

CARTOON CREATOR'S GRISLY MURDER

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In South Florida, Alan Shalleck turned himself into a children's book reader called "Gramps." By the end of storytime, kids would often pile onto his lap.

Liu Xin/Palm Beach Post/ZUMA Press

Alan Shalleck knew a thing or two about storytelling: how to engage his audience and build suspense, how to bring a character to life. He honed those skills in the pioneering days of children's TV and directed the first animated shorts featuring Curious George.

That all took place when Shalleck, a family man with a wife and two sons, resided in New York. In South Florida, though, Shalleck lived out the second act of his life: divorced, broke, and lonely. He turned himself into a children's book reader called "Gramps" who would show up at libraries, schools, and bookstores wearing a straw hat and spectacles. The children would cluster around the sturdy gray-haired man, offering to turn the pages of his book and trying to climb into his lap.

But in South Florida, Shalleck also emerged with a more private and less conventional persona, as a devotee of spanking. In early 2006, the 76-year-old ran a personal ad in the Fort Lauderdale gay magazine *411* that read:

TO SPANK OR BE SPANKED

To endure the outrageous pleasure/pain of a mighty hand, paddle or cane OTK [over the knee]. That is the quest. Let's go beyond and stretch limits to tears of joy.

Satisfied his prose would arouse the curious, Shalleck signed his middle name, Jay, and added his phone number. And the curious called.

That's why, as the Pittsburgh Steelers pounded the Seattle Seahawks on Super Bowl Sunday two years ago, Alan Shalleck's alter ego was awaiting a flogging at his trailer home in

Boynton Beach. It would be, he hoped, a kinky test of endurance, one of many romps. Shalleck was to be the master that night, with a younger man bent over his knee. He'd thwack and smack until that fella's bare tush was crimson, until he couldn't take another hit, until someone cried "uncle" – when the fantasy would end. At least that's how it was supposed to transpire.

It didn't. The playmates that February night, enticed by Shalleck's ad, thwarted his rules. They came seeking cash, reasoning an older man would have money stashed somewhere in his home. The spanking session turned bloody: Shalleck would die from multiple stab wounds. His killers grabbed jewelry, checkbooks, and anything else that seemed valuable and then fled, leaving Shalleck's body in his driveway like a bundle of trash. It would be nearly two days before anyone noticed him there.

Shalleck had been barely scraping by. His career in television and film had ended a decade earlier in personal bankruptcy. There were no royalties rolling in. He lived modestly off Social Security checks and a part-time job as a bookseller at a Borders store.

The night he died, Shalleck spoke one last time on the phone with his old college buddy, actor Jerry Stiller. That was the sort of friendship he'd boast about at cocktail parties but not to his spanking partners. There was no need to chitchat with playmates or even know their names. Several fetish acquaintances say they didn't learn of Shalleck's showbiz ties until after the murder. Likewise, plenty of friends never guessed he might be fooling around with men. And paddles.

Shalleck wouldn't even discuss his spanking fetish with gay friends. He told them they couldn't possibly understand and empathize with his true desires. Jerry Bailis, a friend of 35 years, says Shalleck was an old-fashioned guy stuck somewhere in the 1930s with his Cole Porter tunes. Bailis, who is 72 and openly gay, says his friend was just beginning to acknowledge that men might be the objects of his desire.

Shalleck kept his facets separate, like mismatched swatches of fabric that form an intricate quilt. Few who were close to him ever glimpsed the whole pattern. His sons, David and Adam, and his ex-wife, Joan, are so alarmed by the sexual details surrounding his death they don't want to talk much about the man, especially because he worked with kids. "He was a professional at entertaining children," says David Shalleck, who at 46 is the eldest son. "I hope to God down there [in Florida] they don't perceive someone with a dark side as anything other."

Alan Shalleck was born in Manhattan in 1929, the youngest of three boys. He told friends he was a "mistake baby" conceived many years after his siblings and that his mother wished he were a girl. She didn't want him to get dirty playing outside, he claimed, so he never got into sports. He grew up on the Upper West Side and then moved upstate to study drama at Syracuse University.

In 1950, he got a job in the CBS mailroom in New York. From there he moved into production of network shows. In Jerry Stiller's memoir *Married to Laughter*, he recalls marrying Anne Meara in 1953 before Manhattan Municipal Judge Ben Shalleck, his buddy Alan's uncle. Since the judge was once married to Broadway singer Lillian Roth, Stiller wrote, his presiding over the ceremony "seemed to stamp the moment with some sort of showbizzy significance." Shortly after the wedding, Stiller remembers, Alan arranged for the young couple to appear on *The Price Is Right*, where Shalleck was assistant director; they won a turkey.

But Shalleck wanted to work in children's television. He clinched an associate producer role on *Winky Dink and You*, an innovative Saturday-morning show on CBS that encouraged kids to connect the dots of climactic scenes by drawing on a plastic sheet stuck to the TV screen via static electricity; the main character, Winky Dink, was a wide-eyed pixie who needed kids to, say, draw him a bridge so he could cross a river. The show, which ran from 1953 to 1957, is considered the first interactive TV program.

Then, in 1960, singer/actress Jane Norman approached a CBS station in Philadelphia with an idea for a children's show. She'd dress like Peter Pan, fly around, and hang out in a forest with an owl named Oggie and a butterfly named Fliffy. The show, *Pixanne*, ran for 16 years, and Shalleck got to direct some segments. He also worked as a stage manager for *Captain Kangaroo*. David Shalleck compares tagging along with his father at CBS production sets to "going into Toyland."

In 1977, Shalleck saw a chance to strike out on his own when Hans Augusto Rey, illustrator of the *Curious George* books, passed away. Shalleck approached Hans's widow, Margret, with an offer to direct George's animated television debut. She agreed.

Hans and Margret Rey published the meddlesome monkey's first adventure in 1939 while they were living in France, where the monkey went by the name Fifi. The husband-and-wife team concocted the tale together, with Hans painting the watercolor illustrations and Margret fussing over the words. Just before the Nazis stormed into Paris in 1940, the Reys, both German-born Jews, fled on bicycle. The manuscript for *Curious George* was one of the few belongings they took with them. The couple traveled to Spain, Portugal, and Brazil before settling in New York City that year. In 1941, *Curious George* hit American shelves.

The original story is a series of mishaps that commence when an inquisitive monkey ambles into the trap of a poacher (The Man in the Yellow Hat). The man acts as both captor and protector as George stirs up trouble by almost drowning on the ocean voyage from Africa, accidentally summoning the fire department, escaping from jail, and floating into the sky holding a cluster of red balloons. The story ends with the man paying off an angry balloon vendor before tucking George under his arm and carrying him to his new residence, a big-city zoo.

The Reys, who had no children of their own, penned seven *Curious George* tales together, the last of which, *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*, was issued in 1966. The creative process was so tedious that each time the couple completed a new story, they'd vow not to do another. By the late Seventies, when Shalleck approached Margret Rey, people who grew up with *Curious George* had become parents, and they were ready for a fresh spin on the character.

The Shalleck-Rey collaboration was a window into the bizarre. Shalleck would "spend entire weekends and weeks" at Rey's house in Boston, recalls longtime friend Bailis. "Margret Rey would jump around acting the stories out, and he would write them down. She *was* the monkey." Rey was also a fierce protector of *Curious George*'s image. A monkey ought not talk, she insisted, and George should keep puffing his beloved pipe, even if it inspired kids to smoke tobacco.

To bankroll the TV series, Shalleck turned to Canadian investor Richard Lafferty. The 104 *Curious George* TV shorts Shalleck directed resemble an old-fashioned picture book. The images are frozen, like pages, and the action is moved along by a single narrator's voice. Each

episode lasts five minutes. The shows first aired in Canada, between 1979 and 1982, and then in the United States on Nickelodeon's *Pinwheel* program in 1984 and Disney's *Lunch Box* and *Circle Time* shows in 1989.

Together, Shalleck and Rey also crafted 28 books based on the film plots for publisher Houghton Mifflin. Rey hated them. "The drawings are bad and the stories are bad. They're just third-rate," she told a *Newsday* reporter.

Shalleck wasn't terribly fond of working with Rey. "She was a spoiled little child, but people would put up with her because she was so talented," he once told the *Palm Beach Post*. Shalleck said he received a flat, one-time fee of \$500 per story. In another interview with the *Post*, he recounted scolding Rey in public: "Once when we were having lunch ... she was so rude to the waiter that I snatched her wig off and told her to behave. It was next to a spanking."

In 1991, Rey sued Lafferty for marketing videocassettes of the Shalleck TV shorts without her consent and without paying her royalties. Lafferty countersued. Rey's finicky ways, Lafferty asserted, obstructed his attempts to capitalize on various *Curious George* merchandising deals. Rey decided, for instance, that a plush doll designed by Eden Toys was "junky" and that the monkey depicted on a Sears prototype pajama appeared "plump." Both products suffered commercially because of her exacting standards, Lafferty alleged. In a 1993 decision, the First District U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that although Rey could be overly meticulous and irascible, as a creator of the *Curious George* brand and owner of the copyright, her concerns were legitimate.

Around the same time, in the early Nineties, Shalleck had borrowed beyond his means to produce a beloved video project called *Pepito's Dream*. The 27-minute drama, based on a story by John and Margaret Travers-Moore, is about a boy who dreams of making a speech at the United Nations to plead for world peace. With creditors breathing down his neck, Shalleck filed for bankruptcy and moved to South Florida.

That's where Gramps, the storybook reader, was born. Gramps was an energetic showman – no cane or rocker here! – who liked to share the stage. Rather than telling children to stay still and hush up, he'd invite them to lean forward and shout their favorite parts. Gramps would intentionally mangle lines of cherished books so the kids could correct him and feel involved. And he read each word with a dramatic flair that made it seem like the plot was unfolding inside that very room. By the end of storytime, kids would often pile onto his lap.

Gramps enjoyed the attention. He gave newspaper interviews and signed copies of *Curious George* books with the words "Stay Curious." Judy Stunda, the children's librarian at the Lakewood Branch Library in St. Lucie County, still displays a photo of Shalleck from his 1997 visit. "He was wonderful," the 62-year-old librarian remembers. "You could tell he connected with the kids. It's like an extra sense – children know when you really like them or not. They knew he liked them."

When he could, Shalleck charged a fee of \$100 an hour. He needed the extra income. Shalleck frequently complained to friends about his meager finances and having to work well into his retirement years. When Gramps got bookings, friends say, the black rain cloud over Shalleck's head would suddenly lift. It was like he needed to be around children. Toward the end of his life, he mostly read for free, driving as far as Pahokee to enthrall children.

The night Alan Shalleck died, his close friend Mike Rayber pulled up to his trailer, which was partially obscured by overgrown sea oats. Cars lined the street for Super Bowl parties, and the yells of sports fans masked the rustling of leaves and gentle clink of wind chimes that typically filled the air.

Rayber drove Shalleck to a Boynton Beach Tony Roma's for a late celebration of Rayber's 59th birthday. Shalleck paid. With Rayber, Shalleck could let his guard down. They'd met more than a decade earlier when Shalleck answered a personal ad Rayber had written. Rayber told police he saw himself and Shalleck as homosexuals but that Shalleck had trouble reconciling the idea in his mind. "I don't know that he necessarily considered himself gay."

Rayber said Shalleck would often beg him for a spanking and that, on occasion, he would reluctantly indulge his pal. Shalleck had entrusted him with keys to his trailer and an important task: to dispose of Shalleck's "toys" in the event of his death so his grown sons wouldn't find them. Both assumed he'd die of natural causes.

Shalleck's neighbors in Royal Manor Estates, a tidy 55-and-over community, had long before surmised he might be gay. Denise Zajac, a tiny blond 59-year-old who lives due west of Shalleck's old trailer, waves one hand like a crossing guard as she searches for the best words to describe why she suspected Shalleck was having homosexual trysts. "He had a lot of traffic in and out. You know, people traffic – men. Young, old, black, white – *whatever*. Day, night, morning. C'mon, something's going on. We figured out what type of lifestyle he was leading." At that, her husband, Tom, looks up from the football game he's engrossed in to add, "He had more guys going in there than a locker room."

But who would have imagined the spanking sessions? Whenever a guest arrived, Shalleck would crank up the music – sometimes opera or soul – to mask the howls of a man getting his tail whipped.

Standing in her Florida room, Denise is just six feet from the driveway where Shalleck's battered body was dragged and abandoned after the assault. The Zajacs say they didn't hear or see any signs of a struggle the Super Bowl Sunday their neighbor was killed. And nobody noticed Shalleck's corpse, covered with black garbage bags next to his blue Honda, until Tuesday.

Across the street, 80-year-old Russell Hall remembers his wife, Charlotte, who passed away in 2006, intuiting the moment she met Shalleck that he was gay. "We're both pretty broad-minded people. She liked him, and so did I... He was closet gay, I guess. He never discussed it with us."

At least once a week, the Halls would entertain Shalleck with a cocktail or two – vodka tonic with lime. He'd unload negative thoughts that had him feeling down, and the Halls would try to cheer him up. He was envious of the couple's adoring relationship with each other and their kids. "He wasn't too happy with his life, the way it had gone," Hall recalls.

Shalleck often came bearing gifts: souvenirs from his travels or presents around the holidays. The last Christmas gift, a ceramic jazz pianist and drummer, sits in the corner of Hall's TV room. Hall squints his pale-blue eyes as he reflects on the fate of his friend. "Too bad he had to get hooked up into that stuff – the gay lifestyle. Course, he could have been straight as a die and still had that happen. You never know in this day and age. There are a lot of predators out there."

Jim Sirman shudders to think he might have been at Shalleck's house the night of the

murder. Could he have prevented the crime? Or would he have been killed too? The diminutive 56-year-old already had a date Super Bowl Sunday, so he had turned down Shalleck's invitation. Sirman made plans to meet Monday night instead, but then he couldn't reach his play pal by phone. This was odd. Sirman says Shalleck was usually so eager before a play date he would phone several times that day to confirm the encounter. It was a 50-mile drive to Boynton Beach from his home in Davie; Sirman decided not to make the trip.

Sirman rang Shalleck again Tuesday, and a Boynton Beach homicide detective returned the call. "My heart sank," he recalls. "I knew it had to be about Alan."

The two men, both divorcees and fathers, met through a loose-knit South Florida spanking club of roughly 20 men. At first, Sirman says, he was turned off by Shalleck. He seemed pushy, aggressive. One time Sirman even saw him jump into an ongoing role-play game between two men at a spanking party; such uninvited interruptions are a big no-no in the fetish community.

But a persistent Shalleck phoned him perhaps 10 times until finally the younger man agreed to meet for a private, one-on-one session. Sirman inquired about health problems and established safe words: *green* for go, *yellow* to slow down, and *red* for stop. They got together perhaps three times before Shalleck was killed. Sirman says he gets off hearing older men moan, scream, and squirm under his flat hand or the swift swat of a paddle. And Shalleck liked to be dominated. The sessions would go on for hours. "He had one of the toughest bottoms I've ever seen," Sirman remembers. "It was like leather, his ass."

Members of the spanking club, spooked by the homicide, disbanded for a while. Beating one another relentlessly was suddenly unappealing after one of their brethren got pummeled and knifed to death. Those living in the closet were so terrified of being outed after police came knocking at their doors to ask about Shalleck that they never returned to the club.

Gossip began to circulate in Fort Lauderdale's large gay community about the two men who confessed to the murder, Rex Ditto and Vincent Puglisi. Some wondered whether the duo might have been responsible for unsolved murders in the area.

Vincent Puglisi, a 54-year-old fast-food cashier, and his unemployed 29-year-old lover, Rex Ditto, were about to be evicted from their Oakland Park home when they decided to visit Shalleck in early 2006. The men had been dating for only a month. Both had prison records, Puglisi for burglary and Ditto for assault and arson.

Combing through a list of recent incoming phone calls to Alan Shalleck, Boynton Beach Police found three from Puglisi – who showed up for questioning with cuts all over his hands.

Ditto appeared wearing sneakers with soles that matched a bloody print at the crime scene, and a Fossil wristwatch that belonged to Shalleck. By Wednesday evening, just 36 hours after the body was discovered, the pair had confessed.

Puglisi told police he met Alan Shalleck a year before the murder after reading the "catchy" spanking advertisement in *411* magazine; Puglisi was "curious to see just how kinky he was," so he got together with Shalleck on a few occasions.

Puglisi says he and Ditto discussed robbing and killing Shalleck before they ever traveled north to Boynton Beach; Ditto insists the plan involved only spanking. Each blames the other

for Shalleck's murder.

Both agree that upon arriving at the trailer, around 11 p.m., they watched a porn video. Ditto says it depicted older European men spanking white teenage boys. At Shalleck's behest, Ditto stripped down to his white silk women's underwear and bent over his host's knee. Then the man they knew as "Jay" slipped off Ditto's underwear and began smacking him, first with his bare hand and then with a wooden paddle.

Ditto eventually pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and robbery with a deadly weapon and was sentenced to life in prison with no chance of parole. Puglisi turned down a plea and is expected to stand trial in April, when Ditto has agreed to testify against him. Puglisi's attorney advised him against granting an interview to *New Times*. Meanwhile, Ditto agreed to discuss Shalleck's murder with *New Times* at Everglades Correctional Institution, which is nestled amid the sawgrass near the Miccosukee casino in Miami.

A female corrections officer and a burly inmate with tattooed arms stood watch as a wiry-built Ditto shuffled into a large meeting room wearing royal-blue canvas loafers, baby-blue scrubs, and a flimsy black yarmulke. The seductive face from the booking mug shot had gone gaunt and was partially obscured by a thin beard. His tousled locks had been shorn. Prison had erased Rex Ditto's good looks.

According to Ditto, after a few minutes under an oarlike paddle, he couldn't take anymore corporal punishment. But when he asked for a timeout, Ditto says, Shalleck told him he'd have to withstand the thwacking "till the sun comes up." That's when Ditto, who says he's a diagnosed schizophrenic, claims to have heard voices. *He's a nasty man*, they said. *Hit him in the head.*

Ditto grabbed the paddle and clobbered Shalleck in the forehead. A pissed-off Shalleck began choking him, Ditto says, and the two fell to the floor while they struggled. Ditto says when he hollered for help, Puglisi came with a kitchen knife and began stabbing Shalleck. As the assault dragged on, Ditto says, he decided it was time for a mercy kill; he plunged a knife in a circular pattern all around Shalleck's genitals, aiming for the kidneys. Shalleck was stabbed in more than 40 places, including the anus.

In his statement to police, Puglisi said he never struck Shalleck. Rather he witnessed Ditto bludgeoning Shalleck repeatedly over the head with the paddle; then he held the victim down while Ditto fetched a steak knife. He watched Ditto take up blade after blade, each of which either broke or bent under the pressure of the thrusts. And as he punctured the old man, Ditto repeatedly said, "The son of a bitch won't die." All the while, Shalleck begged for his life.

Robert Gershman, Ditto's attorney, says he thinks the men were equally culpable – and that life in prison was the best deal Ditto could hope for in a death penalty case. "This is probably one of the most gory and gruesome scenes anyone will ever see," Gershman says, remembering the crime scene photos. "The bathroom was covered in blood from floor to ceiling, and there was a handprint smeared down the length of the wall. It was like something out of a horror show."

Ditto and Puglisi dragged Shalleck's body out to their car. They planned to transport it to the Everglades and leave it for the gators. But they got spooked when a security guard drove by and took off. Then they dumped bloody knives and paddles in the New River in Fort Lauderdale and burned some of Shalleck's belongings in their back yard in Oakland Park. Their haul was meager: \$80 in spare change wrapped in paper, some jewelry, and a check

they forged to themselves for \$450. Shalleck's checkbook showed only \$500 in his checking account at the time of his death.

Five days after Shalleck's murder, Curious George made his big-screen debut in a long-awaited Universal film produced by Ron Howard. One of the scenes, when the monkey climbs onto a dinosaur skeleton in a museum, was borrowed from a story line developed under Shalleck's direction.

In the months leading up to his death, friends say, Shalleck was trying to find a lawyer to help him fight for a payout from Houghton Mifflin and Universal, but to no avail. The movie earned \$14.7 million on its opening weekend at the box office. Shalleck and his heirs wouldn't be seeing a piece of that action.

Alan Shalleck's sons arranged for their father's burial in Westchester County, New York. The wooden casket was interred February 14, 2006. There was two feet of snow on the ground that day, David Shalleck says. The funeral wasn't well attended.

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