

Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery

By: Robert Kolker

About the book: A literary account of the lives and presumed serial killings of five “Craigslit” prostitutes, whose bodies were found on the same Long Island beach in 2010. Based on the New York Magazine cover story. Shannan wanted acceptance. Maureen wanted a solution. Megan wanted love. Melissa wanted adventure. Amber wanted to be saved. Over the course of three years, each of these young women vanished without a trace: Sharing the same profile the police concluded they were all the victims of one murderer, the Long Island serial killer. Working closely with the women’s families, Lost Girls tells the stories of their deaths and their lives, offering a searing portrait of crime and circumstance that goes to the heart of modern America itself.

About the Author: Robert Kolker is the author of Lost Girls, a New York Times best-seller and New York Times Notable Book, and one of Slate’s best nonfiction books of the quarter century. He is a National Magazine Award finalist whose journalism has appeared in New York magazine, the New York Times Magazine, Bloomberg Businessweek, Wired, O, the Oprah Magazine, and The Marshall Project.

People:

Maureen Brainard-Barnes: 25 Years old, missing since 2007 body was found in 2010. Working to try to pay to not get evicted went to New York.

Melissa “Missy” Barthelemy: 24 Years Old, Missing since 2009, from New York Found in 2010. The first of the “Gilgo Beach Four” to be found. Her younger sister Amanda kept getting anonymous calls taunting her.

Megan Waterman: 22 years old, went missing in 2010, left her one daughter Lily with her grandmother Muriel who she was raised by. Her mother is Lorraine was in and out of her life. Her body was found in 2010.

Amber Lynn Costello: 27 years old, went missing in 2010, family believed that she was in a residential drug rehabilitation center later filed a missing person's report when she wasn't there. Her and her sister Kim both posted on craigslist.

Shannan Gilbert: 24 years old, went missing in 2010, found in 2011. Her disappearance is what sparked the findings of the bodies at Gilgo Beach. Her mother Mari advocated for the theory that her daughter had been murdered by a serial killer

Rex Heuermann: He is on trial for the murder of Melissa Barthelemy, Megan Waterman, Amber Costello, Maureen Brainard-Barnes, Jessica Taylor, Valerie Mack and Sandra Costilla. He was arrested in July 2023 and he is back in court in January 2026.

Discussion Questions:

1. Kolker highlights the failures of law enforcement and social systems. What systemic issues stood out to you the most, and why?
2. Kolker uses a journalistic, non-sensational tone even though the case is disturbing. How does this style impact your reading experience?
3. The book is structured around the lives of the victims instead of the killer. How did this shift your perspective on true-crime storytelling?
4. What did you think about Kolker's approach to presenting the women's backgrounds?
5. Did any woman's story resonate with you in particular? Why?
6. How does understanding their family lives affect your perception of the case and the victims?
7. Kolker critiques both police work and media coverage. Do you think the case would have been handled differently if the victims came from higher-status backgrounds?
8. What ethical questions arise from the media's portrayal of the women as "Craigslist escorts"?
9. The Long Island setting plays a significant role. How does the geography and socioeconomic landscape shape the investigation?
10. What did you think of the depiction of Oak Beach residents and the tensions within the community?
11. What emotions did the book leave you with — anger, sadness, frustration?
12. Given that the case remained unsolved at the time of publication, how does the lack of resolution affect your interpretation of the story?
13. What do you think the book says about whose lives are valued in American society?
14. What does the story reveal about the intersection of poverty, gender, and vulnerability in America?

Read Alike:

- The devil behind the badge: the horrifying twelve days of the border patrol serial killer by Jervis, Rick
- Boys enter the house: the victims of John Wayne Gacy and the lives they left behind by Nelson, David B.
- Zodiac by Graysmith, Robert