

Adam Parfrey, Publisher of the Provocative, Dies at 61

Sam Roberts

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Adam Parfrey in 2011 in Port Townsend, Wash., where he lived. “Upsetting people is a beautiful thing,” he once said. “Because it gets people to think beyond their last visit to 7-Eleven.”

Credit...Seattle Weekly

Adam Parfrey, who breached the boundaries of kooky but tolerable popular culture by publishing Joseph Goebbels's only novel, screeds by the Unabomber and Charles Manson, and books on taboo topics like cannibals, Satanists, necrophiliacs and pedophiles, died on May 10 at a nursing facility in Seattle. He was 61.

The cause was complications of a series of strokes, his sister Jessica Parfrey said.

Much of Mr. Parfrey's catalog was fodder for a modest but loyal following of conspiracists, cultists and paranoiacs. Most of his titles were published under two imprints with telltale names: first Amok Press and later Feral House (its motto: "Refuses to Be Domesticated").

Mr. Parfrey could also claim credit for a number of breakout books, several of which inspired television shows and films with their own cult followings, including the director Tim Burton's "Ed Wood."

Mr. Parfrey's first major publishing venture for Amok, which began in 1987, was the first English translation of "Michael," the only novel by Goebbels, written in 1929, before he became Hitler's propaganda minister. A New York Times review by John Gross concluded that it "has a certain undeniable drive."

That same year, Amok published "Apocalypse Culture," an unsettling anthology whose chapters included "The Unrepentant Necrophile," "Eugenics: The Orphaned Science" and "The Theology of Nuclear War."

In a cover blurb for what came to be regarded as an underground classic, J. G. Ballard, the postapocalyptic novelist, called the collection, edited by Mr. Parfrey, "compulsory reading for all those concerned with the crisis of our times."

A sequel, released in 2000, included an essay by the president and only member of Jews for Hitler and an analysis of Don McLean's pop anthem "American Pie" through a white supremacist prism.

"Upsetting people is a beautiful thing," Mr. Parfrey told The Los Angeles Times in 2012. "Because it gets people to think beyond their last visit to 7-Eleven."

Mr. Parfrey acknowledged that some people might view his taste in publishing as exploitive. (Another title is "The Gates of Janus," from 2001, by Ian Brady, Britain's "Moors murderer," who murdered five children and who died last year.)

But as Salon wrote in 2000: "In this environment, the intellectual with the greatest freak show wins. Think of Parfrey as equal parts P. T. Barnum, Rod Serling and Hegel. The man can't be beat when it comes to collecting outright oddities."

Adam Parfrey was born on April 12, 1957, in Manhattan. His mother, Rose (Ellovich) Parfrey, was a theater director who taught at the New School. His father, Woodrow, had been captured by the Germans as an American soldier during World War II and became a character actor who played, among other parts, Maximus, an orangutan judge, in the original "Planet of the Apes" (1968).

"I just figured everyone's father did this," Adam Parfrey once recalled. "Got up, went to work, played an orangutan in the movies."

After the Parfreys moved to the Los Angeles area, Adam graduated from high school and attended the University of California, Santa Cruz.



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Credit...Patricia Wall/The New York Times

Interested in theater (and also punk rock), he toured briefly with what he remembered as a second-rate Shakespeare company, then serendipitously shifted his career trajectory to publishing after noticing a trove of books in a dumpster in San Francisco.

He retrieved them and became a book wholesaler. He later moved to New York, worked at the Strand Bookstore and founded Amok with a friend, Kenneth Swezey.

He established Feral House after returning to California in 1989. The company's first book was "The Satanic Witch," by Anton LaVey, the founder of the Church of Satan.

Mr. Parfrey thrived as a cultish curator of the provocative, the vile and the perverse, from anarchism to serial murderers. He published "Technological Slavery: The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a. 'The Unabomber'" (2010) and "The Manson File: Charles Manson as Revealed in Letters, Photos, Stories, Songs, Art, Testimony and Documents" (2011).

As a result of a lawsuit, Mr. Parfrey had to destroy all remaining copies of a book about the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols

and disavow the book's implication that the government had known about the attack in advance.

He also published Rudolph Grey's "Nightmare of Ecstasy" (1991), about Edward D. Wood Jr., the director of audaciously tacky films like "Plan 9 From Outer Space." That book inspired Tim Burton's 1994 film, "Ed Wood," with Johnny Depp in the title role. (Mr. Grey received a \$1,000 advance for the book and \$250,000 for the film.)

Another Feral House book became another Tim Burton movie: "Citizen Keane: The Big Lies Behind the Big Eyes" (2014), which Mr. Parfrey wrote with Cletus Nelson. The book, a biography of Margaret Keane, whose domineering husband, Walter, took credit for her portraits of doleful waifs, was adapted by Mr. Burton as "Big Eyes," released the same year, with Amy Adams as Ms. Keane.

After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Mr. Parfrey issued the anthology "Extreme Islam: Anti-American Propaganda of Muslim Fundamentalism."

Among the other books he published were "The Grand Guignol: Theatre of Fear and Terror" (1988), by Mel Gordon (who died in March); "The X-Rated Bible," by Ben Edward Akerley (1998); and, this year, "The Despair of Monkeys and Other Trifles," the English-language version of the French singer Françoise Hardy's memoir.

As the internet emerged, it became harder for Mr. Parfrey to compete for bizarre subject matter. In 2005, he and his third wife, Jodi Wille, a photographer and documentarian, formed Process Media, which publishes titles about self-reliance, mysticism and music. They moved from Los Angeles to Port Townsend, Wash., a libertarian sanctuary on the Olympic Peninsula.

That marriage, like his previous two, ended in divorce. In addition to his sister Jessica, the managing editor of Feral House, he is survived by another sister, Juliet Parfrey, and a brother, Jonathan.

Mr. Parfrey once explained that, although commercial publishing had become increasingly competitive, he preferred being free to select his own titles rather than depending on support from foundations or other subsidies.

"I realized that if I went the grant route, my interests would have to coincide with material that was less penetrating of people's emotions," he said in a 2002 interview with Reason magazine. "I couldn't have people saying, 'Oh, God, what's that horrible thing?' I'd rather have the bottom line question be, 'Will enough people buy that book?' rather than, 'Will a few people in the ascendancy of academic culture be offended by it?'"

At his death, Mr. Parfrey was working on a memoir titled "A Feral Man in a Feral Land."

The Ted K Archive

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