Anyone You Want Me to Be. A True Story of Sex and Death on the Internet

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Anyone You Want Me to Be. A True Story of Sex and Death on the Internet

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The subtitle “A True Story of Sex and Death on the Internet” made this work irresistible for us at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies. Since the beginnings of the Internet, media and consequently, public, reactions to it have moved between outright fear (Pornography! Virtual Sex! Addiction!) and reckless optimism (Huge profits! Virtual Democracy!). Now Douglas and Singular have added Virtual Serial Killers to the list of our fears.

The killer in question is John Robinson, who began as a small time con man and thief, but took up a career of multiple murder. The victims were women, killed by and large for very small material gains. Also in the mix of motives, however, was a sex-charged life in the demimonde of sadomasochism and bondage.

The transition in Robinson’s life of crime was, according to the authors, enabled by computers and the Internet. As they state:

It was as if the technology itself had set loose something in the human mind or the unconscious, so that the old rules and forms of self-expression and self-control no longer applied. Here you could be whatever you or someone else wanted you to be. Here was a realm where you could finally let go. The technology seemed to encourage people to spell out—and sometimes to act on—their less civilized impulses. (87)

Mr. Robinson’s criminal career is (or was—he was inevitably captured and executed) relatively uninteresting, sordid and nasty. The more interesting question is the one the authors insert at intervals to keep the reader feeling that they are chronicling something of significance that is
happening in our culture with Mr. Robinson’s crimes. The book is clearly being sold on the premise that that something is the impact of the Internet on crime. Furthermore it is true that Robinson’s life changed once he learned to use computers while in prison, and that he met some victims via the Internet.

On balance, however, it is difficult to feel that the Internet was a major factor in his killing spree. He had used other means of contacting victims earlier and continued to rely upon the mails more than upon electronic communications for his alibis in accounting for the absence of his victims from their daily lives.

Somebody like Sherry Turkle[1], with her close analyses of the human personality in electronic environments, might have made something more interesting from the murderously sad life of John Robinson. There may be a useful and highly interesting book there someplace, but I don’t think that Anyone You Want Me to Be is that book. The authors know a great deal about crime, but too little about the Internet.

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