commit a murder may gain strong family support and have the financial resources to hire top legal power to win an acquittal—I have organized the cases based on what seems to be their strongest theme. A mix of cases from different historical periods illustrating these themes is presented chronologically to show how these same patterns can be found throughout history. The date or dates in the chapter subheads for each case indicate when the murder occurred or came to police attention and when a verdict was rendered in the case, or in a few cases when the case was settled without a trial or a verdict occurred in a second trial.

So what are the key patterns that make these homicides by the rich and famous so different? I've already mentioned many of them in this introduction. In brief, they are the following, with one chapter devoted to each theme:

- Motive—highlights how personal motives typically include factors, such as jealousy, power, success, money, prestige, and not losing one's fortune or prestige, that often drive the rich and famous to murder.
- Method—highlights the emphasis on preplanning, waiting for the right moment, creating an organized crime scene, and the types of weapons used, including unusual methods, such as using special poisons to conceal the crime.
- Finding hired help—highlights how the wealthy often hire or persuade others to do the actual killing.
- Cover-ups—highlights how the wealthy are more skilled at covering up the crime, for example, they may be better able to dispose of the body or stage the crime scene.
- Family and friends in high places—highlights how the wealthy often gain strong backing from family and people in power, which enables them to successfully fight back against the charges.
- Police power, politics, and the media—highlights how the wealthy often get special police consideration, which can lead to manipulation of the investigation and the police compromising the crime scene. At the same time, personal connections and the power of the press can delay or influence the outcome of the investigation and trial.
- Legal power—highlights how the suspect's ability to get a strong legal/investigative team behind them can help them beat the case or get a lesser punishment if convicted. This chapter also highlights the ability of the wealthy to influence the trial process, including jurors and judges.
- Kids who kill—highlights how some rich kids are drawn to killing, either as a challenge or as a way of striking back at their parents.
- Losing it—highlights how some of the rich become killers in the course of falling away from a life of luxury by becoming weirdly eccentric; having problems with alcohol, drugs, or mental illness; or living a life that spins out of control.