Black Widows: Veiled in Their Own Web of Darkness

by Joseph Geringer

Violence in Dulcet Tones

The gentler sex.

The softer sex.

The weaker sex.

While most of the violent crime committed since the beginning of time rightfully belongs to men, women have not been the wilting flowers promoted so heartily by Victorian adorers and (right or wrong) often evident in today's society. Before we get into detail about the fascinating phenomenon of the Black Widow, it is worth a brief overview of women’s escalating role in the world of violent crime, particularly in the United States.

Since 1970, there has been an increasing and alarming rise – 138 percent – of violent crimes committed by women. Still, while the equivalent percentage compared to male violence is small – 15 percent to 85 percent – the fact that the numbers have elevated so drastically points to something changing in society.

Sociologists try to explain it, so do criminologists, theologists, politicians and world historians, but the resulting message is clear, and that message is that females are not alien to committing violent acts. In recent years, women have committed some of the most heinous crimes. Darlie Routier killed her two sons for reasons blamed on personal economics. Diane Downs killed one of her three children (she tried to kill all of them) in order to win back a lover who didn't want kids. Susan Smith drowned her boys in a neighborhood lake because her boyfriend did not want the responsibility of raising some other man’s children. Karla Homolka and husband Paul Bernardo sexually assaulted, tortured and killed several young women for thrills.

There are now 130 women on death row in prisons across America. Both Betty Lou Beets and Christina Riggs were put to death this year: Beets by lethal injection in February for her husband’s murder, and Riggs by lethal injection in May for killing two offspring.

Throughout history, violent women and women with violent intent have starkly emerged from many countries, carving their niches in myths and legends. The creation of these stories suggests that men began to notice lethality in feminine charm centuries back.
Delilah snipped Samson's locks to make a weakling out of a superman. Agrippina, Emperor Nero's mother, taught sonny boy the attributes of ruling Rome with an unforgiving heart. Salome stripped for the head of John the Baptist. And there were other men whose fortunes were adversely affected when beguiled by perfume and puckered lips, from Marc Antony to William Tell to John Dillinger.

American history tells of many *femme fatales*, of witches in Salem, Massachusetts; lady pirates on the seven seas; bandit empresses in old New York. Basheba Spooner was hanged for killing a Minuteman during the American Revolution. Madame Lalaurie was suspected of torturing tens of Negro slaves in ante-bellum New Orleans. The federal government in 1865 executed Mary Eugenia Surratt for her role in the plot to assassinate President Lincoln. Belle Starr held up stagecoaches and tortured cowpokes in the Wild West. Martha Place killed a stepdaughter in the 1880s and made history by becoming the first woman to fry in the electric chair. During the Depression years of the 1930s, Bonnie Parker robbed banks and blew away policemen willy-nilly until Texas Rangers blasted her and boyfriend Clyde Barrow to hell in Louisiana. Bonnie Heady died by gas in 1953 after slaughtering a child.

Beginning with colonial Miss Spooner, American courts have sentenced to death 539 women.

**Current Statistics**

The Bureau of Justice's Statistics Division released a report at the end of 1999 citing an estimated 2.1 million known violent female offenders yearly in the United States. That being the bad news, the flip side is that within the rising violence, the volume of murders committed by females has actually declined. "The rate...has been falling since 1980," reads the report, "and in 1998 stood at its lowest level since 1976 – 40 percent lower."

Despite the positive shift, however, there is small cause for joy.

An adjoining "Special Report" details the results found by the Bureau of Justice. The report, compiled by Bureau statisticians Lawrence A. Greenfeld and Tracy L. Snell, highlights specifics. Among these are:

- An estimated 28 percent of violent female offenders are juveniles.
- Three out of four victims of violent female offenders were women.
- An estimated four in 10 women committing violence were perceived by the victim as being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of the crime.
- In 1998, there were more than two million arrests of women – accounting for about 22 percent of all arrests that year.
- Since 1980, the number of female defendants convicted of felonies in state courts has grown at more than two times the rate of increase in male defendants.
Nearly six in 10 women serving time in state prisons had experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past (and) just under a quarter reported prior abuse by a family member.

In the case of more than 60 percent of the 60,000 murders committed by women between 1976 and 1997, the murderer and the victim had known each other intimately – as a lover or family member.

Keep these facts in mind as we now move ahead to further examine and define how and why the Black Widow and other female serial killers fit into the scene of the crime.
Curious Killers

In his book, *Serial Murderers and their Victims*, author Eric Hickey probably best describes females who murder as "quiet killers." His study of these women throughout the 19th and 20th centuries has led him to believe – and his peers agree with him – that, unlike their bombastic and zealously motivated male counterparts, female serial killers are much more subtle. They are sly, deliberate and careful in plotting their murders and performing them. Scenes of bloody rampages are rare, replaced by such *modus operandi* as poisoned foodstuff and staged domestic accidents.

There are a variety of female serial killer types, the most notorious and shifty being the aptly termed Black Widows, whose nickname recalls the toxic spiders who destroy their mates when their usefulness is over. These are the women who wear the Betty Crocker apron and the June Cleaver façade of wife and mother to hide their murderous instinct.

Three-quarters of the time, they kill strictly for profit. They live off life insurance policies, pensions, and other assets gained from "sudden" deaths of close relations – husbands, children, grandchildren, stepchildren, sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers.

Judias Buenoano, who at this writing sits on death row in Texas, masqueraded under various pseudonyms for years while she went about killing a couple of husbands, a fiancée and a son for their loot.

Diana Lumbrera, between 1977 and 1990, smothered her six children to death, one at a time, including a three-month-old daughter. Eventually, Texas doctors got wise, realizing they were not dealing with an unfortunate mother with a streak of bad luck. Lydia Trueblood of Pocatello, Iowa, poisoned an offspring, five husbands and an in-law earlier in the 20th Century. During the 1960s and 1970s, Germany's Maria Velten poisoned two husbands, a lover, an aunt and even her father.

A study done by Christiana Evripidou of the University of Virginia finds, however, that the traditional targets of the Black Widow may be changing. "An increase in strangers as victims has occurred in recent years," says she.

Black Widows are a category of female multiple murderers. Whether they should be called serial killers is open to debate. Generally, female multiple murderers do not kill for the same sexual motives associated with male serial killers. If one accepts a frequently proposed definition that requires sexual motivation and a murderous quest for power over another individual as the definition of the term *serial killer*, then this is not the appropriate term for most female multiple murderers, including Black Widows. The goal here is not to debate terminology, but to present this unusual class of female criminal in its larger framework of females who commit murder more than once.

We have already touched on some of the infamous names in the history of female killers. It is convenient, but confusing to label these women serial
killers. There is a major difference between the Countess Elizabeth Bathory who openly bathed in the blood of a hundred virgins to retain her youth (it didn’t work) and a Genene Jones who asphyxiated perhaps as many as forty youngsters while posing as a caring nurse in a children's hospital.

According to Brian Lane's and Wilfred Gregg's *Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, the majority of serial killings is perpetrated by males and includes certain traits: Their killings are repetitive, often growing in frequency until the perpetrator is arrested or dies. They tend to kill face to face, one on one. There is usually no relationship between victim and murderer. Motives are, for the most part, fuzzy. Murders generally display a gluttonous violence, a brutality, and a bloodbath.

Marked differences between the male and female serial killers are quite distinct.

- While males regularly stalk strangers, females *largely* tend to slay those close to them intimately, family members and people dependent upon their role as caregiver.
- Whereas males tend to be physical – they shoot, stab, batter and strangle – women most often elect the more undetectable, non-aggressive way, poison. (*The Electronic Journal of Sociology*, published by the University of Guelph, Ontario, estimates that 80 percent of female serialists have employed poison by itself or with other means.)
- When men kill repetitively, their motive is half the time sexually driven. Females kill with an aim for profit (75 percent), for control (13 percent) or for revenge (12 percent).
- The longevity of a male's killing spree ranges from several months to, at the extremity, four years. Recorded lengths of like female activities are, on the average, from six to eight years. Some have gone undetected for three decades.

Despite their differences, there are three common denominators in both female and male genders. One, they have an ability to portray a surface normality when it is necessary for planning and survival purposes. Two, they may be psychopaths, but psychopaths are not insane. Three, as psychopaths they lack a conscience.

In separate television interviews over the past year, two experts shared their views on the impact of serial killings in society, citing these three traits.

John Douglas, former FBI profiler, told ABC-TV that the serial killer's greatest defense is that he/she is virtually unrecognizable by sight. "The general public thinks (they look) like Hannibal Lecter," he said. "They actually look like you and I, like the postman, the delivery man who comes to your door." As well, these people are not insane, he added. "They certainly do know the difference between right and wrong."
Adding to that latter conception is Harold Schecter, co-author of *The A-Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, who remarked, "Serial killers are psychopathic personalities...lacking in certain basic human emotions, including remorse. Other human beings are just objects they use for their own gratification."

Eric Hickey in 1991 divided female serial killers into two distinct groups, Black Widows (who, simply put, marry for one purpose: to kill their husband for financial gain) and Angels of Death (mercy killers, who murder someone in their care – e.g., baby, mother, grandmother – for power and, perhaps, attention). But, throughout the 1990s, as the scope of female killers widened, the sense of assorted psychoses deepened and the focus on who was killing whom for what reason sharpened, Hickey's successors elongated his original list to include an array of other types. By 1998, when authors Michael D. and C.L. Kelleher published *Murder Most Rare*, the assortment of female serial categories had lengthened significantly. The Kellehers' book divides the universe of female multiple murderers into nine categories:

1. Black Widows,
2. Angels of Death,
3. Sexual Predators,
4. Revenge Killers,
5. Profit Killers,
6. Team Killers,
7. Killers Whose Sanity is in Question,
8. Killers Whose Motives Defy Explanation, and

We have already tapped into Black Widows and will do so more in greater depth to come. To set the foundation, we will start off by addressing the other categories.

An **Angel of Death** sets herself up as God, preying on those who in her estimation are already marked for natural death – the sick in hospitals or an aged relative whose daily support has been left in her hands. Her weapons are either chemical, such as a lethal injection of potassium, or suffocation with a pillow, both means hard to trace. A classic example of an Angel of Death comes to us from Grantham, England. In 1991, 23-year-old nurse Beverly Allitt killed at least four children and injected twenty-plus others with potassium or insulin with an intent to kill. She was convicted by a Magistrate's Court in 1993 and is now serving thirteen life sentences.

**Sexual Predators** are, as their name indicates, driven by sexual fantasy. Aileen Carol Wuornos, one of the very few women who fit this category, murdered at least seven men between 1989 and 1990. After having sex with them, for pay, she pumped bullets into each client, driving off with their cars and personal effects. In 1992, she was sentenced to death. There is some reason to debate whether sexual fantasy had any part in Wuornos’ motivations. There is evidence to suggest that revenge, hatred of men, and petty theft were stronger motivations. Wuornos’ homosexuality seems to dilute the notion that she killed men as part of some sexually-motivated fantasy.
**Revenge Killers** are typically obsession-driven; hate or love or jealousy are the most common factors. They are as rare as sexual predators but, when pushed, they strike with a vengeance. While many female killers are usually much younger – the average age is mid-20s to early 30s – Martha Wise of Ohio committed her crimes at the age of forty. A spinster when she found her true love, she was overjoyed. But, her family objected to her choice, as did her minister. (Her beau, Walter Johns, was a much younger man.) In revenge, she fed three of the more vocal family members a deadly dose of cyanide and torched the church. When apprehended and her crimes became public knowledge, the press dubbed her "Lady Borgia of America" after the infamous Italian noblewoman whose actions she emulated. Wise told the judge that the devil made her do it, but the State of Ohio, being unable to catch the devil, threw the total blame on her and locked her away for life.

**Profit Killers** kill strictly for monetary gain; they hire out as (to be direct) "hit women". Whereas the equally greedy Black Widows choose their own victims (friends and relatives) and contrive their own killings, female profit killers commit murders for others – usually, jealous wives who want their cheating or abusive mate six feet under. Because they are "silent witnesses," their careers may go on for years. Take Russia's quiet professional, Madame Alexe Popova. Her first murder taking place in 1879, this hit-woman poisoned some three hundred men – other women's husbands and boyfriends – until she was caught and executed by a firing squad in 1909.

**Team Killers** come in assorted shapes and sizes, and comprise two-thirds of the entire female serial killer rank and file. There are three types of female team killer groups. The most predominant is the "male/female" duo, consisting of one woman and one man; in most cases, they are nothing but thrill-seeking lovers. The second most common genus is the "female/female" bonding, made up of two or more women – usually two – engaged in a murder pact. Finally, there is the "killing family" of three or more people joined together on a death-dealing joyride.

It was stated earlier that a female serial killer generally avoids bloody havoc; that is, that her crime is of a "quiet" nature involving poisons and suffocation. That is true when she acts alone. However, that rule of thumb does not always hold up when she is in a partnership with someone else, especially a male who tends to do the thinking and the rough stuff for her.

When 24-year-old Cynthia Coffman sided with James Gregory Marlow in 1986, the pair's *modus operandi* was robbing, then strangling, their victims. They were eventually sentenced to death for the murder of four women. Forty years earlier, buxom Martha Beck and her pipsqueak lover, Ray Fernandez, shot, drowned and garroted at least a dozen innocent women (probably as many as twenty) before the two killers were executed at Sing Sing in 1951.

Female/female teams tend to follow the more familiar pattern of murder-through-subtlety. Lesbian lovers Gwendolyn Graham and Catherine May Wood, both nurses, suffocated five elderly patients at a Grand Rapids, Michigan, nursing home in 1987. Throughout the 1980s, Maria Gruber, Irene
Leidolf, Stepanija Mayer and Waltrand Wagner together or separately lethally injected more than two hundred patients under their care at Leinz General Hospital, Vienna.

Of family teams, one particular person, usually a male who sets himself up as the guru or thinker for the group, guides them all. These teams act impulsively with few set patterns. None more savagely illustrates this arrangement than the Manson "family," which ritualistically killed Hollywood actress Sharon Tate and some nineteen others in a headline spree in the 1960s. The Mansons also brutally killed a series of people in Northern California – including some of their own members who tried to betray them – between October, 1968, and November, 1970. Commanding the family was Charles Manson, a hypnotic-eyed felon whom his followers referred to as "Jesus Christ". Among the sixteen known members of his migratory brood were ten "apostle" females: Susan Denise Atkins, Leslie Van Houten, Patricia Krenwinkel, Mary Theresa Brunner, Lynette Fromme, Sandra Good, Ruth Ann Moorhouse, Catherine Gilles, Nancy Pitman and Catherine Share.

The last three classifications of female serial killers are not as tightly defined.

Leading these categories are those very few women who have managed to escape execution through a Question of Sanity. Jeanne Weber, for instance, evaded the hangman's rope in 1908 after being apprehended on suspicion of strangling her children. Convincing a jury she was bonkers, she was institutionalized. No one will ever know. She hung herself in her cell in 1910.

The second of this genre is that small number of women who are undoubtedly guilty of their crimes, but remain unlabeled merely because their Motives Defy Explanation. Audrey Marie Hilley is the most famous case. Having killed three family members, she might have been slotted in the Black Widow category had her motives been more crystallized. But, there seems to have been no intention of monetary profit or of anything tangible to gain. All the evidence could prove is that this normal Alabama housewife and mother suddenly, at age forty-two, went on a killing spree that lasted four years. She poisoned her victims, but she – nor her accusers – could ever decipher a reason.

Trailing the long list of female serial killers are certain incidences of Unsolved Crimes suspected of having been committed by women – but without a firm suspect or motive. Among these are the murders at Maryland's Prince George County Hospital between 1984 and 1985. Someone injected potassium into the IV tubes of seventeen intensive care patients, killing them instantly. When the law eventually cornered a suspect (a woman), the DA's office believed she was not guilty and set her free.

Cold-blooded killers all, these heartless women. But, none better portray the female killer than the Black Widow, to whose attention we now turn. Throughout her long and devilish reign, she has managed to be the stuff of legend and song and even, in a very macabre way, romance.
Crocodile Tears

A long convoy of automobiles sits idle along the winding driveway beside the plot of graves in a shaded cemetery. From the hearse, in front of the convoy, six dark-suited pallbearers lift a platinum coffin and, somberly, carry it to a gurney waiting beside a newly dug place of interment. Mourners, leaving the confines of their cars, whose windows have been tagged with a purple sticker identifying them as a funeral procession, follow behind. The minister motions family, friends and neighbors to circle the grave, then leads them in a simple rendition of "Rock of Ages". The voices stilled, he whispers a few prayers, decreeing the body of the loved one to the earth and his soul to God. While he prays, he lays a comforting hand on the shoulder of the new widow who weeps into a handkerchief beside him. Family members cup her elbows to keep her from fainting. She looks so frail; the widow does; so forlorn, so much in anguish.

And while she moans, groans, and wets her hankie with thespian tears, she is wondering just how quickly – she hopes it is quickly – Friendly Insurance Company will deliver the check for dear old hubby.

She is a Black Widow, named after the venomous multi-legged crawling thing that comes out of nowhere, bites fast and hard, without deliberation, and kills. The above scenario, though presented tongue-in-cheek, is not, however, atypical. Stereotypical perhaps, but it is true. The scene – the grieving widow cum charlatan – has replayed itself over and over again in real life. Movies starring lovelies Theresa Russell, Jane Seymour or Elizabeth Montgomery murdering unsuspecting beaus do not do the Black Widow justice. Hollywood tends to downplay the Black Widow guile by having us believe that successions of men are drawn to them because of their physical beauty, but that is simply untrue. In reality, the most prosperous Black Widows had neither the statuesque lure of a Seymour, the innocent cuteness of Russell, nor the pouting charm of a Montgomery. Most Black Widows were real “Plain Janes.”

But their unattractiveness applauds their cunning. A Black Widow is able, with the right words, with the right smile and with a deep feminine charm that far surpasses outer beauty, to envelope a man in her arms and, in turn, to ingratiate herself into his total trust and, notwithstanding, his bank account. Every penny of it.

Historically, Black Widows meet their husbands through lonely-hearts ads, at widows-and- widowers clubs, or through mutual acquaintances who fail to spot something wrong with their friend. It is not rare that, as one husband dies, the Black Widow will relocate to an entirely new area of the country where she will change her name, her personality and create a totally fabricated background, playing each personae to the hilt.

Some Black Widows had children from their earliest marriages. We mentioned a few of these killer mothers in the previous chapter. Now, children are perceptive, even to the point of sensing horrible things within their own
parentage; yet most of the young victims seemed to have been oblivious to the murderous intent of their mothers.

The Black Widow’s façade holds up well in a society that has always placed so much stock in the virtue of the faithful wife and doting Mom. Say the Kellehers in *Murder Most Rare*, "Because she will deliberately target those who have come to trust her, the crimes of this type of serial murderer violate our basic assumptions about love, loyalty, guardianship and friendship."

The majority of Black Widows begin killing in their mid-thirties, although some have begun much earlier. Based on cases of record, the average number of victims has been six to thirteen in the United States and ten to fifteen in other countries. Murders occur within an average span of eleven years in the States and sixteen elsewhere. Motive is profit, and only on rare occasions does rage enter into the crime. There have also been a few cases where the Black Widow has been suspected of murdering someone who she fears has learned the truth about her. Otherwise, every murder is a well-planned, methodical masterpiece.

Following are a dozen profiles of Black Widows who scholars like the Kellehers, Hickey and others uphold as the most wicked, colorful, and dangerous of the lot. They cover a virtual history of the Black Widow in modern times.

The profiles begin with Britain's Mary Ann Cotton ("Lady Rotten") and Belle Gunness ("America's first female serial killer") whose crimes shocked the brittle Victorians who vouched for sweet femininity. From that pair, we move on through the 20th Century where, despite scientific innovations and a keener awareness by law enforcers, Black Widows continue to ply their greedy, homicidal trade.
Following are the histories of two Black Widows whose crimes motivated others of their cloth to come. Mary Ann Cotton bore the face of a Mother Hubbard, but the malevolence of the Boogieman. Belle Gunness, who earned the dubious honor of "America's first female serial killer," was a dowdy, putty-faced creature with many secrets buried on her farm.

**Bold Mrs. Cotton(mouth)**

Mary Ann Cotton may have been one of the first in a class of killers to be named after a poisonous spider, but those who were alive when her crimes were found out compared her, metaphorically, to the snake whose name fit her mean-spirit: Cottonmouth.

She was born in 1822 near the rustic mining town of Rainton, England, to a young and religious Methodist couple, Michael and Margaret Robson. Not long after her father moved his family to a more respectable surrounding in Murton, he was killed in an accident at the mine. But, for the diligence of Mrs. Robson, she and her eight-year-old daughter avoided the County Poor House. The child, Mary Ann, never forgot the lean, hungry days and swore that she would never die hungry. She didn’t.

She became a bride for the first time in 1844 when she married 26-year-old railway timekeeper William Mowbray and moved with him to Cornwall. Over the next seven years, the couple had five children, but all died in infancy. Medical diagnosis for each death was "gastric fever." After these great disappointments, Mowbray contracted the same symptoms and followed his children to heaven in January of 1865. His death followed his enrollment in a life insurance policy for £35, the money of which went to his widow upon his passing.

After his death, Mary Ann sought employment. She obtained a job as a ward attendant – comparable to today's "nurse's aide" – at the Sunderland Infirmary at Seaham. As she moved from chamber to chamber, she was given access to the hospital's storerooms where arsenic and other poisonous substances were kept. No one noticed that bottles of these liquids would occasionally disappear.

She married again, this time to a patient she met at the infirmary. Young George Ward was extremely happy with his wife, but not long after their marriage he began encountering chronic dizziness, stomach pains and numbness. Thinking these symptoms were reactions to the medicine he had been given by the doctors during his stay at Sunderland, he never complained. He died fifteen months after his wedding day.

Mary Ann wasn't idle long. Another insurance policy affording her enough money to get by in the interim, she quickly sought and wed widower John Robinson in a beautiful ceremony at Bishopwearmouth Church. Robinson, a well-off sea merchant, gleefully allowed her into his spacious home as a new
mother to his five children. Within a year, three of these youngsters died. Diagnosis: gastric fever. As Robinson brooded, wondering what type of affliction had come into his home, he woke up one morning to find his wife gone and with her several chests of valuables and account books. Feeling abandoned in his hour of need, it would be only later that he would realize just how fortunate he and his surviving children had been.

From Bishopwearmouth, she returned to Murton to tend to her mother who was incapacitated with age. With her, she brought some medicines that she promised would spruce up the elder's ailing frame. It is believed that one of those "medicines" was a bottle of arsenic. Nevertheless, the old lady passed away not long after her daughter's arrival. Again, another victim of "gastric fever".

Footloose and free, Mary Ann ventured to Newcastle in 1870, where she heard that her friend, Margaret Cotton, had a wealthy brother named Frederick who had just become a widower. Frederick Cotton was taken with the perky little "Widow" Robinson – she told him her last husband had died – and sought her company. He got it, and Mary Ann conceived out of wedlock. To save face, the couple married and set up a tidy home.

At first there was no reason for neighbors to believe there was anything untoward happening in the Cotton household. But strange, tragic occurrences, inexplicable things, began happening in their town. Within months, all of the farmers' pigs within the vicinity of the Cottons fell ill and perished, poisoned by an unknown source. In the midst of the animal plague, another one was cutting down some of the local humans. Margaret Cotton died. Then Frederick. Then his 10-year-old son Frederick, Jr. So did a boarder in the Cotton household. So did tiny Robert, to whom Mary Ann had given birth less than a year earlier. And finally Charles, the youngest Cotton son.

"A number of factors helped (Mary Ann Cotton) escape detection for a long time," writes Angus Hall in the anthological Crimes of Horror. "(These were) the state of medical knowledge, the ease with which arsenic could be bought, the trust she created by once having been a nurse, the fact that she always called in a doctor to care for her victims (and) the regularity with which she moved homes."

But now, neighbors were talking, loudly. Suspicions were high, and when the boy Charles died, a local doctor who heard the rumors ordered an autopsy. He knew that certain poisons could create symptoms not unlike the gastric fever that had decimated the Cotton family. Enough arsenic was found in the boy's system to kill five people. Mary Ann was arrested and, since the police had her in custody, they ordered that all of the deceased members of the Cotton family be disinterred. Investigating medical professor Dr. Thomas Scattergood, a leading forensic scholar at the time from Leeds University, announced that the Cotton household had succumbed to the same ingested poison.

Quickly tried, Mary Ann Cotton, who the press had dubbed "Lady Rotten," was abruptly found guilty and hanged at Durham County Gaol on March 24,
1873. The Cotton home, which still stands unchanged today in Newcastle, is said to be haunted by her ghost.

**Bodies in the Hog Yard**

What Mrs. Cotton proved in England – that one could get away with murder for many, many years – Belle Gunness likewise proved in America. Belle even took the lesson a step further by escaping criminal justice, disappearing into oblivion – but not anonymity. She even left behind probably an innocent man to take the rap for her.

When her farmhouse burned on a pre-dawn April morning in 1908, leaving in its rubble the bodies of Belle and the Gunness family, the townsfolk of LaPorte, Indiana, thought, "Poor Belle!" But, within weeks, the sentiment had changed as it became evident that "poor Belle" was the country's most prolific murderess. As volunteers began clearing away the debris, they were uncovering body after body, all poisoned, and mutilated, under the soil in her hog pen.

When Belle Poulsdatter migrated from her native Norway to America in 1883, she first lived with her sister Anna and her husband in Chicago. There, she met and married department store guard Mads Sorenson, serving as a faithful wife without inciting any recorded chicanery in her daily life. Unable to conceive, she and Mads adopted three children – Jennie, Myrtle and Lucy – from other Nordic immigrants who could not afford them. Family life was happily domestic until 1900 when Mads died of an undetermined cause. His wife's grief faded after she received an $8,000 life insurance payoff.

Packing up her household goods and children, Belle left Chicago for the quiet pastoral village of LaPorte, located just over the Indiana border. Mostly Nordic in population, the community turned out with housewarming gifts for the newcomers when Belle and her brood moved into an abandoned farmhouse just outside of town.

Physically, the Widow Sorenson was a woman of wide girth, weighing nearly 300 pounds, with the face of a weathered Viking. But, she could turn on a sexual charm that magnetized men. She oozed a Diamond Lil come-hitherness that was, in a word, risqué for the times. Some females of the local church congregation even remarked aside that they thought her Sunday bodice was a bit low-cut.

She wasn't in LaPorte long before a good fellow named Peter Gunness appeared on her farm. By occupation, he was her handyman, but by observation a lot more. Suddenly the widow had a beau; suddenly she was married. A widower, Gunness brought a small fortune to his newfound family. Belle's money woes were over.

However, it wasn't long after the town came to the wedding that it then attended Gunness' funeral. His death had been unexpected, it had been tragic.
A large iron meat grinder had tumbled off a high shelf in the kitchen to crack his skull wide open.

An ensuing inquest left the county coroner skeptical, but there was no evidence to support foul play beyond his own suspicions. At the hearing, one member of the board recalled Belle "moaning with her fingers before her eyes (but) peeking alertly between them to check the effect she was making." Death was ruled accidental and Belle retrieved Gunness' insurance money.

Over the next four years, Belle had laborers come and go. They would show up at the beginning of harvest, and then disappear sometimes before the crop was picked. Some of them became her suitors, as Old Man Gunness had been. With these masculine types she would parade through town, showing off the new plumed hats they bought her or flaunting the new surrey they just purchased. Just as the town got to know their names, though, every one of them faded into the ether. Wringing her hands, she would tell neighbors how they just "upped and were gone" one day. Poor Belle, they thought, poor Belle.

The widow advertised for farmhands in a Midwest newspaper called The Scandinavian, which was targeted at the Norwegian immigrant. Billing herself a widow in need of muscle, she chose those interested parties who seemed to have more than just muscle. It was their bankroll that mattered. With these callers she eventually sought the prospects of a longer-term relationship. Mostly widowers, they visited her, fell in love with her home-cooked meals (and the sexual innuendoes she undoubtedly exhibited), and stayed. For a while, anyway; at least before they vanished.

Fate eventually caught up with Belle Gunness. Or...Belle Gunness may have manipulated her own fate. What really happened is argued even today.

On the brisk morning of April 28, 1908, the Gunness farmhouse caught fire and burned to a cinder. In the cellar, below where the conflagration had caused the upper stories to collapse, salvagers found the identified remains of Belle's children. Near their bodies was the corpse of an older woman, headless. Immediate supposition was that Belle and her kin were murdered by someone who then set her home ablaze.

A farmhand named Ray Lamphere, suspected of being Belle's latest lover, was arrested for homicide. But, as the townsfolk began picking through the surrounding property, they came upon one cadaver after another, most buried in the hog pen beside the foundation. The farm proved to be a graveyard for all of Belle's fleeting suitors – and then some. When tested, many of the bodies indicated signs of arsenic poisoning. Others had had their skulls cracked by blunt instruments.

Among the interred was Belle's oldest daughter whom everyone in town had been told had gone off to college.

Poor Belle was not what the citizens of LaPorte had thought.
But in the end, the question remained: *Was that Belle's body in the ruins or was it someone placed there by the Black Widow to stage her own death?* The court chose a simple answer and convicted Lamphere for murder. Although Belle was undoubtedly a killer herself, the official verdict read that her lover and possible accomplice did in his employer, whether in jealousy or revenge.

The townsfolk of LaPorte, however, chided the ruling. They believed, as they still believe today, that Belle Gunness merrily skipped off, perhaps to kill again.
The Innovators

There are three reasons that the years prior to World War II are considered to have been the "best" years for the Black Widow.

1. Forensic science was a budding field, emphasis on budding. Much of the technology of chasing murderers, though considered gee-whiz at the time, would later prove faulty. The worlds of policing and science were decades from melding.

2. The medical field had not yet grown as the right-shoulder to law enforcement it would become in later years. While sudden and undiagnosed deaths today prompt blood testing, DNA investigation and autopsies, back then the regime of most doctors was small-town. Bluntly, unless there was a hard line cause to suspect foul play, the deceased were not examined nor was the constabulary alerted.

3. The attitude prevailed that women don't kill. Well, yes, there were the highborn women of dubious means and custom, the sort that filled the pages of dime novels and badly written gazettes, but in all, no, women were not evil-bent. The pedestal upon which femaledom perched was unshakable and stood firm against any suspicion. If a woman lost her husband overnight, the pedestal withstood and she walked away with, at the very most, an elevated, inquiring eyebrow behind her, watching her leave.

It was the Horatio Alger Age, the Civilized Days, when both America and Europe strove for positive natures and gentle lives. That untoward things occurred in the dark was understood but, overall, often ignored.

Here are five of that era's most notorious Black Widows.

Gilligan’s Deadland

Amy and James Archer opened Sister Amy’s Nursing Home for the Elderly in 1901 in Newington, Connecticut, and quickly earned a reputation as genteel caretakers of New England’s wealthy aged. Although neither Amy’s or James’ qualifications bespoke a background in medicine, their establishment offered the right therapies and tonics to keep its senior patients happy and comfortable. So successful was the clinic that six years later, its proprietors relocated a few miles outside Newington to Windsor where they opened the more commodious, more up-to-date Archer Home for the Elderly and Infirm.

That is when strange things began to happen, albeit slowly and subtly at first. Inside its whitewashed walls, patients died mysteriously without any cause. The attending physician, a personal friend of the Archers named Howard King, wrote each death off as old age. Even when Amy’s husband dropped dead, the senile Dr. King innocently ascribed his death as “natural”. Amy wept over James’ coffin, King comforted the pretty brunette, and then Sister Amy went to the insurance office and filed for the claim issued previously on her husband’s life.
Amy didn’t remain a widow long. She wed Michael W. Gilligan in 1913, a wealthy widower, who pitched in to help with the business operation and merged his bank account with Amy’s. He failed to see anything unusual in the death toll at his wife’s rest home – a volume exceeding ten mortalities per annum, all from "old age". He obviously never paused to consider that most of the unfortunates had nothing seriously wrong with them medically or, in some cases, were quite physically agile.

He should have given the matter more thought, for he too eventually contracted a high fever and cramping after one of Amy’s standard "nutritional" meals. Dr. King once again came forth to put pen to paper. “Natural,” he wrote after Cause of Death on Mr. Gilligan’s death certificate.

Although most Black Widows are cautious to a fault, Amy Archer-Gilligan’s tactics were anything but obscure. And relatives of dead patients wondered why their parents or grandparents were very able bodied until they happened to sign an agreement allowing Nurse Gilligan to withdraw extravagant sums of money from their account for personal lifetime-care benefits and personal needs. Such happened to Franklin Andrews, after he signed, Maude Lynch after she signed, Alice Gowdy and a sad parade of others after they signed. An estimated forty-plus. Hometown police finally investigated in 1916.

In the storerooms at the Archer clinic, investigators found large inventories of bottled arsenic; Amy explained that it was used to kill rats and other vermin. Neither the police nor investigators were convinced. A body of the last patient to succumb was exhumed and, as suspected, murderous quantities of arsenic were found in her system. More bodies were disinterred and the results matched. Even her last husband, Gilligan, had met equal fate.

After a long and hot trial in Hartford, Connecticut, Amy Archer-Gilligan was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison. But, erratic behavior behind bars led authorities to believe she was insane after all. She was commuted to a state asylum where she passed away, muttering to herself in her two-by-four cell, in 1928.

**The Psychic**

Chicago has always claimed a large Polish population, and in the first quarter of the 20th Century most of them lived in the Near North Side. The people, mostly a God-fearing, law-abiding nationality would like to forget one of their own, however. Her name was Ottilie (Tillie) Gburek.

They called Tillie a psychic, her neighbors did. She had an uncanny talent of foreseeing the future. Better put, she was able to discern – she said it came to her in dreams – almost the exact dates of death for all her five husbands as well as certain neighbors on her block. She was never wrong. Well, only once.

Her bad habits began rather late for the average Black Widow, at age 49, the age when most of them cease their activities. The year was 1919 when she predicted the death of John Mitkiewicz, her husband of twenty-nine years. As
she told a friend, she dreamed of finding his corpse on a certain day a few weeks ahead. Sure enough, her spouse fell ill on the named morning and died that night. The acquaintance to whom she had confided her portent was awed, especially to see with what alacrity Tillie flew to the insurance company for the check.

Tillie liked men and she didn’t remain in grief long. Before two months were up, she married laborer John Ruskowski. Too sadly, Ruskowski swiftly became the subject of another of Tillie’s nighttime reveries. That is what she told neighbors on her block. Those who laughed at the biddy’s forewarning alarmed when husband number two did indeed keel over on the figured date.

Frank Kupszyck came next, shortly thereafter – to the altar for his marriage and back to the altar in his coffin six months later. Like Mitkiewicz and Ruskowski, Kupszyck had been a man of means; his bride had seen to that. And she had also seen to it that his life insurance policy entitled her to sole beneficiary benefits before she peppered his vegetable soup with arsenic.

Within a year, Tillie had taken the vows again, to Joseph Guszkowski, and then attended his funeral, feigning incredulity at her ill luck and cursing her ominous dreams for all to hear.

Tillie had been verbal about his death, too, in advance. It is believed she even told the victim, Guszkowski, who laughed at her. Now, with her third foretelling proven correct, the seer had gained a local notoriety. “One wonders how Gburek was able to attract...husbands given her chilling reputation,” muse Michael D. and C.L. Kelleher in *Murder Most Rare*. Those who knew her began to avoid her when they saw her nearing on the sidewalk; they did not want to hear about their own death.

Old World superstition maybe, but they had good cause to recoil. It was common knowledge that she had had a vision of a terrible plague striking a particular family on the block, the offshoot being that within weeks that family’s three children died agonizing deaths. (What the rumor didn’t relay was that Tillie and that family had had a heated argument days before the prediction.)

The Klimek family grew worried when its son and brother, Anton, decided to chuck practicality and marry Tillie in 1921. “She iz a goot vooman,” he shouted back at more logical folks, “and I’m a healsy man zat intents to ztay healsy!” The healthy man and the new Mrs. Klimek co-signed a last will and testament, leaving all their possessions to each other. And the healthy man turned feeble overnight.

When he was near the point of death, his family did what Tillie wasn't doing. They rushed him to a hospital in the nick of time. He lived, but an examination showed that he had ingested poison by the tablespoons. The hospital notified the police department.
Faced with the possibility of having her former husbands' remains unearthed, and thus being charged with three murders, Tillie confessed to poisoning Klimek.

An actress to the last, she stood up in the Cook County Courthouse as if in a trance, chanting that the netherworld defied the mortals to send her to death. She would not be executed for her crimes, she oathed. But, it was the law's turn now to be prophetic. It promised to keep her in prison for the remainder of her life.

The prophecy came true.

**Passion and Paranoia**

The most bizarre character in this chapter is Bucharest’s Vera Renczi. She differs from most Black Widows because her motive was jealousy, not profit. Her obsession was not her men’s money, but their devotion. This Hungarian beauty had many suitors and trusted not one of them. Before she was apprehended, Vera had killed two husbands, a son and an estimated thirty-two lovers.

Born in 1903, she was the product of a fading aristocratic family. Her inability as a young woman to maintain a male/female relationship was blamed on a spoiled-rich-girl attitude; her friends said that the moment she was not the center of her boyfriend’s attention, she would flee. The roots of her problem went much deeper, though, and drilled into a firmly-implanted belief that she could not trust men. Her low self-esteem became dangerous, however, as she grew into adulthood. If she suspected her man was eyeing another woman, she no longer merely dropped him – but dropped him dead.

Her first marriage to an older man was a disaster. She pathologically suspected him of cheating. Left at home daily with their one child, a son, she pictured her mate not at work where he was supposed to be, but in the arms of one of his co-workers or with whomever he chanced upon; her suspicions were invalid, impractical and unfounded, but to her, frighteningly real. So that he could no longer look at another woman, she tinctured his wine with arsenic one evening and disposed of his body. No doubt, she conjured up tears to tell family and friends that he had run off.

And she wept in front of them a second time several years later when yet another husband disappeared. She had poisoned him, also, convinced of his disloyalty to her.

The one reasonable choice Madame Renczi made in her life was to never marry again. But, if that decision was erstwhile, it came to no avail as she continued to carry on relationships, one after another, slaying each “wandering” Lothario after a matter of a few weeks or months -- sometimes days. Her men were rich and poor and tall and squat and handsome and homely; they were cheerful and silent and boisterous and shy. Chances are, many of them were truly in love with her, but she saw in them an infidelity
nevertheless. The empty affection she observed was, though she didn’t realize it, actually a self-mirrored image.

At one point in her wayward career, her son Lorenzo, who had grown into manhood, stumbled upon the truth of Mama’s pastime. He tried to blackmail her, but learned the hard way that one doesn’t shove a poisoner against the wall. Lorenzo went *au revoir*.

Because several of Vera’s male friends had been married and had to conduct their *liaisons* with her with some adroitness – a fact which may have added to her skepticism of male consistency – oftentimes the wives became suspicious. It was a scorned wife who brought about the Black Widow’s ultimate undoing. The lady had traced her husband to Vera’s doorstep one evening and, after he failed to emerge the following sunrise, and after Vera denied having known the man, she called the *gendarme*.

The police conducted a routine search of the Renczi residence and found more than a missing husband.

In her wine cellar, they came upon a tableaux right out of an Edgar Allan Poe tale: thirty-two male cadavers, each preserved in his own customized coffin. Vera, who was usually a fast talker, couldn’t find the words to explain how they happened to be there resting in peace.

She spent the remainder of her natural life in prison, perhaps wondering why she hadn’t just buried them. After all, a shovel would have cost her much less.

**Bad News in Johannesburg**

Known as "Lady Death," Daisy Louisa DeMelker of the British Republic of South Africa made short work of two husbands and, like Vera Renczi before her, a progeny who got in the way. She is also alleged to have committed other murders – those of a fiancée, another child, and seven other assorted acquaintances – that supposedly occurred before her recorded crimes.

Daisy Hancorn-Smith escaped the boredom of early 20th Century Rhodesia (and the discipline of her straight-laced, chin-chin British Army officer father) early in life. In 1907, she became engaged to a man named Fuller in South Africa. But, on the day of their scheduled nuptial, her betrothed expired from fever, Daisy at his bedside. Fuller left his 22-year-old intended a sum of £100 to carry on. She took the consolation prize and traveled to bustling Johannesburg, where she set herself up in an apartment.

In her new town, she met the owner of a lucrative plumbing business, William Cowle. Marrying him in 1909, she entered into a life marked by domestic tragedy. Four of the five children she bore died young, three of natural causes, one under questionable circumstances. Only one son, Cecil, survived. As for the parents, their years together passed without intimate growth. Their suffering only cut a gap between the couple. After nearly fourteen years of mediocrity, the union ended with the death of Cowle. In January, 1923, he
turned suddenly and violently ill. Doctors couldn't save him, simply because they couldn't diagnose his illness. He died screaming in pain. Lost for an answer, one physician termed the cause of death as cerebral hemorrhaging. His widow received a life insurance payoff of £1,700.

Three years later, Daisy remarried, this time to a Robert Sproat. Four months into wedded bliss, on a chilly November evening, Sproat awoke from an after-dinner nap, trembling and sweating. As the evening waned, his symptoms worsened. He spent his last hours enduring gut-wrenching convulsions. Officially, a brain hemorrhage killed him. Heartbroken Daisy's loss was seemingly overcome by the sizeable inheritance she was bequeathed.

In March, 1932, Daisy killed her son. Motives vary, depending upon the version of the story one reads. Some authors blame Daisy's want of Cecil's life insurance policy, but the *Sunday Times Online* (of South Africa) cites other interesting prospects: "(The son) seems to have been under the impression that he would come into an inheritance at the age of 21. Perhaps he was demanding more than (Daisy) could give him...(But) the most obvious answer is that she simply didn't like him."

Watching Daisy's escapades from the sidelines for many months had been Alfred Sproat, brother of Robert, her second husband. Alfred believed "Bob" was murdered and vowed to keep an eye on his sister-in-law's subsequent activities. In the first months of 1932, two episodes occurred that reinforced his suspicion. One was 19-year-old Cecil's death; the other was Daisy's marriage to a wealthy entrepreneur named Sidney DeMelker.

Alfred felt that DeMelker's life was now in danger, and he communicated his apprehension to the Johannesburg constabulary. Opening immediate investigation, agents learned that Daisy DeMelker had purchased large quantities of strychnine from the druggist shop, Rose Henville. Authorities recovered the bodies of her last two husbands and son Cecil from their graves for autopsy; the bones and several organs in each held traces of a toxin.

Daisy's ensuing trial was a media splash, possessing the kinetic drama and tawdry scenarios that tingled the bored Continental crowd. Mrs. DeMelker, however, did not enjoy it. Especially when the magistrate sentenced her to be hanged in December, 1932.

Had this Black Widow escaped her dues in Johannesburg, representatives from Rhodesia and other separate governments of Africa were standing by to arrest her for suspected poisonings in their domain. Among these was the murder of her fiancée, years earlier.

**Fashion-Minded Murderess**

Marie Alexandrina had always been a beautiful woman; she never had any trouble attracting the men in her hometown of Liege, Belgium. When 33 years old, she wed Charles Becker, who considered himself fortunate to have won such a lovely woman. And for twenty years she was indeed a faithful wife.
But, after twenty years Marie had grown so bored with living with an unromantic laborer that she could scream. At 53 years old, she knew that the world offered much, much more. Her time, she determined, had come. So she laced Becker's tea with arsenic.

In no time flat, she found herself what she thought was romance on two feet and married it in a fling. However, the new husband, Lambert Bayer, proved to be another dud. She poisoned him, too, after a month's span. Wedded bliss now a myth, Marie decided to spend the remainder of her life flinging and sinning and chasing heartthrobs, wherever they could be found.

One problem remained. To move in the glamorous world she yearned, to meet the type of man she yearned, would require that she keep in step with the upper social class of Liege. As a widow of two middle-class bureaucrats, she had not inherited the kind of francs required to finance her dreams. The money she had received provided a practical toehold in a practical world, it even allowed her to open a small dress shop in a fashionable town square, but it fell short of fantasy.

Marie contrived a solution. Through her store, which offered couture and formal women's wear, she had become acquainted with a number of society's grand dames. Immersing herself in their space, she soon developed a friendship with many of them, often being invited to soirees and teas laid out in palatial courtyards. She convinced quite a few of these women of class to set her up as their sole dressmaker. That was step one.

Step two brought in the real money. The method, simple. Once invited over for a private fashion-session, during which tea and pastries would be served, Marie found an opportunity when the other wasn't looking to mix the elder's refreshments with a lethal dose of digitalis. (She carried a small vial of the liquid in her purse wherever she went.) As her host grabbed her banging chest, gasped for air, turned red and died, Marie helped herself to jewelry, cash and anything expensive she could stuff in her pockets.

For more than a year – from March, 1935 to September, 1936 – she killed ten women, among them models of the Liege aristocracy.

Marie had one big fault, that is, another big fault apart from the obvious. She talked incessantly – and talked and talked. One thoughtless evening in late 1936 she admitted the source of her income to a friend she thought could be considered a confrere. Marie erred. The next morning, the gendarmes came knocking at her door. She accused her acquaintance of spreading lies and almost managed to get away with it, until the police searched her rooms and found more bejeweled trinkets and knick-knacks stuffed in drawers and in trunks than were on display at the Louvre.

It was only due to the fact that Belgium rarely executed women that Marie Alexandrina Becker was saved from the gallows. She died serving a life sentence in prison. No jewels, no men, no dreams.
The Most Aggressive New Breed

As the Rockwellian pace of gentler things passed, the hunger of the Black Widow increased. Naïve husbands and innocent children continued to serve as their sacrificial lambs.

In a world more attuned to violence – World War II had been the awakening factor – tranquility was tested. The Forties and Fifties brought odd revelations, and the Sixties clinched the fact that there was more inside humanity than meets the eye. New terms such as sociopath emerged in the English language to put an even darker side on the id and the ego than Herr Freud had already placed there. Psychopaths extended beyond the image of greasecake weirdoes in a Boris Karloff movie and stepped off the set onto the streets of the world.

As the decades wore on, the serial killer became much too commonplace. Stories about wives who killed their husbands, and mothers who suffocated their babies no longer made universal headlines. Charles Manson's butcher job on Sharon Tate scared the pants off everyone, but since then Manson has been rivaled. And, frighteningly, much of the kind of stuff he's done becomes today not much more than an uncomfortable after-effect.

Notwithstanding, the after-taste of a murder committed by a woman does continue to haunt the "normal" brain that is geared to repel such a conception. Eric Hickey might argue that, "Female killers...do not instill the fear that male killers do," but male murderers do not sicken the positive good in humankind as when we hear that an upscale and angel-faced young lady shot her three children at point-blank range because they got in the way of her love life.

In *Deadlier Than the Male*, author Terry Manners presents recent statistics on latter 20th-Century female serial killers. Thirty-two percent are homemakers; 18 percent are nurses; 97 percent are Caucasian. Average age is thirty-three. Their major motive continues to be as it was when Mary Ann Cotton first decided to add arsenic to her first husband's favorite dish: Profit.

There seems to be one terrifying difference – call it a trend – in the latest series of Black Widow murders. Judging by the cases of the following five who's-who of later-20th Century Black Widowdom, she has grown colder and more vicious, if such a thing is possible. If these cases are to be considered a fair representation of this era's Black Widow (and, according to all the scholars, they are), then her target has varied to include more children and other relatives, even bystanders who have accidentally stepped into their path.

The prospect is alarming, yes, and illustrates that the Black Widow is alive and well – and more active than ever – as we enter a new millennium.

Grandma Venom

Nannie Doss loved her husbands to death – and her children, her grandchildren, her sisters and her mother. And don't ever let it be said that
Nannie didn't let their kindness go unnoticed, for every one of them gave her the (monetary) inspiration to go on, despite the odds. She murdered from the mid-1920s to the mid-1950s.

Nannie, born Nancy Hazel a few years into the 20th Century, flew from an overpowering rural Alabaman father into the arms of a rural Alabaman husband in 1920. After bearing four children for Charley Briggs, she realized her marriage was going nowhere; she was a cook and a housekeeper and hadn't found any romance, the type she saw in the moving pictures at the local theatre. She wanted out.

Experimenting with arsenic-laden rat poison, she first rid herself of two of her runny-nosed toddlers. Arsenic worked well and, as she had heard, it proved undetectable. The doctor wrote off their deaths as stomach ailments. Perhaps Charley may have noticed something sinister in their deaths, and in his wife's recent scowls, for he flew the coop, probably saving his own hide in doing so. He let Nannie have the money collected from the kids' life insurance policies and didn't look back.

Nannie still hoped to find romance. Maybe, she thought, Frank Harrelson would bring it into her life. But, after she married him he proved to be less romantic than Charley. Frank Harrelson died as her two youngsters had previously died, of stomach ailments. His death occurred immediately after he devoured a plateful of Nannie's marvelous stewed prunes.

Husbands number three and four, Arlie Lanning and Richard Morton, came and went the same way. They had not been the knights she pined for and, to compensate for the time she lost with them, she was sure to take their homes and belongings – and life insurance payouts – when they kicked. Because Lanning had lived in North Carolina and Morton in Kansas, when they passed away quite expeditiously no one, especially the family doctor, was any wiser to her plots of elimination. By marrying men in various states, she was able to avoid detection this way for many decades.

Not that Nannie ever forgot her family ties back in Alabama. On occasional trips, she would be sure to visit the old folks at home. She was there when her daughter needed a babysitter for her son. Nannie's grandson happened to meet with a fatal accident while in her care and Nannie felt terrible (but was back in high spirits to collect the insurance refund from a policy she had taken out on the boy). And she was there when her sister took ill and died. And her mother took ill and died.

She married her fifth and last husband, Richard Doss, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the early Fifties. But, when he died (again, after eating Nannie's stewed prunes), Doss' doctor, who knew his medical history, grew wary. He ordered an autopsy.

When the professional discovered that his patient's stomach contained rat poison, the police apprehended the jolly widow at home. Her marriage record
was traced state-to-state and obliging authorities allowed investigators to exhume her spouses. All had met Doss' fate. Nannie confessed.

During her trial, newspapers dubbed her "The Giggling Granny" because she nervously chuckled whenever she discussed her killings. The public was stunned that this overweight, graying, motherly creature in bifocals could have slain so many so long. However, the jury wasn't fooled. It pronounced her guilty and recommended life behind bars.

To the end, Nannie played the lovesick schoolgirl. "I killed'em for love," she told reporters. "My husbands were dull, and all I wanted was romance."

**The Poison Queen**

Occasionally one comes across a Black Widow with a slight mix of characteristics found usually in other female serial killer classifications. Such was Marie Besnard, the most famous of Gallic warlocks. She worked a good part of her 22-year career with a male accomplice, that trait of "partnering" being rare among the Black Widow breed. And yet, she is of that breed, for all her murders were motivated strictly by self-gain and the majority of her victims were relatives and in-laws.

A native of Loudon, France, Marie Davaillaud married Auguste Antigny in 1920. She was 23 years old, he closer to thirty and a kissing cousin. What contentment the union brought rapidly weakened until, by 1927, Marie had had enough of Antigny. The latter did not live long enough to see 1928.

A year later, the widow had remarried. Leon Besnard, a scamp and every bit as formative no-goodnik as his wife; it was truly a marriage made in hell. They were cons, the pair of them, swindlers, cheats and eventual serial killers. Together, the two hatched a get-rich-quick scheme to poison off their relatives, collecting their inheritances, one by one.

To go about this, they used stealth. For many months the couple made furtive endeavors to cement their relationships with both their families – parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and just about everyone they could think of within the Besnard and Davaillaud circles – to insure their place on their respective wills. Marie and Leon Besnard evidently had acting talent; their plan worked well.

Marie is perceived as having been the "brains" of the partnership. Whether or not this is true, and it seems to be true, Besnard was a willing and adept disciple. The first to go were his two spinster aunts, each in the money, each regarding their nephew and his lovely new wife as a wholesome young couple. One aunt went to her grave in 1938, the other two years later, after sipping a bottle of gift wine. Both aunts bequeathed a sizeable reward for the Besnard's kindness to them in life.

Between the years 1940 and 1947, members of both inter-related families may have thought that a curse had visited them. The Davaillauds and Besnards
dropped like flies. Marie's father; Besnard's father and sister; cousins Pauline and Virginie Lalleron, in that order. Causes of death were suspiciously imitative, either of water in the lungs or of cerebral hemorrhaging, but not a single doctor noted the similarities.

According to the Kellehers' *Murder Most Rare*, the villainous man and wife team aimed their poisonous arrows at others besides their immediate family – another standard Black Widow factor from which Marie ventures. Neighbors, too, were their targets. The deadly Besnards convinced an aged, sickly and very rich couple named Rivet to lodge with them that they might tend to their faltering health. The naïve elders, completely duped, moved in with Marie and Leon, only to pass away just after their arrival. Before they died, they had shown their appreciation to the Besnards by leaving their total wealth to these guardian angels.

Leon Besnard fell trap to his own devices in 1947 when his partner, Marie, spiked his wine with a taste of his own medicine. The lady had fallen in love with another man and figured it was time for Leon's exit.

In control of all the money now, Marie grew dizzy with power. She became greedier. And stupid. She killed her mother, then, when she heard the neighborhood was gossiping, physically went about door-to-door threatening the chatterboxes with their lives. She was arrested.

Leon Besnard was exhumed and his body proved toxic. So were the cadavers of those family and in-laws whom she killed. She was charged with thirteen counts of murder. But, in the end, as unbelievable as it seems, Marie beat the rap.

With her vast wealth, and at a time when the world was influenced by wealth, she was able to hire France's top defense team who managed to maneuver three separate trials, between 1951 and 1961, into hung juries.

By escaping justice so remarkably, wrote the Kellehers, "Marie Besnard rewrote the definition of the perfect crime and eclipsed even the remarkable legend of Belle Gunness."

**No Georgia Peach**

Black Widows generally do not have a criminal record before their active burst. Many of them, up to the time before they commit their first murder, have spotless civic reputations and are often caryatids of faith, family and community. There is little forewarning of trouble. In a layman's vernacular, they simply *snap*.

But... is that word misleading? Experts on serial killers would argue that Black Widows are *not* insane. They would agree that Janie Lou Gibbs, although a recognized church pillar and devoted mother, was of sound mind and deliberate strategy when she murdered her husband, three children and a grandson in Cordele, Georgia, for their life insurance policies.
Her first victim was husband Marvin Gibbs, who died after eating one of his wife's family meals in 1965. Collapsing at home, he was rushed to the hospital where doctors blamed his death on the effects of a previously undiagnosed liver disease. There followed a general outpouring of sympathy from the Gibbs' fellow church members, other Christian Fundamentalists, who came forth to offer the widow and her children consolation and support. In appreciation, Janie donated part of the money she received from Marvin's life insurance policy to the church.

One year later, 13-year-old Marvin, Jr., died of what was diagnosed as a similar ailment. Again the community assembled and again bowed its heads in prayer for the reassurance of the unfortunate Gibbses. Again, Janie proudly gave her congregation a percentage of the insurance payout.

Within months of his brother's funeral, Lester Gibbs, who had just turned sixteen, developed a series of dizzy spells and headaches. When he was found dead in January, 1967, the hospital pronounced it hepatitis. At his wake, out of earshot from the weeping mother prostrate over the coffin, general dialogue ruminated about the plague that seemed to have struck the Gibbs family. *What the hell is going on?* they asked in a more pedantic manner.

When her tears subsided, Janie announced she wanted to give the church another sum of money left to her.

Throughout much of 1967, peace seemed to have come to the household. Janie's oldest son, Roger, and his wife were expecting their first child. Janie's attention seemed to have turned from dark days to the upcoming baby. In August, she beamed for all to see when she became a grandmother.

By September, both baby Raymond and his dad were dead.

Medical men could not understand what happened to the newborn. He had been healthy, strong, with organs in perfect working order. Even an autopsy failed to detect anything anatomically wrong.

As for Roger, his kidneys had seemed to just quit working without any apparent cause, and again an autopsy resulted in a non-conclusion. The hospital grew suspicious, especially since his son had died only weeks earlier, also of undetectable origin. The family physician called in the state crime lab to consult.

Results strongly evidenced arsenic poisoning. Armed with this information, authorities disinterred the remains of the other Gibbs children and the grandson for like examination. When results came in affirmative, Janie Gibbs was arrested.

Her lawyers pleaded her insanity, but the State of Georgia was not swayed. The Georgian Black Widow, no peach of a woman, is still in prison where she is serving a life sentence for each of her victims.
Almost a Perfect Crime

The deaths of Waneta Hoyt's children in New York State were, for many years, framed in scholarly medical publications as concrete examples of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS. SIDS is a tragic and spontaneous illness that kills children literally overnight in their beds; it is believed to be genetic and gives no warning signals. Simply, it causes "loss of breath," according to an article in the *New York Times*, and children suffocate in their sleep.

In researching SIDS for a scholastic industry study of the disease, Dr. Alfred Steinschneider, a pediatrician from Syracuse's Upstate Medical Center, learned in 1972 that the Hoyt family of Oswego had lost five of its six children to a SIDS-like affliction between the years 1965 and 1971. The Hoyt case (identified in his paper only as "the H. case" for respect of the family's privacy) became landmark and Steinschneider's findings appeared in medical journals and magazines worldwide, including the highly respected *Pediatrics* magazine, in October of 1972.

Steinschneider details the deaths of several toddlers who died from SIDS, which he believes is an advanced form of apnea, a failure of a child's internal breathing apparatus. Among the case histories examined are the deaths of Molly and Noah, the last two Hoyt children to die.

In 1986, New York State Prosecutor William Fitzpatrick was researching infant-death statistics for a case he was conducting against a mother who allegedly murdered her infant. He came upon Steinschneider's report and, in reading about the "H" case, was struck by stark similarities between the murder case he was prosecuting and the symptoms of the disease that killed the Hoyt kids. The more he studied youth mortalities, the more he truly believed that the Hoyt children were murdered by someone in their family.

Despite the professionalism of the medical verbiage and the excellent, earnest work done by Dr. Steinschneider, Fitzpatrick remained unconvinced that the five Hoyt youngsters – ranging from six weeks to two years at the time of their deaths – died of natural causes.

That skepticism haunted him. When appointed District Attorney of Onondaga County (New York) in 1992, he secretly opened an investigation on the Hoyts. He sought the help of fellow DA Bob Simpson of neighboring Tioga County, where the Hoyts lived. Medical files were reviewed, doctors were questioned and evidence was drawn from the investigative files of each of the five Hoyt children. When the two district attorneys were certain they had accrued enough evidence, Simpson issued an arrest order for the children's mother, Waneta E. Hoyt, in March of 1994.

Forty-six year-old Waneta denied all allegations until she broke down under interrogation. She admitted that she could not endure the children's crying and, frustrated, not knowing how to quiet them, simply smothered them either under their pillow or by pushing their faces against her breast. Her first victim had been three-month-old Eric, on January 25, 1965. Six-week-old Julie died on
September 5, 1968, to be followed by her two-year-old brother, James, two weeks later.

Two years passed before Waneta and her husband decided to have more children. At the time, friends praised the mother's bravery; she had lost three of her four children and yet (as they saw it) she took on the odds despite great personal anguish. Molly Hoyt was born in 1970, but died a year later. Noah came into the world in 1971, only to leave it in 1972.

Waneta sits in a state prison today, for life. Perhaps her greatest aberration is the memory she has of her children, the tiny, helpless faces she sees in her dreams, night after night.

**One Busy Lady**

Blanche Taylor Moore of Alamance County, North Carolina, could not have fashioned herself as another Nannie Doss any better than if her predecessor came back to life herself. But, while Nannie was basically a congenial sort – well, on the surface – Blanche leaned towards the moody and grim.

A product of a Depression-era alcoholic father who forced her into prostitution to pay family bills, Blanche Kiser finally found an escape from this dysfunctional home. She flew her small burgh of Tarheel by grabbing the first man who asked her to marry him. She was 19 years old; husband Jim Taylor was twenty-four. The year was 1952.

Rash or not, the marriage ran happily for many years. Blanche bore two children, one in 1953 and another in 1959. After a decade of harmony, however, the relationship began to crumble. Jim found another love, the amber-toned Lady Whiskey, whom he would enjoy at the local tavern every night after work. To compensate for her abandonment and to buff the pain of her husband's newfound recreation – which was so reminiscent of her hated father – Blanche found a replacement, too. But, hers was flesh and blood. In fact, there followed a queue of many men, any one who listened to her and held her like she wanted to be held.

By 1966, Blanche had had enough of kisses going nowhere. As if Jim Taylor's binges had reawakened childhood nightmares, and as if she thought eradicating the unpromising past would erase the disappointing present, Blanche began to pave the way for a new fulfilling life for herself.

She committed her first murder by killing her father, Parker Kiser. During a visit, she dumped a spoonful of arsenic into the disagreeable old man's beer stein. After his funeral, when she realized that her act had saved her nothing, she returned to the escapist arms of lover Raymond Reid, a stockman at the local grocers. In the meantime, she contemplated the snuffing out of husband Taylor.

Taylor was destined to go (after eating one of Blanche's meals), but not before his invalid mother, for whom Blanche cleaned and cooked on a daily basis.
Once Taylor had safely deposited the inheritance from his deceased mother into the family bank account, he inadvertently signed his death warrant. Like Mr. Kiser's and Widow Taylor's, Jim Taylor's death was diagnosed as natural.

Boyfriend Reid's remonstrance of marriage suddenly began to peter off. The cold feet he encountered may have been attributed to a suspicion he felt about the all-too-easy removal of roadblocks on their way to the altar. If so, Blanche sensed his caution and soon Raymond Reid was a tombstone in the local cemetery. She had poisoned him a little at a time, slowly, surely, to perplex the town doctors. In the end, they attributed his illness and death to a hard-to-treat anatomical quirk.

Before she put Reid six feet under, by the way, Blanche had maneuvered him into signing over half of his property. She may have lost a fiancee, but she gained 50 grand.

Blanche didn't blanch at the prospect of a new meal ticket. She now set her sights on the new pastor of the local United Congregational Church. Reverend Dwight Moore and she met in 1985 at a community function. A thorough planner, Blanche wrapped herself in the cloak of a wholesome middle-age widow seeking Christian comfort and a happy retirement. The reverend bit. Over the next four years their relationship escalated until they became man and wife in 1989.

Her name on both his will and bank account, Blanche proved expeditious in attempting to unload herself of the cleric. On their honeymoon, she made sure that his breakfast included bacon, waffles and arsenic. Moore grew ill and had to be rushed to the hospital. Somehow, he survived. Doctors said he had caught a virus.

Back in North Carolina only a few days, Moore's symptoms returned. Worse than before. Once more, his bride brought him to a hospital. Routine tests again indicated signs of a virus.

But, unlike others she had encountered, Blanche found the doctors at North Carolina Memorial Hospital much more astute – and suspicious. They ordered toxic tests. In doing so, they not only saved Reverend Moore's life, but undoubtedly the lives of other well-off males Blanche would have caught in her web. The results of the tests performed on the pastor concluded that he had ingested a great deal of arsenic over the previous week – a great deal of poison, in fact. That he lived was a miracle from God.

His bride, however, was taken into custody and charged with attempted murder. The police, realizing that she had been the girlfriend of Ray Reid, who had died mysteriously, and the wife of Jim Taylor, who had also died mysteriously, ordered exhumation of those bodies. When arsenic showed up in their remains, a charge of murder was leveled against Blanche Taylor Moore.

Tried, found guilty, she was sentenced to death in 1991.
Postscript: Black Widow's Greatest Sin

Black Widows, the variety that wears women's clothing, are very much alive today, and they kill. Their lives may not be as melodramatic as Mary Ann Cotton's, as glamorous as Marie Besnard's, or as stern as Blanche Taylor Moore's. Many will never get caught.

While this article has taken a sometimes-wry look at the Black Widow throughout history, and the approach has occasionally been tongue-in-cheek, there is indeed a very serious side to the woman who kills obsessively for profit. These are the women who also kill their children.

A report on *Women Offenders* issued by the Bureau of Justice in 1999 gives startling and sickening results about child murder, data gathered from the Bureau's years of investigation. The report informs us that between 1976 and 1997, parents and stepparents murdered 11,000 children. Interpreted, that figure means that almost 525 innocent youngsters were slain per year for the past 21 years. Mothers and stepmothers were directly responsible for half of these murders. More so, the majority of the homicides perpetrated by mothers occurred during their child's infancy.

Motive was not exclusively for-profit. Instigators were also anger or bewilderment, driven here and there by alcohol or drugs. Methods varied, suffocation taking a large part.

The Black Widow in the year 2000 has changed little. She still manipulates. She still smiles in your face and adds ant poison to your coffee. She still smothers and poisons. As well, her *modus operandi* becomes more technical, compliments of Waneta Hoyt who taught her peers the advantages of using SIDS and other hard-to-diagnose illnesses as a shield.

"Medical experts now believe that between one and 20 percent of the 7,000 to 8,000 babies who are annually diagnosed as having died of SIDS may have actually died of other causes," write authors Michael and C.L. Kelleher. "Sadly, many of these infants may die at the hands of their mothers."

Considering that the most basic beast of the wilderness fights to the death to protect its helpless young from predators, there is the saddest comment of all on the human animal who is that predator.
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Veil of Darkness is a Horror-Action-Adventure for the PC, which was developed by Event Horizon Software and published by Strategic Simulations, Inc. in 1993. Veil of Darkness featured an isometric point of view, and an inventory system. The player moved around in a dark valley, solving puzzles and occasionally killing monsters like werewolves, vampires and skeletons. Although VoD lacked a skill system, it can be regarded as one of the spiritual ancestors of popular action RPGs like Diablo or Sacred. With its intriguing horror atmosphere, well designed puzzles and fast action, Veil of Darkness was one of the spiritual ancestors of popular action RPGs like Diablo or Sacred. With its intriguing horror atmosphere, well designed puzzles and fast action, Veil of Darkness was a spiritual ancestor of popular action RPGs like Diablo or Sacred.

The Minister's Black Veil Quotes

There was but one thing remarkable about his appearance. "Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls. It is but a mortal veil; it is not for eternity. Oh, you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened to be alone behind my black veil!"

The townspeople mutter their disapproval of Hooper's black veil. The sexton says he doesn't feel as if Hooper's face is really behind the veil, (full context). ...dinner, "forgets" to extend an invitation. Å Web. 29 May 2019. [Chorus: Fabio Lione & Alissa White-Gluz] The black widow's web She silently waits for a chance Once you're caught she gets hold of your life You are mine Then her poison will make you blind The black widow's web She'll be carefully spreading her net You have nowhere to hide, she will find you Better run from me Tempting your worse desires. [Verse 2: Fabio Lione & Alissa White-Gluz] When I turned on my device of alienation You were draining out all my identity You're not obligated, social isolation And you are trapped by your own vanity. [Chorus: Fabio Lione &