5 Myths about Serial Killers and Why They Persist [Excerpt]

A criminologist contrasts the stories surrounding serial homicide with real data to help explain society’s macabre fascination with these tales

* By [Scott Bonn](https://www.scientificamerican.com/author/scott-bonn/) on October 24, 2014

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*Excerpted with permission from* [Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World’s Most Savage Murderers](http://www.amazon.com/Why-Love-Serial-Killers-Murderers/dp/1629144320/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1409751294&sr=8-1&keywords=why+we+love+serial+killers),*by Scott Bonn. Skyhorse Publishing. Copyright****©****2014.*

Much of the general public’s knowledge concerning serial homicide is a product of sensationalized and stereotypical depictions of it in the news and entertainment media. Colorful story lines are written to pique the interest of audiences, not to paint an accurate picture of serial murder.

By focusing on the larger-than-life media images of socially constructed “celebrity monsters,” the public becomes captivated by the stylized presentation of the criminals rather than the reality of their crimes. Media stereotypes and hyperbole create myths and great distortions in the public consciousness regarding the true dynamics and patterns of serial murder in the U.S.

**The Reality of Serial Homicide in the U.S.**
Serial killings account for no more than 1 percent of all murders committed in the U.S. Based on recent FBI crime statistics, there are approximately 15,000 murders annually, so that means there are no more than 150 victims of serial murder in the U.S. in any given year.1 The FBI estimates that there are between twenty-five and fifty serial killers operating throughout the U.S. at any given time.

If there are fifty, then each one is responsible for an average of three murders per year. Serial killers are always present in society. However, the statistics reveal that serial homicide is quite rare and it represents a small portion of all murders committed in the U.S.

Persistent misinformation, stereotypes and hyperbole presented in the media have combined with the relative rarity of serial murder cases to foster a number of popular myths about serial murder. The most common myths about serial killers encompass such factors as their race, gender, intelligence, living conditions and victim characteristics.

**Myth #1**:**All Serial Killers Are Men.**
*Reality:*This is simply not true but it is understandable why the public would hold this erroneous belief. As late as 1998, a highly regarded former FBI profiler said “there are no female serial killers.” The news and entertainment media also perpetuate the stereotypes that all serial offenders are male and that women do not engage in horrible acts of violence.

When the lethality of a femme fatale is presented in book or film, she is most often portrayed as the manipulated victim of a dominant male. This popular but stereotypical media image is consistent with traditional gender myths in society which claim that boys are aggressive by nature while girls are passive. In fact, both aggressiveness and passivity can be learned through socialization and they are not gender specific.

The reality concerning the gender of serial killers is quite different than the mythology of it. Although there have been many more male serial killers than females throughout history, the presence of female serial killers is well documented in the crime data.  In fact, approximately 17 percent of all serial homicides in the U.S. are committed by women.2Interestingly, only 10 percent of total murders in the U.S. are committed by women. Therefore, relative to men, women represent a larger percentage of serial murders than all other homicide cases in the U.S. This is an important and revealing fact that defies the popular understanding of serial murder.

**Myth #2: All Serial Killers Are Caucasian.**
*Reality:* Contrary to popular mythology, not all serial killers are white. Serial killers span all racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. The racial diversity of serial killers generally mirrors that of the overall U.S. population. There are well documented cases of African-American, Latino and Asian-American serial killers. African-Americans comprise the largest racial minority group among serial killers, representing approximately 20 percent of the total. Significantly, however, only white, and normally male, serial killers such as Ted Bundy become popular culture icons.

Although they are not household names like their infamous white counterparts, examples of prolific racial minority serial killers are Coral Eugene Watts, a black man from Michigan, known as the “Sunday Morning Slasher,” who murdered at least seventeen women in Michigan and Texas; Anthony Edward Sowell, a black man known as the “Cleveland Strangler” who kidnapped, raped and murdered eleven women in Ohio; and Rafael Resendez-Ramirez, a Mexican national known as the “Railroad Killer,” who killed as many as fifteen men and women in Kentucky, Texas, and Illinois.

**Myth #3:** **All Serial Killers Are Isolated and Dysfunctional Loners.**
*Reality:* The majority of serial killers are not reclusive social misfits who live alone, despite pervasive depictions of them as such in the news and entertainment media, including the socially challenged “Tooth Fairy” serial killer in the film *Red Dragon*. Real-life serial killers are not the isolated monsters of fiction and, frequently, they do not appear to be strange or stand out from the public in any meaningful way.

Many serial killers are able to successfully hide out in plain sight for extended periods of time. Those who successfully blend in are typically also employed, have families and homes and outwardly appear to be non-threatening, normal members of society. Because serial killers can appear to be so innocuous, they are often overlooked by law enforcement officials, as well as their own families and peers.

In some rare cases, an unidentified serial killer will even socialize and become friendly with the unsuspecting police detectives who are tracking him. The incredible tale of Ed Kemper (the “Co-ed Killer”) provides an example of this phenomenon.

Serial killers who hide out in plain sight are able to do so precisely because they look just like everyone else. It is their ability to blend in that makes them very dangerous, frightening and yet very compelling to the general public.

**Myth #4:** **All Serial Murderers Travel Widely and Kill Interstate.**
*Reality:* The roaming, homicidal maniac such as Freddy Krueger in the cult film *A Nightmare on Elm Street*is another entertainment media stereotype that is rarely found in real life. Among the most infamous serial killers, Ted Bundy is the rare exception who traveled and killed interstate. Bundy twice escaped from police custody and committed at least thirty homicides in the states of Washington, Utah, Florida, Colorado, Oregon, Idaho and California. Articulate, educated, well-groomed and charming, Bundy was truly atypical among serial killers in his cross-country killing rampage.

Unlike Bundy, most serial killers have very well defined geographic areas of operation. They typically have a comfort zone—that is, an area that they are intimately familiar with and where they like to stalk and kill their prey. Jack the Ripper provides the classic example of this geographic preference because he stalked and killed exclusively in the small Whitechapel district of London in the fall of 1888.

The comfort zone of a serial killer is often defined by an anchor point such as a place of residence or employment. Crime statistics reveal that serial killers are most likely to commit their first murder very close to their place of residence due to the comfort and familiarity it offers them. John Wayne Gacy “The Killer Clown” buried most of his thirty-three young, male victims in the crawl space beneath his house after sexually assaulting and murdering them.

Serial killers sometimes return to commit murder in an area they know well from the past such as the community in which they were raised. Over time, serial murderers may extend their activities outside of their comfort zone but only after building their confidence by executing several successful murders while avoiding detection by law enforcement authorities.

As noted by the FBI in its 2005 report on serial murder, the crime data reveal that very few serial predators actually travel interstate to kill.3 The few serial killers who do travel interstate to kill typically fall into one of three categories: 1) Itinerant individuals who periodically move from place to place; 2) Chronically homeless individuals who live transiently; or 3) Individuals whose job function lends itself to interstate or transnational travel such as truck drivers or those in the military service.

The major difference between these individuals who kill serially and other serial murderers is the nature of their traveling lifestyle which provides them with many zones of comfort in which to operate. Most serial killers do not have such opportunities to travel and keep their killings close to home.

**Myth #5: All Serial Killers Are Either Mentally Ill Or Evil Geniuses.**
*Reality:*The images presented in the news and entertainment media suggest that serial killers either have a debilitating mental illness such as psychosis or they are brilliant but demented geniuses like Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Neither of these two stereotypes is quite accurate. Instead, serial killers are much more likely to exhibit antisocial personality disorders such as sociopathy or psychopathy, which are not considered to be mental illnesses by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). An examination of psychopathy and sociopathy, and a discussion of the powerful connection between antisocial personality disorders and serial homicide is presented in chapter 4.

In fact, very few serial killers suffer from any mental illness to such a debilitating extent that they are considered to be insane by the criminal justice system. To be classified as legally insane, an individual must be unable to comprehend that an action is against the law at the exact moment the action is undertaken. In other words, a serial killer must be unaware that murder is legally wrong while committing the act of murder in order to be legally insane. This legal categorization of insanity is so stringent and narrow that very few serial killers are actually included in it.

Psychopathic serial killers such as John Wayne Gacy and Dennis Rader are entirely aware of the illegality of murder while they are in the process of killing their victims. Their understanding of right and wrong does nothing to impede their crimes, however, because psychopaths such as Gacy and Rader have an overwhelming desire and compulsion to kill that causes them to ignore the criminal law with impunity.

When they are apprehended, serial killers rarely are determined to be mentally incompetent to stand trial and their lawyers rarely utilize an insanity defense on their behalf. Once again, this is due to the extremely narrow legal definition of insanity which simply does not apply to most psychopathic killers. Even David Berkowitz, the infamous Son of Sam, who told his captors tales of satanic rituals and demonic possession, was found to be competent to stand trial for his murders following his arrest in 1977.

Considerable mythology also surrounds the intelligence of serial killers. There is a popular culture stereotype that serial killers are cunning, criminal geniuses. This stereotype is heavily promoted by the entertainment media in television, books and films. In particular, Hollywood has established a number of brilliant homicidal maniacs like John Doe in the acclaimed 1995 film *Se7en.*John Doe personifies the stereotype of the evil genius serial killer who outsmarts law enforcement authorities, avoids justice and succeeds in his diabolical plan.

The image of the evil genius serial killer is mostly a Hollywood invention.  Real serial killers generally do not possess unique or exceptional intellectual skills. The reality is that most serial killers who have had their IQ tested score between borderline and above average intelligence. This is very consistent with the general population. Contrary to mythology, it is not high intelligence that makes serial killers successful. Instead, it is obsession, meticulous planning and a cold-blooded, often psychopathic personality that enable serial killers to operate over long periods of time without detection.

1Uniform Crime Report. 2011. Retrieved <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/violent-crime/murder>

2Hickey*,*E. W*.* 1997.*Serial Murderers* *and Their Victims*. Belmont, Calf.: Wadsworth.

3Morton, R. J. 2005. *Serial Murder: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives for Investigators.* National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder>

**The social study of serial killers-Centre for Crime and Justice Studies**

Kevin Haggerty and Ariane Ellerbrok examine the cultural and historical context of serial killing

The study of serial killers has been dominated by an individualized focus on studying the biography of offenders and the causes of their behavior. Popular representations of Jeffrey Dahmer, Harold Shipman, John Wayne Gacy and other notorious figures emphasize the sociopathic tendencies of the lone serial killer, presented in accounts that accentuate how assorted personality traits and risk factors ostensibly contribute to their otherwise unfathomable behavior. While this emphasis on personal biography lends itself to much needed psychological analysis, the cumulative effect of such accounts is that serial killing can appear a-historical and a-cultural, as though such predispositions might manifest themselves in identical ways irrespective of context.

In fact, serial killing is intimately tied to its broader social and historical setting, something that is particularly apparent when such killing is considered in relation to a series of broad historical changes that have occurred over approximately the past 400–500 years, commonly associated with the rise of modernity. So, while throughout human history there have probably always been individuals who engaged in serial predation, in previous eras it was not possible for an individual to be a serial killer. Serial killing is a distinctly modern phenomenon, a product of relatively recent social and cultural conditions to which criminologists can provide fresh insight by accentuating the broad institutional frameworks, motivations, and opportunity structures within which serial killing occurs (Haggerty, 2009).

Serial killing is the rarest form of homicide, occurring when an individual has killed three or more people who were previously unknown to him or her, with a ‘cooling off’ period between each murder. This definition is accepted by both police and academic experts and therefore provides a useful frame of reference. Unfortunately, it also narrows the analysis of such crimes, as it fails to incorporate many of the familiar (although not inevitable) characteristics of serial killing. These include such things as the diverse influences of the mass media on serial killers as well as their tendency to select victims from particular walks of life. Attending to these (and other) factors can provide insight into the broader social and historical contexts that constitute the structural preconditions for such acts.

Here we briefly identify three aspects of serial killing that are often taken for granted, but that are intimately tied to the emergence of serial murder in its contemporary guise. These include the rise of a society of strangers, the development of a culture of celebrity, and cultural frameworks of denigration and marginalization.

**Society of strangers**

Mass urbanization is a distinctive characteristic of the modern era, something that has profoundly altered the nature of human relationships by virtue of generating an unprecedented degree of anonymity. In pre-modern societies individuals knew one another by name, often having intimate knowledge of their neighbor’s family history, daily routines and personal predilections. Strangers were rarely encountered, and when encountered were the subject of rumor and suspicion. The average medieval citizen might have only met 100 strangers during the course of their entire life (Braudy, 1986), a number markedly low by contemporary standards, where one could confront hundreds of strangers simply on the daily commute to work.

The rise of capitalism and related processes of mass migration to urban centers resulted in individuals being immersed in a sea of strangers (Nock, 1993). This development also proved to be a key precondition for the emergence of serial murder, given that a defining attribute of serial killers is that they prey on strangers (something that distinguishes them from the vast majority of homicides, which typically involve some form of prior relationship between killer and victim). Thus dense modern urban environments represent ideal settings for the routinized impersonal encounters that operate as a hallmark of serial killing.

**Mass media and the culture of celebrity**

Although serial killing is statistically rare, it is nonetheless a ubiquitous cultural phenomena, one that for the vast majority of people is best understood as a media event (Gibson, 2006). Serial killers have become an inescapable point of reference in movies, television fiction, novels, true crime books and video games. This global system of mass media – again, a characteristic attribute of modernity – has made many citizens intimately familiar with the dynamics of serial killing and the lives of particularly notorious offenders.

The relationship between media and serial killing is, however, not straightforward. By widely circulating the details of specific serial killers, the mass media establishes the ‘serial killer’ as a dominant cultural category. One upshot is that, whereas in antiquity killing sequentially may have been something that someone did, today a serial killer is something someone can be. By placing the category of ‘serial killer’ into wide circulation, the media makes the specifics of such behavior open to potential imitation, although this is not to suggest that serial killing might be the product of some straightforward ‘media effect’.

The media has also fostered a culture of celebrity. In our predominantly secular modernity the prospect of achieving celebrity has become desirable to the extent that it promises to liberate individuals from a powerless anonymity, making them known beyond the limitations of ascribed statuses such as class and family relations. For some this promise of celebrity is merely appealing, while for others it is an all-consuming passion, to the point that not securing some degree of fame can be experienced as a profound failure. Serial killers are not immune to the appeals of celebrity. As Egger (2002) has demonstrated in his analysis of seven of the most notorious American serial killers, the majority ‘seemed to enjoy their celebrity status and thrive on the attention they received’. Hence the complaint of a serial killer to local police is telling: ‘How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?’ (Braudy, 1986).

**Marginalisation**

Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of serial murder is that such killings appear random. This, however, is a misleading characterization, for while serial killers do target strangers, their victims are not haphazard (Wilson, 2007). Rather, the victims of serial killers tend to mimic the wider cultural categories of denigration characteristic of contemporary society. All societies have their own distinctive structures of symbolic denigration, whereby certain classes of people are positioned as outcasts or ‘lesser’ humans. Such individuals, often singled out by modern institutions for reprobation, censure and marginalization, are also disproportionately the targets of serial killers, who tend to prey upon vagrants, the homeless, prostitutes, migrant workers, homosexuals, children, the elderly and hospital patients (ibid.). Gerald Stano likened the killing of his victims to ‘no different than stepping on a cockroach’ (Holmes and DeBurger, 1998). Such a statement keenly demonstrates the extent to which serial killers embrace and reproduce the wider cultural codings that have devalued, stigmatized and marginalized specific groups. Through a distorted mirror, serial killers reflect back, and act upon, modernity's distinctive valuations.

Recognizing the dynamics of victim marginalization is particularly germane to the study of serial killers, for the denigration of particular social groups is connected to specific opportunity structures for murder. Criminologists have emphasized the importance of ‘opportunity structures’ as a means of ascertaining the increased likelihood of criminal behavior in certain contexts – noting that crime is more likely to occur when there is a combination of a possible victim accessible to predation, a motivated offender, and a lack of competent guardians. That the victims of serial killers tend to be drawn from modernity's disposable classes can also mean that these victims are outside of effective systems of guardianship, and are targeted not only because they are more accessible, but also because their deaths are less likely to generate timely investigation or legal consequences.

**Modern phenomena**

While serial killing is routinely presented as the unfathomable behavior of the lone, decontextualized and sociopathic individual, here we have emphasized the unnervingly familiar modern face of serial killing. Several distinctively modern phenomena, including anonymity, a culture of celebrity enabled through the rise of mass media, and specific cultural frameworks of denigration, each provide key institutional frameworks, motivations and opportunity structures for analyzing such acts. To exclusively focus on aetiology and offender biography systematically ignores this larger social context, and elides a more nuanced understanding of the hows and whys of serial killing.

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**From the Spiritual Science Research Foundation**

**1. Introduction**

Every now and again the world is shocked by some brutal killings. The killings may be due to serial killers or due to mass murderers.

There are differences between mass murderers and serial killers:

* Mass murderers kill a number of people at one time and in one place. Mass murderers usually attack schools, universities and restaurants believing it to be a place for a maximum kill effect. They often die at the scene of the multiple slayings, either through suicide or police action. Only occasionally do they turn themselves into the police after the killings.
* Serial killers on the other hand, murder one at a time and go to great lengths to avoid detection and apprehension.

The US is believed to have the highest number of serial killers.

**2. Why do people become serial killers or mass murderers?**

Any problem can have causes either in one or more of the 3 dimensions, namely the physical, the psychological and the spiritual. Spiritual research has shown that the main root cause for a person to commit serial killing and mass murder lies in the spiritual realm. The following chart shows a breakdown of the reasons a person commits serial killing and mass murder.



* The psychological factors have been well documented in various publications available on the Internet.
* With regards to the spiritual factors it is primarily [demonic possession](http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/spiritual-problems/demonic-possession/) by medium level ghosts from the [2nd region of Hell](http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/spiritualresearch/spiritualscience/afterdeath/#4) (*Pātāl*). Refer to the section on [types of ghosts](http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/spiritualresearch/difficulties/Ghosts_Demons/typesofghosts). In some cases these people have been possessed for many births by the same higher level ghosts.

It is for this reason that it is very difficult to predict when a mass murderer may go on a killing spree as the ghost possessing him can do it at any time without any warning signs.

**Does this mean that serial killers and mass murderers are exonerated for their crimes at a karmic level?**

As per the [Law of Karma](http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/spiritualresearch/spiritualscience/lawofkarma) we have to experience happiness or suffer the consequences of our actions and thoughts. For extreme acts like killing someone one has to suffer severely at a spiritual level in this lifetime or the next. But what if an entity or a ghost acted through a person? And by possessing the person, the ghost made the person commit heinous crimes like serial killing and mass murder. Is the possessed person still responsible as per the Law of Karma?

The answer is yes. The reason for this is that a ghost gains entry into our consciousness and possesses us due to our own vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities include a high amount of demerits accrued from previous births, incorrect deeds, personality defects such as fear and anger that lead to anxiety and stress, lack of spiritual practice, etc. Even mass murderers or serial killers who are psychologically impaired incur demerits for their crime. The reason is that, basically they are psychologically deranged due to some major incorrect action of theirs either in this or some past birth. That is why they are still accountable for their crimes even though they may not be fully aware of their actions when committing the crime.

However the extent of demerits incurred is less than if they were to do the act without being possessed or psychologically deranged as compared to an average person in his senses and in full consciousness committing the same crimes.

The following chart gives the relative difference.



Mass murderers like Hitler would be earning demerits exponentially more than 100 on the above relative scale.

**3. In summary**

Spiritual root causes of problems can only be completely rectified through spiritual means. Regular spiritual practice as per the 6 basic principles of spiritual practice is the only sure way of preventing a ghost possessing us. Spiritual practice is also the only sure way of being protected from the onslaught of mass murderers and serial killers.

**The Grisly, All-American Appeal of Serial Killers**

In trying to make sense of the darkest extremes of human behavior, the public turns murderers into myths and monsters.

* [**JULIE BECK**](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/julie-beck/)**, OCT 21, 2014, aTLANTIC MAGAZINE**

Bottom of Form

People call him the Killer Clown. While it’s true that John Wayne Gacy Jr. was both a killer and a clown, there’s no evidence that he murdered any of his 33 victims while wearing a clown costume. Gacy dressed up as his alter egos, Pogo and Patches, for parties, or sometimes to entertain children at nearby hospitals. “When he was creepy and going to kill you was when he was dressed normally,” says Rachael Penman, exhibits and events manager at the National Museum of Crime and Punishment. An exhibit at the museum displays the clown costumes alongside Gacy’s plain black leather jacket, juxtaposing the two sides of Gacy’s divided nature. “When he was good, he was the best of good,” wrote Gacy’s defense attorney, Sam Amirante, in an email, “but when he was bad he was the worst of evil.”

But even if Gacy never killed as Pogo, people still associate his murders with white makeup, a painted, pointed red mouth, and a frilly collar. As heinous as his crimes were, this one offbeat detail from his life propelled him to infamy. Because when it comes to serial killers, the myth is what matters.

\* \* \*

If you were to carefully calibrate your fear of being murdered according to statistics, you should be 12 times as afraid of your family members as of serial killers. Less than one percent of murders in any given year are committed by serial killers, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s report on serial murder; in 2012, 12.5 percent of murders were committed by victims’ family members.

Sadly, tales of domestic violence zoom in and out of the news so frequently that they rarely capture the public’s attention, and when they do, they don’t hold it for long. Meanwhile, Gacy’s story, along with those of other serial killers like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and David Berkowitz, are remembered even decades later: They’re so well-known that we continue to hear casual references to them in pop culture. For example, in Katy Perry’s recent song “Dark Horse,” Juicy J raps, “She’ll eat your heart out/like Jeffrey Dahmer.” Dahmer, who was known for cannibalizing his victims, committed his crimes between 1978 and 1991, and was [killed in prison in 1994](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/29/us/jeffrey-dahmer-multiple-killer-is-bludgeoned-to-death-in-prison.html), nearly 20 years before “Dark Horse” was released.

Juicy J can drop that tasteless reference and know it will be understood because serial killers are “still very much a part of our culture,” Penman says. The question is, why? What draws people to their dark, disturbing stories? Why do some killers become celebrities while others are forgotten?

In his new book, [*Why We Love Serial Killers*](http://www.amazon.com/Why-Love-Serial-Killers-Murderers/dp/1629144320) (out October 28)*,* criminologist Dr. Scott Bonn attempts to solve some of these mysteries. “My question is: What can we learn from these individuals?” he says. “What can we learn about ourselves? People are drawn to understanding the dark side, and the dark side is part of the human condition.”

“It’s not really about the victims. It’s more about the puzzle—the interesting labyrinth of human emotions and human motives.”

This desire to see into the mind of a serial killer can be a powerful attraction. At the Crime Museum, I met a 59-year-old tourist named Joanne Marvel who described her lifelong fascination with crime. A recording of a police siren blared around us as she told me how her grandfather used to read crime magazines, and how her father claimed to have met Al Capone once in Chicago during the heyday of organized crime. “For me it’s about how their childhood affected what they did later,” Marvel said. “I think a lot of people think that way—they want to know why [the killer] got that way rather than what he did. It’s more about why he did it.”

As retired NYPD homicide detective Dave Carbone told Bonn when asked about the public’s interest in serial killers, “The why is the wow.” Or in the words of Katherine Ramsland, a forensic psychologist and author of numerous books including [*The Human Predator*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Human-Predator-Historical-Investigation/dp/0425213781)*,*“It’s not really about the victims. It’s more about the puzzle—the interesting labyrinth of human emotions and human motives.”

What made serial killers this way? Why did they kill, and why did they do it so gruesomely? How are they different from us? (*Please let them be different from us*.) These are complicated, compelling questions. But here, at the outer boundaries of the human condition, are realities that resist our understanding.

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In the public imagination, serial killers tend to fit a certain stereotype: “They’re all men, all white, all evil geniuses or mentally ill; they want to get caught,” Bonn said, listing the most prevalent myths. Even the serial killer exhibit at the Crime Museum claims, “Over 90 percent [of serial killers] are white males.”

In reality, Bonn says, “they are actually far more nuanced, far more varied than the general public realizes.” The racial breakdown of serial killers is about the same as that of the U.S. population at large, according to the FBI. Based on the [Radford University serial killer database](http://maamodt.asp.radford.edu/Serial%20Killer%20Information%20Center/Project%20Description.htm), which includes data on nearly 4,000 killers, just 46 percent of serial killers since 1910 have been white men.

It’s not hard to see why that misconception exists, though: Many of the serial killers who become cultural legends *are* white men. Dahmer, Bundy, Gacy, and Berkowitz were all white, as were Gary Ridgeway (the “Green River Killer”), and Dennis Rader (“Bind Torture Kill”). The Zodiac killer, while never caught, was described as a white male. Richard Ramirez, or the “Night Stalker,” is one well-known non-white killer—he was the son of a Mexican policeman—but as Ramsland points out, he became infamous largely because he “had the whole Satan thing going.” (He drew pentagrams on his hand and occasionally shouted “Hail Satan” during his trial. Fairly attention-grabbing behavior.)

“It’s almost as if we have a canonical group, and anyone who comes after that is just seen in that context,” suggests David Schmid, a professor of English at the University of Buffalo who has studied serial killer celebrity and the popularity of true crime in the United States.

Bonn has a few theories about why white male killers get more attention. Female serial killers tend to kill by less-gory methods—poisoning rather than shooting—which makes their stories less sensational. Aileen Wuornos, the killer portrayed by Charlize Theron in the film *Monster,* murdered with a gun, and Bonn believes that is a key reason for her fame.

Only about 9 percent of serial killers since 1910 have been women, according to the Radford database. But 40 percent have been African American, and few of those have achieved celebrity status. Bonn notes that most serial killers tend to kill within their own race, and that white victims, especially white female victims, usually get wider media attention. This means their killers, who are likely white as well, consequently get more coverage.

Another unfortunate possibility is that killers who target minority victims are just less likely to get caught, due to disparities in police resources. “Serial murder investigations are complicated, time-consuming, and very expensive,” Bonn writes. “Although it may not seem fair, affluent white neighborhoods are given priority over poor, black, or Latino neighborhoods by state officials in the assignment of valuable policing resources. This negatively impacts the ability of law enforcement personnel to pursue serial murder cases in poor racial minority communities.”

“We have largely lost our ability to be appalled. It takes a very, very extreme crime for us now to recover that.”

For all of these reasons, and possibly more, the quintessential serial killer is usually imagined as a middle-class white man who turns out to have a dark secret, à la Gacy, who was said to host regular parties at his suburban Chicago home, or Rader, who was active in his church. Schmid talks about the gap between killers’ twisted inner lives and their unassuming outward appearances. David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, was a round-faced, droopy-eyed man who seemed like any other Jewish kid from Brooklyn. Ted Bundy, a clean-cut Republican Party operative, is frequently described as “handsome.” The gap between the extraordinary and the ordinary is part of what fascinates people, Schmid says, and in our culture, “ordinary” is often shorthand for “white, male, middle-class.”

Just as there are misunderstandings about who serial killers are, there are false assumptions about how they got this way. Another prominent myth involves three specific warning signs: bedwetting, cruelty to animals, and setting fires. The Macdonald Triad, as it’s sometimes called, originated from a small 1963 study in which psychiatrist John M. Macdonald analyzed 100 of his violent patients at one psychiatric hospital. Ramsland calls it a “small, poorly-designed study”: Later research refuted the idea that the presence of these childhood traits necessarily predicts violent behavior.

Unfortunately, there’s no easy way to identify a serial killer in the making. The FBI reminds readers in its report that there are a lot of factors that go into influencing human behavior. Just as it would be impossible to describe all of the reasons a person decides to get married—or makes a far more mundane choice, like having pizza for lunch—it’s impossible to explain all the reasons why a person chooses to kill.

Yet the stereotypes live on, making it easier for the public to file serial killers away neatly in their mind-cabinets, clearly labeled for easy reference. “I think it comes down to how a seemingly ordinary person can develop into an extreme offender,” Ramsland says. “We’re hoping the answer is that they’re not seemingly ordinary to start with, that they’re set apart in some way that we’ll be able to identify and eventually treat. We want them to be deviant monsters.”

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The serial killer is a quintessentially American figure. According to the Radford database, there have been more than 2,600 serial killers in the U.S. since 1900. England, the country with the next highest total, has had 142. Schmid, who is originally from the U.K., says that while there are serial killers in other countries, because the rates of violence in general, and serial killer violence specifically, are so much higher in the U.S., “a difference of degree becomes a difference in kind,” and people are led to “see serial killers as prototypically American.”

The U.S.’s high rates of violent crime may also be the reason certain killers become more famous than others. When the news is filled with gun violence every day, another murder by firearm doesn’t necessarily stand out. But when killers stab, torture, rape, and even eat their victims, that’s attention-grabbing, even to a desensitized nation. “I’m so immune to gun violence at this point,” says Penman, the exhibits and events manager at the Museum of Crime and Punishment. “But get out a knife and start stabbing people, and I’m traumatized. It’s different. It shouldn’t be, but it is.”

“We have largely lost our ability to be appalled,” Schmid says. “It takes a very, very extreme crime for us now to recover that.”

The serial killers who become famous are extreme, either in their methods (like Rader, who named himself Bind Torture Kill after his modus operandi) or their madness (the Zodiac, who sent baffling letters written in code to the press). These shocking details are what get people’s attention; the need for answers is what keeps it.

These stories also capture the public’s imagination because they have elements of the most gripping fiction: high stakes, danger, mystery, heroes, and a villain who ultimately gets his comeuppance (or, in a case like the Zodiac Killer, eludes the law and remains an enigma). “It’s sometimes difficult to draw a hard and fast boundary between [reality and fiction],” Schmid says. “True crime shows often use fictional techniques to dramatize what they’re showing, and fictional shows draw upon real stories to give themselves authenticity.”

This is why Bonn believes the public experiences no meaningful difference between real serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer and fictional serial killers like Hannibal Lector from *The Silence of the Lambs*. “They are equally scary and entertaining,” he writes. And fiction and reality do bleed into each other: Buffalo Bill, who collects victims’ skin in *Silence of the Lambs*, was based in part on real-life killer Ed Gein, who kept a collection of women’s body parts. Jeffrey Dahmer, the cannibalistic serial killer who was apprehended in 1991, was compared endlessly to Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lector, particularly since the film version of *Silence of the Lambs* came out that same year.

Even the news media plays into this tendency to paint serial killers as storybook villains. For his book, Bonn did a little media analysis. He looked at articles mentioning serial killers in *The* *New York Times*and *Time*magazine between 1995 and 2013, and searched within them for the words “devil,” “monster,” and “evil.” In both publications, 35 percent of articles contained one or more of those descriptors.

“Even in, arguably, the most credible publications out there, they’re buying into this monster narrative,” Bonn says. “The narrative of good and evil is something that we are taught, and we fit things into that.” Bonn invokes the sociological concept of anomie, a state in which a society’s norms and rules are broken and confused (in this case, the norm of “not killing people”). When a serial killer is at large, people flail about looking for moral guidance, Bonn says. “We demand answers. What we get back from the media and law enforcement is: ‘Evil has come to our town, but don’t worry about it, we’re going to conquer evil.’ That narrative in some ways is reassuring, but it’s reassuring in a way that’s not real. It’s an oversimplification, but it’s done so that we feel better.”

It’s a reductive story, but a useful one. The good-versus-evil/monster-hunt narrative is a way to manage the incomprehensible. Evil doesn’t need to be understood, just eliminated. So the desire for answers is satisfied; the burden of parsing a killer’s complicated motivation falls away. All the messy details are composited into a single figure: the serial killer. This boogeyman-like entity has become less of a threat than a stock character, useful for selling publications and spicing up fictional stories.

The public fascination with serial killers can seem callous at times—especially when the stories are real, but even when they’re imagined. However, research suggests that people who enjoy graphic, frightening stories can have a variety of motivations. A 1995 study on why adolescents watch horror films found that “gore watchers,” who professed to enjoy the blood and guts, tended to have low levels of empathy and a strong need for adventure-seeking. “Thrill watchers,” who watched the movies to get the adrenaline rush of being scared, had high levels of adventure-seeking, but also high levels of empathy. Gore watchers tended to identify with the killer and not the victim, while thrill watchers tended not to identify with either killers or victims—they were captivated mainly by the excitement and the mystery. “If the real serial killer comes knocking on your door, then it has real implications,” Bonn says. “But until then, it’s just entertainment.”

David Schmid has another theory about why people find serial killers entertaining, one that’s not necessarily flattering to American audiences. Procedural shows like *CSI*or *True Detective* may attract viewers simply because of the drama and the plotting, he says, but in other recent shows like *Dexter*and *Bates Motel,*the criminals are the protagonists—the characters people are supposed to identify with when they watch. People both fear and admire criminals, he says, because they live outside the bounds of laws and social conventions.

“For all kinds of reasons, people are not very honest about why they consume these types of products,” Schmid says. “But I really do believe that part of it [is] this fascination with people who don’t obey the rules and put themselves first, always. It’s not that we want to go around murdering people, but we wonder what life would be like if we could just do whatever we wanted.”

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It’s been many years since any new serial killers were added to the canonical group. That’s not to say there haven’t been any: [Richard Beasley](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/09/advertisement-for-murder/309435/)\*, who killed victims he met via Craigslist, and Anthony Sowell, or The Cleveland Strangler, both got some media attention. But none of these recent criminals have attained true celebrity status. There is no modern John Wayne Gacy.

Today, Schmid argues, the fear of being randomly attacked is provoked less acutely by serial killers than by terrorists. Under the right conditions, he says, the public could certainly be whipped into a frenzy by a serial killer again. But for the most part, “post 9/11, terror has come to have a more specific, more political meaning. That’s why [terrorist attacks] get a lot of coverage at the moment, because they allow people to ask if this is the defining crime of the time.”

As the most infamous serial killers slip farther and farther into the past, people are able to look at them through a more detached, historical lens, as “examples of Americana,” Schmid says. According to Eric Hickey’s book *Serial Killers and Their Victims,* in the 1970s and 1980s, there were 40 or so films about serial killers, real or imagined. From 2000 to 2008, there were more than 270, though he notes that more than half of those were straight-to-video releases.

These stories get told and retold, calcifying as they go, shedding the pesky details that don’t quite fit into the mold we’ve come to expect, until we’re left with the familiar, archetypal story: that of the white male serial killer whose everyman exterior hides a twisted, violent alter ego. Killers who don’t fit are forgotten or ignored—as are, all-too-often, their victims.