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A mythical, murderous Boston mob boss

WHITEY BULGER
1929-2018

BY ROBERT D. MCFADDEN

James (Whitey) Bulger, the South Boston mobster and F.B.I. informer who was captured after 16 years on the run and finally brought to justice in 2013 for a murderous reign of terror that inspired books, films and a saga of Irish-American brotherhood and brutality, was found beaten to death on Tuesday in a West Virginia prison. He was 89.

Two Federal Bureau of Prisons employees, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the information was not yet public, said Mr. Bulger was beaten until he was unrecognizable by inmates shortly after he arrived at the prison, the Hazelton federal penitentiary in Bruceton Mills. He had been moved from prison to prison in recent years and was incarcerated in Florida before being transferred to Hazelton, which has been rife with violence.

One of the workers said that inmates were thought to be "affiliated with the mob." A law enforcement official who oversees organized crime cases said he had been told by a federal law enforcement official that a mob figure was believed to be responsible for the killing.

Mr. Bulger, who was serving two life sentences for 11 murders, was found unresponsive Tuesday morning and pronounced dead by the Preston County Medical Examiner, the Federal Bureau of Prisons said in a statement. It did not indicate a cause of death.

To the families of those he executed gangland-style and to a neighborhood held in thrall long after he vanished in 1994, Mr. Bulger's arrest in Santa Monica, Calif., in 2011 and his conviction of gruesome crimes brought a final reckoning of sorts and an end to the career of one of America's most notorious underworld figures, the heir to a nation's fascinations with Dillinger, Capone and Gotti.

In an all-but-lost era in South Boston, before glassy condos and a showcase harbor replaced mean streets and a decrepit waterfront, Mr. Bulger dominated the rackets and folklore in an Irish-American working-class enclave. Tales of his exploits were learned from childhood there: how he shot men between the eyes, stabbed rivals in the heart with ice picks, strangled women who might betray him and buried victims in secret graveyards after yanking their teeth to thwart identification.

For years before details of Whitey Bulger's criminal history became known through trials, books, newspapers and congressional hearings, popular myths in South Boston portrayed him as an Irish Robin Hood, giving out turkeys on Thanksgiving and protecting his own from the hated police and outsiders.

His code of the streets was touted: Never sell angel dust to children or heroin in the neighborhood, trust only the Irish, never lie to a friend or partner and above all never squeal to the authorities. He was an inspiration for Jack Nicholson's mob boss in Martin Scorsese's 2006 film, "The Departed," set in Boston.

But such romantic notions were shattered by disclosures that for some 15 years he had been a federal informer and that the authorities had turned a blind eye to his crimes in exchange for his snitching on the Mafia.

Beyond corrupting agents with bribes, the government said, the arrangement helped him conceal 19 murders, learn the identities of witnesses who later turned up dead, and send an innocent man to prison for a killing that Mr. Bulger had committed. It also led to



James (Whitey) Bulger was escorted after a court hearing in 2011. He was convicted of participating in 11 murders.



Boston police mugshots of Mr. Bulger in 1953. After being discharged from the Air Force at 20 for going AWOL, he robbed banks in three states and served nine years in prison.

a re-evaluation of rules for dealing with informers.

In December 1994, after decades of extortion, bookmaking, loan-sharking, gambling, truck hijacking and drug dealing — much of it carried out as the

authorities looked the other way — Mr. Bulger vanished just as federal officials were about to unseal an indictment and arrest him on racketeering charges. It was later learned that he had been tipped off by the agent who had been his

undercover handler for years. Mr. Bulger and his companion, Catherine Greig, who joined him after he fled, were extraordinarily elusive, despite international searches. Sightings were reported in Europe, Canada, Mexico and elsewhere in the United States but no traces were found. For a decade he was on the F.B.I.'s Most Wanted list. A \$2 million reward was offered for his capture, the largest ever for a domestic fugitive.

A LIFE ON THE RUN

Mr. Bulger's elusiveness was not coincidental. Kevin Weeks, who wrote a memoir, "Brutal: The Untold Story of My Life Inside Whitey Bulger's Irish Mob" (2006, with Phyllis Karas), said that in 1993 and 1994 Mr. Bulger prepared for life on the run by taking safe deposit boxes in Montreal, London, Dublin, Venice and American cities to hide cash, jewelry and identity papers under false names. (Imprisoned on racketeering charges, Mr. Weeks became a cooperating witness against Mr. Bulger.)

After plastic surgery to change their appearances, Mr. Bulger and Ms. Greig settled in Santa Monica, Calif., in a small apartment a few blocks from the Pacific, in 1996. They called themselves Charlie

and Carol Gasko and lived reclusively, paying their \$1,145 monthly rent in cash.

He spent his days watching television. She took walks, went to a beauty parlor and — being a former dental technician — had her teeth cleaned monthly. They took occasional trips, but mostly stayed home.

Embarrassed by its dealings with Mr. Bulger as an informer and frustrated by his invisibility, the F.B.I. in 2011 began a national advertising campaign that focused not on him but on Ms. Greig's idiosyncrasies. Her beauty parlor and teeth-cleaning visits were featured in 350 public service announcements in 14 cities on daytime television shows favored by older women. They noted that the reward for her had doubled to \$100,000.

Acting on a tip, agents closed in and arrested the couple on June 22, 2011. They offered no resistance. The white-blond Bulger hair had been dyed black and was receding. He was 81 and had a paunch. But the angular, narrow face, the jutting chin and the clever eyes behind sunglasses were unmistakable. Inside the apartment walls, agents found \$822,000 in cash, false identity papers and a score of handguns and rifles.

James Joseph Bulger Jr. was born on Sept. 3, 1929, in Dorchester, Mass., one of six children of James Bulger and the former Jane McCarthy. His father, a laborer, lost an arm in an industrial acci-

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dent. James grew up in a public-housing project in South Boston, known as Southie, a clannish community of 30,000, mostly Irish-American, across a narrow waterway from downtown Boston. He preferred the streets to school, where his brothers, William and John, excelled.

A troublemaker from an early age, Whitey ran with a gang, stole cars, mugged people and was sent to reform school. He joined the Air Force at 20 but was discharged after going AWOL. He robbed banks in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Indiana and served nine years in federal prisons.

Back in South Boston, he became an enforcer for an Irish mob. In 1979, he and an associate, Stephen Flemmi, took over the infamous Winter Hill Gang, which had dominated crime there for years.

By then, both were F.B.I. informers. The dates and circumstances of their recruitments are in dispute, but the target was the Patriarca family, which controlled organized crime in New England.

John Connolly, an F.B.I. agent who had been a childhood friend of Mr. Bulger's, became his handler.

The arrangement helped end the Patriarca reign, but the price was high. In 1998, Chief Judge Mark Wolf of Massachusetts federal court concluded that the F.B.I. had protected both informants, even from the police, as they committed murders and other heinous crimes.

Mr. Flemmi and Mr. Connolly were convicted of involvement in murders and given long prison terms.

While he apparently never married, Mr. Bulger had a long relationship with a waitress from Quincy, Mass., and another with Theresa Stanley, who had children from a previous relationship. Ms. Stanley fled with Mr. Bulger when he disappeared in 1994, but within weeks returned to her children. Mr. Bulger was then joined by Ms. Greig, who spent the fugitive years with him. She survives him, as do Mr. Bulger's brothers.

FACING JUSTICE, FINALLY

After their capture, Mr. Bulger and Ms. Greig were returned to Boston to face trials. Ms. Greig was charged with harboring a fugitive and, as part of a 2012 plea agreement, was sentenced to eight years in prison and a \$150,000 fine. She was later sentenced to 21 more months in prison for refusing to testify before a grand jury investigating whether other people had helped Mr. Bulger while he was a fugitive.

Mr. Bulger was charged with complicity in 19 murders, racketeering, extortion, money laundering and other crimes. A parade of former associates testified against him in a two-month trial, telling of the killing of rival hoodlums and others who had been identified as informers. Witnesses told of guns in victims' faces and crochets and of demands for cash for the privilege of doing business on Bulger turf.

Mr. Bulger, who exchanged obscenities with some of his accusers, did not take the stand. His lawyers, J. W. Carney Jr. and Hank Brennan, described a culture of official corruption, with agents taking bribes and alerting criminals to wiretaps and pending indictments, but offered little evidence that Mr. Bulger could not have committed the crimes.

In August 2013, the jury convicted him of 31 of 32 counts, including participation in 11 murders, while saying that the prosecution had not proved his involvement in seven others. No verdict was reached in the death of one of two slain women.

"It's good to be over," June Barry, 79, a lifelong South Boston resident who used to joke with friends about Mr. Bulger's grip on the neighborhood, said after the verdicts. "I'm glad they got him, and they got him alive. He has to pay for it now."

Federal Judge Denise J. Casper sentenced Mr. Bulger to two life terms plus five years. She also ordered him to pay \$19.5 million in restitution to his victims' families and to forfeit \$25.2 million to the government, although it was unclear if any of the millions he had stolen would be retrievable.

"The testimony of human suffering that you and your associates inflicted on others was at times agonizing to hear and painful to watch," the judge said to a courtroom filled with sobbing relatives of the killer's victims. "The scope, the callousness, the depravity of your crimes are almost unfathomable."

Mr. Bulger had been moved to the Hazelton prison after threatening a worker at the Coleman prison in Sumterville, Fla., according to one of the Hazelton workers who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Hazelton has been a hotbed of violence, recording 275 episodes of assaults on workers and fighting among inmates in 2017, an investigation by The New York Times found. At least two inmates were reported killed there this year.

In a statement, Mr. Carney, one of Mr. Bulger's lawyers, said the prison authorities shared blame in Mr. Bulger's death. "He was sentenced to life in prison," Mr. Carney said, "but as a result of decisions by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, that sentence has been changed to the death penalty."

After his incarceration, the story of Mr. Bulger continued to generate publicity, as well as books, a documentary feature and a movie starring Johnny Depp.

To raise money for the victims, the government auctioned off more than 100 bins of items confiscated from Mr. Bulger — furniture, sunglasses, sneakers, hoodies and jewelry.

Katherine Q. Seelye, Danielle Ivory and William K. Rashbaum contributed reporting.

Disabled Muslim comic has development deal for sitcom

COMIC, FROM PAGE 1

Hayes, who plays Jack on "Will & Grace," itself a groundbreaking show credited with helping make gay characters mainstream. Milliner and Hayes are well aware of the envelope-pushing potential of "Can-Can" but said that was not what had sold them on Zayid. Her energy filled the room, and she was self-aware, super smart and madly funny. Crucially, she had a singular story. "The whole business is moving even more toward authentic stories that aren't on TV right now," Milliner said.

Zayid is a vociferous part of a small, dedicated movement calling attention to disability rights in entertainment, which are consistently overlooked in conversations about diversity. Jay Ruderman, president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, a philanthropic and advocacy organization for disability rights (it also works to strengthen ties between American Jews and Israel), said Zayid's show could crush the enduring stigmas disabled people face. "Progress is being made very slowly, but shows can be transformational," he said.

The "Can-Can" character will be much like Zayid, a woman who happens to be disabled and Muslim and who grew up in New Jersey with big hair and Metallica T-shirts, navigating love and friendships and the world.

"I want to get out there and be the image of the American you don't think is American, and the Muslim you don't think of when you think of a Muslim," she said.

Zayid lives in a bright, plant-filled

apartment in Cliffside Park, N.J., that she shares with her husband and their cat. She likes to keep her husband's name private and publicly refers to him as Chefugee, for he is indeed both a refugee — they met while she was working with refugees in the Palestinian territories — and a chef.

Zayid's parents, who are from a village outside Ramallah, also raised their family here. Zayid is the youngest of four daughters and had an idyllic childhood, despite a traumatic birth. The doctor

The "Can-Can" character will be much like Zayid, a woman who is disabled and Muslim and who grew up in New Jersey.

botched her mother's C-section, she said, smothering Zayid. Cerebral palsy is not genetic; it's often caused by brain trauma before or during birth, and manifests differently in different people. Zayid shakes all the time, though yoga has reduced the severity, and can walk but not stand for very long (she calls herself a sit-down stand-up comedian).

Her parents treated her no differently from her siblings. Her father, a gregarious salesman, taught her to walk by having her stand on his feet. She was sent to dance and piano lessons because the family could not afford physical or occupational therapy, and she became a popular high achiever. "I lived in a bubble," she told me, "and that is very much related to who I am now."

At college, her bubble burst. She went to Arizona State University on an academic scholarship, and on her first day in an English literature class, her professor stunned her by asking, "Can you read?" She majored in theater — her lifelong dream has been to appear on "General Hospital" — yet despite impressing teachers she was never cast in school productions. Even when the theater department mounted a play about a girl with cerebral palsy, a nondisabled student was chosen over Zayid for the part. "It was devastating, because I knew I was good," Zayid said. "The girl who got it was a great actress. But why would anyone want to see her fake cerebral palsy, when I'm sitting right here?"

It was a light-bulb moment, and she realized that the movies she loved with disabled characters, like "Born on the Fourth of July," "What's Eating Gilbert Grape," and "Rain Man," all had visibly nondisabled stars. She pursued acting after graduation, until a forthright acting coach told her she would never get cast and ought to do a one-woman show. Zayid took comedy classes instead, began to get gigs, and after Sept. 11, 2001, started the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival with Dean Obeidallah. "The simplest way for me to describe Maysoon is fearless," Obeidallah said.

She also toured with the stand-up comedy show Arabs Gone Wild, landed a part in Adam Sandler's "You Don't Mess with the Zohan," and became a political commentator on "Countdown with Keith Olbermann," which proved a revelation.



Maysoon Zayid performing in New York. A colleague has described her as fearless.

Zayid had long understood that some nondisabled people recoiled at disabilities out of fear. "They're one popped blood vessel or car accident away from being this way," she said. But her Olbermann appearances drew hateful online comments calling her, she said, "a Gumby-mouth terrorist" and "an honor killing gone wrong." It was the first time Zayid had been mocked for being disabled and made her suddenly aware of the abuse that disabled people routinely faced.

After Zayid's TED Talk went viral, she became one of the most booked speak-

ers at the huge talent agency WME and used her bigger platform to push questions forward: Where were the visibly disabled news anchors and talk-show hosts? Why, outside a handful of shows — among them "Switched at Birth," "Breaking Bad," "American Horror Story," and "Speechless" — were visibly disabled actors largely absent from television? Why was it O.K. for nondisabled stars to play disabled characters — a practice nicknamed "CripFace" — and win big awards?

While performances by, say, Joaquin Phoenix as a wheelchair-using cartoon-

ist or Eddie Redmayne as Stephen Hawking largely go unquestioned, and even lauded, by able-bodied people, Zayid said that for many people with disabilities, their acting looks cartoonish, exaggerated, offensive and inauthentic.

"You can put on makeup to look Asian or Latino or black, but black, Asian and Latino people know you're not," she said. "And disabled people watching their disabilities being poorly portrayed know it's not them either."

Or, as she says onstage, if a person in a wheelchair can't play Beyoncé, Beyoncé can't play a person in a wheelchair.

Zayid will find out in January whether her show is to be made into a pilot. In the meantime, she is zipping around the world. In recent years, her gigs have included performing at the Team Beachbody Coach Summit — it's for workout fiends — in Nashville; opening for Pitbull in Las Vegas; and doing comedy, in both Arabic and English, in the United Arab Emirates.

At every turn, she slaps down people for using a particularly dreaded word.

"If you think I'm inspirational because I go and do sit-down stand-up comedy uncovered and uncensored in the middle of the Arab world, I'll take it," she said.

"If you think I'm inspirational because I wake up in the morning and don't weep about the fact that I'm disabled, that's not inspirational," she continued. "That's like I make you feel better about yourself because you're not me. I want to make you feel better about yourself because I made you laugh."