

Have gun, have trouble

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, November 15, 2017, p. 15

Too often these days, when I turn on the radio I hear news of yet another lifeless body found in Metro Vancouver, in a house, a park, a car, on a sidewalk or a road. It amazes me how frequently the residential core of Richmond is the site of such gruesome discoveries. The sixth homicide of the year occurred in broad daylight, on Mother's Day, near Granville Avenue, close to where I live. In October, Richmond's eighth murder victim was found in a park off Garden City Road.

The police are immediately pressed to answer if the general public is in danger or not, if the killing was random or targeted. These words are now invariably linked to crime. It wasn't always so. Random, in the 1500s, referred to great speed, and its roots are in the Proto-German "randa," also the source of the German "rennen" (to run) and our verb run. Target originated in the 1300s as a noun describing a small shield. In the 1600s it was used as a verb as well – if you targeted someone, you were shielding them, the opposite of what it means today. The round target commonly used in practice shooting is first recorded in the mid-1700s, with reference to archery.

Another word we hear in connection with these crimes is gang, from the Old English "gang," meaning a going, journey, passage (our words gangway and gangplank preserve the word's original meaning; it's also preserved in the modern German "Gang," meaning corridor or aisle). By the mid 1300s gang referred to items, such as tools, brought on a journey. Three centuries later a gang was a company of workmen or a group of people traveling together. By the mid 1800s gangs had become bands of criminals.

Usually the killings, whether random or targeted, involve some kind of weapon, a word deriving from the Old English “wæpen,” meaning instrument of fighting and defense (it shares a root with the German for weapon, “Waffe”). Arms, a synonym for weapon, comes instead from the Latin “arma,” meaning armor as well as weapon.

When the police identify the weapon as a firearm, they’re referring to a portable gun. The source of the word is the Middle English “gunne,” documented in 1339. Some suggest it’s a shortening of the Scandinavian female name “Gunnhildr,” formed from “gunnr” and “hildr,” both words for war. Naming artillery after women has a long tradition. The cannon that the Duke of Burgundy presented to King James II of Scotland in 1454 was known as Mons Meg; between 1722-1838 the British land forces used a standard musket called a Brown Bess; and Big Bertha was the name of the World War I German heavy siege artillery.

Crime and murder – I’m a fan of them, but not when they leap off the pages of a novel or out of the TV screen. And weapons? I prefer them safely locked up in the cupboard of history.