

Weather

Today: Mostly cloudy, cooler, showers. High 78. Low 64.
Wind northeast 5-10 mph.
Thursday: Partly sunny.
High 80. Wind 5-10 mph.
Yesterday: Temp. range: 71-88.
AQI: 84. Details on Page B2.

The Washington Post

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116TH YEAR • No. 277

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1993

Prices May Vary in Areas Outside Metropolitan Washington (See Box on A2)

125

'Diary' of Jack the Ripper Canceled as Hoax

By David Streitfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

Warner Books Inc. yesterday canceled "The Diary of Jack the Ripper," exactly one month before 200,000 copies of the Victorian serial killer's purported ramblings were to go on sale. What was once touted by the publisher as the historical find of the century has collapsed into a hoax.

"It's so deadly obvious from every way you look. It's got too many fatal flaws," said Kenneth Rendell, a dealer in historical documents who spearheaded an intensive last-minute investigation of the diary at the behest of the publisher after a July Washington Post story raised doubts about its authenticity.

Among the many problems Rendell cited in his report: The

style of the handwriting is not Victorian; the handwriting does not resemble known examples of the alleged diarist's penmanship; and the diary is written in an oversize scrapbook with the first 20 pages suspiciously missing.

Whodunit is still unclear. There's an odd but distinct chance it's an old hoax. An ion migration analysis, used for determining how long the ink was on the paper, showed the document as dating from 1921, plus or minus 12 years.

"It's possible," Rendell said, "it was done in the '30s, and someone set it out to be found at some later date."

Originally, the diary was Warner's biggest nonfiction book this fall. It explained how Liverpool cotton merchant James Maybrick, seeking revenge on his philandering wife, killed the six Ripper

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THE WASHINGTON POST

The Ripper's Secret Is Safe; Publisher Calls Diary a Hoax

RIPPER, From A1

victims in drug-induced frenzies in 1888. In its catalogue, Warner described the book as being "verified by experts" and "reviewed by premier authorities."

Not enough of them, apparently.

"It's not what it purports to be," said Warner President Larry Kirshbaum. "Despite the huge sales potential, our credibility means more,"

In recent years, the credibility of American publishers has come frequently under attack. From Kitty Kelley's biography of Nancy Reagan, with its unsupported innuendo about the First Lady and Frank Sinatra, to the recent furor over Joe McGinniss's biography of Teddy Kennedy with its "creation" of thoughts, pub-

lishers are being accused of printing anything they think will sell—regardless of truth.

Kirshbaum said his primary emotion yesterday was disappointment. "We spent hundreds of hours on this book. Everyone in the company was excited. We even had a books-on-tape recording by F. Murray Abraham of the diary, which is supposed to be superb. This was an Oscar-winning performance. I guess it goes into the vaults."

Despite Warner's rejection, the diary's British publisher said yesterday he still believes it is genuine.

"I wasn't impressed with Rendell's report," said Robert Smith of Smith Gryphon. "It's very subjective, and everything in it is well covered in the book. There are no sur-

prises whatsoever." Smith said he still planned to publish the diary.

Analyst Rendell, however, has lost his patience with Smith. "If I wrote my own book about this episode, a chapter would be called 'Yes But.' Everything I say, Robert says, 'Yes, but' . . . The English attitude has been, 'Prove it's a fake.' Well, I have. But that's the wrong approach. They should be proving it's real."

Rendell said he did not know the identity of the hoaxer, but speculated: "In an awful lot of hoaxes, the person perpetrating it doesn't want to profit financially or get any recognition. He gets the thrill of beating the experts."

In this case, the thrill would have been exceptional. Jack the Ripper, who traumatized London in late

1888 with his increasingly brutal murders, long ago became a figure of mythology. Which doesn't mean that researchers and amateur historians haven't lusted after clues to his real identity. Indeed, some Ripperologists have argued this sort of hoax was just waiting to happen.

Wrote James Tully in "Jack the Ripper: One Hundred Years of Mystery": "I live in hope that as the remaining slums of Whitechapel and Spitalfields are finally cleared, some hidden documentary evidence of the identity of Jack the Ripper will be found wedged behind a rafter. Or it may well be that . . . there is a dusty tin box marked 'not to be opened for 100 years' and which contains a complete and evidential confession."

The British publishers who first

came up with the present alleged diary said they didn't know how or where it was found. The owner of the volume was identified as a former scrap metal dealer in Liverpool named Mike Barrett. He said he was given the book by a retired printer, now dead, at the Liverpool Daily Post.

Warner's decision to kill the book came at the last possible minute. The presses were scheduled to have started last week, and the decision could be put off no longer.

"This was a go/no-go situation," said Kirshbaum. "If Rendell's report had come back ambiguously, we were going to publish it in the front of the book. We would let the reader decide. But there wasn't an ambiguous word in it. That sealed the decision."