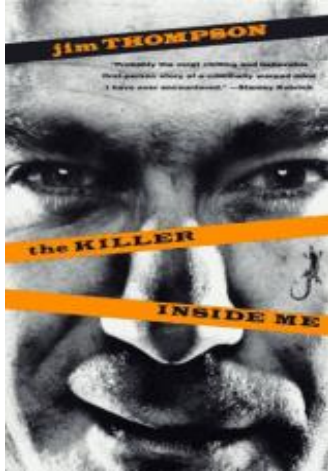


The Killer Inside Me

by Jim Thompson



About the Book

The Killer Inside Me is a chilling portrait of Lou Ford, the twenty-nine-year-old deputy sheriff of a small town in the oil fields of West Texas. Ford is experiencing a recurrence of "the sickness" that triggered a crime in his youth, a crime that his doctor father, now dead, covered up for him. Now Ford spends his days enforcing the law in Central City and his nights with his schoolteacher girlfriend, Amy Stanton, who also comes from a "good family." Ford's goal is to seem normal--"I've stood like that, looking nice and friendly and stupid" but something is seriously off-kilter, because "all the time I'm laughing myself sick inside" [p. 121]. The sickness that returns is worse this time, manifested in a series of sadistic murders. Jim Thompson brilliantly created a first-person voice for Lou Ford, rooting deep inside the warped psyche of this distinctive character to tell his story. Jim Thompson wrote **The Killer Inside Me** in 1952 for Lion Books, a publisher of paperback originals. Lion gave him a synopsis to work from, but Thompson radically changed the formula to his own, and astonished his publisher by writing the book in four weeks.

Discussion Guide

1. In a first-person narration, Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford comments to himself, "If there's anything worse than a bore, it's a corny bore" [p. 4]. How does Thompson use dialogue to dramatize Ford's character? When Lou gazes in the mirror, he describes what he sees: the Stetson, a pinkish shirt, a "typical Western-country peace officer, that was me" [p. 28]. In another context, this would be a mundane description, but what more does it tell us about Lou Ford?
2. Lou says he reads German, French, and Italian medical journals. "I couldn't speak any of those languages worth a doggone, but I could understand 'em all" [p. 27], he says. Is his claim credible in the context of what we learn about him? In what incidents is his self-taught education in evidence, and how is it perceived by others? What would erudition represent to a Lou Ford? The journals are in his father's library. What role does his father play in his psyche?
3. Lou's recollections are often ambiguous, more implied than specific, such as his traumatic boyhood involvement with

his family's housekeeper, Helene. What is Helene's transgression in Lou's mind, and what role does he ascribe to it in the context of his "sickness"? Is this thought process a recurrent pattern in Lou's pathology?

4. Early in the story Sheriff Bob Maples suggests to Lou, "Watch yourself. It's a good act but it's easy to overdo" [p. 25]. Later, at the hotel in Fort Worth, he drunkenly repeats his caution: "Wash--watch y'self.... S-stop all a' stuff spilt milk n' so on. Wha' you do that for, anyway" [p. 85]. Is he implying that Lou's "act" has not been as convincing as Lou thinks? How does Ford react? What is Bob's relationship to Lou, and why does he ultimately resolve it the way he does? Is the relationship credible as portrayed by Jim Thompson?

5. In his treatment of Central City and its citizenry, how does Thompson characterize small-town America?

6. As Lou kills his girlfriend, Amy, he pauses to notice what she's wearing, he sits down to read the paper, he makes puns on her penny-pinching. How do these actions serve the description of a violent act? How important are descriptions of violence in the story of Lou Ford? How, overall, are violent sequences presented?

7. At the novel's end, Lou has set fire to the library and probably the rest of the house. To what extent is this a biblical, spiritual climax? Or is the fire an act grounded in psychological pathology? It is, after all, Lou's father's house. Is the elegiac final paragraph an extension of the spiritual theme, or is it a chilling reminder of the nihilism that has subsumed Lou Ford up until that moment?

Author Bio

James Myers Thompson was born on September 27, 1906, in an apartment above the Caddo County Jail in Anadarko, Oklahoma, where his father was sheriff. At fourteen, amid family money troubles and frequent moves, he was first published. At seventeen he took a night job as a bellhop in a Fort Worth hotel, attending high school by day, which led to a nervous breakdown. As a roughneck in the West Texas oil fields in 1926, he encountered the Wobblies, which influenced his politics. The Depression ended a job as a collections agent, as well as two years of college education at the University of Nebraska. In 1931, newly married to Alberta Hesse, he began to hone his craft writing true-crime stories for pulp magazines; he would be forty-three when he first wrote crime fiction. In 1938, he was appointed director of the Oklahoma Federal Writers Project. Thompson achieved recognition between 1942 and 1973, publishing twenty-nine novels, all but three paperback originals. He also wrote two screenplays for Stanley Kubrick, **The Killing** and **Paths of Glory**.

Jim Thompson died on April 7, 1977. By that time, despite his popularity in the 1950s, he was virtually forgotten. A Thompson revival began in the mid-1980s with a series of reprints and was bolstered by movie adaptations of **The Getaway**, **The Grifters**, and **After Dark, My Sweet**.

Critical Praise

" Probably the most chilling and believable first-person story of a criminally warped mind I have ever encountered. "

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