Thomas Aiello, *The Trouble in Room 519: Money, Matricide, and Marginal Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021), 218 pp.

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One spring night in 1950, Gordan Malherbe Hillman—a moderately successful newspaper man and prolific but forgotten writer of middlebrow fiction—walked into the hotel room he was sharing with his mother, Carolyn, and struck her repeatedly with a bottle. Then he telephoned the police, who took him into custody. Carolyn was pronounced dead on the spot. If your first thought is that this unexpected burst of matricidal violence seems the stuff less of real life than of pulp fiction, you wouldn't be entirely wrong. Hillman's whole life was defined by his tireless if not entirely successful effort to make a living writing short fiction for magazines. Early in his career he wrote for the pulps, but he did the bulk of his work for the glossy magazines like *McCall's*, *Collier's*, *Liberty*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* that shaped the aspirational culture of the middle class in the first half of the twentieth century. In *The Trouble in Room 519*, the historian Thomas Aiello makes a fascinating case that the story of Hillman's crime and the story of his professional aspirations are closely linked. For Aiello, Hillman's shocking crime is not an outlier so much as an exemplary, if extreme, case of the economic and emotional pressures that exerted themselves on the midcentury profession of the middling middle-class fiction writer. As ever, the crime story turns out to be a class story.

The result of what Aiello calls his decade-long "obsession" (vii) with Hillman's strange tale, *The Trouble in Room 519* is an idiosyncratic book, full of illuminating research and compelling insights, but also struggling at times to fully substantiate its case for Hillman's representativeness of an entire professional system and class structure. Part true crime narrative, part biography, and part anthology of Hillman's own stories, *The Trouble in Room 519* aims above all to be a case study of what it meant to be a marginal writer in the first half of the twentieth century: the kind of writer who succeeded in selling short stories to middle-class magazines but who gained neither literary prestige nor a reliable source of income from doing so. Most writers of popular magazine fiction couldn't make a living writing short stories full-time. Almost all of them were forced to supplement their income with day jobs, as Hillman did working for newspapers like the *Transcript* and the *Boston Record*. Through his study of Hillman's life, Aiello reminds us that literature may be art, but making it is still work. And that work isn't always enough pay the bills.

Aiello's argument about the precarious labor of the popular fiction writer is also an argument about the precarious status of popular fiction in academia. "While scholars have studied science fiction of the era, horror, children's stories, and pulp novels," Aiello observes, "general popular-magazine fiction, by far the tamest of the listed genres and

https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac270

the most widely read in this golden age of reading, has been given short shrift" (1-2). To be sure, the shrift is perhaps not quite as short as Aiello suggests; scholars like Gordon Hutner, Tom Perrin, and others have written major studies of the category that is frequently but imperfectly called middlebrow fiction. But Aiello adds substantially to our understanding of the genre. No different from the pulps, middle-class magazines had their own mass-produced subgenres to lure readers: newspaper-industry fiction, boarding-school fiction, Cape Cod fiction. Hillman tried his hand at all of these genres and more; his oeuvre doubles as a fascinating map of the subtle varieties of middlebrow taste at midcentury. Yet the tragic turn in Hillman's life also suggests a fissure between the optimistic middle-class ideology peddled by his stories and the material conditions such ideology was designed to disavow. As Aiello describes them, the "class-aspirational narratives" in which Hillman specialized succeeded by ignoring "the real-life suffering happening during the Great Depression" (164). In one of the book's few comments on race, Aiello notes that such "aspirational fiction" understood "wealth" and social status "as almost uniformly white" (5). Hillman's case is thus a study less in the economic suffering and racial oppression of the 1940s and 1950s than in the professional insecurity of those writers who were paid to conceal it.

The Trouble in Room 519 is divided into eight chapters, each focusing on a delimited period in Hillman's life, and each accompanied by a representative short story of Hillman's that is either from that period or about it. Reader, I confess: I did not care for the stories reprinted in *The Trouble in Room 519*. Is this because I'm precisely the kind of pulp modernist snob who disdains the realist pleasures of middlebrow magazines? Possibly. Yet deeper questions arose for me about what exactly to make of this unusual and slender archive of fiction, especially when the ideological analysis promised by Aiello more often defaults to purely biographical readings of Hillman's stories. Although one glimpses ways of reading these stories as intriguing indexes of larger social and historical forces—the crafting of middle-class ideology, the pressures of genre conformity in the cut-throat landscape of magazine publishing—each story is presented to us, ultimately, as a record of narrowly personal experiences: Hillman's relationship with his eccentric mother, Hillman's years at a prestigious boys' school, Hillman's experience vacationing at Cape Cod as a child. The relentlessly biographical framing of the stories Aiello includes here has the paradoxical effect of making us forget what deeper historical representativeness they are meant to have, and thus why it is we're reading them in the first place.

This gets to the primary challenge a reader confronts in *The Trouble in Room 519*. While Aiello maintains that Hillman is important because he is "a representative example of early twentieth-century American fiction writers" (165) ("His was the fate of most authors who existed outside the canon, outside of the literary elite" [164]), this book is, in both concept and execution, really only about Hillman, whose middling talent and fleeting

success may indeed be "representative," but whose shocking crime is anything but. "Hillman's crime was not necessarily the anomaly that it might have seemed," Aiello counters. "His story was grotesque, tragic, but it was in so many ways representative of both the state of marginal fiction writers in America and the kinds of crimes prosecuted in Boston" (149-150). The final part of this sentence cannot possibly be true. Aiello himself notes on the very next page that there were only "eight deaths classed as homicides in Boston that year" (151), so murder was certainly not the prototypical crime of the Boston legal system, to say nothing of matricide.

As for the suggestion that Hillman's story is exemplary of "the state of marginal fiction writers" in general, that depends on what you understand the central story of *The Trouble in Room 519* to be. I suppose one could argue, if one were really willing to really embrace the allegorical frisson of it all, that matricide is a kind of master-symbol for the marginal male writer's violently gendered frustration at being beholden to the magazine and newspaper industries. But Aiello doesn't make that argument, and in the end, the story of Hillman's professional representativeness and the story of his crime didn't quite come together for me. The problem may reflect a core paradox of true crime narrative: is it a genre of exemplarity or exceptionality? Is the point of the unsuspected killer next door that he could be anyone? Or is the point that, in his shocking act of violence, he turns out to be horrifically singular, to resemble no one but himself?

There are deeper shortcomings to the true crime genre. Foremost among of them is the form's inadequacy for discussing the systemic injustices of the criminal justice system. I found the most striking part of Hillman's story to be not his shocking crime but what Aiello calls his "surprisingly short sentence" (159): three years for murdering his mother in cold blood, then right back to work for the Boston press, quickly married and living in a swank apartment in Beacon Hill. "If there was ever a time and place to murder one's mother with minimal consequence," Aiello notes dryly, "it was Boston in 1950" (151). I was struck by the shortness of Hillman's sentence not because I think it should have been longer. (That's carceral thinking; fuck prison.) I was struck by it because it allows us to see that whatever "kinds of crimes" the US legal system was concerned with at this time, it was not the private violence of the white middle and upper classes. In this way, Gordan Malherbe Hillman may turn out to be a representative figure yet: a vivid example of the difference that class and race make to the systems of policing and prosecution in the United States. Hillman's minimal prison sentence and post-prison success are exemplary indeed of the exceptionality an educated white professional could have expected to experience as he moved through the midcentury American legal system. The crime story is always a class story after all.