

## Approved for use in English IV: Crime Literature

### Summary of the Work:

*Helter Skelter* was written by Vincent Bugliosi (with Curt Gentry), the prosecuting attorney in two headline murder cases occurring in Los Angeles in 1969. The book begins with the discovery of a grisly murder scene involving five well-known Hollywood personalities including actress Sharon Tate. Two days later a second murder scene at the wealthy La Bianca estate is discovered. Eventually, the investigation connects the two cases and ties the murders to members of a cult, the Manson Family, including Charles Manson, Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkel, and Leslie Van Houten. The book chronicles a thorough presentation of police crime scene investigations (and botched investigations), detailed witness testimonies, trial proceedings, and personal conversations that ultimately bring together the facts of the crime and Manson's convoluted philosophy. The book provides answers to difficult questions: Why were these victims killed with such brutality, leaving shockingly heinous crime scenes? How did Charles Manson get his "family" to kill for him?

### Rationale:

The book is especially appropriate for a senior-level Crime Literature class:

- This book made publishing history as the top-selling true crime book.
- The trial itself set records:
  - It was the longest trial, lasting more than nine and a half months.
  - The jury was sequestered for a record eight months.
  - The main prosecution witness, Linda Kasabian, occupied the stand for 18 days.

This book contains graphic descriptions of violent crimes and crime scenes. Some sexual references and language usage is not appropriate for younger readers. Students found some details of the Family behavior truly frightening, especially knowing these events actually happened, but this can make discussions more pertinent. Students generally find this a compelling read, but some parts are disturbing and need to be discussed openly in class.

### Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

*Wilson's Senior High School* 10/01/07  
*Mystery Magazine Web* Fall 2004

- \* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.
- \* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

### Noted Distinction:

- Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime book, 1975

### Readability:

- Lexile Score: 1460
- Readability Level:

### Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

### Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

### Approval:

Submitted to Committee: May 2005

Approved for Adoption: September 2005

### Notes on the Text:

*(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)*

This book works best with seniors, particularly in Crime Literature units. Students taking such a class exhibit a high interest in the work.

The text is an interesting study of some issues of the 1960s: race riots, student protests, the Vietnam War, drug use, Haight Ashbury, rock music/lyrics, communes, etc. The book explains the murders with an extensive explanation of Charlie Manson's convoluted use of the Bible and Beatles music to create a philosophy that appealed to his young followers who, like many young people in the late '60s, had become emotionally lost, disillusioned, and embittered.

The book can be discussed from a sociological/psychological approach. Manson is an intriguing product of his circumstances and the times. He is a victim of child abuse: he was abandoned by his parents and abused by foster parents and relatives. He had lived more than half his life in institutions by the time he went to trial for these murders. Students may research cult mentality, penal institutions, child abuse, schizophrenia, the criminal mind, and American society in the 1960s.

Teaching this book provides an excellent opportunity for incorporating community speakers: a police officer to discuss crime scene investigation and suspect interrogation, a defense and/or prosecuting lawyer to discuss the legal system, and/or a county coroner to discuss crime scene forensics.

### Connection to the Curriculum:

*Helter Skelter* is a popular text in English IV E: Crime Literature, allowing a detailed view of the American legal system and a psychological, sociological study of the criminal mind.

### Additional Connections:

*(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)*

Several film versions of the film exist:

- *Helter Skelter* (1976) ~ Marc Alaimo, Josh Albee, Rod Arrants, and Edward Bell
- *Helter Skelter* (2004) ~ Bruno Kirby, Marguerite Moreau, Jeremy Davies, and Mary Lynn Rajsuk
- *The Beatles* [White Album] (1968) There are allusions in the book to several songs from this album, most notably "Helter Skelter," covered by U2 and others.