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Book Review: Whisper to the Black Candle: Voodoo, Murder, and the Case of Anjette Lyles (1999)

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{Lit.}

Georgia's Most Notorious Murderess

Whisper to the Black Candle: Voodoo, Murder and the Case of Annette Lyles

by Jaclyn Weldon White
Mercer University Press, 1999
177 pp., \$22.95

This little book focuses on the terrible crimes and sensational trial of Georgia's most infamous female murderer of the 20th Century. In the 1950's, Annette Lyles owned and operated a restaurant in downtown Macon. She was an attractive and friendly young woman who worked hard to succeed in her business, and her restaurant was a popular gathering place, with numerous regular customers including many businessmen and lawyers. "Everybody loves her," one of the restaurant's cooks said at the time. "She is a sweet person."

"Going to her restaurant, you didn't think about the food as much as you thought about just being welcome," one patron wrote later. "She hugged everybody's neck when they walked in the door. She would come to each table and sit down and talk. She had a personality that was terrific. It was a pleasure to go to her restaurant... You couldn't help but like her."

In May, 1958, Macon was stunned to hear that 32-year-old Annette Lyles had been arrested and charged with murdering four persons: her two husbands, her mother-in-law and her nine-year old daughter.

Annette was indicted for "having administered and causing to be administered... deadly poisons, to wit: arsenic and arsenic trioxide" to the victims "by artfully, deceitfully, and wickedly enticing, procuring, and causing [them] to swallow and take internally said deadly poisons" with the intent to kill them, and thereby slaying them.

Annette's trial in Macon in October, 1958 was the most publicized and talked about criminal trial in Macon in the 20th Century. Annette was tried for only one of the murders, that of her daughter, but the prosecution was permitted to present evidence showing that in addition to murdering her daughter, Annette had murdered the three other persons.

Generally, in a prosecution for a particular crime, the state is not allowed to introduce evidence that the defendant committed other crimes, but there is an exception to this rule if the evidence of other crimes shows motive, plan, or scheme for the crime for which the defendant is on trial.

At Annette's trial, the prosecution was permitted to prove not only that Annette had killed her daughter by poisoning in 1958, but that she had done the same thing to her first husband in 1952, her second husband in 1955 and her mother-in-law in 1957. The deaths of all four victims were shown to be logically connected in at least 10 ways: (1) each of the victims occupied a close relationship to

Annette; (2) each of the victims died of a unique cause: arsenic poisoning; (3) each victim died as a result of multiple doses built up to a lethal level;

stantial amount of money as a result of each death; (7) each of the victims was lavishly buried by Annette; (8) all the victims were carried to the same hospital, at which they were attended by Annette; (9) Annette expressed intense dislike for each of the victims either before or after his or her death; and (10) Annette predicted the death of each of victim, except her first husband.

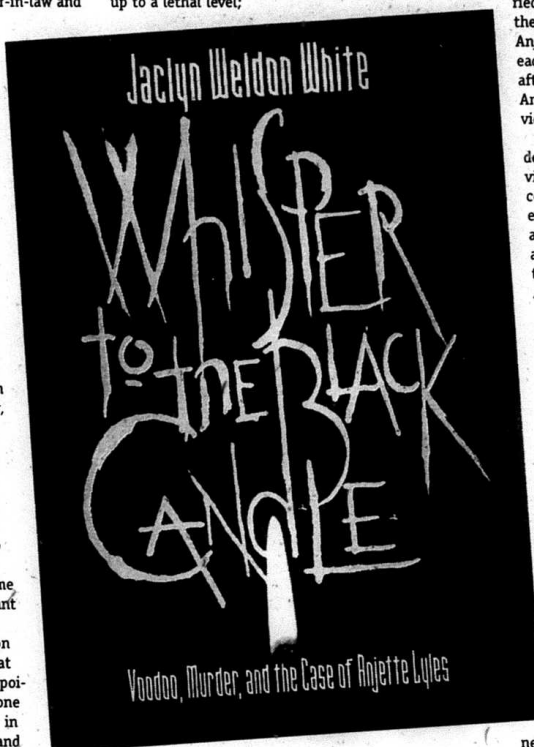
Although circumstantial, the evidence that Annette had killed all four victims was, viewed in its totality, compelling. There was overwhelming evidence that the victims died of arsenic poisoning given in doses over a period of time, and ant poison containing arsenic was found in Annette's bedroom.

The damning evidence adduced by the prosecution included the following chilling vignettes.

On occasion employees of Annette's restaurant heard Annette respond to her daughter's annoying behavior by screaming at her, calling her an SOB and threatening or swearing to kill her.

Annette would take food and drink to the victims while they were in the hospital. But before delivering a drink Annette would disappear into the restroom for a few minutes, taking both the drink and her purse with her. When Annette's daughter was in a hospital bed crying out from hallucination-induced terror—seeing snakes and thinking bugs were crawling out of her fingers—Annette, standing

nearby, did not attempt to comfort the dying child but instead laughed at her. Two weeks before her suffering daughter died, at a time when the doctors were telling her the girl would recover, Annette ordered a



(4) Annette was the only person in close personal attendance to all four victims; (5) Annette showed little or no grief over each death; (6) Annette collected a sub-

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coffin for the girl.

Also two weeks before her daughter died, Annette, remarking "Well, she won't be using these anymore," packed up the girl's personal things in the hospital room, discarded the flowers and put the suitcases in the hall, but kept some of the flower vases, saying she was going to take them to the cemetery.

At the trial it also came out that Annette was a superstitious creature obsessed with magic and the occult. She visited fortune-tellers. She had roots, powders, potions and other voodoo paraphernalia in her home. She would burn candles and talk to them, telling them what she wanted. White candles were for peace, red candles were for love and green candles kept people from gossiping about you. Black candles were burned when you wanted someone to die.

Annette did not put any witnesses on the stand or introduce any evidence. She did not rely on an insanity defense. Her entire defense consisted of her lengthy unsworn statement she made personally and orally to the jury in which she vehemently denied killing anyone and protested her love for the victims. (Incredible as it may seem, until 1961 a Georgia criminal defendant was not allowed to testify under oath at his or her own trial.)

Annette's weak defense was not strengthened by her icy demeanor at trial. When witnesses and spectators would burst into tears at various points in the trial because of poignant testimony concerning her daughter's tragic and painful death, Annette would sit there stone-faced, seemingly indifferent to the spectacle of other people weeping and sobbing for her dead child.

The jury convicted Annette after deliberating for an hour and a half, and she was sentenced to death.

On July 8, 1959 the Georgia Supreme Court affirmed Annette's sentence. The Court had no doubt that Annette was guilty of the crime

charged, observing that the trial evidence "shows nothing short of a deliberate, premeditated, well-concocted plan and scheme... to murder an innocent child for no cause except to satisfy [Annette's] desire for money."

Annette did not die in the electric chair. After the Georgia Supreme Court upheld her conviction, Annette was examined by six medical professionals, including four psychiatrists. They were unanimous in their diagnosis: Annette was a psychotic and insane. "The type of her mental illness is chronic paranoid schizophrenic," the doctors decided. According to one of the doctors, Annette even "experienced hallucinations, including seeing angels flying around the room." Annette's death sentence was therefore repealed, and she was transferred to the state mental hospital in Milledgeville, where she died of heart failure at the age of 52 in December, 1977.

Forty years after her widely publicized trial, it is astonishing how few people today have ever heard of Annette Lyles.

Whisper to the Black Candle is the first book by Jaclyn Weldon White, a juvenile court administrator in Gwinnett county, and she has produced a quality work. The book includes numerous photographs of key personages in the Annette Lyles case. The most intriguing are the photographs of Annette herself—a mysterious, enigmatic figure in her '50s clothes, shoes, hairdos, and horn-rimmed sunglasses. In those photographs, she certainly does not look like the woman many have described as the most evil murderess ever produced by the state of Georgia. There she is: the inscrutable Annette Lyles, vivid proof that the good old days, as we like to call them, were often terrible.

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

(Eugene Wilkes teaches in the University of Georgia School of Law.)

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