

Why Do Women Fall In Love With Serial Killers?

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Contributor

Not long after the February 2018 shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, hundreds of teenaged girls started sending love letters to the alleged shooter as he awaited trial in prison. According to media reports, the letters – over 200 of them – contained flattery, encouragement, and even scantily-clad photographs.

It's hard to believe, but even men accused of the most heinous crimes often have legions of devoted fans. Ted Bundy, Steven Avery, Chris Watts and Charles Manson are just a few examples of convicted murderers who, despite killing women, have received love letters from other women while they were behind bars.

The reasons for this are complex, says Sarah Hewitt, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Middletown, CT.

For some women, Hewitt says, trauma can play a part. “When a woman has a history of trauma that is related to violence, their level of normalcy around violence is higher,” Hewitt explains. “Women who come from families where violence or crime is the norm can be attracted to men who engage in similar behaviors, even if they're more extreme.”

Women also tend to be socialized as caretakers, Hewitt adds. While men might be repelled by a woman's criminal past, women are more likely to see men incarcerated or on death row as potential partners who they can care for and emotionally “save.”

Another draw, says Hewitt, is the ability to control. “Since these men have lost their physical freedom, it's easier for women to 'trust' them,” she says. “Women who have a history of traumatic relationships, either with parents or significant others, where they have interpreted loss as rejection, can be attracted to men in prison because the men physically cannot leave them.”

Dr. Damian Jacob M. Sendler is a Harvard-educated forensic sexologist and principal research investigator at the Felnett Health Research Foundation who studies women who seek out long-term relationships with men in prison. And though there is a “wide range” of crimes that these women find attractive, Sendler says, “murderers tend to score the most interest and admiration.”

The reason for this is two-fold, according to Sendler. “About half of our female participants had difficulties growing up,” Sendler says. “On the one hand, these women want to help these men achieve their potential. “On the other hand, these women hope to find their soulmate, someone they can relate to based on life’s negative experiences.”

A small subset of these women, says Sendler, have something called hybristophilia, where a person is genuinely sexually aroused by the thought of someone committing a crime. Not all women who write letters to men in prison have hybristophilia, however, and simply having a relationship with someone behind bars doesn't make someone a hybristophilic.

“People with this type of paraphilia seek to fulfill their desire to love a much stronger and more dominant partner,” Sendler says. “Criminals are viewed as strong, fearless, and indifferent toward the law or social norms. Many women, and some men, idealize criminals and murderers as the type of person who can give them support. It's like a fetish.”

Are men also attracted to women behind bars for murder? It doesn't happen often, says Sendler.

“I am sure that there are men who find female criminals attractive,” he says. “The biggest difference between how women and men fall in love with criminals is that women seek to take care of the 'sinful,' while men are willing to forgive a criminal record only when they think that the woman acted in some sort of self-defense.”

Sarah Watts is a health and science journalist based in Chicago.

Why Do Women Fall In Love With Serial Killer Questions

1. What happened not long after the 2018 shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School?
2. Critical Thinking: What kind of teenage girl might engage in this kind of behavior? Support your view.
3. Who are some other serial killers who have received love letters from women while behind bars?
4. How can trauma in a women's life impact how she views serial killers?
5. Critical Thinking: Do you think repeated exposure to violence desensitizes people to its impact? Explain.
6. What are women more like to be socialized as?
7. Critical Thinking: Can a person emotionally "save" another person? Explain your view.
8. Why is it easier for women to "trust" a serial killer in a relationship?
9. What crime score the most interest and admiration among women who seek partners in prison?

10. What is hybristophilia?

11. What is the biggest difference between how men and women fall in love with criminals?

12. Critical Thinking: How should prison officials manage the letters that killers receive in prison? Explain your view.

13. Critical Thinking: Do you believe the media coverage that many killers receive increases their appeal? Explain your view.

14. Critical Thinking: Can a relationship with a partner in prison for the long term be successful? Explain your view.