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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [Christine Corcos](http://docs.google.com/bios.htm#corcos)          The very neighborliness of the serial killer is what allows many of them to blend into the ordinariness of everyday life, coupled with our increasing unwillingness to get involved, our genuine lack of knowledge about those around us, indeed our very uncertainty about what constitutes "normality." | |  | | --- | | **The People Next Door**  by Christine A. Corcos  The people upstairs all practice ballet./Their living room is a bowling alley./Their bedroom is full of conducted tours/Their radio is louder than yours./They celebrate the weekends all the week. When they take a shower, your ceilings leak/They try to get their parties to mix/By supplying their guests with Pogo sticks/And when their orgy at last abates/They go to the bathroom on roller skates/I might love the people upstairs wondrous/If instead of above us, they just lived under us.  Ogden Nash, I Wouldn't Have Missed It: Selected Poems of Ogden Nash (1971).  In this age of terrorism and uncertainty, we surely must rely more than ever on our neighbors, yet we are more than ever unlikely to know them, or know much about them. The fear of the stranger is never more potent than when that stranger is someone in one's own home town, someone who should share one's values and dreams, on whom one should be able to rely in times of need and whom one should also expect to assist when necessary. We expect to know our neighbors if we live in small towns or intimate communities in large cities, but we expect not to know them if we live in anonymous high-rises. Indeed, we so prize our privacy that we resist those who attempt to make friends. They could be well meaning but nosy, but they could also be serial killers. People disappear daily, and their neighbors tell police, "We didn't know much about her. She kept to herself. One day we just didn't see her anymore." Kitty Genovese's lonely, terrifying death on a New York street in 1964, within earshot of neighbors who did nothing, not even call the police, and dramatized in the 1975 film *Death Scream*, symbolized our turn toward willful ignorance. Someone we thought we knew is taken away in handcuffs, and the obligatory interviews on the six o'clock news reveal, "He was such a good boy! Always went to church! Always visited his mother!"  Not surprisingly, Hollywood has explored our strange relationship with our neighbors in numerous films and television shows, to the point that certain neighbor personas are now archetypal, if not clichéd, as are the legal issues that involve neighbors. The phrase "good fences make good neighbors" has a great deal of truth, and not just because those fences protect our children from falling into our neighbors' pools. From the classic fifties comedy *Dennis the Menace* to the nineties hit *Family Matters* television series highlight the long-suffering neighbor who must deal with a destructive and nosy child. *I Love Lucy* had faithful neighbors who were also close friends, as did the Jackie Gleason vehicle *The Honeymooners*. The popular sitcom *Home Improvement* features a neighbor with all the answers. Comedies about neighborhoods are perennially popular with viewers. They create a friendly, reliable world that does not necessarily reflect our own, but that we yearn for, a world that seems secure, and predictable, and to a great extent desirable.  Series like *American Gothic*, on the other hand, remind us that the smallest, friendliest seeming town hides secrets. Like Shirley Jackson's short story "*The Lottery*", shows like *American Gothic* give us the permanent creeps: we suspect that somewhere in this country, there really is a town where evil has overtaken good. Isn't that what Stephen King keeps telling us? In particular, the small Southern or mid-Western town comes in for its share of suspicion. *My Cousin Vinny* (1992) derived much of its humor from the juxtaposition of New York and Southern culture, and New York didn't always win out. Fred Gwynne's bewilderment at Joe Pesci's pronunciation of "two youths" is worth the price of the film. And as Judge Haller, Gwynne teaches Lawyer Gambini (Pesci) some rules about courtroom decorum he'll never forget. But Southern towns aren't always so amusing: *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) is the archetypal example of the clash between prejudice and honor, a story in which a local policeman must decide to arrest his neighbor, a fellow officer, in the interests of justice.  The notion that our neighbors have things to hide is a popular theme in Hollywood. *In Fright Night*, a teenager begins to believe that his new neighbors are vampires and he carries out numerous investigations (also known as trespasses) in order to prove himself right. Teenagers with time on their hands, usually during summer vacation, are notorious for investigating empty houses and bothering retired people, the local "witch" and anybody who doesn't fit in. For years, movies had obligatory scenes in which children bothered the town eccentrics, sometimes played for laughs as in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), and sometimes not, as in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).  In some movies, the adults take matters into their own hands once they take the children seriously as in the Tom Hanks comedy *The 'Burbs*, when they begin to suspect that their new neighbors are up to no good, especially since the former occupants of the house vanished without a trace, as does one of their present neighbors. The vigilante justice that is a major part of these "Neighborhood Watch" investigations indicates that we have little faith in the ability of the police to investigate our suspicions, even if we can convince the folks in blue to take them at face value. We know from countless courtroom dramas that the police cannot intervene until a crime has been committed, by which time it is normally too late. Indeed, the theme of many movies of the week as well as Hollywood blockbusters such as *What Lies Beneath* (2000), is precisely that the police are legally impotent, and that we must protect ourselves, because the people we expect to protect us (the police, the district attorneys, and the judges) simply cannot do so. That's what the NRA keeps telling us, anyway. In the Dan Ackroyd black comedy *Getting Away With Murder* (1996), Jack Lambert (Ackroyd) believes he is living next door to a Nazi war criminal (Jack Lemmon). Because he cannot convince the authorities that this is so, he decides to deal with the man himself, a theme that we see taken seriously in such films as *Death and the Maiden* (1994) and *The Execution* (1985). In *Rear Window* (1954), the granddaddy of all nosy neighbor flicks, the immobilized James Stewart details the cool and beautiful Grace Kelly to do his leg work (literally) when he suspects his neighbor of a murder. If only Hitchcock had known how often his theme was to be reused over the next decades ("But, Mom, I know our new neighbors are up to something!" "Now, mind your own business, Timmy, and do your homework." Organ music swelling up in the background. Ominous sounds of digging. Weird laughter. Small pets disappearing suddenly in the night.)  Hollywood particularly loves the Nazis Among Us theme, and not just because it may actually be true. The movies that gave us Nazis in patrician New England in *The Stranger* (1946) also gave us Nazis in Manhattan in *Marathon Man* (1976), *Music Box* (1989), *Descending Angel* (1990), *Death and the Maiden* and *The Execution*, all war crimes films made more believable because of the real life trials of John Demjanjuk, Adolph Eichmann, and Klaus Barbie. Except for *Music Box*, all of these films require the intervention of laypersons to bring the wrongdoer to justice, or to make a decision not to do so. Although lawyers play parts in some of these films, most notably *Death and the Maiden* and *The Execution*, in few do they have the heroic role. Indeed, the lawyers in the latter three films seem to most non-lawyers to act in contravention of justice, to prevent evildoers from being brought to account, to protect the evil neighbors, rather than to root them out.  Nazis (and later Communists) are only one of the hidden threats that may face us in our neighborhoods. The neighbor as serial killer threat has recently emerged as a favorite, particularly since FBI profilers have impressed upon us that serial killers are not easily recognizable loonies. In fact, they are usually the boy (or girl) next door. Mark Harmon was cast against type as Ted Bundy in *The Deliberate Stranger* (1986), perhaps the U. S.'s most notorious serial killer, but Bundy himself was a handsome, charming man. Harmon also played a serial killer in the 1991 remake of the Hitchcock thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*, in which he is arguably even more creepy than Joseph Cotton in the original (1943) version. The very neighborliness of the serial killer is what allows many of them to blend into the ordinariness of everyday life, coupled with our increasing unwillingness to get involved, our genuine lack of knowledge about those around us, indeed our very uncertainty about what constitutes "normality." In these days of unusual religious views, differing dress codes, a reluctance to exchange even the most perfunctory greetings on the street, is it any wonder that many of us refuse to ask the most basic questions about our neighbors' daily or nocturnal habits? Innocent questions might be seen as harassment. Who needs confrontation? Anyone might have a concealed weapon, and might be willing to use it. And fear breeds more fear.  Meanwhile, "normal" people go unchallenged, even when we have some sneaking doubts about whether their behavior is in fact entirely normal, until one day, we hear that the nice man next door, the deacon of the church, has been arrested for possession of child pornography, or the vice president of the bank has been hauled in for sexual harassment, or the helpful home economics teacher has been convicted of raping a fourteen year old boy. These people live in our neighborhood? Yes, and they've begun to reproduce-cineamatically speaking. After a rash of serial killer movies-*The Killer Next Door* (2001); *Through the Eyes of a Killer* (1992)(Richard Dean Anderson is a carpenter who builds himself a secret passageway so he can spy on his client/victim), we had a rash of female sexual predator conspiracy to murder movies (*Stay the Night* (1992); *To Die For* (1995); *Murder in New Hampshire* (1991); *Seduced By Madness* (1996)). We've had female serial killer movies (*Black Widow Murders* (1993); *Wife, Mother, Murderer* (1991); *Overkill* (1992) and *Monster* (2003), both about Aileen Wuornos). With the possible exception of Wuornos, none of the real life people depicted was necessarily identifiable as dangerous to the average person. Just your average normal, daily dog walking, Saturday night beer drinking, Sunday church going, weekly lawn cutting, annual Girl Scout cookie-buying serial killer.  In some cases, fictional neighborhoods can be confining to the point that the scriptwriters clearly decide to scrap them for more liberating venues. *Murder She Wrote*'s Jessica Fletcher clearly needed to move out of Cabot Cove for the more sophisticated and grittier locations of New York, Los Angeles and London, not just because Maine was sleepy. It was also because at the rate the show was going, it was fairly clear that half of her neighbors were homicidal lunatics and the other half were their victims. This is not to say that fictional neighborhoods cannot reflect truth. Certainly Agatha Christie made a great point of showing us that her sleuth Miss Jane Marple detected crime using the small neighborhood of "St. Mary Mead" as a lens through which to view the larger world. Everyone in her tiny village had an analog somewhere in the world; it was simply a matter of finding the similarity.  Of course, Nazis Among Us quickly became (literally) Aliens Among Us in the 1950s once Kenneth Arnold spotted those flying saucers, although we were never quite certain whether those aliens were Communists or extra-terrestrials. While *My Favorite Martian*, *3d Rock from the Sun*, and *Alf* played the idea of neighbors next door as real aliens for laughs, some Americans truly believe that aliens do dwell among us. The movies that depicted popularity of fifties movies such as *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) translated fairly easily into *I Married a Monster* (1998) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and *Body Snatchers* (1993), films which represented Communism for some people and real alien invasion for others. Indeed, the invasion narrative is now such a part of our culture that both Hollywood and independent filmmakers now parody it easily: *Evolution* (2001), *Galaxy Quest* (1999), and the much underrated *Top of the Food Chain* a/k/a *Invasion* (1999). Is it safe to go out at night? Many of us believe the law no longer protects us adequately. It's better to stay home with our security systems and our pay-per-view. For myself, after assessing the risk, I think I'll still go out at night, to plays and to concerts and to movies, I'll still talk to my neighbors, even if they think I'm a little bit of a nut. I want to rely on them, and I want them to rely on me, even if I don't keep watching the skies.  Posted May 19, 2004 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |