

A familiar scenario, with a psychotic hero

Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse

By Joe Eszterhas.
211 pp. New York:
Random House \$5.95.

By ANNIE GOTTLIEB

On Friday, April 21, 1972, at 5:50 P.M., the little town of Harrisonville, Mo., became the site of another of those explosive multiple murders that have so puzzled, fascinated and frightened Americans over the last 10 years. A lanky 25-year-old small-town hippie named Charlie Simpson, alias "Ootney," jumped out of his friend's car, pulled an M-1 semi-automatic out from under his patched army jacket, gunned down two cops and a middle-aged dry-cleaning store manager, and then sucked the gun barrel and blew off the top of his head.

We might not know or remember this among the litter of fallen Presidents and candidates, the spoor of nurse-slashing Specks and bell-tower snipers, except that Joe Eszterhas of Rolling Stone became another of those investigative reporters to get on the trail of a weirdly random crime and trace it back to its origins. As in Capote's "In Cold Blood"; as in Wambaugh's "The Onion Field." The rationale is dual: one, we are interested in violence and enjoy the shudders, thrills and gore (so this kind of book sells); two, more valuably, the examination of a bloom of violence and its roots can tell us something

*New York Times
Book Review
1974
Jan. 27*

about ourselves and our society, its soil. Unfortunately, Eszterhas's book does not dig as deeply as either of the above mentioned two, and does not unearth as much. The reasons lie both in the nature of Ootney's crime and in the limitations of Eszterhas's style and point of view as a journalist of the counterculture.

In brief, Charlie's crime was a very late bloom of the "generation gap" hysteria of the late sixties, a thing that could have happened only in a little prairie town three or four years behind the times. Harrisonville kids picked up on Abbie Hoffman just about when everyone else was putting him in mothballs, and began their "revolution"—which consisted of growing a lot of hair, slouching around the town square, and staging smoke-ins and feel-ups on the courthouse steps for the benefit of the local rednecks, their parents. This fooling with the tenderest fears and bigotries of Middle America naturally provoked panic and retaliation; the busts and roughings-up that

Annie Gottlieb is the editor of ELIMA, a women's literary magazine.



After the funeral of Charles Simpson.

followed confirmed the kids in their kounter-kulture media-fed belief that the uptight killer parents were out to get the saintly spontaneous young. A rather too-familiar scenario: generational gang war between the "Necks" and the "Bros."

Weren't we finished with this years ago? Even if Harrisonville wasn't? The anachronism of the situation immediately lends a dated, period-piece air to Eszterhas's report

on it—an air he could have avoided either by probing a little more deeply and retrospectively into that charade we called "polarization" (in which the media played master of ceremonies, handing out the stereotyped roles) or by getting a little further into Ootney Simpson, as individual and symptom.

Simpson was the kids' leader and philosopher, and later, conveniently, their martyr: an unstable, sensi-

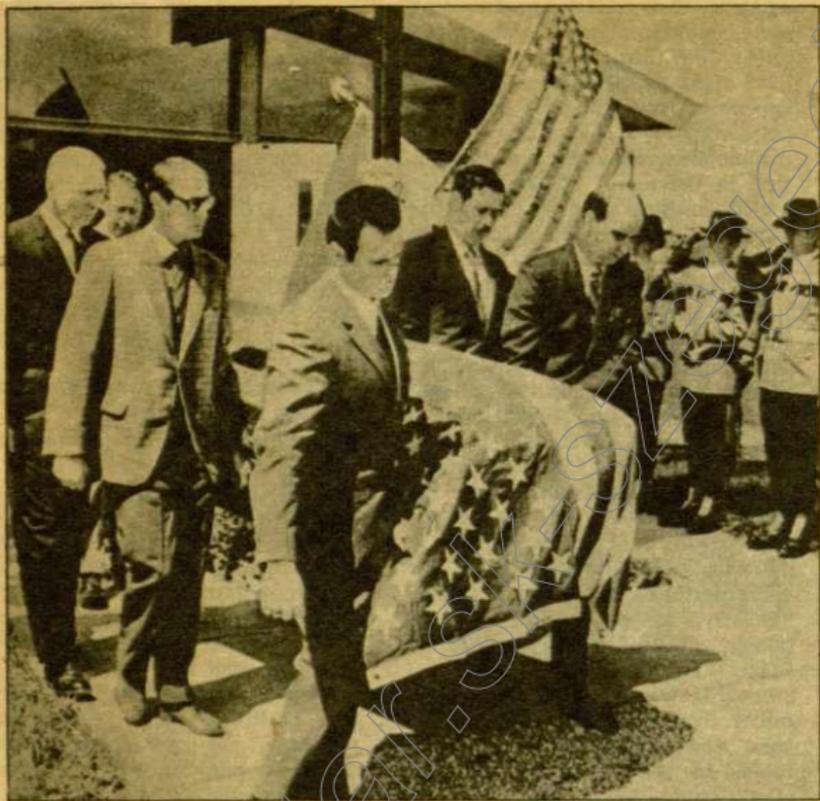


tive Pisces type, solitary, strange and abruptly violent, though a self-proclaimed eco-pacifist and admirer of Henry David "Toe-Row." In both Capote's and Wambaugh's books, the killer, the man through whom lightning strikes, is analyzed with exceptional care and becomes an interesting and sinister character. But Eszterhas's Charlie Simpson is never quite more than just one of those disturbed kids who latched onto the ideas of the Movement as expressions of their own inarticulate trouble and seized its occasions and excuses for cathartic violence. We learn just enough of Ootney to know that his act was (of course) psychotic, not ideological.

Yet Eszterhas shows—and here he's good—how both sides of Harrisonville seized on the shooting as a sign that the real, ridiculous, hokum Revolution was upon them. Seized on it almost gleefully: for both sides come across as equally lazy in their prejudices, equally eager to provoke each other, equally ready to turn to violence as an antidote to boredom and an alternative to thought. It alarms Joe Eszterhas that no one in Harrisonville really seemed to care about the actual killings; hippies and Chamber of Commerce alike just looked to their respective images as Revolutionaries and Defenders of the American Way.

But what about the killings? The power of Wambaugh's "The Onion Field" lies in his re-creation of the terror and pain and grief of the murder victims and their families. Eszterhas himself, in pointing out that both sides of the town were preening their images, fails to get behind those images to the reality of what happened. The fact that all this teasing, bristling and posing led to real death seems just the point, but it never quite comes across. The problem is style and the implications of style.

Eszterhas is writing Rolling Stone journalese at its least satisfying: an adjectival jazz full of facile value judgments (Harrisonville is a "tacky jaundiced Southern town" in the "hidebound but atrophied Dixie tradition") that does not capture the human roundness of its subjects, but spins out a running caricature of American ranch. It is a mode by now as down-pat as Harrisonville's revolution, and it distracts irritatingly from the substance of what it describes, though it can be entertaining in itself, like a stoned showman's patter. It undermines any seriousness and implicitly puts Eszterhas on the side of the kids; though he finally does see them and expose them as the fitting spawn of their narrow-minded parents, his style cannot take a third, objective position, and so his book stays half-trapped in the "counterculture" of which it should be the post-mortem. ■



After the funeral of Simpson's victim, police officer Donald L. Marker.

