The 1964 Kitty Genovese Tragedy: Still a Valuable Parable

A review of

Thirty-Eight Witnesses: The Kitty Genovese Case
by Abraham M. Rosenthal
$14.95, paperback

Twisted Confessions: The True Story Behind the Kitty Genovese and Barbara Kralik Murder Trials
by Charles E. Skoller
“What happened on the night of March 13, 1964?” While few can easily answer this question, millions of Americans would recognize mention of the Kitty Genovese tragedy of that night. Among college audiences today, over 90 percent typically raise their hand when asked, “Who is familiar with the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese?” Even students not born until the 1980s know of the woman who screamed for her life in the presence of many inactive neighbors who later told police, “I just did not want to get involved.” On March 13, 2004, when over 100 New Yorkers convened in a public forum marking the 40th anniversary of this tragedy, participants visibly agreed on three points: (a) There continued to be something unusually haunting about Genovese's tragedy; (b) even 40 years later, important new details continued to emerge about this incident; and (c) this tragedy of bystander inaction during crimes was not unique but in reality common (Takooshian et al., 2005).

In 2008, two very different books by nonscientists appeared simultaneously, each remarkable in its own way—one, the reprint of a book by the late journalist A. M. Rosenthal (1922–2006); the other, a stunning new volume by the attorney Charles E. Skoller. This review summarizes each of the two volumes and then comments on their significance for behavioral scientists and why their appearance now is so timely.

A. M. Rosenthal's *Thirty-Eight Witnesses: The Kitty Genovese Case*

When *Thirty-Eight Witnesses* first appeared in 1964, Rosenthal was already a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter who was in his first year as city editor of *The New York Times*. His slim yet gripping 68-page volume drew worldwide attention to the Genovese tragedy. It was reprinted by the University of California Press in 1999; 2008 marks its third printing, this time by Melville House as part of its Journalism Classics series.

And what a classic this is, in at least three ways. First, the worldwide furor it created, marked it, as author Gay Talese noted, as “a most important book by perhaps the most important newspaper editor of the last half century” (3rd ed., dust jacket, back cover). Second, Rosenthal, in pointedly asking many behavioral scientists “How could this happen?” documented their utter inability in 1964 to offer any data-based explanation of such bystander inaction. Third, it is hard to think of a single nonscience book that has had a greater impact than this one on the course of the behavioral sciences. Rosenthal's bold challenge directly spawned two, if not three, new specialties within psychology that barely
existed before the Genovese murder: prosocial behavior (the classic laboratory experiments by Latane & Darley, 1970), urban psychology (the classic field experiments by Stanley Milgram, 1970), and the relation of law and cognition (the surveys by Harry Kaufmann, 1967/1978).

Rosenthal's original book was in two parts: One half recounted the tragedy (with photos); the second half recounted several experts' inability to explain this tragedy and described several cities' inadequate systems to grapple with such criminal emergencies. This third printing is expanded to 116 pages because it adds three forewords to the original 68 pages: (a) a vapid three-page essay on newspapers by former New York Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger that manages to say nothing about the Genovese incident or about Rosenthal; (b) a reprint of Rosenthal's 1999 20-page foreword to the second edition explaining why he felt morally impelled to write the book in 1964 after years of being an inactive bystander himself on the cruel streets of India; and (c) an essay by Columbia journalism professor Samuel G. Freedman written after Rosenthal's death in 2006 explaining why he holds up his friend Abe's book as a model of journalistic excellence, noting, “My students and I all stand in Abe Rosenthal's tradition, trying to be worthy” (p. 20).

**Critique**

This posthumous third edition of Rosenthal's classic reflects the tenacity of his friend and literary agent, Andrew Blauner, who was determined to make this classic available to a new generation of readers. Many readers, particularly psychologists, may well miss several things in this third edition. As in past editions, it lacks an index and table of contents. It has no mention, much less a chronology, of the immense impacts of this classic volume on psychology in particular, or society in general, that can be directly traced to the soul-searching following this 1964 tragedy—the emergence of block watchers, neighborhood patrols, the national 911 emergency phone system, and provictim programs and legislation. Post-Genovese society is simply not the same. As well, Rosenthal (Takooshian et al., 2005) readily acknowledged some long-recognized excesses in his original reporting—for example, that the number 38 was not a precise count by police and that more of these were “ear” witnesses rather than eyewitnesses—but such correctives are not mentioned in this new edition. Apparently Blauner's preference was to retain the simplicity of the original volume and leave it to other authors to identify and fill in these gaps. Enter Charles Skoller.
Charles Skoller's *Twisted Confessions: The True Story Behind the Kitty Genovese and Barbara Kralik Murder Trials*

Who could be more familiar with all the minutiae of the Genovese tragedy than the attorney handpicked to prosecute her killer? Charles Skoller is that man—the Queens assistant district attorney who represented “the people” in the murderer's sensational June 1964 trial. His 228-page book *Twisted Confessions* is unique in many ways. This book was 44 years in the making, a labor of love and the first piece of writing by this trial attorney.

To remain independent and objective, Skoller reports that he took it on himself to completely avoid all prior writings on the Genovese tragedy, even Rosenthal (1964) and Seedman and Hellman (1974). Fortunately for readers, this attorney combines a razor-sharp mind with a deft pen and a rare, eidetic memory to relive the tiniest details from 40 years ago—from precise conversations and daily events to a judge's glance and a witness's squeaky shoes resounding in an eerily silent courtroom. The resulting book is a dramatic page-turner, which many readers will finish in one sitting.

Even those few psychologists and others who are highly familiar with details of the Genovese tragedy will find a trove of unknown new details here across most of its 21 chapters—about Genovese, her live-in lover Mary Anne Zielenko, her neighbors, and her killer. For example, though her killer was a sociopath who reported enjoying sex with a corpse he had mutilated a month before attacking Genovese, he was also a doting husband and father of a “normal” Queens family, and he had an IQ over 130 (p. 28). Though witnesses varied greatly in their proximity to the two assaults on Genovese, the two witnesses with by far the clearest view (Joseph Fink and Karl Ross) were never called at trial because Skoller feared that their callous indifference would distract the jurors' focus on the killer. Skoller confessed, “It made me almost sick to my stomach dealing with this man” (p. 53). In contrast, Skoller describes how Sophie Farrar phoned police immediately upon hearing that her neighbor Kitty was injured, then fearlessly ran to Kitty's blood-soaked body and “fell to her knees, and cradled Kitty in her arms” (p. 25) until the ambulance came to take her to Queens General Hospital.

The subtitle of Skoller's book links Genovese with the also-sensational murder of Barbara Kralik, a 15-year-old brutally slain in her Queens bedroom on July 19, 1963. Local thug Alvin Mitchell, nicknamed “the monster” (p. 19), already confessed to her murder but tried to recant this when Genovese's killer falsely confessed to killing Kralik, too. Skoller faced the onerous task of carefully orchestrating these two sensational prosecutions to ensure that Mitchell did not succeed in “getting away with murder.”
Critique

Whereas Rosenthal's book focuses more squarely on the witnesses and on society, Skoller's book focuses squarely on Genovese and the facts of her case. The two books are journalistic accounts that complement each other well, “Just the facts, ma'am,” leaving scientific analysis to others. Behavioral scientists will find some clear limitations in Skoller's book. These include the absence of any index or table of contents to allow easy access to the rich plethora of names, events, and facts in this volume. In addition, the book suffers from the absence of any photos of the principals or locations and from the intentional lack of any bibliography or cross-reference to others' related writings.

Significance

The original account of the Genovese murder was a brief, 127-word entry in the Police Blotter section of The New York Times on March 14, 1964. Without any doubt, this horrific tragedy would have slipped into oblivion if Rosenthal had not quickly seen its moral significance, then helped society see it as well, by making it a worldwide story that continues to reverberate four decades later. Until the September 11 attack, this tragedy was by far the single most-cited incident in the social psychology literature (Dowd, 1984), inspiring extensive behavioral research. The Genovese tragedy became what Merriam-Webster (2003) defines as a valuable parable, a short “story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle” (p. 897) about street crime.

Rosenthal was the first to report what we now know as the “Genovese syndrome,” the undeniably common tendency for bystander inaction during emergencies. Each year, we see several such incidents now make front-page headlines—like the infamous 1984 New Bedford barroom gang rape or the 1993 slaying of two-year-old James Bulger. In fact, in this age of video, some of these “Genovese syndrome” tragedies can now be seen in real time. In June 2006, for example, Angel Arce was shocked to watch a security video showing a car strike his 78-year-old father, Angel Sr., on a busy Hartford, Connecticut, street in daylight and then dozens of pedestrians and drivers quietly staring at the writhing body on the asphalt until a police car luckily happened to drive by 90 seconds later.

In fact, the Genovese incident was the first of many sensational New York crimes to become valuable parables serving to increase awareness of public safety—including the fatal 1973 stabbing of Roseann Quinn (inspiring the novel Looking for Mr. Goodbar; Rossner, 1975), the 1984 Bernhard Goetz subway shooting (vigilantism), the 1986 death of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach (hate crimes), and the 1989 Central Park jogger beating (“wilding”; Roberts, 1989).
Journalistic accounts of these events have been invaluable aids for behavioral scientists, and they have helped us better understand the nature, causes, and remedies for such not-so-random urban violence. It is no accident that applied scientists such as James Q. Wilson and Thomas Reppetto have helped devise new databased law enforcement policies (e.g., zero-tolerance concepts, New York City's CompStat process, and Amber Alert policies) that have successfully reduced crime rates in major U.S. cities.

The one sad fact of Rosenthal's volume is its excesses concerning some original facts, first revealed by New York City's chief of detectives, Albert Seedman, in his book Chief! (Seedman & Hellman, 1974). It seems that behavioral scientists' wonderfully quick responses to Rosenthal's 1964 challenge were based on some inaccurate assumptions or details. For example, 38 was an arbitrary number (since there were fewer or more witnesses than the 38 questioned by police); most of these were “ear” witnesses rather than eyewitnesses; a few had far greater proximity to the tragedy than others; and alert bystanders were in fact key to the capture of her killer later that month. Fortunately, like science, journalism is an imperfect but self-corrective process, so even 40 years later, we continue to clarify the facts about the Genovese case, thanks to new accounts like Skoller's.

It is also worth noting that those who learn more about Genovese in the process of researching her tragedy have come to express a personal affection for her—for example, Rosenthal (Takooshian et al., 2005), Rasenberger (2004), and now Skoller.

**Timeliness**

The appearance of these two volumes in 2008 is made especially timely by a recent article in the *American Psychologist* aiming to debunk “the parable of the 38 witnesses” (Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007). This article pointed to some exaggerations of the Genovese tragedy and then, incredibly, concluded, “The story of the 38 witnesses is not supported by the available evidence” (p. 555) and should be removed from textbooks. Much like “Holocaust denials,” this bold article seems deeply flawed on several levels.

First, from the outset, its title mistakenly used the term parable to connote a falsehood or myth rather than a valuable moral truth. Second, whether it was 38 or another number, three facts remain undeniable—there were many witnesses, they heard or saw their neighbor scream for her life, and she saw them do nothing to save her. Third, the three British authors based much of their analysis on one Internet site, www.kewgardenshistory.com. This nonreferenced source is maintained by a genial amateur historian who loves his neighborhood, views the Genovese incident as an unfair blight on it, and uses the site to minimize this incident by pointing out inconsistencies in the many accounts of it (DeMay, n.d.). Sadly, the site has now come to maintain that the Genovese tragedy never occurred in Kew Gardens as reported, not mentioning the more accurate point that such a tragedy can and does occur in
many neighborhoods. Fourth, this article did nothing to rebut 40 years of behavior research evidence verifying the obvious reality of the Genovese syndrome (Dowd, 1984). The result seems a wrongheaded attempt to try to ignore the Genovese parable today in much the way that the original witnesses ignored her original cries in 1964.

In 1964, when the veteran chief of detectives Albert Seedman asked Genovese's killer whether he was afraid of the many witnesses watching him, Seedman was chilled by the killer's cold reply: “Oh, I knew they wouldn't do anything. People never do” (Seedman & Hellman, 1974, p. 129). Surely one key reason why people worldwide remain so moved by the Genovese tragedy is the haunting image of this young woman's terror as she watched others ignore her desperate screams. Yes, Genovese may have seen her screams ignored that night, but, thanks to Abe Rosenthal and now Charles Skoller, these screams have reverberated around the world for four decades, and our society is now the better because of its many responses to them. Yes Kitty, we hear you now, and we are not the same because of this.

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**References**


March 13, 2009, marks the 45th anniversary of Kitty Genovese's murder.