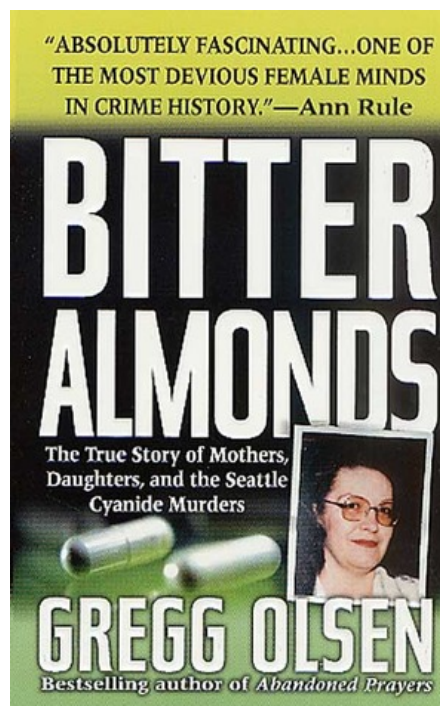




Bitter Almonds: The True Story of Mothers, Daughters, and the Seattle Cyanide Murders

Gregg Olsen

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Bitter Almonds: The True Story of Mothers, Daughters, and the Seattle Cyanide Murders Gregg Olsen Stella Nickell's small-time world was one of big-time dreams. In 1986, her biggest one came true when her husband died during a seizure, making her the beneficiary of a \$175,000-plus insurance payoff—until authorities discovered Bruce Nickell's headache capsules had been laced with cyanide. In an attempt to cover her tracks, Stella did the unconscionable. She saw to it that a stranger would also become a "random casualty" of cyanide-tainted painkillers. But Stella's cunning plan came undone when her daughter Cynthia notified federal agents. And troubling questions lingered like the secret of bitter almonds...

What would turn a gregarious barfly like Stella into a cold-hearted killer overnight? Why would Cynthia, a mirror image of her mother, turn on her own flesh and blood? Did Cynthia reveal everything she knew about the crimes? The stunning answers would unfold in a case that sparked a national uproar, dug deep into a troubled family history, and exposed an American mother for the pretty poison she was.

Gregg Olsen's *Bitter Almonds* is true crime writing at its best.

Bitter Almonds: The True Story of Mothers, Daughters, and the Seattle Cyanide Murders Details

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From Reader Review Bitter Almonds: The True Story of Mothers, Daughters, and the Seattle Cyanide Murders for online ebook

SouthWestZippy says

Had some repetitive parts and kinda dragged along on others but overall a good book.

Joan says

"Too detailed - became confusing; nevertheless an interesting story."

Alisi ? wants to read too many books ? says

Man. Could Mr. Olsen have written a more boring and dull book because, seriously, I don't think he was trying hard enough...

This is so incredibly long. It delves way too deep in the history of everyone who Stella might've once acknowledged. I thought I had a high tolerance to the length of inane details some true crime authors will go to but I think I've met my match here.

In fact, at this point, I don't think I'll ever pick up another one of his books.

Maryann MJS1228 says

Before there was "mega" there was "super". In the 1970s anything that was more with a capital m earned the prefix "super". Stars whose mere existence caused fans to swoon were superstars. Billionaires were super rich. The top trailer park antics of Stella Maudine Stephenson etc Nichols and her daughter Cindy are of a similar magnitude - they are more than trashy, they are super trashy. In the hands of true crime great Gregg Olsen their story is art.

Do It Yourself gal Stella Nichols, who lived a tough life by any standards, is one of the most staggeringly promiscuous people ever. How promiscuous? She drove to bars in her trusty pickup truck ""TP 4" with a mattress in the back. That's how promiscuous. Being a bar fly with her own rolling motel wasn't enough to keep Stella amused. She was a winner at Tri-Chem design, which seems to have been the tasteful way to tart up one's clothes before the invention of the Bedazzler. She designed her own pottery. She even managed to fit a few fish tanks into her single-wide trailer. Oh, and she picked up a few facts about how to kill with natural herbs and cyanide. One of the challenges of Stella's story is that while her crime is awful, you can't help admiring her ability to fit so much into a day.

Stella isn't the only epic barfly in this story. Her whole family is man-crazy. I tried adding up the number of marriages the Stephenson "girls" and Grandma Cora Lee managed to rack up and I stopped at 30. That's thirty marriages for 5 women. Just the marriages. When Stella's even trashier daughter Cindy complains about Stella's boozing and bed-hopping a few weeks after her husband's death saying "I have a reputation

myself to uphold in the town" one wonders if Cindy was merely vexed at having competition for the title of town tramp. This example of family love pales in comparison to warm welcome Stella's sister Georgia extends to her daughter Wilma's baby: "I hope that bitch you're holding ..." Wilma responds to this heartwarming expression of maternal love with a right hook and some hair pulling. The female bonding in this clan is something special.

In the hands of a lesser writer, this would be simply depressing. Fortunately we have Gregg Olsen on the case and no one is better at depicting the underclass of America. He's neither preachy nor faux-sympathetic. The more of his work I read the more convinced I am that Gregg Olsen is a brilliant combination of Darcy O'Brien (another true crime great) and filmmaker John Waters in his ability to show us what we'd prefer to avoid while showing us a little of ourselves in the process. Gregg Olsen gives Stella Maudine and the rest of the Stephenson girls what they would probably most want: their dignity. He shows them at their trashy worst but always shows their strength. Of course, that strength can take the form of dumping your kids, turning your mom into the FBI or poisoning your husband but then life's not for wimps.

Katie Scofield says

I had high hopes for this one, but alas, I made it halfway through and had to give up. Very interesting story...but WAY too detailed, to the point of being cumbersome and occasionally confusing. The narrative jumped around so frequently from story to story and year to year that it felt like a lot was left unexplained or unfinished. I looked online to find out how everything worked out in the end, but didn't have the energy to finish the book. Also, the errors (typographical and punctuation errors were most frequent) were a big issue for me...very distracting.

Kimmy says

I read this thinking...what kind of person does this!

Nancy says

I really wanted this to be a better book than it turned out to be. I was thinking of just putting it down and walking away from it forever several different times. In the end I stuck with it out of some sort of loyalty. The story is about some Excedrin capsules laced with Cyanide in the 1980's, shortly after the Tylenol poisonings; I actually thought this was the story about the Tylenol poisonings which contributed to my disappointment in reading this. The first 280 pages or so are backstory, specifically the story of one family, with multiple family members (at least one of whom changed her name halfway through the book), and lots of boyfriends and friends and children. It really had too many family members for the average reader to keep straight, which in my opinion is its fatal flaw. If you can keep up with a large cast of characters and an achingly slow start, you'll like this, if not, pass and just look up the crime on Wikipedia or something.

Jim Thomsen says

This is my favorite of Gregg Olsen's true-crime books — a deliciously nasty, trashy Puget Sound story, well-

told through authoritative research and reporting.

The story: In the mid-1980s, two Puget Sound-area people, totally unknown to one another, die within days of another from cyanide poisoning after purchasing and taking what they thought were Tylenol capsules. Suspicion centers on one surviving spouse (who behaves plenty suspiciously), but more methodical investigation eventually puts a spotlight on the other spouse, Stella Nickell.

Nickell makes a fabulous suspect, all right: The rural Auburn resident is a white-trash diva of the first order, with a long history of torrid romances, homewreckings and high-maintenance histrionics. And she behaves hilariously once she becomes aware of law enforcement's interest in her, running around in hysterics, backtracking like mad, trying to keep everybody in her life working off the script she makes up as she goes. So over the top is her behavior, both before and after the crime, that we, like she, almost forget about the husband, the victim.

She acts guilty, but is she? And, as Olsen takes us further into this astonishing tale, a second question emerges: Was Stella Nickell the ONLY suspected murderer? Could the victim's stepdaughter have been a part of the plot? Olsen skillfully suggests that it's possible — maybe even more than possible — without stepping over the line and steering us toward saying it's so.

In the end, we're a) convinced we have most of the necessary information; b) impressed by the pluckiness and fortitude of the few people who manage to rise above the muck; c) satisfied that the primary evildoer got what she deserved; and d) tantalized by the possibility that someone else not only got away with murder but did so by selling out her own mother.

Oh, and e) wildly entertained. I know it sounds like a blase thing to say about murder, and Olsen deftly balances the black comedy of the *The Gang That Couldn't Loot Straight* with the touching torment of the other victim's family, but it's true all the same. "Bitter Almonds" is simply a crackerjack story from a crackerjack storyteller.

Tom Schulte says

This is quite an accomplishment in the true crime canon. Olsen's detailed account of the Seattle Cyanide murders at times reads with scarcely believable behind the scenes dialogue, like a Bob Woodward book. At one point the detail - around the 80th chapter - I felt was too much, this was the role played by the one recalcitrant juror and her possible motives. This came after overly detailed courtroom chapters including quoted testimony which I find in length too banal and tedious to be as compelling as the rest of the book. It is very compelling to read of the walls closing in around product tamperer as witness interviews and technology uncovering fingerprints, library checkouts, algacide, and more work to bring her down. From crime to post-sentencing fallout that includes reward payout and incriminating discoveries in Stella's trailer, Olsen brings to life the lives and crimes here in a way that will have me reading more of this work.

Jlsimon says

This book's purpose is a little elusive. I'm getting very close to done, and unless there is a plot twist coming I just don't understand why it's going on the way it is. I mean, Olsen has established the evidence the state had against Stella Nickel, yet, we are going on and on and on about the testimony given at the trial regarding the evidence already established.

I had decided long ago I didn't care for Olsen's style of writing. After hearing a preview of the audio of this book I thought I'd give him another chance. I'm regretting it. It was a 20 hour book that should have been about 14 hours. The repetition is past daunting, it has progressed into something in the realm of slogging through the book rather than listening.

This could have been an excellent book. What we know is that Bruce Nickel died of cyanide poisoning. We know that the wife, Stella's finger and hand prints were found on encyclopedias researching cyanide. We know she purchased the cyanide. We know when, and where it was purchased. We know her daughter testified against her. We know her behaviors were more than strange after Bruce's death. We know that only 3 bottles of capsules were tampered with. One was replaced at the store, the other two were found in the Nickel's home. The rest of the book is an abundance of "he said", "she said".

In the end I am going to rate this book with 4 stars. Why? Because despite Olsen's need to drag a 14 hour book into 20 hours of belaboring work it is still an interesting case, it was still very well researched, and one must assume that just because I don't care for his style of writing doesn't make it bad.

Tabitha Rohm says

Awesome !!!! Olsen gets so close and with his subjects. I loved all the details.

Tiger Gray says

Well, I'm giving it three stars because I finished it and I didn't hate it as much as other two star books I've read. However, this work is deeply flawed. Despite its tagline, it focuses almost exclusively on Stella's (the murderer) family and very little on Sue Snow's (one of the victims, the other being Stella's husband). I understand what he's trying to do--showing how abuse is passed down through generations and how this might influence behavior like Stella's--but he ultimately fails. There's a real opportunity here to talk about class divides as well; Stella and her family are characterized by crippling debt and low social status while Sue Snow lives a comfortable middle class existence devoid of abuse, but this rich vein never really gets the mining it deserves. I also feel like the family dynamics in Stella's case are too detailed. I don't really need to know every single argument Stella and her daughter ever had, or what she eats for breakfast, or what her ex husband thinks of her. I felt as if he should have just chosen a couple of the most illustrative examples rather than bogging down the narrative with everything from CB radio to bar hopping to what books Stella likes to read.

Furthermore, the appearance of all the female characters is detailed with almost obsessive precision. Granted, part of this is because Stella often uses looks and sex to manipulate the men in her life, and in that context it's worth discussing. But I feel the author goes too far, as if he's really trying to drive home how pathetic Stella is for dying her hair black and wearing bright red lipstick in her forties. One or two mentions germane to her methods is fine. Forty mentions, not so much. He also delves in to how pretty her daughters are and what the people at work think of their appearances.

It takes an extraordinary long time therefore to get to the crime itself, which is why I bought the damn thing. Of course back story is needed in these types of books, but this book doesn't hold a candle to the great titles that balance the criminal, the victims, and the crimes. It's bloated and meandering and ultimately, these traits doom it.

Leigh says

As someone who suffers from frequent headaches stories like this are alarming and probably why I buy tablets. I first heard this story on a TV show about forensic science in which the author was interviewed. Stella Nickell sounded fascinating to me. Boy did I get more than I bargained for with her. The story opens with Stella's husband Bruce suddenly collapsing under mysterious circumstances and being rushed to hospital where he later passes away. His death is ruled to be of natural causes. Meanwhile in another part of town Sue Snow is found collapsed in her bathroom displaying similar symptoms to those that Bruce Nickell had. Sue too dies shortly after arriving at the hospital. What follows is an at times long winded story outlining the backgrounds of each person involved. From the victim Sue Snow and her family to Stella herself. While overall the book moves along and is well written it often got bogged down with details, to the point where I was getting confused. I get that Stella was a party girl that she went from bar to bar but after a while it felt like it was getting repetitive. If nothing else I truly felt like I was in the head of Stella Nickell and I didn't like it. Given the childhood and family life she had it was no wonder she ended up doing all the wrong that she did. While not the best true crime I've read, it was still an fairly engaging book and I wouldn't hesitate to pick up another book by Gregg Olsen.

Clare says

Listened to in audio format.

I love true crime books. I enjoy the background of the crime, the Police investigation and the court case.

Unfortunately I found Bitter Almonds too long, it took me 2 weeks to listen to this which is not a good sign. I think it would of been better had there been less about Stella Nickell's mother and her sisters.

Lauren says

Way too much detail mostly because it is either repetitive or inconsequential to the story. Needs to be edited there were several Paragraphs repeated in different chapters. I believe story could be told in 360 pages.
