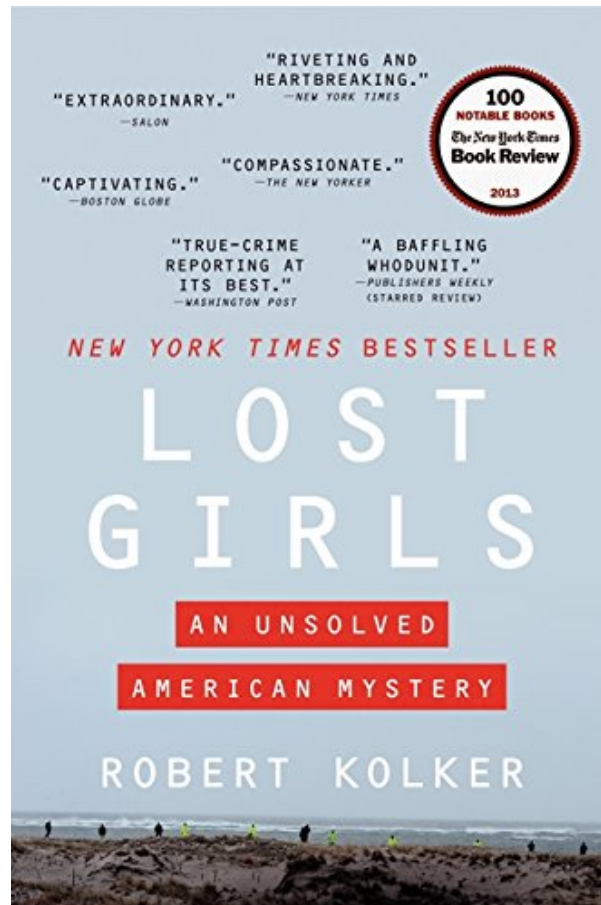
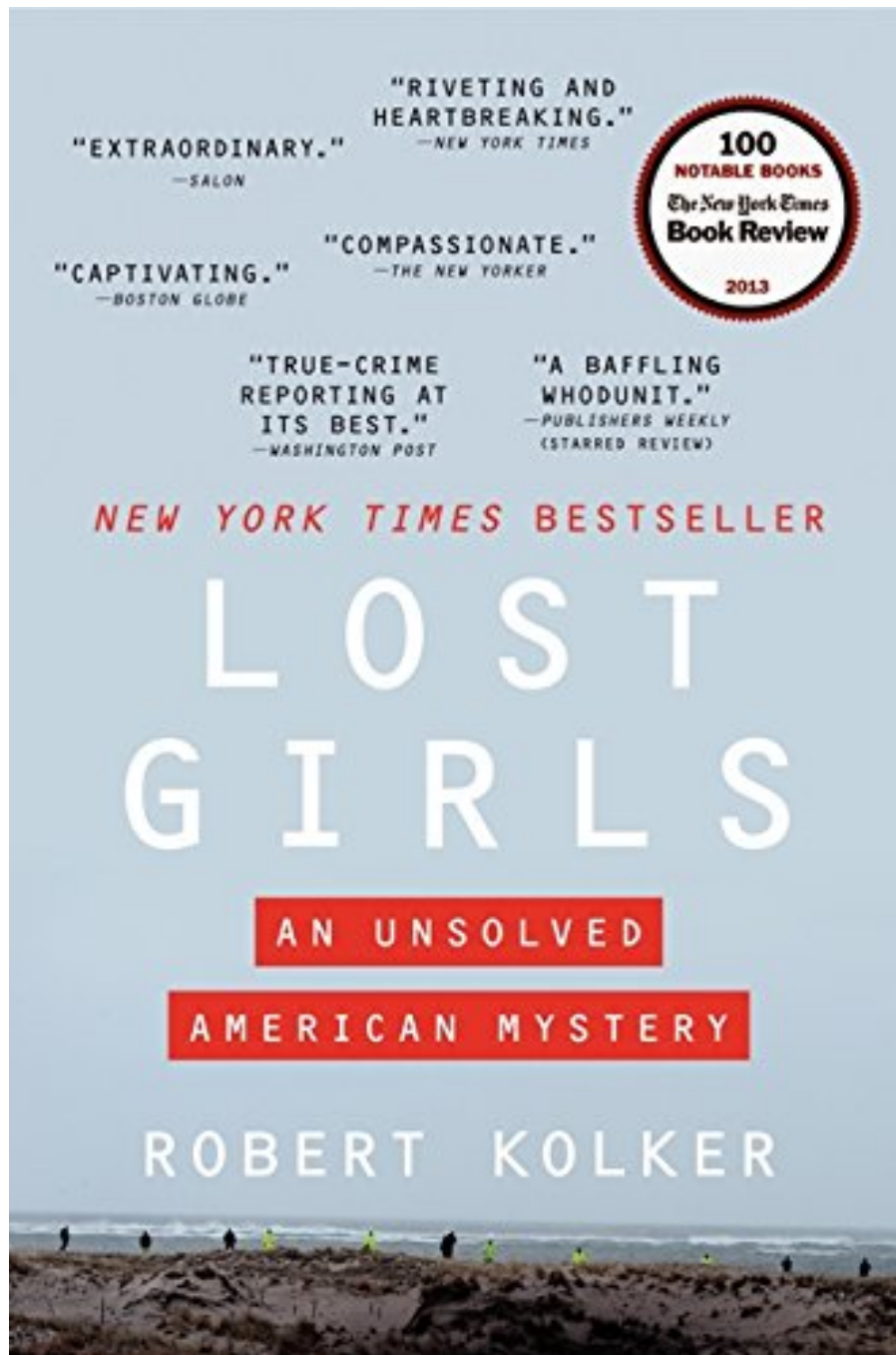


LOST GIRLS: AN UNSOLVED AMERICAN MYSTERY BY ROBERT KOLKER



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A Publishers Weekly Top Ten Book of 2013

Award-winning investigative reporter Robert Kolker delivers a humanizing account of the true-life search for a serial killer still at large on Long Island, and presents the first detailed look at the shadow world of online escorts, where making a living is easier than ever and the dangers remain all too real. A triumph of reporting, a riveting narrative, and "a lashing critique of how society and the police let five young women down" (Dwight Garner, New York Times), *Lost Girls* is a portrait of unsolved murders in an idyllic part of America, of the underside of the Internet, and of the secrets we keep without admitting to ourselves that we keep them.

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- Original language: English
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- Binding: Paperback
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Robert Kolker is a New York magazine contributing editor and was a finalist for the National Magazine Award. He writes about issues surrounding criminal justice and the unforeseen impact of extraordinary events on everyday people. He lives with his family in Brooklyn. This is his first book.

Most helpful customer reviews

108 of 121 people found the following review helpful.

The unsolved murders of five marginalized victims

By TChris

In December 2010, the remains of four young women were found buried in Oak Beach, a community in one of New York's barrier islands. The women all worked as escorts, as did a fifth woman whose body was discovered later. They all disappeared between 2007 and 2010. Arguing that these lost girls do not deserve to be stereotyped and forgotten simply because they engaged in prostitution, Robert Kolker brings them back to life in a book that is dedicated to telling their stories, if not to solving the mystery of their killer(s).

A pregnant high school dropout at sixteen, Maureen went through a series of dead-end jobs and failed relationships. A hair stylist in training who did well in high school, Melissa saw a path out of Buffalo when a man (who turned out to be a pimp) offered her a job cutting hair in a New York barbershop. Rebellious, impossible to control, and marked as white trash, Megan was impregnated by a thirty-two year old when she was seventeen. Sexually abused as a child, Amber eventually joined her sister at an escort service because the workers provided her with a sense of family. All of the women advertised on Craigslist and disappeared after making appointments with unidentified clients.

Raised in a series of foster homes, Shannon worked for an escort agency that catered to high-end clients before the police put it out of business. She also turned to Craigslist. Her last appointment was in Oak Beach. Unlike the other lost girls, Shannon made quite a scene before she disappeared, running around Oak Beach screaming and banging on doors, perhaps frightened by something, perhaps suffering from cocaine psychosis. She called 911 but got no help from the police. Her client that night was Joe Brewer. When the remains of four women were found buried at regular intervals along an Oak Beach highway, Brewer became a person of interest. Shannon's body, however, was not one of the four. Her skeleton was found a year later. Whether she was murdered or accidentally drowned in a marsh is unknown; the autopsy was inconclusive, although it seems to have been less than thorough.

Once the police started digging, they found several more bodies. How many of the bodies are connected to the same killer is unclear. Some have never been identified. Rumors identified a variety of suspects, from Long Island clammers to New York cops, from pimps to "my ex-husband" (two of those, actually). Kolker reports stronger reasons to be suspicious of a doctor who made an odd phone call in which he claimed to have seen Shannon, then denied making the call before admitting the call but disclaiming any knowledge of Shannon. Strange behavior, yes, but far from proof of guilt. Kolker also reports a variety of (mostly farfetched) conspiracy theories that took root in the insular world of Oak Beach, with its petty jealousies and backstabbing neighbors.

Lost Girls is thoroughly researched and easy to read, but it doesn't solve the crimes. Then again, neither did the police. One of Kolker's strongest themes is the indifference of law enforcement to crimes committed against prostitutes. Escorts never receive the same attention as advantaged girls from wealthy families who go missing. When Melissa disappeared, the police ignored her missing persons report for ten days because (as they candidly admitted) they are unconcerned about hookers who can't be found. The police in Suffolk County laughed when Shannon's boyfriend reported her disappearance. At least initially (before the bodies were discovered), the investigative work by family members (which Kolker describes in detail) was more thorough than any efforts made by the police. Still, some family members seemed to be exploiting the tragedies for their own benefit, basking in the attention they received as the mother or sister of a crime victim. The sections of the book that depict family members sniping at each other are among the most interesting. The chief of detectives who investigated the case, on the other hand, resents the pressure he received from family members and condemns the victims for being "greedy." There are no heroes in Lost Girls, but the least heroic are all the police officers who didn't think potential crimes against missing prostitutes were important enough to investigate. Even worse are those who blame the prostitutes, who imply that they deserved to die.

Of course, once the bodies were discovered and it became likely that a serial killer was responsible, the talking heads of crime media descended like vultures. Kolker has done a credible and detached job of reporting, unlike many of the media sensationalists who reported the story, particularly Nancy Grace, who made factual pronouncements with absolute certainty despite knowing none of the facts. Pundits busied themselves making monsters out of any plausible suspects while exploiting the tears shed by the victims' families to boost ratings.

As is often true of book-length investigative journalism, we are sometimes treated to facts that seem like filler, including the history of Oak Brook and biographical details of pimps and drivers who play only a collateral role in the crime story. On the other hand, Kolker offers a compassionate glimpse of the difficult and dangerous life that prostitutes live, and includes a balanced (but too brief) discussion about whether Craigslist provides a useful service or causes social harm by permitting escorts to advertise. Most importantly, Kolker encourages readers to see prostitutes as individuals. They don't all have the same story. They haven't all been trafficked or abused. They come from different family backgrounds and have different

attitudes about their work. Perhaps the one thing that unites them is their vulnerability to crime in a society that marginalizes their existence. Apart from its objective reporting of an unsolved mystery, that theme makes *The Lost Girls* worth reading.

51 of 57 people found the following review helpful.

A Necessary Book

By Oliveira

I read Robert Kolker's "Lost Girls" in one sitting, so immersed was I with this "unsolved American mystery." I would urge you to read it as soon as you can, but first let me give you a few reasons why you should. Without trying to give too much away, let me describe you (partially) the main narrative of Kolker's story. Almost the first half of the book is concerned with the story of four young women: one chapter narrating their personal histories (with their actual names) and the other recounting their descend into prostitution (with their respective pseudonyms). Briefly, these are their stories:

- Maureen/Marie: A telemarketer who wishes to be a poet, or a song composer for rap artists. Unable to launch her career, she is astonished by the amount of money that escorts (working for certain agencies) can actually make. Maureen sees Craigslist as an opportunity to make money without having to pay escort services.

- Melissa/Chloe: A girl whose dream is to open a hair-salon, she grows up in Buffalo, NY, in a neighborhood where hers is one of the only white families. "The race thing was a peculiar subject for all of them." Melissa feels like she was born on the wrong body since she wants to be black. That is why she finds herself a black boyfriend, a boy involved in drug dealing, and moves to NYC.

- Shannan/Angelina: Diagnosed as bipolar, and described by her mother as "independent-minded," Shannan decides to grow up in a series of foster homes rather than with her mother. Seeking to have "the best of everything," Shannan wants to pursue a singing career and also moves to NYC.

- Megan/Lexi: As a child, growing up in Portland, ME, Megan becomes the perfect example of misbehavior. She is raised by her father and her father's girlfriend, who gain custody over her mother, and is diagnosed with ADHD. Pregnant at an early age, and unable to pay the bills and feed the baby, Megan is in urgent need of a well-paid job.

- Amber/Carolina: She grows up in North Carolina and experiences a trauma that will haunt her for the rest of her days. She ends up joining Coed Confidential, an escort agency, and her story becomes (at least in my opinion) one of the most interesting in the whole book.

What follows is a roller coaster ride of an investigation. The second part of the book is not divided by the victims stories but rather by the evidence found after the murders. Perhaps what turns out to be the most attractive element of the book is its own structure: it made me think of Rodolfo Walsh, the Argentine writer/journalist, with some inevitable hints to Capote. (Especially the beginning seems to me highly reminiscent of Capote.)

As TChris, the previous reviewer, has very perceptively stated, one of the main themes is the civil/legal differences that exist between prostitutes and wealthy people. Citing a book by criminologist Steve Egger, Kolker asserts that almost 78 percent of female victims to serial killers turn out to be prostitutes. What is more terrifying is that these victims are not reported to be missing until their bodies are discovered.

Although some digressions may appear unnecessary, because they don't seem to add anything to the main

narrative of the story, I found those "side stories" to be extremely informative. For example, the historical account of "the exchange of sex for money," or prostitution, from colonial times to contemporary America. Another theme of Kolker's seems to be the terrible effect that the internet (and especially sites such as Craigslist) has had on prostitution: "In the few years that the website had caught on, Craigslist had done more to delegitimize the age-old system of pimps and escorts than a platoon of police officers could."

One of the most harrowing "digressions," however, happens when reporters approach Joel Rifkin, Long Island's most famous and prolific murderer, for his opinion on the case. While critiquing the new killer for leaving all the bodies in one place, Rifkin declares, "America breeds serial killers. You don't see any from Europe."

Kolker's book is a testament to the power of good journalism: its story resonates with us because it is immediate, urgent, necessary, something that fiction is not always able to accomplish.

I grant it five stars (despite its sometimes long, not-so-necessary digressions) because of the urgency in its description of present day America and its "exclusions": namely, the underworld of prostitution.

Highly recommended.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

One of the best investigative TC books in years

By Elisabeth Young

I just finished Kolker's "Lost Girls" and I had to go back and reread several passages because I didn't want the book to end. This book is absolutely fascinating and extremely well researched. Each of the five most recent victims has their story told with sensitivity and grace. The families of the women must have really opened up to the author because their most intimate stories are told here. The fact the killer(s) is still out there adds to the suspense of the book. I really disagree with the reviewer on here who felt the author wasn't connected enough with the police. As I pointed out under his review, how much can the police tell an investigative journalist when the crimes remain unsolved? The reviewer also found fault with how much the Internet and Facebook were referenced but the web is actually a center player in these cases and FB is how people communicate. FB provided the author with a wealth of information on how the friends and families of the victims felt minute by minute in their own words. The crimes keep me up at night as I try to figure out whether Shannan Gilbert was a victim of the same "Long Island" serial killer or just a coincidental isolated murder (or as the police continue to allege) an unfortunate accident? Does this killer reside in Oak Beach and if so, why can't he be caught? What are his connections to New York City and Oak Beach? Why did Dr. Peter Hackett insert himself into this case? The questions go on and we can only hope a resolution can be found for the families of these young women. The fact they were escorting on Craigslist makes them no less important or missed by their loved ones. An intriguing book that should be missed by no avid TC reader.

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“Rich, tragic...monumental...true-crime reporting at its best.” (Washington Post)

“Engrossing...a car-crash of a book...By humanizing the women, Mr. Kolker has produced a subtle indictment of the sex trade.” (Nina Burleigh, New York Observer)

“A heart-chilling non-fiction tour-de-force...terrifying and intensely reported.” (Complex Magazine)

“A rare gem of a book that not only tells a riveting story but illuminates something about a slice of America and gets into a lot of very deep issues. Its really great on every front.” (Slate, DoubleX)

“Riveting and often heartbreaking...a lashing critique of how society, and the police, let these young women down.” (Dwight Garner, New York Times)

“Immensely evocative...we are left with is a visceral understanding of the lives of the victims and why they should have mattered more.” (New York Daily News)

“Terrific...vivid and moving...Grade: A-” (Entertainment Weekly)

“So masterful.” (Megan Abbott, author of Dare Me , via Twitter)

“By learning the intimate details of the women’s lives, seeing them as humans rather than victims, we see our similarities...Lost Girls is possibly the realest, fullest picture of what is happening with sex work in the US right now.” (The Guardian (UK))

“Kolker does not hold back in addressing the fact that there was dysfunction in these women’s lives. They were drug addicts and teenage mothers and petty criminals. They suffered. But he can also see that within those circumstances they had moments of strength and self-assurance. ” (Barnes & Noble Review)

“Lost Girls is partly unsolved mystery...[partly]the intimate story of the five women... [and] a case study in the profound impact of the Internet, and particularly Craigslist, on the business of buying and selling sex.” (National Post (Canada))

About the Author

Robert Kolker is a New York magazine contributing editor and was a finalist for the National Magazine Award. He writes about issues surrounding criminal justice and the unforeseen impact of extraordinary events on everyday people. He lives with his family in Brooklyn. This is his first book.

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