

Helltown: The Untold Story of a Serial Killer on Cape Cod

By: Casey Sherman

About the Book: 1969: The hippie scene is vibrant in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Long-haired teenagers roam the streets, strumming guitars and preaching about peace and love... and Tony Costa is at the center of it all. To a certain group of smitten young women, he is known as Sire—the leader of their counter-culture movement, the charming man who speaks eloquently and hands out hallucinogenic drugs like candy. But beneath his benign persona lies a twisted and uncontrollable rage that threatens to break loose at any moment. Tony Costa is the most dangerous man on Cape Cod, and no one who crosses his path is safe. When young women begin to disappear, Costa's natural charisma and good looks initially protect him from suspicion. But as the bodies are discovered, the police close in on him as the key suspect.

About the author: Sherman was born in Hyannis, Massachusetts. He attended Barnstable High School and graduated from Fryeburg Academy in 1988. He studied at Boston University, graduating in 1992. Sherman is an American author, journalist and screenwriter most famous for his 2009 book *The Finest Hours*, which was adapted into the Disney Studios 2016 film of the same name, and *Boston Strong*, which was adapted into the 2016 film *Patriots Day*.

Victims

- **Patricia Walsh** (victim)
- **Mary Ann Wysocki** (victim)
- **Susan Perry** (victim)
- **Christine Gallant** (victim)
- **Sydney Monzon** (victim)

Law Enforcement and Legal Figures

- **Tom Gunnery** (Massachusetts State Police Detective)
- **Bernie Flynn** (Massachusetts State Police Detective)
- Edmund Dinis (Massachusetts, district attorney)

Other Individuals Mentioned

- **Carl** (the name of Costa's "friend" who he claimed committed the murders)
- **Kurt Vonnegut** (His daughter, Edith, met Costa)

Questions:

1. What was your overall reaction to *Helltown*? Did it change your perception of Cape Cod or the true crime genre?
2. What aspects of the story did you find most compelling or disturbing?
3. How effectively do you think law enforcement handled the investigation at the time?
4. What investigative mistakes or missed opportunities stood out to you most?
5. How did the limitations of forensic science in the 1970s affect the case?

6. Do you think modern DNA technology and investigative tools would have solved the case sooner?
7. What role did jurisdictional issues and local politics play in the investigation?
8. How does Sherman portray Tony Costa? Did you see him as purely evil, deeply disturbed, manipulative, or something more complex?
9. What warning signs about Costa's behavior were overlooked by people around him?
9. Why do you think serial killers like Costa are able to gain trust despite alarming behavior?
10. Did the book offer insight into what motivates violent offenders, or did it leave those questions unanswered?
11. Why do you think society remains so fascinated by serial killer stories decades later?
13. Did the media coverage in the book help or hinder the investigation?
14. How does Sherman balance storytelling with factual reporting?
15. Did any parts of the book feel sensationalized, or did it remain respectful toward the victims?
16. How well do you think the victims were represented as individuals rather than just parts of a crime story?
17. What ethical responsibilities do true crime authors have toward victims' families?
18. Did the book make you think differently about missing persons cases and how they are investigated?
19. How does the unresolved nature of parts of the case affect your feelings about the story?
20. How important was Cape Cod itself to the atmosphere of the book?
21. The book contrasts the beauty of Provincetown with horrific crimes. How did that contrast affect your reading experience?
22. Why do you think isolated or tourist-heavy areas often become central to true crime narratives?
23. What did you think of Casey Sherman's writing style?
24. Did the pacing keep you engaged throughout the book?
25. How effectively did Sherman weave historical facts, interviews, and suspense together?
26. Were there moments where you questioned the reliability of any accounts or theories presented?
27. What does *Helltown* reveal about fear, rumor, and paranoia in small communities?
28. How does the book explore the idea of evil hiding beneath ordinary appearances?
29. What broader social or cultural themes stood out to you while reading?
30. Do you believe true crime books can serve a meaningful social purpose, or are they primarily entertainment?
31. Which moment or revelation from the book stayed with you the longest?
32. If you could ask Casey Sherman one question about his research or conclusions, what would it be?
33. Did the ending feel satisfying, frustrating, or haunting? Why?
34. Would you recommend this book to others?
35. Compare *Helltown* to another true crime book such as *Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery* by Robert Kolker or *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara?

Other Books by Casey Sherman:

-The Last Days of John Lennon: John Lennon, one of the world's most influential figures, spent the decade after the Beatles' breakup searching for his identity while facing growing threats and scrutiny. At the same time, Mark David Chapman's obsession with Lennon intensified, culminating in the 1980 murder that shocked the world and scarred a generation.

-The Finest Hours: The True Story of the U.S. Coast Guard's Most Daring Sea Rescue: *The Finest Hours* tells the true story of the devastating 1952 nor'easter that split two oil tankers in half off the coast of New England, leaving dozens of sailors stranded at sea. Facing towering waves and near-impossible odds, small Coast Guard rescue crews launched a daring mission that became one of the greatest acts of bravery in maritime history.

-A Murder in Hollywood: The Untold Story of Tinseltown's Most Shocking Crime: *Murder in Hollywood* explores the shocking true story of actress Lana Turner, her abusive relationship with mobster Johnny Stompanato, and the 1958 killing that changed Hollywood forever. When Turner's daughter Cheryl fatally stabbed Stompanato while trying to protect her mother, the sensational trial exposed the dark side of fame, violence, and celebrity culture.

-Above and Beyond: John F. Kennedy and America's Most Dangerous Cold War Spy Mission: *Above and Beyond* recounts the tense true story of President John F. Kennedy and U-2 pilots Rudy Anderson and Chuck Maultsby during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when a single mistake could have triggered nuclear war. As two spy planes went missing under dangerous circumstances, Kennedy's leadership and the pilots' bravery helped steer the world away from catastrophe.

-The Killer and Frank Lloyd Wright: The True Story of Mass Murder in Paradise: *The Killer and Frank Lloyd Wright* explores the brilliant but turbulent life of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, whose scandalous affair and tragic 1914 Taliesin murders captivated the nation. The book reveals how personal obsession, public scandal, and devastating loss shaped both Wright's legacy and the darker chapters of his life.

Read A Likes:

-A hunger to kill: a serial killer, a determined detective, and the quest for a confession that changed a small town forever by Kim Mager: *A Hunger to Kill* tells the chilling true story of Detective Kim Mager, whose psychological skill and persistence led to the confessions and conviction of Ohio serial killer Shawn Grate after an abducted woman's 911 call exposed his crimes. Through intense, high-stakes interrogations, Mager uncovered Grate's admissions to multiple murders, kidnappings, and sexual assaults, ultimately helping end his deadly rampage.

- The Scientist and the Serial Killer: the Search for Houston's Lost Boys by Lise Olsen: This true-crime account explores the horrific murders committed by Houston serial killer Dean Corll in the 1970s and the decades-long effort to identify his many unidentified victims, known as the "Lost Boys." Through forensic science, investigative reporting, and relentless determination, forensic anthropologist Sharon Derrick worked to restore the victims' identities and bring long-overdue closure to their families.

-Behold the Monster: Confronting America's most prolific serial killer by: Jillian Lauren: *Behold the Monster* follows journalist Jillian Lauren's disturbing investigation into serial killer Samuel Little, who confessed to murdering dozens of women over six decades while largely evading justice. Through extensive interviews with Little, Lauren uncovers chilling insights into his crimes while also restoring humanity and recognition to the victims whose stories had long been overlooked.

- The Babysitter: My Summers with a Serial Killer by Liza Rodman: Growing up on Cape Cod in the 1960s, Liza Rodman was a lonely little girl. During the summers, while her mother worked days in a local motel and danced most nights in the Provincetown bars, her babysitter—the kind, handsome handyman at the motel where her mother worked—took her and her sister on adventures in his truck. He bought them popsicles and together, they visited his "secret garden" in the Truro woods. To Liza, he was one of the few kind, understanding, and safe adults in her life. But there was one thing she didn't know; their babysitter was a serial killer. Though Tony Costa's gruesome case made screaming headlines in 1969 and beyond, Liza never made the connection between her friendly babysitter and the infamous killer of numerous women, including four in Massachusetts, until decades later.