

Lefkow killer doesn't fit our need for symbols

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You probably don't like to jump to conclusions in homicide cases, either.

But I bet nobody figured that the killer in the Lefkow slayings would turn out to be some crazed Polish electrician with mouth cancer and a grudge.

Instead, many of us thought of the obvious, of young white men, skinny and hateful and poor, with a thing for leather, scrawling swastikas on their shoulders with markers, stacks of magazines under their beds, porn and Soldier of Fortune, speaking with a twang.

"No one would have figured it," a Chicago police detective told me. "[Investigators] had nothing. If he didn't kill himself, if he didn't draw attention to himself with the notes, he'd probably still be out there."

The electrician seems so ludicrous after so many white supremacist theories that it was unsettling. Not as unsettling as the slayings themselves, but almost.

Because the killer of the husband and mother of U.S. District Court Judge Joan Lefkow was supposed to be a white supremacist.

Isn't that so?

That's what was expected. But it didn't happen.

It must have been jarring for many, the news that the killer is not some creepy ideologue, but a lonely, angry man raging against Judge Lefkow because she tossed out his medical malpractice suit.

Bart Ross, who lived on the North Side with his dog and cat, claimed responsibility for the Feb. 28 slayings of Michael Lefkow and Donna Humphrey. He wrote at least two notes of confession and described how he killed them.

He sent one note to the NBC news station in Chicago. He had another with him in his car when he drove to Milwaukee. A local cop stopped him for a minor traffic violation, and Ross decided to put a bullet into his own brain.

The news was disappointing. Most folks weren't ready for something this random. They weren't properly prepared. No one was. How could we have been?

The drumbeat was all about the supremacists. The politics lined up neatly, along with all the theories. And there was this key fact: The deadly white supremacist Matthew Hale was already awaiting sentencing on charges that he conspired to have Lefkow killed.

So it was Matthew Hale this and Matthew Hale that, and white supremacists this and white supremacists that. That was a natural connection to make, and it had to be investigated. But those outside the investigation, those speculating, had proper political cover.

It also fit our need to make the killings of the family of a federal judge something worthy of the deed. It had to be linked to someone like Hale; someone tied to a bitter

ideological vine, because by then the victims themselves had also been transformed. They'd become symbols for what is decent.

And it wouldn't do if some babbling maniac wiped out decency. That would leave too much to chance and not enough to reason. Most of us are reasonable people. So it had to be a supremacist.

Then reality showed up and ruined the movie.

It also eclipsed the Big Speech.

The Big Speech is what I call that monologue that concludes a TV crime drama. The Big Speech is given by actors who play a detective or prosecuting attorney or judge, and they speak in a weary voice as prescribed by the cliché. I suppose we should throw in real news people, since we often make the Big Speech, too, although we play ourselves.

The Big Speech in the Lefkow case was so tempting; a few couldn't help but make it before anyone was charged with the crimes. Those who came later would have struck the same tone.

We would have all denounced the racism of the haters and stood confidently on the side of angels. We would have each felt very good about ourselves, wagging our fingers at Hale, comfortable with the moral of the story.

There has to be a moral, at least in bad fiction written by people who probably should know better. It is the lesson, the why. That's the Big Speech.

"That's why I never watch detective shows," the detective told me Thursday, as we talked about the Lefkow case, as we had been doing for several days.

"You know those shows," he said. "First the victim is killed, then there's a commercial, you get a sandwich and at the end, you get a guilty verdict and the boss says something snappy and then another commercial. You don't watch reporter shows, do you?"

Of course not.

"OK. A homicide is either simple, cut-and-dried gang stuff, or domestic stuff, and you figure you know who did it, or it takes some weird twists and you have to backtrack it for a long time," he said. "But in those weird ones, you never focus in on one theory. Otherwise, you get tunnel vision."

And you can't make the Big Speech, I said.

"Whatever," he said.

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Page: 2

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