



**An Interview with William Bernhardt,
Author of *Nemesis: The Final Case of Eliot Ness***

Question: Is *Nemesis* a true story? What really happened?

Answer: *Nemesis* is based on a true story. After Prohibition, Eliot Ness was appointed Safety Director for the city of Cleveland. He made significant progress toward cleaning up the city, but his successes were soon forgotten after a series of bizarre murders began plaguing the city. Eventually, the "Torso Murder", also known as the "Mad Butcher of Cleveland" claimed at least a dozen lives. The mayor asked Ness to get involved in the case—but the killer was never convicted.

Q: You say that you investigated this decades-old mystery. What did you do?

A: I combined all my skills—as a lawyer, as a writer, as a history buff, and as a generally nosy person—and applied them to this case. I traveled to Cleveland and scoured the archives and records relating to the crimes. I spoke to people who actually knew Eliot Ness. And I followed the leads and theories of other knowledgeable people. Eventually, the pieces of the puzzle began to come together.

Q: How did you become interested in Eliot Ness?

A: I have long been interested in this legendary crime fighter, probably from the first time I saw an episode of *The Untouchables*. I only learned a few years ago, however, when reading a biography of Ness, that he was involved with America's first serial killer. I thought that was a fascinating story—but it lacked an ending, since the killer was never found. So I set about trying to give the story an ending. I spent more than two years researching the case.

Q: Without spoiling the ending of the book, what proof do you have of your solution to the mystery?

A: I've identified a suspect who:

- was in Cleveland at the time of the murders
- lived near the site where most of the bodies were deposited
- had a history of mental illness and violence
- had the requisite medical knowledge
- had the perfect "laboratory" to commit the crimes and deposit the bodies in the river
- was politically connected
- was institutionalized shortly after the last victim was found—explaining why the murders finally stopped, and
- sent threatening postcards to Eliot Ness claiming to be the killer

What more do you want?

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Q: Did politics play a role in the case? Is that part of why the mystery was never solved until now?

A: Late in life, Eliot Ness claimed that he had a suspect for the Torso murders—but that the man was politically connected so he was unable to arrest him. At the time, no one believed him. But the suspect I have identified was in fact the cousin of an Ohio congressman who used his influence to release the suspect from questioning and to put him away in an institution so he would not be arrested. All of the sudden, Ness’s story looks a good deal more credible.

Q: What role did modern behavioral sciences play in your investigation?

A: When Eliot Ness tried to solve this case, there was no behavioral sciences department at the FBI or anywhere else. Now there is, and the vast amount of information the FBI has collected about serial killers was very helpful. Virtually all American serial killers fit the same profile—so I knew generally speaking who I was looking for.

Q: Is it true the acts of a child provided the critical clue?

A: In a way. Late in his life, Eliot Ness adopted a son, Bobby. When Bobby died of leukemia, his wife donated his memorabilia pertaining to his father to a Cleveland library. His scrapbooks provided a vital clue—threatening postcards sent to Ness by someone claiming to be the killer. A Cleveland police officer managed to trace the postcards back to the man who sent them. I investigated even further and became convinced that the man who sent those postcards was in fact “The Torso Murderer”.

Q: Your book is set during the Great Depression. Some people believe we’re headed for another one. How do the times depicted in your book mirror present times?

A: The crash of Wall Street and the financial markets triggered the Great Depression, at least in America, and we’re seeing something similar happening today. That said, I don’t believe our current economic woes have approached or will approach those of the 1930s. What I find most interesting, as I hear people predict dark times for the book world, is that during the Great Depression, reading books and spending on books actually increased. During the entire Depression, not a single library closed. Some people will always read. No other medium comes close to providing the same emotional and intellectual experience you get from reading.

Q: You call the person who committed these crimes—“The Torso Murderer”—America’s first serial killer. Why?

A: There had been other mass murderers, such as H.H. Holmes, the subject of *The Devil and the White City*. He was undoubtedly a sociopath, but most behavioral sciences experts do not consider him a serial killer because he always had a reason or motive for his acts. A true serial killer murders for no other reason than being driven by psychosexual compulsions. America’s first known serial killer was “The Torso Murderer.”

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Q: Is the movie *The Untouchables* accurate?

A: Well, both the television series and the Kevin Costner film are riddled with historical inaccuracies, but it is true that Ness was an important part of the Treasury Department's effort to convict Al Capone. Ness primarily hampered Capone's illegal business activities and kept Capone distracted while the financial team quietly collected the information that would ultimately put Capone away for income tax evasion.

Q: The final chapter of Ness's life—after the media turned against him—is a tragic coda to his heroic work in law enforcement. Is America fascinated with watching its heroes fail?

A: It would seem so. Ness was very popular with the media—until he failed to capture “The Torso Murderer.” Then they turned on him. He never recaptured his previous popularity and this began a downward spiral in his life from which he never recovered. He ended up dying in his mid-fifties, unemployed, short on money, drinking heavily, telling his stories of past glory to people who thought he was making them up—it was a sad finish for someone who had contributed so much to American law enforcement.

Q: Was Ness stymied by his lack of knowledge of psychological and behavioral sciences?

A: Yes. He and the homicide detectives working the case spent a great deal of time looking for logical motives or connections between the victims. Of course, there were none to find—he was a serial killer. He killed because he was psychologically compelled to kill, not because of any logical motive.

Q: Since this is a true story, why did you write this as a novel?

A: In the book, I invent dialogue and interior monologue for the three main characters. I don't think that would be appropriate in a work of nonfiction. That said, I stick very closely to the historical record for the first four-fifths of the book. At the end, I propose a solution based upon the evidence.

Q: You've written sixteen novels featuring lawyer Ben Kincaid. When will Ben return?

A: I have written the next Ben Kincaid novel and it is scheduled to come out next fall.

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To schedule an interview with William Bernhardt, please contact Kristen Schremp at Kristen@kaspublicity.com or 703.928.5527