**“The Killings”**

a young man is murdered. This is not a spoiler, because we’re told this in the first line of the story. His father focuses on revenge, which doesn’t give him the closure — or the release from his anger — that he’d hoped for. It’s a dark, disturbing story that offers no redemption and no easy answers.

**The *In the Bedroom* Collection**

In Dubus’s biography, one finds many of the themes reflected in the stories in In the Bedroom: relationships, love, fatherhood, divorce, religion — specifically Catholicism — guilt, and the unsatisfied yearning for redemption.

At times, the reader is lulled by the gently unfolding character development, and then slammed into a brick wall when a shocking event occurs.

Dubus writes in a unique style, with long, rambling run-on sentences which would have me pulling my hair out if I found them in my students’ work. However, this style fits his stories, which have a strong introspective quality. It’s not stream of consciousness — it’s often not even written in first person — but it’s something close.

I saw the main characters doing, or not doing, things that were horrifying and unthinkable, yet at the moment, I completely understood why they acted as they did. Dubus’s probing but compassionate eye for his characters and his honest exploration of love, sexuality, and spirituality are, above all, what make these works unforgettable for me.

He also used imagery skillfully. With a few expertly crafted lines, he could clearly conjure a landscape or connect you to the rhythms of nature. And glimpses of nature, particularly the ocean, often appear in metaphors. There were many times when I stumbled on a gorgeous passage that I wanted to tuck away, like a jewel, to admire later.

**More About the Stories**

“Killings” — As I mentioned, this story is about a bereaved father’s quest for revenge.

It seemed to Matt … that he had not so much moved through his life as wandered through it, his spirit like a dazed body bumping into furniture and corners. He had always been a fearful father: when his children were young, at the start of each summer he thought of them drowning in a pond or the sea, and he was relieved when he came home in the evenings and they were there; usually that relief was his only acknowledgment of his fear, which he never spoke of, and which he controlled within his heart … and then he lost Frank the way no father expected to lose his son, and he felt that all the fears he had borne while they were growing up, and all the grief he had been afraid of, had backed up like a huge wave and struck him on the beach and swept him out to sea.

**The Cinematic Connection**

This is the first full-length film Todd Field directed, and it is a good one, though not for the faint of heart. In this adaptation of “Killings,” which is a very short piece, the original story and characters are changed and expanded to fit a feature length movie. And the focus of the story changes from being about a father’s choices and internal struggle to being about the relationship between him and his wife.

The film unfolds its true story, which is about the marriage of Matt and Ruth–about how hurt and sadness turn to anger and blame. There are scenes as true as movies can make them, and even when the story develops thriller elements, they are redeemed, because the movie isn’t about what happens, but about why.

"Killings" by Andre Dubus was first published in The Sewanee Review in 1979. The short story was adapted into a critically acclaimed film titled In the Bedroom in 2001, directed by Todd Field.

"Killings" is set in a blue-collar town in Massachusetts. The story explores the psychology and emotions of a couple after their son, Frank, is murdered. Dubus treats the dark antagonist and murderer, Richard Strout, with small notes of empathy. Dubus provides horrifying detail during the revenge kidnapping of Strout as Matt, Frank's father, walks through the strange and tidy apartment. As a master of the short story craft, Dubus presents this scene with startling incongruity. How does a man who lives in this tidy manner commit such a brutal murder? Dubus brings Strout to a level that is startling: he is an ordinary man who commits an evil act. Who else in the story is capable of such brutality?

Critics note that Dubus’ style is concise, refined, and straight from the heart.

Critics note that Dubus does not simply write about family: he writes well about the point of view within an individual family. He is inside the family. The voices of mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, husbands and wives offer multiple perspectives in the action—and they inevitably get entangled.

Killings Summary

"Killings" begins with a funeral. Matt Fowler and his wife Ruth are burying their youngest son, Frank, who died at age twenty-one. Steve and Cathleen, the Fowler’s two other children, are also at the funeral. Frank was shot in the head by Richard Strout. He is the soon-to-be ex-husband of Frank’s girlfriend, Mary Ann Strout.

Richard Strout is twenty-six years old and has won a football scholarship to the University of Massachusetts. He is a frustrated young man who quit college (before he was expelled) and missed an opportunity to lead the family business. He is now a bartender. He married Mary Ann and they had two children after six years of marriage. Richard is known for his hot temper.

Matt and Ruth are tormented when they see Richard in town. He is out on bail and his freedom is incongruous with his vicious crime and their unbearable loss. Matt and his wife discuss where they have seen him around town. Ruth saw him when she visited the Sunnyhurst, a store in town. There is also talk that Richard has a new girlfriend.

Matt also ruminates with his old friend, Willis. Following Frank’s death, Ruth encourages Matt to go and spend some time with his friends who are playing poker. When Matt walks through Willis’s house, he reviews what has been shattered by Frank’s murder: the “quietly harried and quietly pleasurable days of fatherhood.” The implication is that Strout has taken away what Matt accumulated in his adulthood as a parent.

Willis also shares his hatred for Richard as he sees him as a patron of the restaurant he owns in town. The conversation shifts in a dark direction. Willis and Matt share details about other murders in the area in which the suspects often get off free without serving any time. The two men share a collective frustration that is growing. Matt tells Willis that he carries a .38 with him at all times.

Frank's relationship with Mary Ann had been troubled and tensions had been escalating. When Frank was still living at home with his parents, he started dating Mary Ann. He was a graduate student in economics and worked as a lifeguard at the beach, which is where he met her. He spent time at her home with her two sons. One night Frank came home with stitches over his right eye and swollen lips. Richard beat him up. This encounter stirred the emotions of both Ruth and Matt. They wondered whether Frank should be in a relationship with a woman who was older and had two young children. More importantly, they wondered if Frank should be with Mary Ann while she was in the process of a divorce. At one point, Ruth learns that this marriage had gone bad because both had played around, which raised the question of whether Mary Ann was good enough for Frank. Prior to his murder, Matt talked with Frank about his plans and any intentions he may have with Mary Ann. Matt offered a few cautions about the... »

In the Bedroom and “Killings” focus on Matt and Ruth Fowler, a middle-aged New England couple devastated by the murder of their son Frank. When Frank is killed by Richard Strout, the estranged husband of Frank’s girlfriend, Matt and Ruth try to cope but are haunted by Richard’s presence around town. Frank takes the law into his own hands: he lures Richard into the woods and shoots him.

“Killings” opens in media res, at Frank Fowler’s funeral. It stays there for a couple of pages before returning to the circumstances around Frank’s death: his affair with a married woman, and her husband’s sudden homicide. The bulk of the story, however, concerns Matt’s vengeance. What’s the point of telling a straightforward story in such a meandering manner?