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# The Midnight Assassin: Panic, Scandal, And The Hunt For America's First Serial Killer



## Synopsis

A sweeping narrative history of a terrifying serial killer--America's first--who stalked Austin, Texas in 1885. In the late 1800s, the city of Austin, Texas was on the cusp of emerging from an isolated western outpost into a truly cosmopolitan metropolis. But beginning in December 1884, Austin was terrorized by someone equally as vicious and, in some ways, far more diabolical than London's infamous Jack the Ripper. For almost exactly one year, the Midnight Assassin crisscrossed the entire city, striking on moonlit nights, using axes, knives, and long steel rods to rip apart women from every race and class. At the time the concept of a serial killer was unthinkable, but the murders continued, the killer became more brazen, and the citizens' panic reached a fever pitch. Before it was all over, at least a dozen men would be arrested in connection with the murders, and the crimes would expose what a newspaper described as "the most extensive and profound scandal ever known in Austin." And yes, when Jack the Ripper began his attacks in 1888, London police investigators did wonder if the killer from Austin had crossed the ocean to terrorize their own city. With vivid historical detail and novelistic flair, Texas Monthly journalist Skip Hollandsworth brings this terrifying saga to life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Prior to the Jack the Ripper murders, a similar case in Austin, Texas, beginning in 1884 and culminating in 1886, occurred. Some thought the two incidents were connected. It started with scare tactics. During one of the first incidents a ghostly man appeared at the foot of the bed of a potential victim, then disappeared. During ensuing events the culprit attacked various maids sometimes hitting them over the head, at other times shooting through the window. A Swedish girl was hit in the back by a bullet, missing vital organs. But then the attacks got more gruesome. Molly Smith, a cook and maid, was hacked to death with an axe, but her paramour, Walter Spencer, survived. The authorities concentrated their investigators on the black population, until two white socialites were murdered with an hour of each other. An insane asylum existed outside Austin, with a building for the criminally insane. Author Skip Hollandsworth devotes a chapter to the progressive treatment of the inmates. For instance a wall was torn down and replaced by a four foot barrier. The inmates were treated humanely for that time in American history when most insane asylums were horror shows. But Hollandsworth and the police didn't seem to think it was worth the effort to talk to the supervisor until about a hundred pages into the book. The authorities were convinced it was a black man or a black gang committing the atrocities, and several were hauled in for questioning. But all had alibis or there was no evidence. In my opinion Hollandsworth spends too much time trying to make a connection between Austin and Jack the Ripper. For instance one of the Jack the Ripper suspects attended the New Orleans Exhibition at the same time as the attacks and murders. There is one very intriguing clue.

Historical true crime books that are about crimes 100 or more years old often suffer from a central difficulty: the witnesses, the suspects, and investigators have passed on. In some cases, files and reports have gone with them. This is clear with perhaps the most famous unsolved historic crime of all: Jack the Ripper. There are so many theories and suspects in the killing that it has spawned a virtual industry churning out book after book, some claiming to have positively identified the identity of England's most notorious killer. And yet, no claim has gone on to become the absolutely only true solution. It is near to impossible to truly verify, as police work in the late 1800s did not include the modern techniques most people would see on a crime television show today. Very little evidence survives. This doesn't have to discourage the historian or journalist, as usually they know how to research, where to look and to find multiple sources. Writing about the crime without going too far afield in speculation, but documenting the era, the people and the case can still provide an interesting and cautionary tale. Skip Hollingsworth is up to the task and has written an intriguing and

captivating book about such an unsolved case: *The Midnight Assassin: Panic, Scandal, and the Hunt for America's First Serial Killer*. In fact, the Hollingsworth's subject and the Ripper case have a tenuous connection, which Hollingsworth discusses later in the book. The case concerns a series of gruesome murders that occurred from 1884-1885 in Austin, TX. The killer attacked women in the homes late at night, killing them brutally, and sometimes attacking others and leaving them barely alive, and then escaping into the dark of the evening.

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