

SOURCE

Are We Close?

Christian Patterson – Redheaded Peckerwood

The title of this book raises problems that rebound upon what Christian Patterson is doing in this latest very stylish MACK publication, designed in part, I can't help but think, to feed the expanding market for that new bourgeois fetish and collector's item, the photobook (it is already out of print). "Redheaded Peckerwood" is a derogatory term used through the mid- twentieth century by Southern African Americans and upper class whites to describe poor rural whites. It is akin to 'redneck'. Wikipedia's extensive entry on "Peckerwood" also mentions an affinity with the abusive term "white trash."

The subject of this book concerns the infamous crimes of two poor rural white kids, 19 year old Charles Starkweather and 14 year old Caril Ann Fugate. Starkweather first killed a gas station attendant in December 1957, then went on to slaughter Fugate's mother, step-father and baby sister in January 1958. Despite having witnessed the murder of her family, Fugate accompanied him as he drove across Nebraska and Wyoming on a spree of robberies and murders that claimed seven more lives, before they were arrested. Starkweather was executed in the electric chair in 1959, Fugate was sentenced to life but released on parole in 1976, and now lives in Michigan under an assumed name. We do not get all this information about the crime in this book, which remains deliberately elliptic and only gives us information in fragments.

The terrible events of 1958 are now part of American mythology, perpetuated by a succession of films drawing on the killings: notably Terence Malick's *Badlands*, Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* and David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. It was Malick's film that apparently led Patterson to the subject and the murder sites.

He models his publication, to a certain extent, on crime dossiers devised by Dennis Wheatley and J.G. Links in the 1930s, which invited readers to become detective and work out who was the prime suspect from evidence gathered from the crime scene, both actual and spoof and all presented in a cardboard folder: cigarette ends, hair, crime scene photographs, interviews, newspaper cuttings and so on.

With *Redheaded Peckerwood* there is no mystery to solve and everything is presented in the form of a book, not a folder. It begins by taking us straight into the horror of the family murders through a meticulous photographic copy of the pages of a handwritten letter by Caril Ann Fugate, describing in detail Charles 'Chuck' Starkweather's killings. Such an account – "For the Law Only," the exclusivity of its intended addressee already giving our relationship to the material a strong sense of taboo and the forbidden – imaginatively puts us at and in the crime scene. It is affective and subjective. At the same time we are very aware of the young girl's poor grammar and spellings, and her peculiar way of drawing a bullet and knife instead of using the words when she describes her family's murder.



Charlie's Bloody Ear, 2007

House at Night, 2007

Burned-Out Room, 2010

Fruit Cake 98 Cents, 2011

While a lot goes unsaid and the captions listed at the back of the book are not too detailed, words and language play a key role in this book. A little later on, there is a facsimile till receipt for Jensen's General Store together with a little poem the owner had printed on the back, singing the joys of living in a little town, where every house is more than a house, it's home. The receipt is separate from the book's pages and presented as a paper artifact, as if it's something that had been preserved within the book. So is the fold out copy of a typewritten page of jokes, full of errors, headed "CONFASIUS SAYS." The page was apparently found in the pockets of one of the victims. Towards the close of the book, there is a photographic picture of a scrap of

Durden, Mark. "Are We Close?" [Source](#), Spring 2012.

lined yellow paper, set out against the white page, bearing Fugate's full name written out again and again as a sample of her handwriting, and pictures of two pages of typewritten texts, transcribed perhaps from interviews with Starkweather, one where he describes emotions, hate, and the other his replies to two questions, one about what he would do differently if he had his life to live over again, and the other, whether he feels sorry for the victims.

The photography is deliberately mixed in this book, both Patterson's own photographs and the crime scene and press photographs he also presents. The front and back grey boards of the book bear a screen print based on a stained and faded monochrome snapshot of Fugate and Starkweather seated side by side, both looking to camera, but with only the girl's face visible, smiling, and with her partner's worn away and unnervingly blank. In fact we never see a portrait of Starkweather, just a photograph of the back of his head that shows, as its caption indicates, "Charlie's Bloody Ear." There are a couple of pictures of Fugate in the book, a photobooth portrait of her pulling a face and a press photograph showing her leaving court having just been sentenced.

A number of Patterson's photographs, both colour and black and white, give us views of the Nebraskan and Wyoming landscapes, of stormy and expressive skyscapes, views of the plains, snow covered grasses, and one spare near-white landscape view (setting human drama against the beauty and sublime of the natural world takes its cue, perhaps, from Malick's *Badlands*). There are architectural views, a double-page is given over to an Edward Hopper-like depiction of a house at night, with a Dead End sign clearly visible. There are pictures of a burning building, a burnt-out building, a burning tree, the markings of blood and piss in snow, close up details of cut-out 50s pin up girls stuck on walls, flowery wallpaper, a dirty bed, burnt out and broken bulbs. There is even a colour close up of the fake asphalt siding, which we realise, from a following black and white crime scene photograph, matches the Bartlett house where Starkweather killed Fugate's family. Is the close up, then, a means to get us close?

All this evocative and emotive material is set against a series of pictures that involve what I can only describe as Pop jokes to do with the dumb and indifferent readymade signage of American culture, "FRUIT CAKE 98c," "Ask for ETHYL." Then there are the rather makeshift still lives that aspire to but fall short of advertising, all significant for the messages they carry: a red petrol can bearing the word HELP, a tyre with the words on its rim YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM ANYTHING. The fruitcake sign is paired with a picture of a grubby blue-grey soft toy dog, placed upon and against a pink backdrop, its back to us. Apparently Patterson found this object at the first murder site, the killing stemming from Starkweather being refused credit for it from a person working at a gas station. The toy was intended as a gift for Fugate. Or so we are led to believe. Whatever truth it carries, it is the juxtaposition with the sign that matters. The tension between this pathetic but creepy relic and the indifferent affectless POP sign, (blank that is unless one sees it as a way of describing Starkweather, "as nutty as a fruitcake") sets up a split which characterises our relation to the whole book. Between on one hand the desire to understand and engage, the human realm of empathy and affect, of getting close, and on the other, in our inevitable distance from it all. We come back then to the class and racially charged slur carried by the title *Redheaded Peckerwood* in the fifties. And also to the cruelty of the brilliant closing POP sign of the book: "Let's all go out and get a STEAK." We are all right, they are not us, life goes on.

-- Mark Durden