



The Killing of Emma Gross

Damien Seaman

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Based on the true story of notorious serial killer Peter Kürten and the unsolved murder of Düsseldorf prostitute Emma Gross...

Düsseldorf, 1st March 1929, the dying days of the Weimar Republic. A prostitute is found dead in a cheap hotel room, brutally murdered. But her death is soon forgotten as the city's police hunt a maniac attacking innocent women and children. A killer the press has dubbed the Düsseldorf Ripper.

Detective Thomas Klein's career is going nowhere until he gets a tip-off leading to the Ripper's arrest. But the killer's confession to the hooker's murder is full of holes, and Klein soon comes to believe this is one murder the killer didn't commit. Motivated by spite, ambition, or maybe even a long-buried sense of justice, finding out who really killed Emma Gross becomes Klein's obsession.

Particularly when the evidence begins to point closer to home...

The Killing of Emma Gross Details

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Nancy Oakes says

I have the Five Leaves Crime version of this novel -- the cover picture is so much better than the edition listed here. (Give it a look-see here.

As I've been known to say for some time, I like my crime fiction dark and edgy. The Killing of Emma Gross is both of those things, and is based around the real-life case of Peter Kürten, the so-called "vampire of Düsseldorf" or "monster of Düsseldorf," a serial killer who plied his trade during the days of Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-1933). The author is quick to point out that the "vampire" label didn't actually originate at the time, but Kürten's crimes were definitely beyond heinous, as he brutally preyed on women and young girls. While those crimes and the "monster" who committed them are definitely a focus in this novel, the book examines a detective's quest to solve another murder, that of a young prostitute named Emma Gross, also a real victim, but not one of Kürten's. He claimed her as one of his, but it was a false confession. There is absolutely, I repeat, absolutely no light in this novel, but it is definitely a story worth looking into.

Detective Thomas Klein of the Düsseldorf KRIPO (kriminalpolizei) has accomplished the impossible. He has arranged to meet Peter Kürten and put an end to the fear plaguing the streets of Düsseldorf. Kürten is arrested and taken away, but not by Klein; that honor went to his rival, Detective Inspector Michael Ritter. Ritter and Klein are at odds not only because Klein worked on his own to arrange Kürten's arrest and

withheld important evidence, but also because Klein had previously been sleeping with Ritter's wife Gisela. When Kürten is brought in, Klein is put away in a cell as well and worked over -- part of Ritter's revenge and anger toward him. When the police start to question Kürten, however, he won't speak to anyone about the case except for Klein, so Ritter is forced to release him and accept that Klein will be a part of the investigation. Kürten is only too eager to talk -- he confesses to all the murders and as proof that he really did them, takes police to the body of a little girl they'd been looking for and others not previously known about. But when he confesses to the murder of Emma Gross, something is off -- he gets the details wrong. In the meantime, another man had supposedly confessed, was taken to trial and convicted of the murders of Emma Gross and two others; that man now lives in a mental hospital, too mentally ill to be put away in prison at the time. Klein realizes that two of the murders confessed to by Kürten were ascribed to this other man, and if that's the case, perhaps the killing of Emma Gross was done by someone else entirely. Following only the slimmest of hints and leads, Klein sets about to find Emma's killer and help clear the name of the man falsely accused.

The Killing of Emma Gross is very straightforward, no unnecessary detours are taken throughout the novel, and the historical era is well conveyed, although perhaps not as fully as I'd expected. It's nearing the end of the Weimar era (1929) and the author captures ordinary citizens' frustration at inflation and unemployment, the Communists who took on "capitalist corruption" and printed their versions of the "truth" in their newspapers, police brutality and corruption, and the darker, seedier side of the city during this time. In one scene that I'll probably never forget because of the image it made in my head, Klein walks into a club where a bizarre cabaret is going on, performed by women dressed in nothing but a Kaiser Wilhelm mustache and a helmet. The time and place are not conveyed as well as they are, say, in Marek Krajewski's characterizations of this period in his Eberhard Mock novels, but there's enough here to transport the reader. Aside from that issue, the author is a master of sleight-of-hand (I can't explain why, but just trust me here), his central mystery is very well focused, as is Klein's investigation. There's also bonus at the end of this book for anyone who may be remotely interested in the real-life Peter Kürten -- a timeline that takes the reader through his crimes up to his eventual execution in 1931.

I'd recommend this novel for readers of very dark crime -- this book is definitely not for the faint of heart, nor for anyone looking for a happy ending. It's edgy, gritty and I have to say, one of the better books I've read in the area of crime this year. It is a no-nonsense, cutesy-less novel and I hope he continues this trend in the next book he writes -- considering that this is his first novel, I'm amazed to discover that his way of writing crime fiction matches the type of work I look forward to finding and reading in this genre. Super.

Elusive says

Based on a true story, 'The Killing of Emma Gross' is about a prostitute who is found dead in a hotel room. Meanwhile, the police are focusing on capturing a serial killer nicknamed the Ripper. It is up to Detective Thomas Klein to determine if there is any connection between the prostitute and the serial killer.

This story held so much promise but it ultimately didn't quite deliver. The opening scene itself was a massive mistake as it revealed the identity of the person involved in the prostitute's murder. The attraction of a crime story lies in the opportunity for the reader to attempt to solve the mystery. Therefore, when such a major revelation is presented from the start, it ruins the aforementioned opportunity. Plus, it takes away any suspense the story could have evoked. In this case, it would have been better if the author had written the book from the perspective of that particular person.

The lack of focus and direction was another problem. Sure, Klein did investigate and it was interesting to read about his mishaps and difficulty in getting people to answer important questions. However, the whole thing felt disorganized and messy. There was nothing that helped to gradually lead up to the climax or to systematically bring the reader to the point of getting closer to the answer. There were a couple of humorous dialogues which I liked and more of those would have certainly been welcomed. Apart from Klein, other characters were flat and as a result, it's hard to care about any of them.

Overall, 'The Killing of Emma Gross' could have been good if the characters were fleshed out, combined with a structured writing style.

Josh says

The Killing of Emma Gross chronicles the reign of notorious serial killer Peter Kürten in which late 1920's/early 1930's saw Düsseldorf's own Jack the Ripper terrorise residents and taunt police in a spree which can be compared to modern day horrors typically more macabre and heinous than those of the bygone era.

Damien Seaman invokes the provocative and nurtures the killers' prerogative through blood red lenses as he depicts a period piece where artistic licence and fact bleed a more daring form of truth. Capturing the essence of the tainted and honest alike, Seaman's early introduction of key players Thomas Klein (aka Doubtful Thomas) and Peter Kürten pits a well mannered killer against a police force in need of redemption following a string of grotesque murders. From Klein's distinct under dog persona - having fallen victim to segregation courtesy of fellow officers' personal vendetta which threatens to impedes an investigation surrounding the disappearance of a young girl, to the evolution of a lone wolf complex not unlike the PI's of the noir tradition - the story grows with the protagonist with each dimension delivering further depth and humility.

Adding complexity with conviction, Damien Seaman, weaves the certifiable Stausberg's murders into the equation raising doubt over the initial sentence and subsequent competency of the police to shed new light on decaying bodies - notably Emma Gross.

The Killing of Emma Gross is a unique and captivating historical police procedural that delivers on premise from the opening blood soaked stanza to the twisted conclusion. An essential guide to the darker side of 1930's Europe.

Side note: As much as The Killing of Emma Gross was a joy in itself to read, the timeline material at the end provides a sense of context to the murders and showcases the struggles the police had in bringing those responsible to justice. History buffs and crime enthusiasts will love this.

Katherine Tomlinson says

March, 1929...a prostitute named Emma Gross is killed in a Dusseldorf hotel room and her body mutilated so the wounds mimic those borne by two other murder victims. Johann Stausberg confesses to all three crimes and is sent to Grafenberg Asylum for the criminally insane. That should have been that, but a year later, the arrest of *serienmörder* (serial killer) Peter Kürten brings to light certain discrepancies that investigating officer Thomas Klein simply can't ignore. And it doesn't hurt that proving Johann Stausberg

didn't kill Emma Gross will humiliate his ex-partner Michael Ritter who has hated him ever since learning of Thomas' affair with his wife Gisela.

Damien Seaman's debut novel, *The Killing of Emma Gross* stuns the reader like a blow from the claw-hammer wielded by one of its characters. The novel is equal parts police procedural, psychological thriller and dramatic deconstruction of a love affair gone very, very wrong. This is a plot that involves secrets and lies buried so deep inside that winking them out involves blood and pain on an epic scale.

For everyone but Thomas, the question of "Who killed Emma Gross?" is less important than "Who cares who killed Emma Gross?" and the closer Thomas gets to answers, the more questions surface. This is not a simple book and Thomas is not a simple character. A veteran of the Great War, he is scarred inside and out from the experience, but traumatized even more by the death of "Lilli" and his wretched love affair with Ritter's wife. He is capable of mistreating people in his search for the truth, but he's also susceptible to moments of what he calls "softness."

He is utterly appalled and repelled by the bond Peter Kürten wants to forge with him but forced by circumstances to nurture that relationship in order to get information he hopes will save a little girl's life. Peter is a total sociopath who enjoys his little jokes at Thomas' expense, and who tries to arrange to have his wife collect the reward money offered for information leading to his arrest.

Everyone wants credit for bringing "the Ripper" to justice, and the game of ambition being played out in the Dusseldorf police station is complicated by the arrival of Ernst Gennat, an investigator from Berlin who suspects that all is not what it seems but who has no interest in upsetting the status quo, at least not openly. He is, however, not above giving Thomas tacit permission to probe all he likes—so long as there's plausible deniability back at the station.

Some reviewers have compared *The Killing of Emma Gross* to Philip Kerr's Berlin Noir novels featuring private detective Bernie Gunther, but Seaman's work most resembles that of novelist/historian Caleb Carr, particularly his third novel *Angel of Death*. Like *Angel of Death* and its prequel *The Alienist*, *The Killing of Emma Gross* weaves real people—pathologist Karl Berg, murderer Peter Kürten, Chief Inspector Ernst Gennat, victim Emma Gross—into a plot filled with original characters so seamlessly that it's impossible to tell where invention takes over.

The story plays out against an historical backdrop that is subtle—a comment about the economy here, a description of a decadent nightclub there. The rabid paranoia attached to the Communists becomes part of the plot as the investigative reporter Du Pont embarrasses the police by uncovering their incompetence and pointing fingers at their ineffectual investigations. Thomas, for all his irreverence, is not entirely immune to the zeitgeist. At one point, he tiredly admits to himself that there are arguments for sterilizing "the criminal classes." Since Thomas is a "good German," we want to think he's only joking, but we know what is to come in a decade and so the remark is chilling.

Seaman, who has lived in Germany, salts his dialogue with the kinds of phrases not taught in high school classes, words like the epithet *arshloch*, a term that needs no translation. The variety of derogatory words his characters use for "prostitute" seems indicative of a culture that was fascinated by illicit sex.

With *The Killing of Emma Gross*, Seaman turns lurid fact into brilliant fiction.

Mark Satchwill says

Taking inspiration from the real life crimes of the "Vampire of Dusseldorf", Peter Kurten, Damien Seaman's debut novel is a dark and gritty crime thriller set in Weimar-era Germany.

Emma Gross, a prostitute, is murdered. A simple young man, Johann Stausberg confesses to the murder, and to two others, and is thrown in an asylum. So why is newly arrested Peter Kurten, keen to form a bond with officer Thomas Klein, confessing to the murder as well? Is this a chance to humiliate his ex-partner Michael Ritter, who arrested Stausberg for the crime, and who has hated him since he learned of Klein's affair with his wife? His investigations uncover uglier truths that he had ever suspected...

Mr. Seaman skilfully weaves fact and fiction to create his story, subtly creating the atmosphere of the times without resorting to cliche. Klein himself is a well-written and complex character, determined to find the truth but willing to use unorthodox methods to uncover it, as well as expressing some morally dubious attitudes.

An excellent debut novel and highly recommended.

Louise says

when I finally sat down for some time with this book, I found it quite fast paced... it was a fairly bleak subject, the murder of a prostitute, tangled up with several other murders of a famous serial killer.

Despite the opening pages telling us who the murderer was, the story managed to turn most things on its head, and have good plausible reasons for doing so...

interesting characters, and well thought out plot, mixing the Ripper's actual victims with this story.

Quentin says

Excellent. One of the best things I've read this year.

Kath says

I have been a follower of Blasted Heath since they went live and, when I read the blurb about this book, pre-ordered it in a flash mainly because I was intrigued by the concept of injecting fiction into a very well known murder enquiry.

I am pleased to say that my expectations were not just met but totally superseded. Attention to detail was perfect, and the amount of research done was clearly evident. The timeline at the end of the book added an extra dimension and did actually leave me wanting to know more about Kurten. Sometimes I read a book just for a distraction and sometimes I either want to learn something from it or I want it to give me something to think about. This book definitely falls into the latter category, for me anyway.

It was also refreshing to read a book set in days past, especially one also based in a different country, rather than the same old police procedurals set in UK, in the now, that I have been reading recently.

Formatting, grammar and spelling faultless (to my knowledge) good descriptive passages without being over-descriptive and the language and whole feel of the book assisted the story to flow and be totally

credible amongst the facts already laid down from Kurten's history. Characters were nicely fleshed out and believable - even the "bit part players". The book literally took hold of me from start to finish - read it in a day.

All in all, it made it hard to believe that this is actually a "first novel" from this author. I will keep an eye out for more from Mr Seaman, and indeed from Blasted Heath.

Rebecca McNutt says

Creepy, and the content will linger in your mind long after you read it, but this book was really morbid and I was more interested in the police procedures than hearing a bunch of PSYCHOlogy nuts' theories about killers. I like crime fiction but only when there's more to it than just disturbing content.

Midnight says

I found this very clever combination of fact and fiction totally riveting. Most good fiction has a loose foundation on actual experiences or events with a generous dollop of the author's imagination. In this story, Damien Seaman takes an actual historical 'cold case' and places his own twist on it.

The story is set in Germany from March 1929; a period when a killer daubed 'The Ripper' and the 'Vampire of Dusseldorf' by the media is alluding police. During this time, prostitute Emma Gross was murdered and her body mutilated in the same way as two other victims; simpleton Johann Stausberg has confessed to all three crimes and been committed to an asylum.

However, there are a number of inconsistencies in Strausberg's recall of Emma's killing. Later, Peter Kürten is arrested for a number of other serial killings and Detective Thomas Klein begins to probe further into her murder.

The author adds extra authenticity by the use of various real life characters including pathologist Karl Berg; murderer Peter Kürten, who was actually charged with nine murders and seven attempted murders and was executed by guillotine in 1931; and Chief Inspector Ernst Gennat.

Additional true-life detail is given in a timeline included at the end of the story, adding further interest.

If I were able to award more than five stars to this story, I would certainly do so and I sincerely hope the author has more in a similar vein in the pipeline.

I cannot recommend this highly enough and am amazed this inspired piece of writing is a debut novel!

Nigel Bird says

The Killing Of Emma Gross is based upon a true story, set in a period when 'the Ripper' (or 'Vampire Of Dusseldorf') was terrorising families in Germany in the late 1920s.

The murder we're concerned with is of one Emma Gross, a prostitute found killed in the room of a seedy hotel where customers pay by the hour. It's one that comes as part of a rather unfortunate package.

Seaman takes the idea of this unsolved case and weaves a wonderful story for the reader to delight in.

The book opens with Detective Michael Ritter with the body of Emma Gross and we get a fly on the wall view of what happens.

From that point on we're inside the head of one Detective Thomas Klein. In fact, we're not just inside his head but inside his whole body as it reacts to each situation and new emotion in different ways. It's quite a skill Seaman has with internal settings, giving us not only Klein's insides, but small rooms and oppressive atmospheres that lend to the whole piece a claustrophobic feel which entirely makes sense for the period and situation.

Unfortunately for Klein, he has something of a history with his senior colleague Ritter and this leads to trouble when their paths cross over the case.

Klein has been tipped off about the 'the Ripper' Peter Kurten and sets off to arrest him in a church.

Instead of making Klein the hero, Ritter turns the world upside down and Klein is given a roasting in an interrogation room.

The bringing in of a Berlin hotshot soon sees Klein back on the case and he's soon sent off to work on a maverick operation that leaves him vulnerable from every angle.

Klein is a superb character. An old storm trooper who's allowed himself to go to seed, he moves through the underbelly of the city with all senses bar smell switched on.

We get a glimpse of what it might have been like in a post-war world where the communists have been crushed, there's an economic depression and Freud has a spreading influence that percolates through German Expressionism. I got flashes of the movie 'M' every so often (Fritz Lang's very early talkie from the period and dealing with a serial child-killer) – that's a film I admire greatly so if the effect was intentional, I take my hat off.

Seaman throws in some German language every once in a while, usually in terms of humour (the word 'arsch' is slipped in wonderfully from time-to-time).

I'd say he also did a lot of research, but it's leaked to us subtly rather than rammed.

It's a must for the fan of the police procedural and is even more of an essential read for those fans looking for something with a strong and unique flavour.

Full Marx.

Anthony Cardenas says

I really, REALLY liked this book. More than I thought I would. I usually don't read "based on a true story" type of fiction, as I'm almost too tempted to look up the subject matter on the internet ahead of time and have it all spoiled for me before I even read the story. Thankfully, I knew nothing of the historical case, and I kept my curiosity reserved for the actual book, which was an absolute pleasure to read.

I won't repeat the synopsis, as the book description pretty much says it all. The writing is descriptive without being flowery. A very lean, no nonsense, economical and evocative prose, one that gets the job done. Which makes sense, because the book is told from the point of view of Detective Thomas Klein, former stormtrooper and a man nursing ulcers, guilty secrets, and a ton of regrets. He fits the mold of the Noir anti-hero, but it feels different because we are actually experiencing a noire-like story set in late 1920's, early 1930's of Dusseldorf.

Dusseldorf. This is the second time in recent memory that this city has come up in a work of fiction that I have enjoyed. The first was in Naoki Urasawa's masterpiece, *Monster*, and now this. Both show Dusseldorf as a city filled with corruption and, perhaps, a little sick in the soul. Another work that came to mind while I was reading was Fritz Lang's *M*. And when I got to the end of the book and read the appendices, I was pleased to discover who the character of Gennat was based upon. It made perfect sense.

Klein narrates his journey into the underbelly of Dusseldorf to uncover (I hesitate to use the word "discover" for the reason I indicate below) the truth about the murder of a prostitute, Emma Gross, with gritty determination and resolve. One reviewer mentioned that we not only get into Klein's head, but also inside of his body, and I couldn't have said it better myself. We the reader inhabit Klein completely, suffering his mental, emotional, malaise along with him (did anyone else get indigestion just reading about how much stomach acid was burning through his guts...?). This is by far the most compelling thing about the book, and why I found myself not reading faster, but reading slower, almost savoring each scene, really enjoying "being" Klein, as painful and uncomfortable as that may have been throughout his ordeal.

So there were two things that prevented me from absolutely loving this book:

First, and oddly the most ironic, is the way in which the book starts. I say ironic because the opening is one of my favorite parts of the book, and one of the best openings that I've ever read in any work of fiction. In fact, it was what made me buy the book in the first place. But after that opening, which is told in a 3rd person point of view, it shifted into Klein's limited point of view, and that's where the how and why of the opening is told. It's not as if the opening gives everything away...but it sure does give a lot away on the onset, making a lot of what Klein "discovers" seem almost redundant at times. I think I would have preferred more "mystery" in that opening, and not so much detailed information. Something to keep me guessing a little bit more than I actually did.

The second reason, is probably the least important to the overall work, as it is completely subjective and open to interpretation, is the cover logo. I actually found the book logo really difficult to read. The whites bleed into the background and the font itself was so jagged and bizarre, that at first I thought it read "The Kill Emma Cross". And I hope that if Mr. Seaman sees fit to have a paperback edition produced (even a print on demand one) that he rethinks the lettering on the book cover as it may look slightly off in print. But again, this is the most vain and superficial comment of all time, and I blush at even mention it. But it did actually stand out to me so i thought I would share it.

In summary:

This was a great book. As a first book, it really hits it out of the park. As a piece of historically based fiction (with some liberties taken obviously) it is completely engrossing. I'll definitely be looking forward to other

works by Damien Seaman.

Raven says

I have recently attended CrimeFest in Bristol and saw Damien Seaman on a couple of the crime panels in which he mentioned his book, currently only available in e-book format. I was very intrigued by the premise of the story which is a historical re-imagining of the infamous serial killer Peter Kurten aka 'The Vampire of Dusseldorf' set in the 1920's so hastily downloaded it. I was thoroughly gripped from start to finish and found Seaman's recreation of this period utterly real and with close adherence to original source materials (with only a little tinkering) enforcing the realism of the story and making it even more affecting. Seaman conjures up locale and atmosphere with a deft touch so the sights and sounds of this period are perfectly evoked and his description of the murder victims and scenes of crime are tangible and powerful. His main protagonist, detective Thomas Klein, is a wonderfully drawn character possessing a single-minded determination to not only capture the infamous Kurten but to properly establish the truth behind the killing of the prostitute Emma Gross which Klein realises is analogous to the other murders taking place- being similar but dissimilar in certain regards. Klein is imbued with a dark and pithy sense of humour reminiscent of the quick fire hard-boiled style of McBain and Chandler and the whole atmosphere of the book reminded me of the black and white unlit atmosphere of films such as 'The Third Man. As a prolific crime reader this was certainly an impressive debut that I would thoroughly recommend to other readers who enjoy crime based on true life cases and I very much look forward to the next book...

Scot says

This debut novel by author Damien Seaman gets points with me for being based upon a carefully researched historical incident, the serial killings of "the Vampire of Dusseldorf" in the late 1920s. A researched chronology of the actual historical events is a useful and interesting addendum.

The narrator, a heroic hard boiled type with the requisite code of honor and a wry sense of humor, has to deal with the political machinations and underhandedness of a former partner--whom, we later learn, he cuckolded in the past. The grittiness of this tough cop style comes through nicely, and so does the atmosphere when in some of the tawdrier drinking establishments visited during the ongoing investigations. Still, not all of the conversations or interactions are believable. Too often, behaviors and attitudes come across as too modern (and even American), and I guess what I hungered for were even more details to flush out the German cultural beliefs, practices, and social interactions appropriate to that time and place. When this sort of thing is done, such as describing the visit to the church-run hostel, I find the tale most compelling. Good development of a personal subplot even as the mystery about just who did what killing when and why grows more intricate and engaging.
