

## Monsters or Victims? What They Are and Who They Kill

*"It was an urge. ... A strong urge, and the longer I let it go the stronger it got, to where I was taking risks to go out and kill people — risks that normally, according to my little rules of operation, I wouldn't take because they could lead to arrest."*

— [Edmund Kemper](#)

Where does this urge come from, and why is so powerful? If we all experienced this urge, would we be able to resist?

Is it genetic, hormonal, biological, or cultural conditioning? Do serial killers have any control over their desires? We all experience rage and inappropriate sexual instincts, yet we have some sort of internal cage that keeps our inner monsters locked up. Call it morality or social programming; these internal blockades have long since been trampled down in the psychopathic killer. Not only have they let loose the monster within, they are virtual slaves to its beastly appetites. What sets them apart?



Henry Lee Lucas

Serial killers have tested out a number of excuses for their behavior. [Henry Lee Lucas](#) blamed his upbringing; others like [Jeffrey Dahmer](#) say that they were born with a "part" of them missing. [Ted Bundy](#) claimed pornography made him do it. [Herbert Mullin](#), Santa Cruz killer of thirteen, blamed the voices in his head that told him it was time to "sing the die song." The ruthless Carl Panzram swore that prison turned him into a monster, while [Bobby Joe Long](#) said a motorcycle accident made him hypersexual and eventually a serial lust killer. The most psychopathic, like [John Wayne Gacy](#), turned the blame around and boasted that the victims deserved to die.

They must be insane — what normal person could slaughter another human, for the sheer pleasure of it? Yet the most chilling fact about serial killers is that they are rational and calculating. As the "British Jeffrey Dahmer" [Dennis Nilsen](#) put it, "a mind can be evil without being abnormal."

Before we look at who they are, we must first describe what they are. The FBI defines serial murder as:

- A minimum of three to four victims, with a "cooling off" period in between;
- The killer is usually a stranger to the victim — the murders appear unconnected or random;
- The murders reflect a need to sadistically dominate the victim;
- The murder is rarely "for profit"; the motive is psychological, not material;
- The victim may have "symbolic" value for the killer; method of killing may reveal this meaning;
- Killers often choose victims who are vulnerable (prostitutes, runaways, etc.)

Statistically, the average serial killer is a white male from a lower-to-middle-class background, usually in his twenties or thirties. Many were physically or emotionally abused by parents. Some were adopted. As children, fledgling serial killers often set fires, torture animals, and wet their beds (these red-flag behaviors are known as the "triad" of symptoms.) Brain injuries are common. Some are very intelligent and have shown great promise as successful professionals. They are also fascinated with the police and authority in general. They have either attempted to become police themselves but were rejected, worked as security guards, or served in the military. Many, including John Gacy, the [Hillside Stranglers](#), and Ted Bundy, have disguised themselves as law enforcement officials to gain access to their victims.

## Why Are They So Difficult to Spot?

### Getting Away with Murder

We think we can spot lunacy, that a maniac with uncontrollable urges to kill will be unable to contain himself. On the bus, in the street, it is the mentally ill we avoid, sidestepping the disheveled, unshaven man who rants on over some private outrage. Yet if you intend to avoid the path of a serial killer, your best strategy is to sidestep the charming, the impeccably dressed, polite individuals. They blend in, camouflaged in contemporary anonymity. They lurk in churches and malls, and prowl the freeways and streets. "Dress him in a suit and he looks like ten other men," said one attorney in describing Dahmer. Like all evolved predators, they know how to stalk their victims by gaining their trust. Serial killers don't wear their hearts on their sleeves. Instead, they hide behind a carefully constructed facade of normalcy.

## Mask of Sanity

Because of their psychopathic nature, serial killers do not know how to feel sympathy for others, or even how to have relationships. Instead, they learn to simulate normal behavior by observing others. It is all a manipulative act, designed to entice people into their trap. Serial killers are actors with a natural penchant for performance. [Henry Lee Lucas](#) described being a serial killer as "being like a movie-star ... you're just playing the part." The macabre Gacy loved to dress up as a clown, while the [Zodiac](#) suited up in a bizarre executioner's costume that looked like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. In court, Bundy told the judge, "I'm disguised as an attorney today." Bundy had previously "disguised" himself as a compassionate rape crisis center counselor.



The Faces of Ted Bundy

The most coveted role of roaming psychopaths is a position of authority. Gacy was an active, outgoing figure in business and society; he even became a member of the Jaycees. Many joined the military, including Berkowitz, who was intensely patriotic for a time. Playing police officer, however, is the most predictable. Carrying badges and driving coplike vehicles not only feeds their need to feel important, but also allows them access to victims who would otherwise trust their instincts and not talk to strangers.

Yet, when they are caught, serial killer wills suddenly assume a "mask of insanity" — pretending to be a multiple personality, schizophrenic, or prone to black-outs — anything to evade responsibility. Even when they pretend to truly reveal themselves, they are still locked into playing a role. What nameless dread lies behind the psychopath's mask?

"What's one less person on the face of the earth anyway?" [Ted Bundy's](#) chilling rationalization demonstrates the how serial killers truly think. "Bundy could never understand why people couldn't accept the fact that he killed because he wanted to kill," said one FBI investigator.

### What Makes a Serial Killer Tick?

Edmund Kemper

Just as these killers rip open their victims to "see how they run" (as [Ed Kemper](#) put it), forensic psychiatrists and FBI agents have tried to get inside the killer's mind. Traditional explanations include childhood abuse, genetics, chemical imbalances, brain injuries, exposure to traumatic events, and perceived societal injustices. The frightening implication is that a huge population has been exposed to one or more of these traumas. Is there some sort of lethal concoction that sets serial killers apart from the rest of the population?

We believe that we have control over our impulses — no matter how angry we get, there is something that stops us from taking our aggressions out on others. Do serial killers lack a moral safety latch? Or are they being controlled by something unfathomable? "I wished I could stop but I could not. I had no other thrill or happiness," said [Dennis Nilsen](#), who wondered if he was truly evil. Serial killers are undeniably sick, and their numbers seem to be growing. Are we in the midst of a serial killer "epidemic," as Joel Norris describes it? If this is a disease, what is the cure?

### Family Tree

#### Are Serial Killers Truly the 20th Century Bogeymen?

Is it our modern times that creates them, or have they been in operation before we classified them as a phenomenon? Although the term "serial killer" was coined in 1971, early fables of human/monsters reveals that there has always been danger in straying too far, or in accepting the help of strangers. The carnivorous characters in Grimm's Fairy tales become vivid metaphors of human bloodlust. Gruesome stories of Bluebeards and their bloody chambers, big bad wolves, trolls under the bridge and witches in the forest, all of whom make meals out of unsuspecting innocents, remind us of our contemporary monsters. These cautionary tales may represent an early, pre-psychological way of understanding the sadistic side of human nature.

### Wolfmen

"Lycanthropy," a combination of the Greek words "wolf" and "man", was another early concept created to describe the horror of senseless sexual murder. In *The A-Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* Harold Schechter and David Everitt describe the lycanthropic madman as sexual predators who terrorized 16th century peasant villages, so much that the authorities "regarded it as one of the most pressing social problems of the day." Among the most notorious of these medieval "wolfmen" was [Gilles Garnier](#) of France, and the

German [Peter Stubbe](#), both of whom attacked children, ripping them apart and cannibalizing them. Stubbe even went so far as to savagely mutilate his own son, gnawing at his brain.

The wolfman myth is still popular today — we still hear how a full moon can bring out the crazies. [Albert Fish](#), the notorious cannibal killer of children, was called the "Werewolf of Wisteria," and enjoyed dancing naked in the full moon. Other lunar lunatics include [Ed Gein](#), who also frolicking in the moonlight, dressed in his mothersuit made from the skin of women. Unlike Gein, [Bobby Joe Long](#) did not appreciate being adorned in female body parts — at puberty he had his abnormally enlarged breasts surgically removed. Even after the operation, Long claimed to be affected by the moon's cycles through his own bizarre "menstrual" cycle.

## Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hydes

The 19th century gave rise to another chilling predecessor to the serial killer's persona — Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Robert Louis Stevenson created a literary man/monster who embodied the Divided Self — appearing civilized and rational on the outside, while inside a wretched brute struggled to break loose.



John Wayne Gacy

One of the most intriguing peculiarities of serial killers is their benign, "Dr. Jekyll" appearance. They look and behave like everyman or any man — "abnormally normal", as Mark Seltzer says. If they come across as potentially dangerous in any way, they will neutralize it in their behavior. The imposing 6'9" [Edmund Kemper](#) cultivated a "gentle giant" routine, which helped him to lure female hitchhikers into his car. The charming [Ted Bundy](#) wore a cast, looking meekly pathetic, and asked for help. The young women who gave him a hand must have thought of it as a random act of kindness. What resulted was a senseless act of murder. The notorious Gacy entertained hospitalized children in his Pogo the Clown costume. "You know, clowns get away with murder," he once said. Gacy used rope tricks from his performance to strangle unsuspecting young men, who thought the worst they would have to endure

would be some hokey entertainment. With many serial killers, the hidden Hyde comes out only after the victim is lulled into complacency.

## Frankensteins

As a man obsessed with recreating a human being from dead body parts, Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein was seeking the same ultimate power of creation as God Himself. While Dr. Frankenstein attempted to compose a man, our modern day Dr. Frankensteins are more gifted in the decomposing arts. [Jeffrey Dahmer](#) and [Dennis Nilsen](#) both tried to create companionship in corpses. Dahmer operated on his victims, hoping for his own love-zombie who would never stray. In his own attempts to create the perfect companion, Nilsen said, "I think that in some cases I killed these men in order to create the best image of them. ... It was not really a bad but a perfect and peaceful state for them to be in" (As if he were doing them a favor!) "I remember being thrilled that I had full control and ownership of this beautiful body," he mused. Many believe that [Ed Gein](#) was attempting to reconstruct his mother by stealing body parts from a nearby cemetery.

## Vampires

And of course, one of the most popular monster monikers for serial killers is "vampire." In Gothic drama, vampires represented the repressed sexuality of straitlaced Victorian society, creatures of the night driven by beastly desires. The vampire motif is so frequent that we see localized vampires ("The Vampire of Dusseldorf" Peter Kurten; "The Vampire of Hanover" [Fritz Haarmann](#); "The Vampire of Sacramento" Richard Chase.) Kurten claimed that his "chief satisfaction in killing was to catch the blood spurting from a victim's wounds in his mouth and swallow it." Another deeply demented vampire killer, John Haigh, claimed that disturbing dreams created his unquenchable thirst for human blood: "I saw before me a forest of crucifixes, which gradually turned into trees. ... Suddenly the whole forest began to writhe and the trees, stark and erect, to ooze blood. ... A man went to each tree catching the blood ... 'Drink,' he said.

## Early Killers: How Did They Explain Their Evil?

### The Baron Gilles de Rais

This 15th century French aristocrat murdered hundreds of peasant children. Gilles blithely declared that torturing the innocent was "entirely for my own pleasure and physical delight, and for no other intention or end." Gilles was unbelievably bold in gathering victims — he would send servants out to round up children and haul them back to his castle, as if he were collecting his rightful

harvest from the peasant population. Why would a military hero and companion to Joan of Arc torture children? Gilles' excuse is precociously modern — he blamed his parents. They didn't physically abuse him, however; the monstrous aristocrat whined that he was the hapless victim of their amoral attitudes. While lax parenting doesn't sound like a familiar prerequisite for today's serial killer, it was an arch offense by Medieval standards — one had to be a diligent guard against the Devil's cunning ways. As a child Gilles said evil descended "when I was left uncontrolled to do whatever I pleased and to take pleasure in illicit acts."

Was Gilles de Rais the sole sadistic multiple murderer of his era, or were there others who used more discretion, choosing victims who were less likely to be missed? It is impossible to say. Some, like Elliott Leyton, argue that "the curious phenomenon of the murder of strangers is extremely rare in so-called 'primitive' societies," and that it is primarily in "modern, industrializing societies that stranger-murder becomes a major homicidal theme. "We can only speculate. It can be said, however, that the major archetype of the serial sex slayer emerged in the grimy, gaslit streets of industrialized 19th century London.

## Jack the Ripper

[Jack the Ripper's](#) infamous Whitechapel murders baffled the police and terrorized London. As the first sensationalized serial killer, the Ripper became the prototype of the lust murderer. The mystery of his identity paralleled the mystery of his motive. Nothing like this was seen before — why would anyone go lurking in the dead of night, eviscerating poverty-stricken prostitutes? Clearly the Ripper was insane, thought the police. They explored the insane asylums, looking for a raving, woman-hating madman. Crazy immigrants, lunatic butchers, and even syphilis-ridden royalty were suspect. Most believed [Jack the Ripper](#) had to be an immigrant (Americans were a favorite suspicion) because no Englishman would commit such horrid crimes. The Ripper's bladework had some speculating he was a deranged doctor. In any case, as the insane asylums were searched and suspicious whispers echoed in respectable bourgeois homes, it became clear that the Ripper could be anyone. The uncivilized monster behind Victorian society's prim veneer had acted out in the ugliest of deeds.

## Popular Explanations

In the 19th century, civilization stopped looking to the Devil as the sole force behind violent, sadistic behavior. Instead, scientists and writers began searching for the beast within. As Fred Botting points out, the inhuman was now seen as "in-human". Darwin's theories on evolution bridged the gap between beasts and man. How far are we from our grunting, rock-throwing apelike ancestors? Not very far at all, according to 19th century criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau, who believed that violent men had "primitive" faces with heavy jaws and low foreheads. By measuring the foreheads of Italian criminals, Lombroso believed he could target the violent criminal.

Although Lombroso and his measuring tape have long since been discredited, the concept of a lingering animalistic brutality is still popular today. As we move forward, becoming more technologically advanced, there is something that refuses to budge, some primitive holdout of the darkest recesses of our psyche. Is it the caveman within, as some contemporary paleopsychologists say, the vestigial beast that got us through the "survival of the fittest" when we needed it, but now that we live in a civilized society, it is no longer needed.

Franz Josef Gall promoted "phrenology." By feeling the bumps on a person's head, Gall believed that he could predict their character and level of intelligence. Physiognomy, developed by Johann Kaspar Lavatar, claimed to read a person's character in their facial features.

These theories were all the rage when [Herman Mudgett](#) (aka H. H. Holmes) stood trial for running a deadly boarding house that put the Bates Motel to shame. In *Depraved*, Harold Schechter describes how the public, eager to know why Holmes was such a fiend, flocked to see maps of the killer's head shape, as if a certain pattern in the bumps of his skull would spell out "murderer." Holmes himself described his own evil metamorphosis: "My features are assuming a pronounced Satanical cast. ... My head and face are gradually assuming an elongated shape. I believe fully that I am growing to resemble the devil—that the similitude is almost completed. In fact, so impressed am I with this belief, that I am convinced that I no longer have anything human in me." This "devil made me do it" routine was a transparent attempt to avoid the hangman's noose. This devil was eventually hanged for his misdeeds.

## Childhood Abuse



Edmund Kemper

"I have several children who I'm turning into killers. Wait til they grow up" - message scrawled on [David Berkowitz's](#) apartment wall, with an arrow pointing to a hole in the wall. Are some children just born "bad"? Some serial killers are precociously demented, fascinated by sadistic violence at a very early age. As a child, [Ed Kemper](#) was already beheading his sister's dolls, playing "execution"

games, and once told his sister that he wanted to kiss his second grade teacher, but "if I kiss her I would have to kill her first."

One of first places our society looks to for an explanation is the serial killer's upbringing. "So many of us wanted to believe that something had traumatized little [Jeffrey Dahmer](#), otherwise we must believe that some people simply give birth to monsters," Ann Schwartz has written.

In some cases, the abuse of children by their parents is barbaric, and it seems little wonder that anything but a fledgling serial killer would come from such horrible squalor. As a child, the "Boston Strangler" [Albert DeSalvo](#) was actually sold off as a slave by his alcoholic dad. Many sadistic murderers portray their childhood as an endless chain of horrifying sexual abuse, torture, and mayhem. Some stories of torture may be exaggerated for sympathy (it is always to the killer's advantage to concoct wicked parents as an excuse) but some have been corroborated by witnesses. Even families that appear healthy on the outside may be putting on an act. Children can learn the "Jeckyl and Hyde" routine from parents who are outgoing and social with neighbors and co-workers, but who scowl at their kid's inadequacies when they get home.

As we examine childhood abuse as a possible key to the serial killer's behavior, we must remember that many children have suffered horrible abuse at the hands of their parents, but did not grow up to be lust murderers. Childhood abuse is not a direct link to a future in crime. And while many girls are victimized as children, very few grow up to be sadistically violent toward strangers. Childhood abuse may not be the sole excuse for serial killers, but it is an undeniable factor in many of their backgrounds.

In his book *Serial Killers*, Joel Norris describes the cycles of violence as generational: "Parents who abuse their children, physically as well as psychologically, instill in them an almost instinctive reliance upon violence as a first resort to any challenge." Childhood abuse not only spawns violent reactions, Norris writes, but also affects the child's health, including brain injuries, malnutrition, and other developmental disorders.

Some parents believed that by being harsh disciplinarians, it would "toughen" the child. Instead, it often creates a lack of love between parent and child that can have disastrous results. If the child doesn't bond with its primary caretakers, there is no foundation for trusting others later in life. This can lead to isolation, where intense violent fantasies become the primary source of gratification. "Instead of developing positive traits of trust, security, and autonomy, child development becomes dependent on fantasy life and its dominant themes, rather than on social interaction," writes Robert Ressler, Ann Burgess and John Douglas in *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives*. When the child grows up, according to these authors, all they know are their fantasies of domination and control. They have not developed compassion for others. Instead, humans become flattened-out symbols for them to enact their violent fantasies.

In looking to the parents for explanations, we see both horrifying mothers and fathers. The blame usually falls on the mother, who has been described as too domineering or too distant, too sexually active or too repressed. Perhaps the mother is blamed more because the father has often disappeared, therefore "unaccountable." When the father is implicated, it is usually for sadistic disciplinarian tactics, alcoholic rants, and overt anger toward women.

### **Monstrous Mothers**

*"We're still blaming mothers."* - Joyce Flint, Dahmer's mother

It all seems to begin or end with Mother. [Henry Lee Lucas](#) launched his murderous career by killing his mom; [Ed Kemper](#) ended his by killing his mom. Even the Shakespearian multiple murderer Hamlet had an unnatural obsession with his mother's sexuality. "Serial murderers are frequently found to have unusual or unnatural relationships with their mothers," notes Steven Egger in his book *The Killers Among Us*. In our culture, the imposing image of "Mother" looms large in our collective psyches, and some writers easily accept that these killers are lashing out at maternal tyranny. If these murderers are still dominated by Mother (Hitchcock's Norman Bates is the archetype), then it is easy to dismiss them as "mama's boys" who never fully matured. Perhaps we find comfort in this cliché — the mother is a readymade excuse, particularly in our contemporary era of obsessive parenting. Yet, as we look at some of the techniques of the serial killers' mothers, we are inclined to see a deadly link between the womb and the tomb.

### **Uptight Moms**

In an effort to keep their children chaste, some mothers have linked sexuality with death. [Ed Gein's](#) religiously fanatical, notorious mother convinced her son that women were vessels of sin and caused disease. In some sort of twisted misinterpretation, Gein made literal vessels out of women, using their skulls for bowls, and other domestic objects. Ed's body may have escaped from sexual disease, but his mind was clearly contaminated.

[Joseph Kallinger](#) was adopted by sadistic, Catholic parents, and after a hernia operation at age 6, his mother told him that the surgery was to keep his penis from growing. Kallinger never questioned her, and as an adult believed it had been stunted. A strict disciplinarian, Kallinger's mother forced him to hold his open hand over a flame, beating him if he cried. Kallinger later grew up taking extreme pleasure in torturing others, and became a sadistic parent himself. After taking an insurance policy out on his 13-year-old son Joey, he slowly drowned him, deaf to his own son's pleas for mercy.

"I certainly wanted for my mother a nice, quiet easy death like everyone else wants," said [Ed Kemper](#). His idea of an easy death is markedly unusual — after beheading his mom, he shoved her vocal cords down the garbage disposal, raped her headless body, and, by some accounts, placed her head on the living room mantel and used it as a dartboard. Admittedly, Kemper's mom was a shrill, tyrannical nag who locked her young son in the basement when he grew too large and frightened his sisters. As an adult, Kemper and his mother fought constantly, yet he chose to live with her. Why not just move away and don't take her calls?

"Hillside Strangler" [Kenneth Bianchi's](#) adoptive mother was pathologically over-protective. When Ken wet his pants, she took him to the doctor to have his genitals examined. One protective agency wrote that Bianchi's mother was "deeply disturbed, socially ambitious, dissatisfied, unsure, opinionated and overly protective ... had smothered this adopted son in medical attention and maternal concern from the moment of adoption." As a child Bianchi was very dependent on his mother, yet harbored a deadly hostility beneath the surface.

### Loose Moms

Some serial killers had their sexually uninhibited mothers to blame. These mothers overstepped the boundaries, exposing their children to inappropriate sexual behavior. Bobby Jo Long killed women he characterized as whores and sluts, who he said reminded him of his own mom. She had frequent sex (according to him) with men in the same room where Bobby slept. According to Long, he shared his bed with his mother until he was 13 years old.

[Charles Manson's](#) prostitute mother Kathy Maddox, indifferently declared his name as "No Name Maddox" for his birth certificate. She hoisted him off on relatives, and in one story, famous but probably untrue, she traded the infant Charlie for a pitcher of beer. When he was sent to live with his aunt, his uncle told him he was a sissy, and punished him by sending him to school dressed as a girl.

[Henry Lee Lucas](#) also suffered gender confusion as a child, courtesy of his mother's sadism. She was a heavy drinker and bootlegger. For unknown reasons she dressed him as a girl until he was 7. "I lived as a girl. I was dressed as a girl. I had long hair as a girl. I wore girl's clothes." She senselessly beat him after he had his hair cut because his teacher complained. At one point, his mom struck him on back of head with a wooden beam, fracturing his skull. Lucas was also apparently exposed to his mother's sexual activities. He killed his mother in 1951.

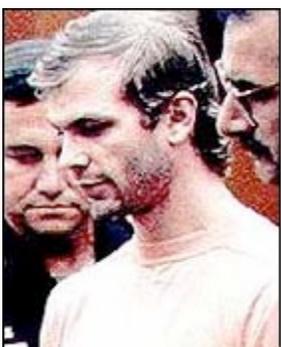
### Deadly Dads



Albert DeSalvo

It is usually the sadistically disciplinarian father that pops up in the serial killer's family tree. [John Gacy's](#) dad berated his son, calling him a sissy, queer, and a failure. A violent alcoholic, Gacy's father beat his mother, and shot his son's beloved dog to punish young John. When Gacy later strangled his young victims, he encouraged them to stay brave while facing death. "Through this ritual, Gacy sought to reassert his own vision of a masculine identity that had been squashed down by his father," wrote Joel Norris.

[Albert DeSalvo's](#) father would bring home prostitutes and brutally beat his mother, breaking her fingers one by one as young Albert helplessly watched. The elder DeSalvo sold his children off as slaves to a farmer in Maine, while his mother went frantically searching for them for six months, as story that has been confirmed by family friends and social workers. "Pa was a plumber," said DeSalvo. "he smashed me once across the back with a pipe. I didn't move fast enough."



### The Dahmer Case

Jeff Dahmer

Not all serial killers were beaten or abused as children. [Jeffrey Dahmer](#) had an apparently normal upbringing, yet grew up to be one of the most notorious sex murderers in popular culture. In his book *A Father's Story*, Lionel Dahmer searches for answers to his own son's deviance. Lionel, who

describes himself as an "analytical thinker," believes that Jeffrey's mother's hysteria and psychosomatic illnesses during pregnancy might be responsible.

He describes Joyce as going through a difficult pregnancy, constantly vomiting, as if her body was being sickened by what was germinating, an early biological "rejection" by mother. While pregnant with Jeff, Joyce developed strange fits of rigidity: "At times, her legs would lock tightly in place, and her whole body would grow rigid and begin to tremble. Her jaw would jerk to the right and take on a similarly frightening rigidity. During these strange seizures, her eyes would bulge like a frightened animal, and she would begin to salivate, literally frothing at the mouth."

As Lionel describes it, it's as if a corpse was giving birth. Father Lionel remains detached and analytical while Mother Joyce is in the midst of a biological warfare, fighting hormones with drugs. Lionel asks, ominously, "Why was she so upset all the time? What was it that she found so dreadful?"

"Then, at the end of the long trial, my son was born." Lionel's first sight of his son is in a plastic container, which is how the victims of apartment 213 will later be removed. The bloody chamber of Jeff's apartment, according to Lionel, had its origins in Joyce's drugged womb.

While Lionel implicates Joyce as the biological contaminant in Jeffrey's sickness, he admits to his own destructive inclinations, which may have been passed on to their son. Lionel was fascinated by fire and made bombs as child. "A dark pathway had been dug into my brain," he writes. Little Jeffrey is transfixed by pile of bones, which only seems macabre after the adult Jeffrey's deadly deeds. At the time, Lionel saw it as normal curiosity.

At age 4, Jeffrey had a double hernia, and had to have surgery. "So much pain, I learned later, that he had asked Joyce if the doctors had cut off his penis." Lionel thinks this quasi-castrating surgery affected his son: "In Jeff, this flattening began to take on a sense of something permanent," he wrote. "This strange and subtle inner darkening began to appear almost physically. His hair, which had once been so light, grew steadily darker, along with the deeper shading of his eyes. More than anything, he seemed to grow more inward, sitting quietly for long periods, hardly stirring, his face oddly motionless."

Both father and son found solace in controlling biological experiments. "In the lab, I found a wonderful comfort and assurance in knowing the properties of things, how they could be manipulated in predictable patterns. It provided a great relief from the chaos I found at home." Jeff became shy and fearful of others, just as his dad had been. "It was as if some element of my character yearned for complete predictability, for rigid structure," said Lionel. "I simply didn't know how things worked with other people." Lionel recognized that Jeffrey was "so intimidated by their presence, that in order for him to have contact with them, they needed to be dead."

Lionel sees a "terrible vacancy" in own son's eyes, and wonders, "Am I like that?" and sees his son as a "deeper, darker shadow" of himself. He remembers that at the age of 13 he wanted to hypnotize and cast a spell over a girl, "so I could control her entirely." At what point does an innocent fantasy warp into a deadly fascination? Can we control the inner life of our children? Lionel warns that "some of us are doomed to pass a curse instead." The frightening conclusion of Lionel Dahmer's cautionary tale is that we can be blind to our own destructive tendencies, and may innocently pass them on. "Fatherhood remains, at last, a grave enigma, and when I contemplate that my other son may one day be a father, I can only say to him, as I must to every father after me, "Take care, take care, take care."

## **Childhood Events**

### **Adoption**

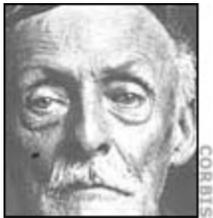
Adoption as a potential contribution to the serial killer's motivation is fascinating because it creates two questions. The first one is that the biological parents may have left their child with deviant genes. (We will look into the genetics of serial killers shortly.) Finding out that one was adopted may also undermine the sense of identity in a fragile youth, and make the child prone to fantasizing an identity of his "true" parents, either good or bad. Was the mother a prostitute? A nun? Was the father a gangster? A hero? And why did they "reject" their child? This sense of rejection can have profound consequences on an already unstable psyche. If the child actually meets his biological parent and is again rejected, the damage is worse. [David Berkowitz](#) was deeply hurt when his biological mom brushed him off. Some have speculated that Berkowitz's "Son of Sam" was an fantasy attempt to reclaim a parent/child identity that had been crushed in real life. According to Bundy biographers Michaud and Aynesworth, Ted's emotional growth was stopped in its tracks after he learned that he was illegitimate at age 13. "It was like I hit a brick wall," Bundy had said. Of course, he tried out every excuse he could rummage, so it's difficult to take his word on this when his family life appeared otherwise healthy.

It goes without saying that adoption does not create serial killers. At worst, it may dislodge a child's self-identity. But that does not mean that finding oneself in multiple murder is the only option available to adopted children.

## Witnessing Violence

Some lust murderers claim that exposure to violent events ignited their thirst for blood. [Ed Gein](#), among others, said that seeing farm animals slaughtered gave him perverted ideas. But wouldn't that make 4-H a breeding ground for serial killers? Both [Albert Fish](#) and [Andrei Chikatilo](#) blamed their sadistic bloodlust on frightening childhood stories. Does this mean we can expect Stephen King's children to top the murder charts? Even truly traumatic experiences don't automatically create a serial killer. "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh, as a child, ran outside after a WWII bombing at his London home. The bomb came with "a horrifying shriek, and as I staggered up, bruised and bewildered, a head rolled against my foot." Joel Peter Witkin, a well-known artist who's work is admittedly gruesome but fascinating, experienced the same event after witnessing a car accident. So what makes one person become a serial killer, and another a famous artist?

## Juvenile Detention



Albert Fish

Reform school in the early 20th century did anything but reform. The stories of sadistic guards and medieval punishments are almost paralleled by the violent behavior of the prisoners who went on to serial killing. Fortunately, this sort of extreme discipline is no longer openly tolerated.

Although 1920's killer Carl Panzram was an incorrigible juvenile delinquent, the brutal torture he received in reform school aggregated his violent rage. "From the treatment I received while there and the lessons I learned from it, I had fully decided when I left there just how I would live my life. I made up my mind that I would rob, burn, destroy and kill every where I went and everybody I could as long as I lived. That's the way I was reformed ... " [Henry Lee Lucas](#) also claimed prison transformed him into a serial killer. Manson said that he was raped and beaten by other prisoners when he was 14, while a particularly sadistic guard would masturbate as he watched. The grandfatherly pervert [Albert Fish](#) blamed his sadomasochistic impulses on his experiences at a Washington, D.C. orphanage: " I saw so many boys whipped, it took root in my head."

## Peer Rejection

For different reasons, many multiple murderers are isolated as children. Lucas, who was already a shy child, was ridiculed because of his artificial eye. He later said that this mass rejection caused him to hate everyone.

[Kenneth Bianchi](#) was also a child loner, with many problems. One clinical report said that "the boy drips urine in his pants, doesn't make friends very easily and has twitches. The other children make fun of him." Dahmer was antisocial as a kid, laughing when he saw a fellow classmate injured. He later became an alcoholic teenager, routinely ignored by his peers.

As the isolation grows more severe, the reliance on fantasies, especially destructive ones, can grow. These fantasies of violence often reveal themselves through two of the three "triads" of predicting criminal behavior, firestarting and animal cruelty.

## The Triad

### Animal Cruelty

These secret compulsions are seen as the seeds to greater mayhem. "Violent acts are reinforced, since the murderers either are able to express rage without experiencing negative consequences or are impervious to any prohibitions against these actions. Second, impulsive and erratic behavior discourages friendships," increasing isolation." "Furthermore, there is no challenge to the offenders' beliefs that they are entitled to act the way they do." (Ressler, et al, *Sexual Homicide*) "All learning, according to Ressler, has a "feedback system." Torturing animals and setting fires will eventually escalate to crimes against fellow human beings, if the pattern is not somehow broken.

Torturing animals is a disturbing red flag. Animals are often seen as "practice" for killing humans. [Ed Kemper](#) buried the family cat alive, dug it up, and cut off its head. Dahmer was notorious for his animal cruelty, cutting off dogs heads and placing them on a stick behind his house. Yet not all serial killers take their aggressions out on pets. [Dennis Nilsen](#) loved animals, particularly his dog Bleep,

whom he couldn't bear to face after being arrested for fear that it would traumatize the dog. Rapist torturer and murderer of eight, [Christopher Wilder](#), had made donations to Save The Whales and the Seal Rescue Fund.

## Pyromania

Peter Kurten loved to watch houses burn, and Berkowitz, when he tired of torturing his mother's parakeet, became a prolific pyromaniac, keeping record of his 1,411 fires. "Oh, what ecstasy," said [Joseph Kallinger](#) to his biographer Flora Schreiber, "setting fires brings to my body! What power I feel at the thought of fire! ... Oh, what pleasure, what heavenly pleasure!" Pyromania is often a sexually stimulating activity for these killers. The dramatic destruction of property feeds the same perverse need to destroy another human. Because serial killers don't see other humans as more than objects, the leap between setting fires and killing people is easy to make.

## Bed Wetting

Bed wetting is the most intimate of these "triad" symptoms, and is less likely to be willfully divulged. By some estimates, 60% of multiple murderers wet their beds past adolescence. [Kenneth Bianchi](#) apparently spent many a night marinating in urine-soaked sheets.

## Conclusion

Formative years may play a role in the molding of a serial killer, but they cannot be the sole reason in every case. Many killers blame their families for their behavior, seeking sympathy. In true psychopathic fashion, serial killers are blaming someone else for their actions. If their bad childhood is the primary reason for their homicidal tendencies, then why don't their siblings also become serial killers? And if these conditions truly created them, serial killers would probably be unionized by now, there would be so many of them (a sad commentary on our continuing neglect of children.) We must look at other components to see what pushes a serial killer over the edge.

## Psychopaths?

### Twisted Rationalizations



Ted Bundy in prison

"I'm the most cold-blooded sonofabitch you'll ever meet," said [Ted Bundy](#). "I just liked to kill, I wanted to kill." The hallmark of the psychopath is the inability to recognize others as worthy of compassion. Victims are dehumanized, flattened into worthless objects in the murderer's mind. [John Gacy](#), never showing an ounce of remorse, called his victims "worthless little queers and punks," while the "Yorkshire Ripper" Peter Sutcliffe brashly declared that he was "cleaning up the streets" of the human trash.

In the 19th century, psychopathology was considered to be "moral insanity". Today it is commonly known as "antisocial personality disorder" or "sociopathy." Current experts believe that sociopaths are an unfortunate fusion of interpersonal, biological and sociocultural disasters.

Psychopaths/sociopaths are diagnosed by their purposeless and irrational antisocial behavior, lack of conscience, and emotional vacuity. They are thrill seekers, literally fearless. Punishment rarely works, because they are impulsive by nature and fearless of the consequences. Incapable of having meaningful relationships, they view others as fodder for manipulation and exploitation. According to one psychological surveying tool (DSM IIIR) between 3-5% of men are sociopaths; less than 1% of female population are sociopaths.

Psychopaths often make successful businessmen or world leaders. Not all psychopaths are motivated to kill. But when it is easy to devalue others, and you have had a lifetime of perceived injustices and rejection, murder might seem like a natural choice.

The following are environmental factors, psychiatrists say, which create a sociopath:

- Studies show that 60% of psychopathic individuals had lost a parent;
- Child is deprived of love or nurturing; parents are detached or absent;
- Inconsistent discipline: if father is stern and mother is soft, child learns to hate authority and manipulate mother;
- Hypocritical parents who privately belittle the child while publicly presenting the image of a "happy family".

## Genetics

Tests are showing that the nervous system of the psychopath is markedly different — they feel less fear and anxiety than normal people. One carefully conducted experiment revealed that "low arousal levels" not only causes impulsiveness and thrill-seeking, but also showed how dense sociopaths are when it comes to changing their behavior. A group of sociopaths and a group of healthy individuals were given a task, which was to learn what lever (out of four) turned on a green light. One lever gave the subject an electric shock. Both groups made the same number of errors, but the healthy group quickly learned to avoid the punishing electric shock, while sociopaths took much longer to do so.

This need for higher levels of stimulation makes the psychopath seek dangerous situations. When Gacy heard an ambulance, he would follow to see what sort of exciting catastrophe was in the making. Part of the reason for many serial killers seeking to become cops is probably due to the intensity of the job.

Genetics and physiological factors also contribute to the building of a psychopath. One study in Copenhagen focused on a group of sociopaths who had been adopted as infants. The biological relatives of sociopaths were 4-5 times more likely to be sociopathic than the average person. Yet genetics don't tell the whole story; it only shows a predisposition to antisocial behavior. Environment can make or break the psychopathic personality.

When a psychopath does inherit genetically-based, developmental disabilities, it is usually a stunted development of the higher functions of the brain. 30-38% of psychopaths show abnormal brain wave patterns, or EEGs. Infants and children typically have slower brain wave activity, but it increases as they grow up. Not with psychopaths. Eventually, the brain might mature as the psychopath ages. This may be why most serial killers are under 50. The abnormal brain wave activity comes from the temporal lobes and the limbic system of the brain, the areas that control memory and emotions. When development of this part of the brain is genetically impaired, and the parents of the child are abusive, irresponsible or manipulative, the stage is set for disaster.

Can psychopaths be successfully treated? According to the psychiatrists, "No." Shock treatment doesn't work; drugs have not proven successful in treatment; and psychotherapy, which involves trust and a relationship with the therapist, is out of the question, because psychopaths are incapable of opening up to others. They don't want to change.

## Inside the Psychopathic Mind

### **Most psychopaths end up in prison, instead of psychiatric hospitals.**

According to Dr. J. Reid Meloy, author of *The Psychopathic Mind: Origins, Dynamics, and Treatment*, the psychopath is only capable of sadomasochistic relationships based on power, not attachment. Psychopaths identify with the aggressive role model, such as an abusive parent, and attack the weaker, more vulnerable self by projecting it onto others. As multiple murderer [Dennis Nilsen](#) put it, "I was killing myself only but it was always the bystander who died."

Dr. Meloy writes that in early childhood development, there is a split in the infant psychopath: the "soft me" which is the vulnerable inside, and the "hard not-me" which is the intrusive, punishing outside (neglectful or painful experiences.) The infant comes to expect that all outside experiences will be painful, and so he turns inward. In an attempt to protect himself from a harsh environment, the infant develops a "character armor," distrusting everything outside, and refusing to allow anything in. The child refuses to identify with parents, and instead sees the parent as a malevolent stranger.

Soon, the child has no empathy for anyone. The wall has been built to last. "Human nature is a nuisance, and fills me with disgust. Every so often one must let off steam, as it were," said "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh.

In normal development, the child bonds with the mother for nurturing and love. But for the psychopath, the mother is experienced as an "aggressive predator, or passive stranger." In the case of violent psychopaths, including serial killers, the child bonds through sadomasochism or aggression. According to Meloy, "This individual perversely and aggressively does to others as a predator what may, at any time, be done to him."

## The Victim Through the Psychopath's Eyes

When they are stalking a victim, psychopaths don't consciously feel anger, "but the violence shows the dissociated effect." Many killers seem to go into a trance during their predatory and killing phases. The psychopath seeks idealized victims in order to shame, humiliate, and destroy them. "I must have" ends with "It was not worth having," says Meloy. By degrading the victim, the psychopath is attempting to destroy the hostile enemy within his own mind. At Gacy's trial, forensic psychiatrist Richard Rappaport said that "he

is so convinced that these qualities exist in this other person, he is completely out of touch with reality ... and he has to get rid of them and save himself ... he has to kill them."



Richard Ramirez

The victim is seen as a symbolic object. Bundy described it by using the third person: "Since this girl in front of him represented not a person, but again the image, or something desirable, the last thing we would expect him to want to do would be to personalize this person. ... Chattering and flattering and entertaining, as if seen through a motion picture screen." And later, "They wouldn't be stereotypes necessarily. But they would be reasonable facsimiles to women as a class. A class not of women, per se, but a class that has almost been created through the mythology of women and how they are used as objects." If Bundy got to know anything too personal about the victim, it ruined the illusion.

### **Deluded Warriors**

In a manic state, the psychopath is fearless and thinks he is omnipotent, sometimes evil incarnate, as we have seen in [Richard Ramirez's](#) "Night Stalker" run. They are completely out of touch with reality. One psychopath, while in custody, would dress himself as an Indian warrior using his own feces as warpaint. Many serial killers identify with the myth of the warrior. Calaveras County torturer Leonard Lake was fascinated by medieval knights, and on a more modern cinematic note, many serial killers, including Gacy and Kemper, worshipped John Wayne, the American archetype of the lone warrior.

### **Smooth Talkers**

Psychopaths know society's rights and wrongs, and will behave as if they sincerely believe in these values. "There are individuals who are so psychopathically disturbed that, in my opinion, no attempts should be made to treat them," says Meloy. Many psychopaths will read psychology books, and become skilled at imitating other more "sympathetic" mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia. They will use any means possible to manipulate their evaluators. Do psychopaths ever legitimately hear voices in their heads? According to Meloy, "most functionally psychotic individuals do not experience command hallucinations, and those who do generally successfully resist them."

[John Gacy](#) was "a smooth talker and an obscurer who was trying to white-wash himself of any wrongdoing. He has a high degree of social intelligence or awareness of the proper way to behave in order to influence people," said Eugene Gauron, who evaluated Gacy before the killings began. Still, he was released. Perhaps the most dramatic duping of the doctors was [Ed Kemper's](#) evaluation. Two psychiatrists interviewed him and agreed that he was now "safe." All the while, Kemper had the head of one of his victims sitting in the trunk of his car, parked outside the doctors' office. Bundy charmed his way into the good graces of his jailers, only to escape when they became more lax in their watch of him.

### **Lustmord**



Patrick Mackay

Is serial murderer ultimately a quest for sex or power, or both? It depends on who you ask. Some believe that sexual domination is an expression of the need for power. "Sex is only an instrument used by the killer to obtain power and domination over his victim," writes Steven Egger. According to Bundy, sex was not the principal source of gratification. "I want to master life and death," he said. He wanted total control over his victims: "Possessing them physically as one would possess a potted plant, a painting, or a Porsche. Owning, as it were, this individual." Others believe that a deviant sexual drive is the cause, and power is the tool to achieve sexual satisfaction.

Some serial killers will identify with perceived sources of power, in an attempt to siphon off some of the feeling of control and omnipotence for themselves. Some will indulge in illusions of religious grandeur, be it Christ or Satan. Others look to the police, and will mimic them, as if their borrowed authority gives the killer the authority to kill others. One of the most chilling power role models, however, is Hitler.

As a teenager, British [Patrick Mackay](#) was grimly predicted to become a "cold, psychopathic killer" by one of his doctors. Mackay identified with Hitler, and would pose in his own handcrafted Nazi uniforms. After confessing to killing eleven people, including a Catholic priest with an axe, he declared, "I shan't shed a tear. Life is full of shocks of all descriptions and they have to be faced."

## Sexual Deviance

"The demons wanted my penis," wrote [David Berkowitz](#). For the "Son of Sam" murderer, sex was not something that involved a willing partner. Instead, his warped sexual fantasies, bred in social isolation, conjured up abstract forces of evil. We usually think of demons as pursuing loftier goals, such as wayward souls, not penises. But for the lust murderer, sexuality, power, and domination are intertwined so tightly they bleed into one another. It is difficult to tell where sexual lust leaves off, and lust for blood takes over.

## Sexual Homicide

According to Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas in *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives*, the number of "murders classified as 'unknown motives' has risen dramatically." They believe that there are two types of sexual homicide: "the rape or displaced anger murderer" and the "sadistic, or lust murderer."

How does a lust murderer differ from a rapist who kills his victims to keep from being caught? Rapists who kill, according to one study cited in *Sexual Homicide* (Ressler et al), "rarely find any sexual satisfaction from the murder nor do they perform postmortem sexual acts. In contrast, the sadistic murderer kills as part of a ritualized sadistic fantasy." Mutilation is "overkill," obsessively injuring the victim's body far beyond what is necessary to kill the victim. Because psychopaths have a low arousal rate, it takes more to stimulate them. Macabre mutilations excite the lust murderer. For them, killing triggers a bizarre sexual fantasy, which had developed in the dark recesses of their warped minds.

Ressler writes that "since his sexual history is that of solo sex, and he finds interpersonal relationships difficult, if not impossible, he reverts to masturbatory acts even when a real partner (his victim) is available. Masturbation generally occurs after death, when his fantasy is strongest." Because the fantasies do not involve an actual person but a symbolic, sacrificial victim, the violence can escalate after death. "Mutilations often occur when the victim is already dead, a time when killer has ultimate control over the victim," writes Ressler.

Many of the serial killers we have discussed admit to an abnormally strong sex drive. [Ed Kemper](#), who would often behead his victims before raping them, said that he had a "very strong sensual drive, a weird sexual drive that started early, a lot earlier than normal." Yet he fantasized about dead women, not living ones. "If I killed them, you know, they couldn't reject me as a man. It was more or less making a doll out of a human being ... and carrying out my fantasies with a doll, a living human doll." The most disturbing thrill Kemper got from murder was the sexual excitement in decapitating his victims: "I remember there was actually a sexual thrill ... you hear that little pop and pull their heads off and hold their heads up by the hair. Whipping their heads off, their body sitting there. That'd get me off," he said.

Kemper went on to say, "With a girl, there's a lot left in the girl's body without a head. Of course, the personality is gone." Those pesky personalities that serial killers find so troublesome in their victims explains why they go to such extreme lengths to depersonalize the bodies of their victims with horrifying mutilations. What is it about a personality that these killers find so threatening, that they need to obliterate it?

## Sex & Death



William Heirens

Other killers who had abnormal sex drives include the "Boston Strangler," [Albert DeSalvo](#), who reportedly needed sexual release at least five times a day. He even went on to blame the murders on his wife's coldness. "It really was Woman that I wanted, not any special one, just Woman with what a woman has," he said.

David Berkowitz compulsively masturbated, and "his preoccupation with oral sexuality," wrote Dr. David Abrahamsen, "suggests his immature sexual development."

Because sex is linked to death, not life, for the lust murderer, the concept of procreation disturbs them. "Sex should not exist," said John Haigh. "Propagation should be an insensible act, like the throwing off of acorns by an oak tree."

For some of these killers, sexuality is equated with sin and death by overzealous parents who were anxious to keep their sons from becoming promiscuous. Their libidinous drive was channeled into other deviant behavior. "Lipstick Killer" William Heirens claimed

that burglary was his primary form of sexual release. As a child, he had been warned that sexual contact was dirty and "caused disease." Joseph Kallinger, who was raised by sadistic Catholic parents who told him his penis had been operated on to keep it from growing (it was actually a hernia operation) was sexually excited by fires. For Ed Gein, who had been sternly taught that sex was sinful and degenerate, it almost seems natural that he would associate his own sexual curiosity with death, the fruit of sin itself.

### **Killing the Woman Within**

Henry Lee Lucas, who was forced to dress like a girl as a child, declared, "I was death on women. I didn't feel they need to exist. I hated them, and I wanted to destroy every one I could find. I was doing a good job of it." Many believe that John Gacy was killing young men who symbolically represented his own hated homosexual self. Bobby Joe Long, who had an extra X (or female) chromosome, and grew breasts in puberty, brutally murdered prostitutes, and women who reminded him of his mother's promiscuity.

Currently, there is debate over whether serial killers who are "insecure" in their masculinity are the most vicious killers, as if they needed to excavate and destroy the female lurking within. Joel Norris wrote that if "the killer is especially savage with respect to the bodies of his female victims, police should look for evidence of feminine physical traits on the suspect. Does he have especially fine hair. ... Are his features disproportionately delicate?" Yet, as Richard Tithecott points out in his book *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer*, "The motivation of serial killers is frequently explained in terms of the need to expel: to expel the feminine, to expel the homosexual. ... The question (and the problem) becomes not masculinity but femininity, or rather femininity's invasion of masculinity." Tithecott goes on to point out that somehow feminine qualities are to blame for the killer's psychosis, when historically, almost all aggressive acts are masculine in nature. This targeting of the "female within" is nothing more than the serial killer's attempt to blame the victim.

### **Morbid Curiosity and Cannibalism:**

Before they begin killing, many serial killers display a fascination with death. This in itself is not unusual. Perhaps if their antisocial personalities had not gotten in the way, serial killers may have become doctors, scientists, morticians, or even artists. Gacy worked in a mortuary, sleeping in the embalming room, alone with corpses, but was fired after corpses were found partially undressed. Dennis Nilsen pretended he was a corpse and masturbated in the mirror to his own dead image. As a youngster Berkowitz became fascinated by the morbid: "I always had a fetish for murder and death — sudden death and bloodshed appealed to me," he said.

Jeffrey Dahmer, who loved the dissection in biology class, told a classmate that he sliced open the fish he caught because "I want to see what it looks like inside, I like to see how things work." He later gave the police the same excuse — he cut open his victims "to see how they work." His attorney rationalized Jeffrey's cannibalism by declaring that "he ate body parts so that these poor people he killed would become alive in him." Cannibalism is a literal form of internalization: instead of making room in their hearts for the one they crave, the cannibal makes room in his stomach for the one they desire. The metaphorical hunger for another's companionship becomes a literal hunger. Many describe it as a way to incorporate the other into oneself. Because psychopaths are incapable of experiencing empathy and love, this crude and primitive form of bonding becomes a sickening substitute.

One particularly gruesome example of this notion of "all-consuming love" is Japanese cannibal Issei Sagawa, who killed and ate a Dutch student. He would lucidly recount how he coveted his victim: "My passion is so great I want to possess her. I want to eat her. If I do she will be mine forever." Sagawa hesitates when he discovers her womb: "If she had lived she would have had a baby in this womb. The thought depresses me for a moment." But Sagawa continued on.

The Martha Stewart of serial killers, Ed Gein's gruesome home improvements featured lamp shades made from human skin, seat covers, and skulls used for drinking cups. He also made clothing and bracelets out of body parts. Anatomical textbooks were not enough to satisfy his curiosity — he took to grave robbing, and eventually murder.

### **Are They Insane?**



Ed Gein

Are serial killers insane? Not by legal standards. "The incidence of psychosis among murderers is no greater than the incidence of psychosis in the total population," said psychiatrist Donald Lunde. The legal definition of insanity is based on the 19th century McNaghten Rules: Does the offender understand the difference between right and wrong? If he flees or makes any attempt to hide the crime, then the offender is not insane, because his actions show that he understood that what he was doing was wrong. Yet what person in their right mind would filet young children and write letters to the parents, rhapsodizing over what a fine meal their child made? In the case of Albert Fish, the jury found

him "insane, but he deserved to die anyway." Only a few, including the dimwitted Ed Gein and sadistic Peter Sutcliffe have successfully pleaded insanity.

Always looking to manipulate, serial killers will do just about anything to convince the authorities of their insanity. Being declared "legally insane" means avoiding death row, and if the criminal can convince his keepers that he has fully recovered, there is the hope of actually being released.

"Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh drank his own urine in front of a jury to convince them of his insanity, but only served to repulse them more. William Hickman was stupid enough to put in writing his intention to convince the jury he is crazy: "I intend to throw a laughing, screaming, diving act before the prosecution finishes their case. ... " (He closes this letter to a fellow inmate with "P.S. You know and I know that I'm not insane however.")

### **Alter Egos**

One of the most predictable attempts to shift the blame is by creating an evil dark side, or alter ego. Some of these creations are named as the true culprits of the crimes. While in custody H. H. Holmes invented "Edward Hatch," who he claimed was the shadowy mastermind behind the murder of the young Pietzel children. "Lipstick Killer" William Heirens created George Murman, and actually corresponded with George by letters. John Gacy based his alter ego, "Jack Hanley," on an actual cop by the same name. Gacy's Jack was tough, in control, and loathed homosexuality. When Gacy drank too much, the punishing hand of Jack would take control. One of the most notorious alter egos is "Hillside Strangler" Kenneth Bianchi's "Steve Walker." Steve came out during hypnotic sessions as the aggressive opposite to Ken's gentle guy act. Clever hypnotists were able to snare Steve as a hoax. (It was later revealed that Bianchi had seen the movie "Sybil" two days prior to his psychiatric evaluation.)

Fabricating an alter ego is a convenient way to pin the guilt on another, even if that other is within. It's a psychological variation of "the devil made me do it." But diabolical alter egos are usually clumsy constructions that fall apart under scrutiny. At best, a legitimate split personality could hope for a mental institution instead of death row. But authentic cases are exceptionally rare.

### **Schizophrenia**

Most schizophrenics will resist the aggressive commands of the auditory hallucinations they hear, according to Dr. Meloy. Santa Cruz in the 1970's had a renaissance of psychopathic killers. Of course, there is Edmund Kemper, the most articulate of them the batch. His schizophrenic colleagues, however, are frightening examples of the truly mentally-ill serial killer.

Herbert Mullin heard his father's voice in his head, commanding, "Why won't you give me anything? Go kill somebody — move!" By killing people, Mullin was convinced, he was actually preventing earthquakes and tidal waves. Unlike most serial killers, he was not seeking a certain type of victim. His 13 "sacrificial" victims included a family, a priest, a homeless man and some hapless campers.

Upon his arrest everyone agreed that Mullin was a paranoid schizophrenic, but was found "legally sane." Unlike many serial killers who try to convince the authorities that they are crazy, Mullin tried to prove his sanity, stating that he was the victim of a huge conspiracy. He declared that he "a good American person who was tricked into committing the crimes. I know I deserve my freedom."

On a self-described "divine mission": John Linley Frazier, slaughtered a wealthy Santa Cruz family in 1970 because he believed they had been "polluting and destroying the Earth." Initially he was called an "acid casualty," but later tests revealed Frazier as an acute paranoid schizophrenic. Nonetheless, Frazier was declared legally sane and sentenced to life imprisonment.

David Berkowitz's "Son of Sam" routine was a well-constructed attempt to appear schizophrenic. "There is no doubt in my mind that a demon has been living in me since birth," he raved. "I want my soul back!" he wrote. "I have a right to be human." Later he held a press conference, announcing that his story of demons had been an invention.

### **Natural Born Killers I**

Genetics/Bad Seeds Are the psychopathic criminals really different from birth? Many parents say that their children who grow up to be violent offenders are markedly different from their non-violent siblings. Three-year-old Ted Bundy sneaked into his teenage aunt Julia's room one morning, and slipped butcher knives under the covers of her bed. "He just stood there and grinned," she said. Serial killer Carl Panzram himself wrote: "All of my family are as the average human beings are. They are honest and hard working people. All except myself. I have been a human-animal ever since I was born. When I was very young at 5 or 6 years of age I was a thief and a liar and a mean despicable one at that. The older I got the meaner I got." German child killer Peter Kurten had drowned two playmates by the tender age of nine.

Are these children just born bad? Environment alone cannot explain deranged behavior — too many abused and neglected children grow up to be law-abiding citizens. If there is a genetic explanation, it's a slippery, discreet mutation. We don't see entire families of serial killers. There is no such thing as a "kill gene", but research is revealing some genetic tendencies to violent behavior. In other words, bad seeds blossom in bad environments.

One study of twins who were raised apart, done by Yoon-Mi Hur and Thomas Bouchard in 1997, revealed a strong link between impulsivity and sensation-seeking behavior, "attributed almost entirely to genetic factors." Both sensation-seeking traits and impulsivity have been "found to be higher in drug abusers, delinquents, and psychopaths."

### **Do Serial Killers Have an Extra Chromosome?**

Multiple murderer Bobby Joe Long had an extra X (female) chromosome, otherwise known as Klinefelter's syndrome, which meant he had the female hormone estrogen circulating in higher amounts in his system. His breasts grew during puberty, which caused him great embarrassment. Long, however, has an abundance of other serial killer prerequisites. He suffered traumatic and repeated head injuries, among other things.



Richard Speck

Conversely, an extra Y (male) chromosome was once in vogue as an explanation to violence. Mass murderer Richard Speck's legal defense said he had an XYY genetic makeup, but further tests proved this wrong. While an extra male chromosome seems like a logical explanation for mutant-aggressive behavior, there is not much evidence that links the X or Y chromosome to serial killers.

### **Testosterone**

High testosterone in itself is not a dangerous thing, but when it is combined with low levels of serotonin, the results might be deadly. Testosterone is associated with the need for dominance (many successful athletes and businessmen have high testosterone levels.) But since not everyone can be the top dog, serotonin keeps the tension from peaking, and mellows us out. When serotonin levels are abnormally low, however, frustration can lead to aggressive, even sadistic behavior, according to a study by Paul Bernhardt.

### **Heavy Metals**

Some research has shown that violent offenders have higher trace levels of toxic heavy metals (manganese, lead, cadmium and copper) in their systems. Excess manganese lowers the level of serotonin and dopamine, which contributes to aggressive behavior. Alcohol increases the effects. James Huberty, the mass murderer, had excessive amounts of the toxic substance cadmium in his system.

### **Brain Defects**

"After I'm dead, they're going to open up my head and find that just like we've been saying a part of my brain is black and dry and dead," said [Bobby Joe Long](#), who suffered a severe head injury after a motorcycle accident. According to many researchers, brain defects and injuries have been an important link to violent behavior. When the hypothalamus, the temporal lobe, and/or the limbic brain show damage, it may account for uncontrollable aggression.

The hypothalamus regulates the hormonal system and emotions. The "higher" brain has limited control over the hypothalamus. Because of the physical closeness of sexual and aggressive centers within the hypothalamus, sexual instinct and violence become connected for lust murderers. The hypothalamus may be damaged through malnutrition or injury.

The *limbic brain* is the part of the brain associated with emotion and motivation. When the limbic brain is damaged, the individual loses control over primary emotions such as fear and rage. The predatory gaze of the psychopath, according to Meloy, lacks emotions, and is as cold as a reptile's blank stare. Reptiles are missing the limbic part of their brain, where memories, emotions, socializing, and parental instincts reside. In other words, serial killers are aptly described as "cold-blooded," just like their scaly reptilian brethren.

The *temporal lobe* is highly susceptible to injury, located where the skull bone is thinnest. Blunt injuries, including falling on a hard surface, can easily damage this section of the brain, creating lesions, which cause forms of amnesia and epileptic seizures. Damage to the temporal lobe can result in hair-trigger violent reactions and increased aggressive responses. As a child, Ken Bianchi fell off of a jungle gym, and landed on the back of his head. He soon began to have epileptic seizures.

Researcher Dominique LaPierre believes that the "prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain involved in long-term planning and judgment, does not function properly in psychopathic subjects." Paleopsychologists also believe that there is some sort of malfunction in the brain of serial killers, that somehow their primitive brain overrides the "higher" brain: reason and compassion take a backseat to lust, aggression, and appetite. A study by Pavlos Hatzitaskos and colleagues reports that a large portion of death-row inmates have had severe head injuries, and that approximately 70% of brain-injured patients develop aggressive tendencies.

Some of these brain injuries are accidental, but many of them were inflicted during childhood beatings. Among the many serial killers who had suffered head injuries are Leonard Lake, [David Berkowitz](#), [Kenneth Bianchi](#), [John Gacy](#), and Carl Panzram, who, as a child, had some sort of head infection. "Finally my head swelled up as big as a balloon. ... I was operated on in our own home. On the kitchen table," he wrote. "I would sure like to know if this is the cause of my queer actions." [Ted Bundy](#), however, had extensive X-rays and brain scans, which revealed no evidence of brain disease or trauma.

## No Fear

*Crime Times* reports on findings that psychopaths have a greater fear threshold, and are less likely to respond to fear-inducing stimuli, such as sudden, loud noises. In other words, psychopaths may be immune to fear. The psychopath's heart rate and skin temperature are low, and their "startle reaction" was substantially less than the average person. The autonomic nervous system of intensely violent people is intensely sluggish. ... They need a higher level of thrill or stimulation in order to have an intense experience," says forensic psychologist Shawn Johnston.

## Sensory deprivation

Studies show that the lack of physical touch can be harmful to the child's development. In a study of chimpanzees, the babies who were not handled became withdrawn, and later began to attack others. Some serial killers had been separated from parents at early age, or were denied their mother's love and physical touch.

## Conclusion

These physiological characteristics, however, do not guarantee a serial killer. Many, who are not violent, have brain injuries and biological abnormalities. A lump on the head is no singular forecast for a serial killer. Can evil be reduced to a chemical equation? Perhaps it is a combination of environment and chemical predispositions. What we do know is that no singular pattern emerges for serial killers. Many of these biological studies are new, so perhaps in the future the chemical profile of serial killers will be revealed.

## Deadly Fantasies



Dennis Nilsen

Strange and bizarre fantasies thrive in isolation and anger. For the fledgling serial killer, fantasies of violence prompt further isolation, which in turn creates a greater reliance on fantasy for pleasure, according to Robert Ressler (et al) in *Sexual Homicide*. "As I grew up I realized, though imperfectly, that I was different from other people, and that the way of life in my home was different from that in the homes of others. ... This stimulated me to introspection and strange mental questionings," said "Acid Bath Murderer" John Haigh.

Eventually, to sustain the fantasy, serial killers come to a point where they need to live it out. They will dwell on the murder act for years, and drift into almost trance-like states days before the murder, completely enraptured by their fantasy. Their victims are reduced to hapless pawns in their wicked reverie. Much of the strange, ritualized mutilations come from an inner drama that only the killer can understand. "I made another world, and real men would enter it and they would never really get hurt at all in the vivid unreal laws of the dream. I caused dreams which caused death. This is my crime," said Dennis Nilsen. Nilsen's American counterpart Jeffrey Dahmer had a similar insight: "I made my fantasy life more powerful than my real one."

Yet the brutal, messy reality of murder never completely fulfills the power of the fantasy. In fact, it is usually a letdown, but the fantasy won't go away — it is too deeply ingrained in the killer's psyche. This accounts for the serial nature of lust murder. "The fantasy that accompanies and generates the anticipation that precedes the crime is always more stimulating than the immediate aftermath of the crime itself," observed Ted Bundy.

Many serial killers will keep "souvenirs" of their crime, which later refuels the fantasy. When Bundy was asked why he took Polaroids of his victims, he said, "when you work hard to do something right, you don't want to forget it."

Doctors B. R. Johnson and J. V. Becker at the University of Arizona are attempting to understand how deeply fantasy warps the serial killer's mind. They are studying nine cases of 14 - 18 year olds who have "clinically significant fantasies of becoming a serial killer." The research is attempting to see if we can spot potential killers based on the potency of the sadistic fantasies of teenage boys, and if there is any way to interrupt the link between fantasy and action.

## **The Last Straws**

It's one thing to fantasize about killing someone, but it's another thing to do it. What prompts serial killers to cross the line, again and again? Drugs are often involved, especially alcohol, as we see in the case of Gacy (who also had Valium, amphetamines, and pot in his arsenal) Ramirez, Nilsen and Dahmer.

## **Stressors**

According to Ressler et al, "stressors" are events that trigger the killer into action. They can be "conflict with females, parental conflict, financial stress, marital problems, conflict with males, birth of a child, physical injury, legal problems, and stress from a death." As the killer grapples with frustration, anger, and resentment, the fantasies of killing can eclipse reality. "Many triggering factors center around some aspect of control," says Ressler. Gein's mother's death sent him over the edge, while Kemper's fight with his mom made him crazed ("I remember one roof-raiser was over whether I should have my teeth cleaned.") Christopher Wilder, who traveled across the country, raping, torturing, and murdering eight women, claims his murderous rampage began after his marriage proposal was rejected.

## **After the Murder**

According to Joel Norris, there are 6 phases of the serial killer's cycle: 1) The Aura Phase, where the killer begins losing grip on reality; 2) The Trolling Phase, when the killer searches for a victim; 3) The Wooing Phase, where the killer lures his victim in; 4) The Capture Phase, where the victim is entrapped; 5) The Murder or Totem phase, which is the emotional high for killers; and finally, 6) The Depression Phase, which occurs after the killing.

Norris writes that when depression sets in, it triggers the phases into beginning again. Bundy said he never really got what he had hoped for out of the murders, and always felt emptiness and hopelessness after. Joel Norris aptly describes the "post-homicidal depression" the serial killer experiences: "The killer is simply acting out a ritualistic fantasy ... but, once sacrificed, the victims identity within the murderer's own fantasy is lost. The victim no longer represents what the killer thought he or she represented. The image of a fiancée who rejected the killer, the echo of the voice of the hated mother, or the taunting of the distant father; all remain vividly in the killer's mind after the crime. Murder has not erased or changed the past because the killer hates himself even more than he did before the climax of emotion ... it is only his own past that is acted out. He has failed again. ... Instead of reversing the roles of his childhood, the killer has just reinforced them, and by torturing and killing a defenseless victim, the killer has restated his most intimate tragedies."

## **Social Evils**

**Violent Contemporary Culture** Many multiple murderers blame our violent culture for feeding their appetites. Days before he was executed, Bundy declared that hard-core pornography was responsible for his murderous rampage. In our entertainment, sex and violence seem to go hand in hand. Is there any validity to Bundy's claim?

Many serial killers adopt violent figures as their role models. Mild mannered Peter Kurten, who on the surface was a polished and polite gentleman, idolized Jack the Ripper while in jail (Weimar Germany as a culture seemed fascinated by the Ripper's nefarious deeds.) "I thought of what pleasure it would give me to do things of that kind once I got out again," he said. Both John Wayne Gacy and Ed Kemper worshipped John Wayne, who obviously had a broader fan base than only serial murderers, but his vigilante justice appeals to the killer who feels he has been wronged. To this day many homicidal acts are blamed on movies and music. Although there is no direct proof that violence in the media creates serial killers, it may activate the fantasy, and perhaps legitimizes it for some. As Ed Kemper said regarding violent pornography, "That didn't make me mean. It just fueled the fire."

According to Elliot Leyton, in his book *Hunting Humans*, serial killers are "not alien creatures with deranged minds, but alienated men with disinterest in continuing the dull lives in which they feel entrapped. Reared in a civilization which legitimizes violence as a response to frustration, provided by the mass media and violent pornography with both the advertising proclaiming the 'joy' of sadism and the instruction manual outlining correct procedures, they grasp the 'manly' identity of pirate and avenger."

## Stranger Society

It is easier for us to see each other only as strangers, or stereotypes. The serial killer stalks stereotypes. "We are creating strangers of each other," says Steven Egger. "As we become strangers we begin to see others more as objects and less as human beings."

"It's the anonymity factor," said Bundy on the ease of killing. In the 20th century, the angst of the city continues to spawn both killers and victims. Serial killers can easily troll for victims among the "forgotten": runaways, prostitutes, drug addicts, and the poverty-stricken. Perhaps the anonymity itself is a factor that creates a serial killer. Feeling disenfranchised, forgotten, ignored in the looming crowd, the psychopath not only kills those who mirror back his own forgotten, anonymous identity, but even makes a name for himself, "becomes somebody" in the process.

## Serial Killing as a Career?

David Berkowitz illustrates this possibility. "Hello from the cracks in the sidewalks of New York City, and from the ants that dwell in these cracks. ..." he wrote. Berkowitz had no stable identity — no achievements, no friends, no attachments. Just isolation. The "Son of Sam" identity gave him great notoriety and power over others. "I believe they were rooting for me," he said of the general public. He was thrilled to hear co-workers at the post office chat about the Son of Sam, with no idea that the mild-mannered David was the same psycho-killer in the daily newspapers.

Notoriety as a possible incentive is indeed frightening. The serial killers who are initially motivated by a need for power love the media attention. Gacy treasured his scrapbook of all the press he received. Jeffrey Dahmer's trial had "the air of a movie premiere, complete with local celebrities, groupies who hounded for autographs, and a full-scale media onslaught—of which I was a part," wrote Dahmer biographer Anne Schwartz.

But Dr. Meloy, author of *The Psychopathic Mind*, warns us against celebrating serial killers: "If the murder attracts media attention and catalyzes both public fear and fascination, it will reinforce the psychopathic's concept of self as larger than life. ... In a real sense, the popular media may mythologize predators to the degree that they do become a legend in their own minds. This verification in reality of that which heretofore had only been experienced in fantasy leads the psychopath to consider predation as the sole means to achieve notoriety."

## Conclusion

When Do They Stop? When does a serial killer stop? Either when they are caught or killed. Very few have turned themselves in. Only [Ed Kemper](#) called the police to confess, and waited at a phone booth to be picked up. Recently, a Humboldt county truck driver walked into a police station with a female breast in his pocket as proof of his deeds. Some plea to be caught, yet coyly disappear before the cops arrive to arrest them. William Heirens wrote his memorable message ("For heavens sake catch me before I kill more I cannot control myself") in bizarre, red lipstick cursive on the wall, while his victim lay dead, shot and stabbed in the neck. If there are any serial killers who quit because they were satiated or bored, we cannot know because they are not in captivity.

Some claim that if they could they would have indulged in mass destruction. The "Vampire of Dusseldorf" Peter Kurten said "the more people the better. Yes if I had the means of doing so, I would have killed whole masses of people — brought about catastrophes." When Carl Panzram wasn't fantasizing about poisoning towns with arsenic, he spent his time plotting a grand scheme to incite war between the British and the Americans. "I believe the whole human race should be exterminated, I'll do my best to do it every chance I get," he told a jury before their deliberation (they sentenced him to death in less than a minute.)

## Are There Any "Reformed" Serial Killers?

Fortunately, our society is not willing to risk the opportunity to find out by releasing them. In fact, one of the most outspoken critics of "reform" is a serial killer himself, the unrepentant Carl Panzram: "I have no desire to reform myself. My only desire is to reform people who try to reform me. And I believe that the only way to reform people is to kill em. My Motto is, Rob em all, Rape em all and Kill em all."

## Conclusion: "A person was a blank"

In the end, all we can conclude is that serial killers are human black holes. That they are so normal, so generic, so invisible, they terrify us because they mirror us. [Henry Lee Lucas](#) grimly proclaimed that "All across the country, there's people just like me, who set out to destroy human life." Many of them describe themselves as having a piece missing, something dead within, or as Bundy said, a void inside. Not only are the victims "a blank" to the killer, as Lucas put it, they are blank to themselves. "What I wanted to see was

the death, and I wanted to see the triumph, the exultation over the death. ... In other words, I was winning over death. They were dead and I was alive. That was a victory in my case," mused [Ed Kemper](#). In other words, "Get a life" becomes "Take a life."

Killing others is not an attempt to fill the void, but to spread the void. To make the other into a lifeless object mimics the killers own lifelessness. "It didn't mean nothing, it just didn't mean nothing." said DeSalvo. "It was so senseless that it makes sense, you know?"

The serial killer lives on the other side of our social boundaries. He is an embodiment of the darkness, desire, and power that we must repress within ourselves. He is not a creature of reason, but of excess and transgression and voracious appetites - selfish, carnal desire. He breaks the social rules that confine the rest of us- our outrage keeps the boundaries intact, while our curiosity can explore the dark recesses of our own repressed desires from a safe distance. He crosses the line into a world of mayhem and depravity. We recoil at their bloody antics, but remain transfixed.

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