**Caril Fugate & the Starkweather Spree Killings**

In 1958, the Starkweather-Fugate spree killings rocked America; Caril Fugate's culpability is still debated, though many seem sure she was guilty as charged

The Starkweather murder spree took the lives of eleven people, including the entire family of Caril Fugate, Charles Starkweather’s fourteen-year-old girlfriend and apparent accomplice. Most observers believed Caril absolutely guilty of participation in the heinous crimes, based partly on her conflicting and confused statements, and partly on her stone-cold “combat stare” demeanor, which was not exactly indicative of girlish virtue. There was relatively little discussion at the time of the contribution of her immaturity or possible traumatized condition to her attitude and actions.

Now that the 1950s are long gone and fresher atrocities have blotted Caril from much of the public consciousness, revisiting the case with a cooler head is possible. Advances in understanding of such psychological conditions as acute stress reaction and dissociation may help to explain Caril, as might a study of the adolescent mind and its practically unerring inability to achieve adequate levels of adult reasoning skill. Of course, barring a deathbed confession or other definitive evidence, there will always be a cloud of secrets hovering over Caril’s name; whether these whispers of innocence and injustice or manipulation and murder will never be satisfactorily determined.

**The Caril Fugate Case: Trauma and Memory**

After her capture, Caril’s statements to the police contained some glaring contradictions. She maintained that Starkweather had murdered her parents and baby half-sister Betty Jean Bartlett while she was at school. When she returned, he supposedly told her that her family was being held hostage; but that if she went along with everything he said and did, they would be released unharmed. That was her excuse for not trying to escape his control during the subsequent eight-day killing spree (she claimed to have penned a short note begging police for assistance, but this missive was never located).

However, it is clear that Caril did see newspaper stories containing photographs of her family and descriptions of their deaths prior to her arrest. Moreover, she at first stated that she had witnessed her family’s massacre, although her description of her two-year-old half-sister’s murder did not match the actual facts of the case. She babbled about being tied up, and held as a hostage; and alleged that Starkweather belonged to a gang and was planning a bank robbery. Little of this had any validity. She often said she did not remember much of anything that occurred in the Bartlett residence, even failing to recall minor details such as who made coffee after the carnage or who cut out the pictures of her parents that she had in her possession at the time of arrest.

Caril’s deportment was often described as cold; her eyes seemed blank, staring out at the world with an icy, expressionless gaze indicative of pure evil. She described the killing spree and her time with Starkweather with little emotion, appearing a positive monster to many onlookers.

Witnessing a series of violent deaths, and experiencing great terror and helplessness as a result, may result in the development of Acute Stress Disorder within one month following the horrific events. Symptoms include an absence of emotion, confusion, and an inability to remember said events properly (dissociative amnesia). This last is certainly not unknown in cases involving traumatized teens: In another notorious 1958 killing, that of gangland figure Johnny Stompanato by fourteen-year-old Cheryl Crane, Crane later wrote that she woke up the next day in a jail cell and had no idea why she was there.

If Caril had dissociated the murders, either in whole or in part, it is not really surprising that she gave conflicting stories and invented dubious ones; a distressed juvenile might well attempt to please authority figures by giving them the explanations they are demanding through interrogation.

It is uncertain whether Caril exhibited severe stress symptoms or not. In her 18 years in prison, she often refused to discuss the murders; but this might be either a true avoidance symptom, indicating long-term development of PTSD, or simple reticence or obstinacy. Of course, there may also be a similar condition caused by inflicting terrible trauma on others (i.e., so-called Post-Trauma-Infliction Disorder), believed by some to have been experienced by many former Nazi concentration camp guards.

Which did Caril have? Did she have either? It is impossible to say, but it is also unlikely that her case is quite as clear-cut as it may have seemed back in the 1950s.

**Caril Fugate: The Psychology of Juvenile Offenders**

Starkweather noted Caril’s incessant complaints about her parents and Betty Jean, whom she supposedly disparaged as a spoiled brat. Already preoccupied with guns, killing, and murderous fantasies he called his “death deal” (he admitted Caril “laughed at [his] notions,”), Starkweather may have taken Caril’s alleged complaints as a license or instruction to fulfill those dark dreams, starting with her stepfather, who justifiably objected to Starkweather spreading the false rumor that he’d impregnated Caril, and to the very existence of his relationship with the much younger teenager. He later said that Caril wanted him to kill her family, and that she allegedly admitted as much to him after the bloody deeds were done.

The adolescent mind is not much like that of an adult: A teen can often see no farther than her latest action, and the notion of lasting consequences stemming from words or acts seems no more concrete than the latest musical or fashion fad. Recent research and U.S. Supreme Court decisions signify that adolescents and children have quite different brains than those of adults; the degree of a teen’s culpability cannot be measured by the same standards as that of her more mature counterparts.

Although Starkweather described Caril as very adult, reading portions of her trial transcript does not bear this out. Her responses to questions often seem more childish than her age would denote, such as the phrase “he was a big sheriff and all that,” which she employed to clarify Starkweather’s death-obsessed boastings to her prior to the murder spree. Other cases involving pre-adolescent or adolescent girls whose boyfriends kill their families “for them” indicate that the females made comments interpreted as requests or commands to commit murder; but that the puerile girls themselves did not really understand this, believing that nothing would ever come of their overtly violent words.

Experts on children who murder their families say they are either severely abused at home, gravely antisocial, or flagrantly psychotic. Caril never seemed to fall definitively into any of these categories. Placing her “in a box” seems practically impossible.

Testifying against Caril at her trial, Starkweather refused to don his glasses, declaring, “There ain’t nobody in here that I want to see.” Throughout the ensuing decades, many have disagreed. They very much wanted to “see” Caril, perhaps not as she really was, but as they needed her to be: either hapless victim or heartless killer.

In films as varied in quality and perspective as The Sadist, Badlands, Murder in the Heartland, and Natural Born Killers, Caril’s portrayal runs the personality gamut from vapid quasi-idiot to blameless dupe to gleefully vicious sociopath. Some seemingly well-researched sources insist on her virtually complete innocence; others scoff at such bleeding-heart nonsense. Despite all that analysis, a complete and clear picture of Caril Fugate has never emerged. Like smoke from Starkweather’s ever-present dangling cigarette, Caril is very easy to see, and always impossible to grasp.

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Starkweather’s “laughed at my notions” quote taken from Newton, p. 63; “ain’t nobody in here” from p. 288. Reference to “death deal” may be found on p. 60.

Caril’s “big sheriff” quote from Newton, p. 295.