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The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer

Lisa Downing

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The subject of murder has always held a particular fascination for us. But, since at least the nineteenth century, we have seen the murderer as different from the ordinary citizen—a special individual, like an artist or a genius, who exists apart from the moral majority, a sovereign self who obeys only the destructive urge, sometimes even commanding cult followings. In contemporary culture, we continue to believe that there is something different and exceptional about killers, but is the murderer such a distinctive type? Are they degenerate beasts or supermen as they have been depicted on the page and the screen? Or are murderers something else entirely?
In *The Subject of Murder*, Lisa Downing explores the ways in which the figure of the murderer has been made to signify a specific kind of social subject in Western modernity. Drawing on the work of Foucault in her studies of the lives and crimes of killers in Europe and the United States, Downing interrogates the meanings of media and texts produced about and by murderers. Upending the usual treatment of murderers as isolated figures or exceptional individuals, Downing argues that they are ordinary people, reflections of our society at the intersections of gender, agency, desire, and violence.

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