

MULTIPLE MURDER

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AMERICA'S FASCINATION WITH MULTIPLE MURDER

The break of dawn on November 16, 1957, heralded the start of deer hunting season in rural Waushara County, Wisconsin. The men of Plainfield went off with their hunting rifles and knives but without any clue of what Edward Gein would do that day. Gein was known to the 647 residents of Plainfield as a quiet man who kept to himself in his aging, dilapidated farmhouse. But when the men of the village returned from hunting that evening, they learned the awful truth about their 51-year-old neighbor and the atrocities that he had ritualized within the walls of his farmhouse.

The first in a series of discoveries that would disrupt the usually tranquil town occurred when Frank Worden arrived at his hardware store after hunting all day. Frank's mother, Bernice Worden, who had been minding the store, was missing and so was Frank's truck. But there was a pool of blood on the floor and a trail of blood leading toward the place where the truck had been garaged.

The investigation of Bernice's disappearance and possible homicide led police to the farm of Ed Gein. Because the farm had no electricity, the investigators conducted a slow and ominous search with flashlights, methodically scanning the barn for clues. The sheriff's light suddenly exposed a hanging figure, apparently Mrs. Worden. As Captain Schoephoerster later described in court:

Mrs. Worden had been completely dressed out like a deer with her head cut off at the shoulders. Gein had slit the skin on the back of her ankles and inserted a wooden rod, 3½ feet long, and about 4 inches in diameter, and sharpened to a point at both ends, through the cut tendons on the back of her ankles. Both hands were tied to her side with binder twine. The center of the rod was attached to a pulley on a block and tackle. The body was pulled up so that the feet were near the ceiling. We noticed that there were just a few drops of watery blood beneath the body on the dirt floor, and not finding the head or intestines, we thought possibly the body had been butchered at another location.

(Gollmar, 1981, p. 32)

The brutal murder and dismemberment of Bernice Worden was not the only gruesome act of the reclusive man whom no one really knew. In the months that followed, more of Gein's macabre practices were unveiled. Not only was he suspected in several other deaths, but Gein also admitted to having stolen corpses and body parts from a number of graves. Gein used these limbs and organs to fashion ornaments such as belts of nipples and a hanging human head, as well as decorations for his house, including chairs upholstered in human skin and bedposts crowned with skulls. A shoe box containing nine vulvas was but one piece of Gein's grim collection of female organs. On moonlit evenings, he would prance around his farm wearing a real female mask, a vest of skin complete with

female breasts, and women's panties filled with vaginas in an attempt to recreate the form and presence of his dead mother.

The news of Gein's secret passion devastated Plainfield. The townspeople were shocked to learn of the terrible fate of Mrs. Worden and to hear of the discovered remains belonging to 51-year-old barkeeper Mary Hogan, who had disappeared years earlier after being shot by Gein. They were outraged by the sacrilege of their ancestors' graves. They were literally sickened remembering the gifts of "venison" that Gein had presented to them.

THE GEIN LEGACY

Any small town is shocked by a murder in its midst, but the horror of Gein's rituals surpassed anything that the people of Plainfield had ever encountered or even imagined. Outside Wisconsin, however, few people had heard of Edward Gein. As bizarre and offensive as his crimes were, Gein never really made headlines in other parts of the country; what happens in Plainfield is not nearly as important, at least to the national media, as what occurs in a large city like Chicago or Washington, D.C. Very few eyebrows are raised at the mention of the name Ed Gein. Hardly a household name or a box office attraction, he might have been immortalized like Charles Manson in the film *Helter Skelter* (1976) had he killed in Los Angeles. Had he lived in a metropolis like New York City, director Spike Lee might have featured Gein in a retrospective docudrama, as he did serial killer David Berkowitz in the film *Summer of Sam* (1999). A killer from Plainfield, Wisconsin—which rings very much like Anywhere, USA—however, probably will never be regarded as important enough to warrant a major movie release called *Autumn of Ed*.

Although the name of Edward Gein is unknown to most moviegoers, he was discovered by Hollywood. His legendary place in the annals of crime has inspired a number of fictional films, both popular and obscure, as well as a low-budget portrayal of the Gein story, simply titled *Ed Gein* (2000).

The promoters of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) claimed that it was based on fact, although a crime of this description cannot be found in reality. One thing is for sure: The film contains numerous elements reminiscent of Gein's patently deviant behavior. For instance, the farmhouse of the Chainsaw family of killers, like Gein's house, is littered with spare body parts and bones. Also similar to Gein, the family has an armchair with real arms.

A little-known film imported from Canada more closely parallels the Gein theme. In *Deranged* (1974), a killer known as the "Butcher of Woodside" slaughters and stuffs his victims. At one point, he parades in the skin of a woman he has just killed, similar to Gein's moonlight escapades. A poster ad for the film depicts a woman hanging from her ankles, just as the body of Bernice Worden was discovered.

Probably because of Anthony Hopkins's memorable portrayal of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), some may forget the presence of a second despicable character in the film known as Buffalo Bill. Just as Edward Gein collected women's skin in order to recreate his mother, so the serial killer Buffalo Bill trapped and murdered his female victims for the same purpose, to harvest enough human skin to complete his "girl suit."

Perhaps the most noteworthy cinematic production inspired by the Gein case was the classic thriller *Psycho* (1960), the original version of which was directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Operating out of a warped sense of reverence, Norman Bates (played by Anthony Perkins in the original and by Vince Vaughn in the 1998 remake) stuffed and preserved his deceased mother, just as Gein had tried using female body parts to symbolize and resurrect his mother. Both conversed with their dead mothers, and both struggled with strict moral constraints that had been enforced when these dominating and sickly women were alive. Finally, Norman Bates was implicated in the deaths of two other young women, just as the excavation of undersize bones near Gein's farm suggested his role in the disappearance of two teenage girls.

MULTIPLE MURDER IN POPULAR CULTURE

Hero worship has always been an integral part of popular culture. Over the decades, we have celebrated those members of society who have reached the pinnacle of success in their fields by honoring them in movies, in documentaries, in magazine profiles, and even on trading cards. More recently, we have extended our celebration to what some consider our new antiheroes, those who have distinguished themselves in the worst possible ways by reaching the pinnacle of success as murderers.

In 1991, a California trading card company published its first series of mass and serial killer cards, spotlighting such brutal criminals as Edward Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, Theodore Bundy, and Charles Manson. Selling for \$10 per pack (without bubble gum), they were no joke. Several other card makers soon followed suit, hoping to cash in on the celebrity of multiple murderers. Besides mere collectables, you can also purchase serial killer playing cards to add a bit of fascination to your Saturday night poker game.

Even comic books have been used as vehicles for celebrating the exploits of vicious killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, rather than traditional superheroes. One comic book, *Jeffrey Dahmer: An Unauthorized Biography of a Serial Killer* (Fisher, 1992), goes so far as to portray, in drawings, Dahmer sodomizing one of his victims. By taking on a starring role, once held by the likes of Batman and Superman, the killer is unnecessarily glorified. As in Marshall McLuhan's (1964) famous adage, "The medium is the message," the victims' memories are trivialized by placing them in a comic book format. Diving even further into the realm of absurdity, several serial killer coloring books are available for adult entertainment. *American Female SERIAL KILLERS: Coloring Book for Adults* is promoted as an adults-only vehicle for both enjoyment and stress relief.

In a more respectable context, the coveted cover of *People* magazine has become a spotlight for infamous criminals. It was bad enough that Milwaukee's confessed cannibal, Jeffrey Dahmer, was on the cover of *People*—an honor usually reserved for Hollywood stars and Washington politicians—but the popular celebrity magazine also chose Dahmer as one of its "100 Most Intriguing People of the 20th Century."

During the 1970s, only one killer was featured on *People's* cover. By the 1990s, in contrast, the incredibly popular celebrity magazine printed more than two dozen different cover stories about vicious criminals, including Dahmer, David Koresh, Laurie Dann, and Theodore Kaczynski (see Levin et al., 2002). In recent years, however, *People* has reversed the practice by focusing much more on the victims of horrible crimes than the perpetrators.

The public's taste and tolerance for the front-cover attention afforded multiple murder extends beyond the readership of *People*. *Time* magazine similarly featured both of the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as well as their 13 victims, yet it was clear who was literally the center of attention. While the portraits of Harris and Klebold were in color and occupied almost half the cover, their victims formed a small border ringing their killers in black and white, with the letters of the magazine even covering some of their faces.

In October 2002, the so-called “Beltway Snipers” terrorized the residents of Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, shooting residents at random times and places. Ten people were killed and three others were wounded as the police struggled to crack the case. The media did its part to ramp up the hysteria. The cover of *Newsweek* was headlined “The Tarot Card Killer,” reflecting the manner in which the gunmen left messages at crime scenes. Quoting from one of the more ominous notes, *U.S. News & World Report* adorned its cover with a bullet and the words “I am God.”

Rolling Stone magazine was widely condemned for how it portrayed 20-year-old Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the brothers who planted bombs at the 2013 Boston Marathon, killing three spectators and seriously injuring hundreds of others. The August 2013 issue of *Rolling Stone* featured the curly-haired terrorist on the front cover in a photograph reminiscent of rock stars who had made it big over the years. Whether it was the recency of the bombing or the anti-American sentiment behind the attack, the magazine came under intense criticism for its approach, including a letter from Boston's

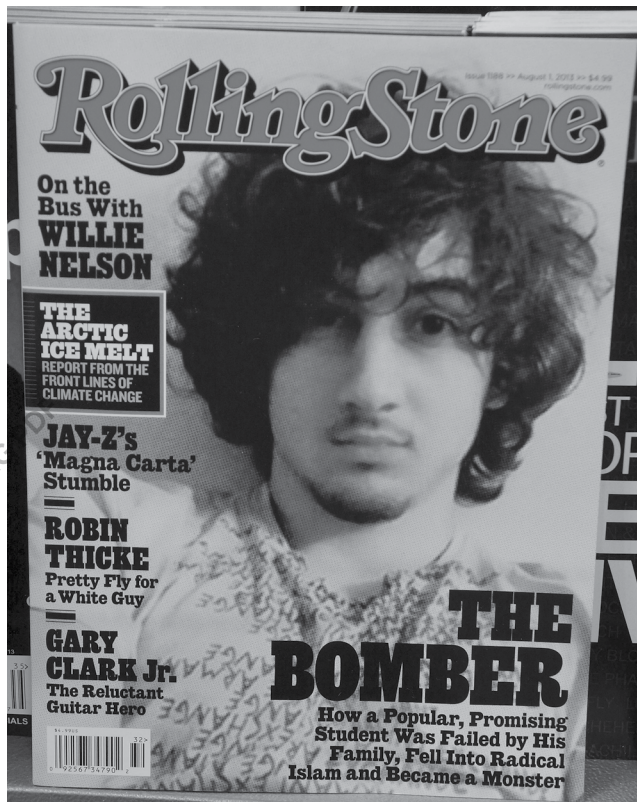


PHOTO 1.1 Boston Marathon Bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev appears on the August 1, 2013, cover of *Rolling Stone*.

Source: (Rick Maiman/Polaris/Newscom).

mayor, Tom Menino, blasting the publication for giving Tsarnaev celebrity treatment. Numerous newsstands and stores, including CVS and Walgreens, refused to sell the controversial issue (Stanglin, 2013). Yet, despite a grassroots campaign to mount a boycott, the magazine flew off the shelves wherever available, giving *Rolling Stone* double its usual street sales for the issue.

Television has also helped to turn criminals—both real ones like Florida's Aileen Wuornos and fictional ones like Showtime's Dexter Morgan—into celebrities. In fact, some observers have characterized multiple murder as a chiefly media event (Gibson, 2006) that allows people to obtain close knowledge of the essential characteristics of serial killing and the propensities peculiar to specific offenders (Jenkins, 1994). This is a particularly salient by-product of the media-saturated nature of serial killing, given that it is statistically one of the least common types of crime (Haggerty, 2009). Media, at their worst, have catered to public hunger for gripping topics, financially exploiting gruesome events and turning the horrific into an institution of celebrity culture (Haggerty, 2009). The prevalence of attention to rare but horrifying events such as mass murder is not limited to television media. These stories saturate detective and true crime books and can be seen often in film and police dramas along with collector cards, comic books, and more recently, Internet memes (Jarvis, 2007; Schmidt, 2005).

Docudramas on television or in the theaters are often biographies of vicious criminals—many of whom are played by leading actors and actresses, such as Mark Harmon as Theodore Bundy, Brian Dennehy as John Wayne Gacy, Jeremy Davies as Charles Manson, Michael Badalucco as David Berkowitz, Jean Smart as Aileen Wuornos, Laura Prepon as Karla Homolka, and John Cusack as Robert Hansen. Actress Charlize Theron also played Wuornos in the 2003 movie titled *Monster*, winning an Academy Award for the performance and, in the process, winning Wuornos some posthumous measure of sympathy. In terms of popular culture, Theodore Bundy's infamy seems to have stood the test of time. Even though the case is several decades old, the biopic, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, was released in theaters and on *Netflix* in 2019. The film portrayed Bundy's life and relationship with his girlfriend, starring well-known actor Zac Efron as the serial killer. Unfortunately, having glamorous stars cast in the roles of vicious killers infuses these killers with glamour and humanity.

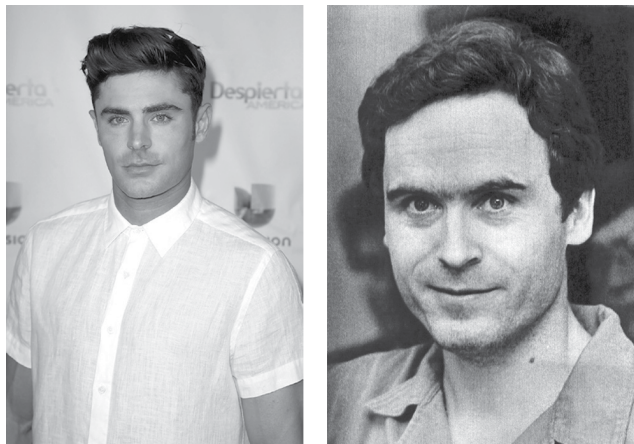


PHOTO 1.2 Zac Efron starred as Ted Bundy in a biopic about the serial killer

Source: (Alexander Tamargo / Contributor); (Bettmann / Contributor).

Besides the undeserving focus on the criminal as the star of the show in these programs, television docudramas are sanitized by virtue of the restrictions that are placed on network television. Ironically, though, theatrical films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Red Dragon* (2002), *Along Came a Spider* (2001), *Copycat* (1995), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *The Cell* (2000), *Horsemen* (2009), the *Saw* franchise (multiple years), and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012) are able to depict all the horrible details of purely fictional crimes without fear of censorship.

A rare true crime film that does not glorify serial murder can be found in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), a low-budget motion picture based on serial murderer Henry Lee Lucas and his partner Ottis Toole. In *Henry*, the two killers are shown for what they really were—cruel and inhumane men without any redeeming social value. They weren't portrayed as smart, friendly, handsome, or charming, and they weren't played by actors most people would recognize as stars. Most important, the film refused to soft-pedal the monstrous acts of this killing team, showing their unmitigated cruelty without compromise.

Finally, in this age of instant gratification, podcasts have become a uniquely popular medium for on-demand information and entertainment. It is no surprise that true crime podcasts, especially those that feature cases of multiple murder, are some of the most popular. A November 2021 ranking of podcasts published by *Newsweek* had three true crime-themed offerings in the top 10: *Serial*, a pioneer of sorts in this genre as number eight; *My Favorite Murder*, featuring a more humorous approach to the topic, as number six; and *Crime Junkie*, with over 500 million downloads in its first four years, as number three.

THE SELLING OF MULTIPLE MURDER

The glorification of multiple killers has created a market for almost anything that they say or do. For example, the artwork of John Wayne Gacy became much in demand, but only after he was convicted of killing 33 young men and boys in Des Plaines, Illinois, and especially after his execution. His very ordinary paintings of clowns have been displayed in art galleries and have become collector's items. His paintings had special significance because he had been known to dress as a clown to entertain children at neighborhood birthday parties. In May 2011, the Arts Factory in Las Vegas exhibited for sale a number of Gacy's paintings, advertising that at least part of the proceeds would be donated to charity. While he was incarcerated, Gacy took up painting. He made \$100,000 on sales of his artwork through a broker. Similarly, the paintings of deceased mass murderer Richard Speck, who slaughtered eight nurses in Chicago and then died in an Illinois penitentiary, now sell for up to \$2,000. Although this kind of price tag may seem relatively slight for original art, his paintings would hardly be worth the canvas they're painted on were it not for his bizarre notoriety.

Along the same lines, a Denver art studio produces and sells serial killer action figures. Collectors of these and other pieces of what has been termed *murderabilia* can purchase a wide variety of clothing items emblazoned with their favorite serial killers or can bid on such items as a lock of Charles Manson's hair or a pair of his sandals at an Internet auction site. Online vendors peddle signed letters and photographs from serial and mass murderers. Even the death certificate of Aileen Wuornos, a female serial killer executed in Florida, is available for a price. And the prices of the more unusual items can get quite high. The handheld calculator used by Virginia Tech gunman Seung-Hui Cho goes for \$4,500 on one murderabilia site, where the rosary belonging to John Wayne Gacy is selling for ten times that figure.

Founder of *Serial Killer Ink*, Eric Holler (who commercially uses the name “Eric Gein” for its obvious reference to one of the most bizarre killers), spends months cultivating friendships with the most ruthless of criminals in order to peddle their letters and other paraphernalia for 100% profit. When asked if he feels guilty for profiting off of murder and rape, Holler callously responded:

I don't feel badly at all. I am desensitized to the crimes. When I'm in contact with these guys, I'm not thinking, “Wow. This guy destroyed 30 families.” I'm thinking, “This guy can make me money.” It may sound brass and cold but that's the reality for me.

(Ng, 2011)

Some individuals are so fascinated with serial and mass murderers that they will purchase any item associated even remotely with a killer's hideous crimes. Bricks taken from Jeffrey Dahmer's apartment building were considered by some as prized souvenirs. Other serial murder fans were willing to bid for the refrigerator in which Dahmer had held his victims' body parts, and even the receipt from its purchase. Several websites auctioned off souvenirs associated with Dennis Rader, who was captured in 2005 for the BTK killing spree, including dirt taken from his home and sold by the ounce.

After it was discovered that Gary Ridgway was the so-called Green River Killer, who had murdered at least 48 prostitutes in the Seattle area, eBay customers were eager to purchase Green River-related merchandise online. Until it was yanked from the website, customers could bid on a bloodred T-shirt bearing the image of Gary Ridgway and the words “I was good at choking.” Or they could purchase a business card from the Green River Task Force and a used mug taken from the truck factory where Ridgway had worked for 30 years. The business card was sold for \$29, but the old mug brought only \$4.25.

Before his arrest in 1995, 47-year-old serial killer Keith Jesperson was dubbed the “Happy Face Killer” because of the doodle he scribbled on his anonymous confession. The long-haul trucker, who took the lives of at least eight women in five states, sold his artwork online. At two websites, his colored pencil drawings of various animals in the wild were displayed with their price tags of \$25 each. A signed photograph of the killer came free of charge with every purchase (Suo, 2002).

While few people may be in the market for legitimate murderabilia, there are a plethora of cheaper and more mainstream options. Urban Outfitters sold a popular line of cereal bowls featuring portraits of serial killers at the bottom, which have since become collector's items. Knife sets bearing pictures of serial killers and cutting boards engraved with contrived messages such as “I Love Men, But I Can't Eat A Whole One—Jeffrey Dahmer” are sold on a variety of online sites, including mainstream ones like Amazon. Gory figurines of Elizabeth Bathory, Jack the Ripper, and Billy the Kid are marketed as toys by *McFarlane's Monsters*. Even thongs decorated with Charles Manson's face are available for a price.

A song written by multiple murderer Charles Manson became a cult classic when recorded by the heavy metal rock group Guns N' Roses on their 1993 album *The Spaghetti Incident*. To publicize their release, lead singer Axl Rose wore a Charles Manson T-shirt on the album cover. Patti Tate, sister of the Hollywood actress Sharon Tate, who was murdered in 1969 by Manson followers, said in response that the record company “is putting Manson up on a pedestal for young people who don't know who he is to worship like an idol” (Quintanilla, 1994, p. E1). Patti Tate's judgment was confirmed when



PHOTO 1.3 Photo of an exhibit of John Wayne Gacy's clown paintings as displayed May 2011 in the Arts Factory in Las Vegas

Source: [Author's Collection].

an iconoclastic young rocker adopted the stage name Marilyn Manson. Charles Manson himself maintained his own music career, even from his prison cell, until his death in 2017. Tapes of his music were smuggled out from the penitentiary and then distributed on CDs. No small wonder that Manson, even in his 70s, after four decades behind bars, still boasted that he was the most famous person who ever lived (Levin, 2008). Although his sense of importance was absolutely inflated, at least in terms of name recognition, Manson's claim may not be that much of an exaggeration.

Americans have become fascinated with the many talents displayed by vicious killers. Apparently, Sacramento serial killer Dorothea Puente was renowned for her culinary skills, so much so that in 2004, author Shane Bugbee published a collection of her favorite recipes in a book entitled *Cooking with a Serial Killer*. Drifter Danny Rolling, convicted in the Gainesville student slayings, performed his own musical compositions. He sang love songs to his sweetheart, both in court and with guitar accompaniment on the national television program *A Current Affair*. He and his then-fiancée Sondra London (1996) published a book containing his artwork and poetry, which many fans purchased at leading bookstores around the country.

Decades ago, the New York State legislature passed the Son of Sam law prohibiting murderers like David Berkowitz from profiting off of their crimes. In 1991, however, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that this law was unconstitutional on First Amendment grounds. This decision by the Court hasn't prevented lawmakers from making creative attempts to ensure that killers do not reap financial reward. For example, Senator John Cornyn of Texas has, on several occasions, filed bills attempting to prevent the proceeds from the sale of murderabilia to be transmitted to convicted criminals through the US mail, but up until now has not succeeded in having them passed into federal law.

It is disgraceful enough when private citizens buy and sell killer art and artifacts, but even the federal government has gotten into the sordid business. Compelled by court order, the General Services Administration (GSA) in May 2011 launched an online auction of personal items that belonged to “the Unabomber” Theodore Kaczynski, the reclusive misfit who killed three victims and injured 23 others during an 18-year-long campaign of mayhem. Included on the auction block were his driver’s license, birth certificate, academic transcripts, and personal checks, which had been recovered from Kaczynski’s secluded Montana cabin (the same structure that later drew large crowds when it went on display at the Newseum in Washington, D.C.).

The GSA auction was mandated as part of a \$15 million restitution order for Kaczynski’s victims and their families. Because serial killers rarely have the financial means to contribute as restitution to the innocent people they harm, it is often the government’s place to establish and fund victim compensation programs. Although the objective was certainly laudable, hawking macabre property to those fringe collectors who wish to own a piece of infamy is a dubious way to raise money. The prized centerpiece of this auction, of course, was the original 35,000-word manifesto that Kaczynski negotiated by threat of violence to have published in *The Washington Post*. Both the handwritten and typed versions were available for the highest bidder, as was the typewriter with which Kaczynski produced his manuscript.

CRAVING ATTENTION

Not only is the value of multiple murderer artwork and music inflated, but their statements to the press, both spoken and written, are treated as words of wisdom. Suddenly, they become instant experts on everything from psychology to criminal justice. The media often solicit their opinions about how victims might protect themselves from murder, what motivates other serial killers, and the role of pornography in the development of a sexual sadist. In fact, Ted Bundy’s *expert testimony* on the eve of his execution concerning the dangers of erotic materials became ammunition for ultraconservative groups lobbying for federal antipornography legislation widely called the “Bundy Bill.”

In a November 29, 1994, interview with Stone Phillips for *Dateline NBC*, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer similarly appealed to religious groups by blaming the theory of evolution for dismembering and cannibalizing 17 men and boys. “If a person doesn’t think there is a God to be accountable to,” said Dahmer, “then what’s the point of trying to modify your behavior to keep it within acceptable ranges? ... I always believed the theory of evolution as truth, that we all just came from the slime.”

Thirty-eight-year-old serial killer Leslie Allen Williams, after his 1992 arrest under suspicion for the slayings of four women, exploited the Detroit area media to the hilt. Rather than giving an interview to every media outlet that wanted one, Williams took requests. In a contest, the outcome of which he alone would decide, one local television station won an exclusive interview with the serial killer. In addition, one daily paper, *The Detroit News*, was chosen for the privilege of printing Williams’s 24-page open letter to the public that expounded on his theories and philosophy. Anyone who would question whether this was a privilege for *The Detroit News* should consider what it did to boost street sales over its competitor.

The relationship between the media and serial killers has become so intertwined that it has been described as symbiotic (Haggerty, 2009). The media seek the attention of their

captivated audience by exploiting its interest in scintillating themes. For their part, the murderers look to the media to help them construct their serial killer identities. In fact, reading their own press clippings helps them to complete an identity transformation in the same way that reading the press does for athletes and entertainers.

Donald Harvey, who confessed to killing scores of patients while working as an orderly in Cincinnati-area hospitals, agreed to a taped, face-to-face interview with popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey as part of a program on nurses who kill. During the taped segment, Harvey visibly showed enjoyment in recounting the details of how he killed his victims. He described with glee how he had injected some with poisons and had suffocated others. Realizing that Harvey was having the time of his life talking about murdering patients, producers of the Oprah Winfrey show wisely decided that it would be insensitive—if not unethical—to air the program and canceled it. By doing so, the producers deprived Harvey of a chance for stardom on a national stage. The show's producers correctly recognized the fine but critical line that divides informed analysis from unhealthy glorification.

Although most convicted killers and rapists typically avoid publicity out of embarrassment and shame, serial killers often shamelessly seek it, seemingly proud of their murderous accomplishments. Lawrence Bittaker and accomplice Roy Norris tortured and murdered a string of teenage girls in 1979 in Southern California, dumping one mutilated body on a suburban lawn to encourage media coverage, while pitching others off cliffs. After Bittaker was caught, he signed autographs from his prison cell, “Pliers Bittaker,” reflecting the tool he used in maiming his victims. Clifford Olson, who raped and murdered 11 children in British Columbia in 1980–1981, begged to be referred to as “Hannibal Lecter,” apparently likening himself to the fictional character from *The Silence of the Lambs*. He also boasted that he was as important as Charles Manson from the United States.

Becoming a pop culture celebrity is an important part of the motivation that inspires serial killers to continue committing murder. Once they are identified with a superstar moniker, their frequency of murder often increases. No longer satisfied with obscurity, they seek to prove that they deserve the superstar status to which they have been assigned.

There are many different ways in which multiple murderers can thrive on their undeserved celebrity. While living a reclusive existence in a tiny cabin in a remote area of Montana, Theodore Kaczynski routinely traveled to the nearest public library where he would scan newspapers for reports of his deadly handiwork. And while his wish to have his manifesto published in a prestigious media outlet conceivably reflected an altruistic purpose of warning society about technology enslavement, even after his capture, Kaczynski still had a knack for the limelight. Locked away in federal prison, he was not able to attend his 50th reunion at Harvard. Instead, he submitted his accomplishments for the special reunion report for the Class of 1962:

THEODORE JOHN KACZYNSKI

HOME ADDRESS: No. 04475-046, US Penitentiary-Max, P.O. Box 8500,

Florence, CO 8126-8500.

OCCUPATION: Prisoner

HOUSE/DORM: Eliot.

DEGREES: AB '62; MA, Univ. of Michigan '65; PhD, *ibid.* '67.

PUBLICATIONS: *Technological Slavery* (Feral House, 2010).

AWARDS: Eight life sentences, issued by the United States District Court for the Eastern District of California, 1998.

Kaczynski's entry was published along with the submissions from his many classmates. Following the firestorm of criticism, the Harvard Alumni Association issued this apology: "We regret publishing Kaczynski's references to his convictions and apologize for any distress that it may have caused others" (Knothe & Andersen, 2012).

Narcissism and the desire for attention on the part of murderers isn't just limited to serial offenders like Olson and Kaczynski. Even though they may not survive to bask in the limelight, some mass killers also want public recognition. For example, school shooter Nikolas Cruz said this on a video he recorded on his cellphone: "When you see me on the news, you'll all know who I am" (Robles, 2018). As Lankford (2016) explains:

[S]ome rampage shooters succumb to criminal "delusions of grandeur," and seek fame and glory through killing. At least in part, their desire for fame can be understood as attempted compensation for the belief that they were underappreciated, disrespected, or mistreated in the past. Instead of being marginalized, ignored, or forgotten, they want to show the world that they deserved far more attention—and now they are going to get it. (p. 124)

KILLER COMMUNICATION

Some Americans disparagingly refer to serial killers as animals—of course, only in a figurative sense. Actually, what distinguishes humans from animals is the ability to communicate verbally and in writing, and some serial killers have, in fact, chosen to reach out through such means to contact the police, the press, or the public.

Letter carrier David Berkowitz, initially labeled "The .44 Caliber Killer" for his repeated gun assaults on young couples in parked cars in 1976 and 1977, did more than just tote the mail. During his killing spree, Berkowitz sent a series of letters to brash *New York Post* columnist Jimmy Breslin. Besides his lengthy and sometimes incoherent ramblings, Berkowitz offered the police a bit of assistance, with Breslin as the go-between, in the closing of one of his notes:

P.S. Please inform all the detectives working on the case that I wish them luck. Keep them digging, drive on. Think positive. Here are some clues to help you along. The Duke of Death, The Wicked King Wicker. The 22 Disciples of Hell. John Wheaties, rapist and suffocater of young girls.

At the same time, Berkowitz was displeased about his new-found public image. The killer wrote a letter of complaint to Captain Joe Borelli of the New York Police Department

(NYPD), hoping to set the record straight: “I am deeply hurt by the newspaper calling me a woman hater. I am not. But I am a monster. I am a little brat. I am the ‘Son of Sam.’”

Unlike Berkowitz, most serial killers elect strategically to remain silent regarding their identity and their activities. Some murderers-at-large—those who are social isolates in personality—resist any impulse to go public out of their own personal awkwardness and discomfort in interpersonal relations. Others recognize that killing under the radar is most advantageous for continuing their crime sprees without detection or apprehension—that is, if pleasure and fantasy fulfillment are what motivates them.

Of course, not all repeat killers are driven by sexual sadism or the need to dominate their victims. Certain motivations for murder necessitate that the killer expose and publicize his or her existence, if not identity. For example, some multiple murderers seek power fulfillment not so much by dominating innocent victims but by spreading fear throughout a community, gripping an entire city or region in an atmosphere of panic and hysteria. In a series of chilling unsolved homicides in Wichita, Kansas, beginning in the mid-1970s, the unidentified killer began writing to the police and the media to accomplish just this. His one-way communication intensified the level of fear and apprehension among residents of this previously relaxed Midwestern community.

Early on in his crime spree, the killer phoned a local newspaper reporter and directed him to locate a mechanical engineering textbook on the shelves of the Wichita Public Library. Inside the text, the reporter found a letter in which the writer claimed credit for the recent massacre of a local family and promised more of the same in the future. In his letter, the killer wrote, “The code words for me will be . . . Bind them, Torture them, Kill them.” He signed the letter “BTK Strangler.”

The BTK moniker, originating with the killer himself, was commonly used by newspaper reporters in their articles about his string of seven murders. In January 1978, BTK sent a poem to a reporter at *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon* in which he wrote about a victim he had slain a year earlier. In February of the same year, BTK wrote a letter to a Wichita television station complaining about the lack of publicity he had received for his murders. “How many do I have to kill,” BTK asked, “before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?” (Scott, 1978). In addition, the killer compared his crimes with those of Jack the Ripper, Son of Sam, and the Hillside Strangler.

BTK’s killing spree apparently ended in 1977. The murders seemed to have stopped, the leads in the case never panned out, and the media no longer heard from the killer. After more than 25 years, however, BTK resurfaced to terrorize the Wichita community again. In 2004, *The Wichita Eagle* marked the 30th anniversary of BTK by speculating what had become of his fate—the man had moved away, was imprisoned for some other crime, or had died, according to various theories. Feeling challenged and wanting everyone to know that none of those hypotheses was true, BTK reopened lines of one-way communication, insisting that he had been around town all along. In a letter addressed to the *Eagle*, the retired serial killer included his usual contrived BTK return address and enclosed a photocopy of a missing driver’s license belonging to a woman who had been strangled in 1986 and copies of three snapshots of her body lying in front of her television.



PHOTO 1.4A Convicted “BTK” killer Dennis Rader

Source: (Sedgwick County, KS, Sheriff's Office).

BTK was back—back not to resume his killing spree but only to toy with the police and the press for his enjoyment and fame. He even went so far as to send out a word puzzle, created from a computerized spreadsheet, which contained various hidden clues about his identity and whereabouts. It is arguable that he resurfaced in part because of feeling slighted and upstaged by contemporary serial killers such as the DC Snipers, who were publicized all over the Internet and cable television. Of course, these communication outlets were not in existence during BTK's prime crime years.

Unfortunately for him, but luckily for the residents of Wichita, the BTK

Strangler's ego and narcissism were his downfall. The police were able to trace the IP (Internet Protocol) address of the computer he had used to create the puzzle—that being a desktop machine located at Christ Lutheran Church in Wichita. It didn't take the authorities long to identify the source: Dennis Rader, president of the Congregation Council.

Rader mistakenly believed that he and a police lieutenant of the Wichita Police Department shared a special bond. Rader must have been disappointed when he learned that police reassurances that a floppy disk could not be traced back to a specific computer were false (Hansen, 2006).

Even following his capture, Dennis Rader couldn't resist the urge to talk with the cops about his crimes. Having failed in his life's ambition to join the police force, he chatted with the detectives as if he was one of the guys. Rader described his arrest and admission of responsibility to Harvard University psychologist Robert Mendoza:

I saw this whole line of police cars. That's not good. And—they were right on me. Just that quick. I thought maybe it was a traffic stop or something. But as soon as one of 'em's behind me with the red lights and sirens, I knew that was it.

They pulled guns on me. Told me to lay down. And I sprawled out and they grabbed me real quick like in handcuffs and stuck me in a car. “Mr. Rader, do you know why you're going downtown?” And I said, “Oh, I have suspicions, why?”

At first it was kind of—kind of a cat and mouse game. That they had a suspect. But it, but it, but it did kind of hurt, you know. Like you said, I had the power, you know, I was a law enforcement officer technically and here I am—these law enforcement officers were trying to do my duties. That kind of hurt a little bit.

I know a lot of the police terminology. I know how they do things. So it, yeah, it's kinda a bonding type thing, you know.

I enjoyed it. And once the confession was out and I admitted who I was, then, then the bonding really started. You know, I just really opened up and you know we shared jokes and everything else. It's just like we were buddies.

(NBC, 2005)

For some serial murderers, boasting about their violent exploits can more accurately be described as an act of taunting. Out of sheer arrogance, certain killers tease the police or the public with a “you can’t catch me” message. For them, winning the cat-and-mouse game with law enforcement is a powerful fringe benefit to their killing sprees—potentially as fulfilling as the homicides themselves.

California’s Zodiac killer, whose first suspected murder—that of Cheri Jo Bates—dates back to 1966, appeared unconcerned about being captured as he sent letter after letter to the newspapers, claiming intellectual superiority over the police. Even his first communiqué, received by the Riverside Police Department in November 1966, long before he had established his elusiveness, tauntingly announced his intentions (Wark, n.d.). His use of capital letters reflected a certain bravado and confidence:

CHAPTER 8



PHOTO 1.4B Rader taunted police by sending a word puzzle containing hidden clues to his identity. (Author)

SHE WAS YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL BUT NOW SHE IS BATTERED AND DEAD. SHE IS NOT THE FIRST AND SHE WILL NOT BE THE LAST I LAY AWAKE NIGHTS THINKING ABOUT MY NEXT VICTIM. MAYBE SHE WILL BE THE BEAUTIFUL BLOND THAT BABYSITS NEAR THE LITTLE STORE AND WALKS DOWN THE DARK ALLEY EACH EVENING ABOUT SEVEN. OR MAYBE SHE WILL BE THE SHAPELY BRUNETT THAT SAID NO WHEN I ASKED HER FOR A DATE IN HIGH SCHOOL. BUT MAYBE IT WILL NOT BE EITHER. BUT I SHALL CUT OFF HER FEMALE PARTS AND DEPOSIT THEM FOR THE WHOLE CITY TO SEE. SO DON'T MAKE IT TOO EASY FOR ME. KEEP YOUR SISTERS, DAUGHTERS, AND WIVES OFF THE STREETS AND ALLEYS. MISS BATES WAS STUPID. SHE WENT TO THE SLAUGHTER LIKE A LAMB. SHE DID NOT PUT UP A STRUGGLE. BUT I DID. IT WAS A BALL. I FIRST CUT THE MIDDLE WIRE FROM THE DISTRIBUTOR. THEN I WAITED FOR HER IN THE LIBRARY AND FOLLOWED HER OUT AFTER ABOUT TWO MINUTES. THE BATTERY MUST HAVE BEEN ABOUT DEAD BY THEN. I THEN OFFERED TO HELP. SHE WAS THEN VERY WILLING TO TALK TO ME. I TOLD HER THAT MY CAR WAS DOWN THE STREET AND THAT I WOULD GIVE HER A LIFT HOME. WHEN WE WERE AWAY FROM THE LIBRARY WALKING, I SAID IT WAS ABOUT TIME. SHE ASKED ME, "ABOUT TIME FOR WHAT?" I SAID IT WAS ABOUT TIME FOR HER TO DIE. I GRABBED HER AROUND THE NECK WITH MY HAND OVER HER MOUTH AND MY OTHER HAND WITH A SMALL KNIFE AT HER THROAT. SHE WENT VERY WILLINGLY. HER BREAST FELT WARM AND VERY FIRM UNDER MY HANDS, BUT ONLY ONE THING WAS ON MY MIND. MAKING HER PAY FOR ALL THE BRUSH OFFS THAT SHE HAD GIVEN ME DURING THE YEARS PRIOR. SHE DIED HARD. SHE SQUIRMED AND SHOOK AS I CHOCKED HER, AND HER LIPS TWICLED. SHE LET OUT A SCREAM ONCE AND I KICKED HER IN THE HEAD TO SHUT HER UP. I PLUNGED THE KNIFE INTO HER AND IT BROKE. I THEN FINISHED THE JOB BY CUTTING HER THROAT. I AM NOT SICK. I AM INSANE. BUT THAT WILL NOT STOP THE GAME. THIS LETTER SHOULD BE PUBLISHED FOR ALL TO READ IT. IT JUST MIGHT SAVE THAT GIRL IN THE ALLEY. BUT THAT'S UP TO YOU. IT WILL BE ON YOUR CONSCIENCE. NOT MINE. YES, I DID MAKE THAT CALL TO YOU ALSO. IT WAS JUST A WARNING. BEWARE . . . I AM STALKING YOUR GIRLS NOW.

Source: CC. CHIEF OF POLICE ENTERPRISE

Three years later, the killer's communications, both letters and phone calls, picked up in pace. He also adopted the sign of the Zodiac, as well as its name, as his calling card and monogram for murder. The moniker only intensified the frightfulness of the assailant whose identity, despite theories and speculation, has never been established.

There are two general classes of multiple murderers based on their motivation: those who find killing a fulfilling end in itself and those for whom murder is a necessary, but not necessarily desirable, means toward some larger objective, often political or profit-based. The former is focused squarely on the act of killing, whereas the latter generally requires communication with third parties to get their compliance.

For the DC Snipers, who gunned down 10 innocent people near the nation's capital during a three-week period in 2002, communication with the investigative task force, and ideally its leader, Chief Charles Moose of the Montgomery County Police, was necessary to gain their ultimate prize—a ransom of \$10 million.

Through notes left at the sites of shootings (one of which was scribbled on a tarot card for added effect), the killers gave instructions for the head of the task force to read at a press conference the phrase, “We have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose,” adapted from a children's folktale. The snipers, later identified as John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, were frustrated in their repeated attempts to reach the man in charge who could authorize the transfer of funds to a stolen debit account. For Muhammad and Malvo, communication was nothing more than a means to negotiate for profit.

Unlike the DC Snipers, Theodore Kaczynski, the central figure in the 2011 GSA auction mentioned earlier, was a prolific communicator and relentless negotiator. Given the moniker “the Unabomber” by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for his series of bombings directed at university-based scientists and airline executives, Kaczynski was focused on advancing his cause rather than seeking profit, power, or revenge. He wished to send a clear message of impending doom to alert the nation to what he saw as the evils of technology, and he used murder and the threat of further bombings in order to get everyone's attention.

Despite his distorted view, Kaczynski was a brilliant individual with a PhD in mathematics who landed a coveted teaching position at the University of California, Berkeley. But he also struggled with mental illness throughout his life. As he withdrew deeper and deeper into minimalist ideology and schizophrenia, Kaczynski abandoned his teaching post and moved to a remote spot in Lincoln, Montana, to take up a simple, reclusive existence.

From his tiny, secluded cabin, lacking the basic comforts of electricity or running water, Kaczynski toiled away making bombs and sending occasional letters to *The New York Times* outlining his outlook and philosophy, excerpts of which were published by the *Times* in the hope that someone would recognize the ideas and phrasing.

More importantly, Kaczynski spent long hours polishing his 35,000-word treatise, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” in which he warned of the dangers of human enslavement to technology:

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have greatly increased the life-expectancy of those of us who live in “advanced” countries, but they have destabilized society, have made life unfulfilling, have subjected human beings to indignities, have led to widespread psychological suffering (in the Third World to physical suffering as well) and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world. The continued development of technology will worsen the situation. It will certainly subject human beings to greater indignities and inflict greater damage on the natural world, it will probably lead to greater social disruption and psychological suffering, and it may lead to increased physical suffering even in “advanced” countries.

Kaczynski sent copies of his treatise to both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, along with an ultimatum: Either his document is published unedited and in its entirety or more people will die. With advice from the FBI, the *Post* capitulated to the killer's coercive tactics and published the manifesto as an eight-page supplement to its September 19, 1995, edition.

The decision to give in to the murderer's demands was certainly controversial, potentially setting a dangerous precedent. Would others in the future opt to threaten violence unless their letters or manuscripts were published? Of course, reasoned the editors of the *Post*, this was not the typical offender, but someone who had terrorized the nation for almost two decades. They only hoped that someone would read the text and recognize its author.

Notwithstanding the desire to end the carnage and the hope that publication would help to uncover the Unabomber's identity, the choice to print the manifesto in the weekday *Post* was curious and seemed somewhat to belie the purpose for publishing the lengthy document. Although this would satisfy the terrorist's demands in the most minimal way, it also contradicted the notion of disseminating the words widely so as to produce leads. The *Post* has far less circulation than the *Times*, and the daily substantially less than the Sunday edition. However, in the early Internet days of 1995, the choice of location virtually guaranteed that no one in the San Francisco or Chicago metropolitan areas, where the FBI had believed the Unabomber lived, would get hold of the daily edition of the *Post*.

As the story unfolded, David Kaczynski noticed some similarity between the manifesto and his brother's ranting and raving about the evils of modern technology. He contacted the FBI, leading to the eventual arrest of his older sibling for the serial bombings. In the minds of many observers, the happy ending justified the controversial means. But David Kaczynski was actually tipped off long before the *Post*'s publication of the manifesto by reading the letters excerpted earlier in the *Times*. Even if the *Post* had not published the manifesto, David Kaczynski would, in all likelihood, still have responded to the FBI's invitation for anyone to examine the manifesto, denying the killer his undeserved platform.

Of course, the nature of the media has changed significantly since the mid-1990s when the *Post* chose to become a mouthpiece for the Unabomber. The popularity of social media as a means for broadcasting personal experiences and ideas, without having to threaten a newspaper or television outlet, has not been lost on the more violent members of society. Many hate-motivated multiple murderers have filled their Facebook pages with angry rants and rambling diatribes about the *enemy*, be they members of some religious or racial group or the government that protects them. Others have found pictures and even video to be a convenient way of getting their message across to the world. Seung-Hui Cho, for example, took a break from his April 16, 2007, killing spree at Virginia Tech to travel to the post office in order to send a package of explanatory videos to *NBC News* in New York City.

Thanks to YouTube video and a 141-page autobiographical tale of a troubled life, we have a fairly clear idea of why 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed six and injured 14 others—by shooting, stabbing, and vehicle ramming—terrorizing the ordinarily tranquil oceanside community of Isla Vista, California. Even before the names of the victims in the May 23, 2014, rampage were publicly released, we had the benefit of the gunman's own words to help us make some sense of what seemed to be such a senseless act of violence.

Seated behind the wheel of his BMW—the same vehicle later used to facilitate his rampage—Rodger produced the last entry in his personal YouTube channel called, “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution.” Just before taking his own life, Rodger calmly signed off on this pathetic, seven-minute recording with these words:

You forced me to suffer all my life, now I will make you all suffer. I waited a long time for this. I’ll give you exactly what you deserve, all of you. All you girls who rejected me, looked down upon me, you know, treated me like scum while you gave yourselves to other men. And all of you men for living a better life than me, all of you sexually active men. I hate you. I hate all of you. I can’t wait to give you exactly what you deserve, annihilation.

(CNN, 2014)

Even more telling was the lengthy and chronologically sectioned manuscript in which Rodger recounted the details of his unhappy youth and frustrating adolescence.

Why would this young man devote so much time and energy to reporting on his pitiful existence? Why would he then publicly distribute a document that hardly portrays him in a positive light?

Like many other rampage killers before him, Rodger apparently felt the need to set the record straight—to inform the world about his justification for murder. He may have reasoned that without his written words and recorded explanation, society would conclude he was just some deranged individual who suddenly snapped and slaughtered innocent victims for no reason at all. It would have been important for Rodger to demonstrate that at the end of the day, despite the history of bullying and social ostracism, he emerged victorious. He apparently wanted us to know that he was the good guy, not the evil one, who was ready to exact retribution for the injustices he had endured and ultimately to win one for, quite literally, the little guy.

Rodger appears to have wanted us to judge him in context. He needed us to understand the mistreatment that he suffered at the hands of grade school classmates who teased him just for being the shortest in stature and the sense of rejection he experienced for never having even kissed a girl, while undeserving other young men received all sorts of sexual favors.

The irony, of course, is that Rodger is no longer an “insignificant, obscure mouse,”—as he referred to himself—but someone who is well known, although hardly in a positive light, around the university community he so violently devastated. However, he became a hero to incels (short for “involuntarily celibates”), the online community of men who are unable to attract women sexually and, as a result, are hostile toward women as well as sexually active men. Rodger’s posthumous fanbase included Alek Minassian, who, in 2018, just prior to driving a rented van into a crowd of pedestrians on a busy Toronto street, killing 11 and injuring 15, posted this on his Facebook page: “The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!”

KILLER GROUPIES

Because of their celebrity status, infamous multiple murderers attract a surprising number of extreme sympathizers, the so-called *killer groupies*. Several convicted serial killers, such as Hillside Stranglers Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, were pursued and married

while serving life sentences for their brutal and sadistic murders of young women on the West Coast. Other multiple murderers have married from death row, giving the traditional vow “til death do us part” an ironic twist. The pattern of behavior is sufficiently common to have been assigned a clinical label: *hybristophilia*, a paraphilia in which someone is sexually aroused or attracted to a person who has committed particularly vicious or gruesome crimes. In its more common form, hybristophiles merely seek to be close to some “bad boy” or “bad girl.” Occasionally, however, hybristophilia can lead to behaviors far more dangerous than mere adoration and devotion, including participating in murder for the sake of their loved one.

So why would someone in her right mind correspond with, visit, or even fall in love with a man who has raped, tortured, and mutilated innocent victims? Why would hundreds of women attempt to visit Los Angeles Night Stalker Richard Ramirez, who was convicted of stealthily entering more than a dozen homes in the dark of night and killing the occupants? Why would so many women send proposals of marriage to suspected repeat killer Joran Van Der Sloot just days after his incarceration in the country of Peru? And why would a woman like Veronica Compton be so attracted to Sunset Strip Killer Douglas Clark that she would break off her relationship with Hillside Strangler Kenneth Bianchi, but only after she had committed a copycat crime in hopes of exonerating her incarcerated boyfriend?

Actually, there are several reasons why serial killers are pursued by adoring women. Some groupies may be attracted to their idols' controlling, manipulative personalities. A Freudian might attempt to trace this attraction to a woman's need to resurrect her relationship with a cruel, domineering father figure. At least a few killer groupies strove to prove that their lover was a victim of injustice. These women's fight for rights gives their otherwise unfulfilling lives a strong sense of purpose. Others wish to break through the killer's vicious façade with thoughts such as, “The whole world sees Johnny as a monster. Only I see the kindness in him; he shares that only with me ... I feel so special.” Still other devotees simply are comfortable in always knowing where their man is at 2 a.m.—even if it's on death row: “He may be behind bars, but at least he's not out in the bars with some other woman.”

Dozens of women wrote love letters to Danny Rolling, the serial killer who in 1990 brutally murdered five college students in Gainesville, Florida. One adoring fan wrote to the killer, “I fell in love the first time I saw you. I have even seen you in my dreams ... You're a very handsome man” (Blinchow, 1999, p. 42). A 29-year-old woman sent Rolling bikini-clad photos of herself and wrote, “I love you with all my heart ... I don't care what you've done in the past ... I wish I could hold you and comfort you.” She addressed her letter, “To my sweet prince” (Blinchow, 1999, p. 42). Many other women sent Rolling red roses, locks of their hair, and love poetry. Some sprinkled their letters with perfume and begged the killer to allow them to visit. Of course, Rolling's 2006 execution put an end to these romantic fantasies.

Underlying all these motivations, however, are the glamour and celebrity status that killer groupies find exciting. One teenager from Milwaukee appeared years ago on a national TV talk show to admit that she would give anything to get an autograph from serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer; it is likely that she also collected the autographs of rock stars or rap artists. The young girl never got her wish fulfilled before Dahmer was murdered by a fellow inmate.

In general, serial killers are more accessible than other celebrities. If a fan wants to get close to her idol from the world of music or film, she generally doesn't have a chance. But with someone like Night Stalker Richard Ramirez, all she would have to do is write a few gushy love letters and she might even get to meet him and perhaps even marry him. After



PHOTO 1.5 The celebrity of killers often attracts adoring fans and groupies, even marriage proposals. A spokesman for San Quentin prison holds a photo of “Night Stalker” Richard Ramirez and his new bride Doreen Lioy, taken during their wedding ceremony inside the prison.

Source: (Associated Press).

watching TV coverage of Ramirez’s 1985 arrest, Doreen Lioy, a freelance magazine writer, carried on a decade-long courtship with the convicted serial killer. Following her 1996 marriage to the condemned inmate, Doreen Ramirez told CNN, “He’s kind, he’s funny, he’s charming ... I think he’s really a great person. He’s my best friend; he’s my buddy” (CNN, 1997). Because her husband was on death row, Doreen was not permitted conjugal visitation at any time. Despite the physical limitations, the marriage survived until 2013 when Richard Ramirez suffered a fatal heart attack.

MASS MEDIA AND MASS MURDER

“If it bleeds, it leads”—so goes the much-overused maxim about the media’s approach to violent crime. But when it comes to multiple murder, it’s more like a hemorrhage producing an avalanche of sensationalized news coverage. When a gunman slaughters a large number of innocents in a school, shopping mall, or church, the response by news organizations is immediate: for print media, it is “stop the presses,” and for television, “we interrupt our regularly scheduled programming.”

Cable news channels, having hours upon hours of airtime to fill, are especially drawn to murder stories, often devoting around-the-clock coverage to such tragedies, including graphic videos of people frantically fleeing as the sounds of gunfire ring out, images of weeping survivors being comforted by loved ones, and exclusive interviews with eyewitnesses at the scene. Meanwhile, traditional broadcast networks, not wanting to lose audience members to the cable news outlets, follow up their live coverage with hour-long special reports aired in prime time.

When the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting occurred, many observers were astonished that a mass killing would occur, not just in a high school like Columbine populated with adolescents or at a college like Virginia Tech, but at an elementary school, resulting in the violent deaths of a score of young children. Apparently, few people were aware of or recalled the 1989 mass shooting at the Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, in which five children were killed and dozens more were injured. The difference is not just a matter of poor memory or that Sandy Hook was situated in an affluent Connecticut suburb while Cleveland Elementary served a working-class, Southeast Asian immigrant population. Rather, the contrast reflects how technology had changed in the intervening years.

When the Stockton massacre occurred, there was but one cable news channel, CNN, and it did not nearly have the level of market penetration it enjoys today. Back in 1989, there wasn’t the same fleet of satellite trucks to show up at the scene to transmit live images of carnage. In the instance of Sandy Hook, satellite trucks arrived in time to relay into everyone’s living room high-definition video of children being led out of school with tears still fresh in their eyes, making it seem almost as if the tragedy was unfolding just down the street. They say that “seeing is believing,” and by seeing extensive and graphic coverage of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary—as well as at a cinema outside of Denver, and at an El Paso Walmart, among others—the audience can come to believe that such random acts of evil are the “new normal” in America.

In the wake of such horrific rampage shootings, the level of media coverage spikes nearly fivefold, before dissipating gradually over a period of two weeks (Fox et al., 2021b). Serial murder cases are also a staple for the news media, but the coverage is more drawn out, as body after body is discovered over time, although the arrest of a “most-wanted” killer may top the news.

It is somewhat disingenuous to blame the media for featuring stories of murder and mayhem. After all, their business model is all about ratings. The higher the ratings, the more advertisers are willing to pay to have their commercials aired.

At the same time, the style of television news reporting as these tragedies unfold can inadvertently inspire others in negative ways. While most viewers sympathize with the victims and their families, a few disturbed individuals on the fringe of reality may identify instead with the power of the perpetrator and have a very different reaction. They revel in the scenes of carnage and chaos. They would love to replicate the bloodletting in their own communities, seeing this as a way to punish society or some segment of it for their own disenchantment and misery. Unfortunately, notorious

cases have been shown to inspire others who may empathize with the assailant or simply seek their own opportunity for fame (Langman, 2018). Often referred to as a “copycat effect” (see Coleman, 2004), this process of imitation is typically substantiated through isolated anecdotes (Helfgott, 2015). As discussed later in Chapter 16 in the context of school shootings, the potential for copycatting is particularly strong among adolescents, who often take their cues from others. There are indeed certain iconic mass killers who are seen as heroes by a few dispirited individuals living on the fringe of society. But these infamous killers represent a rather small percentage of all those who have perpetrated deadly shooting sprees. In addition, it is often the place, not the perpetrators, that easily comes to mind. For example, the names Columbine High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School are far more familiar than those of the individuals who caused these places to become infamous.

Beyond individual copycats, some scholars contend that notorious mass murders are contagious, spreading violence through society like a virus. The concepts of copycatting and contagion, although often used interchangeably, are somewhat distinct. Whereas copycatting refers to an attempt, be it successful or not, by an individual who is inspired by a crime committed by someone admired, such as the Canadian incel who revered Eliot Rodger, contagion is a more general process by which highly publicized crimes increase the statistical likelihood of similar offenses.

The contagion hypothesis received a significant boost from a widely publicized study by Towers et al. (2015), who found that each mass shooting tends to produce an average of 0.2–0.3 attacks in the ensuing two weeks. Although this study was motivated by the proposition that media attention produces the contagion effect, its claim of a short-term contagion was based on modeling that did not actually include any measure of media coverage. Implicit in the analysis, therefore, were the dual assumptions that all mass shootings receive substantial media coverage and that all types of massacres are equally contagious. However, neither assumption appears to be valid.

In an analysis of the timing of mass shootings and the extent of daily news coverage of such events from 2000 to 2018, Fox et al. (2021b) failed to find compelling evidence of contagion. Whereas mass shootings tend to increase the amount of related news coverage, news coverage of mass shootings does not tend to increase the incidence of mass shootings, at least over a period of several weeks. That there appears to be some temporal clustering of events does not necessarily mean that media coverage of mass shootings leads to a heightened risk of additional incidents as a result. As Lankford and Tomek (2018, p. 260) argue, “Incident clusters could theoretically be attributable to many other social and environmental factors, such as political cycles, stock market gains or losses, or other news events unrelated to crime.” Of course, clustering can also reflect the operation of pure chance or coincidence.

JUST THE FACTS

Whatever the nature and source of imitation, the recent series of high-visibility mass shootings has invigorated the “No Notoriety” movement, composed of several prominent members of the media (including CNN’s Anderson Cooper) and a growing number of academics (see Lankford & Madfis, 2017). They urge the news media to avoid frequently repeating the names of mass killers or showing their images.

The idea that the identities of people who commit unspeakable acts should themselves remain unspoken is certainly understandable. However, it is hardly reasonable, practical,

or even possible for the names and images of mass killers to remain sealed from public awareness. The name, image, and basic demographic characteristics of an assailant are as newsworthy as the descriptions of those who were killed. The conventional wisdom among journalists appears to support and defend such practices, according to a large-scale survey of the working media (see Dahmen et al., 2018).

Although identifying mass shooters more than necessary does add insult to injury as far as the victims and their families are concerned and also may give them the undeserved fame that some desire, there is not much evidence beyond simple anecdotes that this encourages copycats. Indeed, it is the act, not the actor, that like-minded individuals applaud and find inspirational. Some white nationalists, for example, hailed the August 2018 massacre of Hispanics at an El Paso Walmart, without necessarily referencing the gunman's name (see Hayden, 2019). Similarly, there are likely some anti-Semites who considered the fatal shooting of worshipers at a Pittsburgh synagogue in October 2018 to be an appropriate defensive act. But how many can actually recall the assailant's name or identify him from a photograph? It would hardly make sense for the news media not to cover these and other mass shootings because there may be some individuals who might find the crimes themselves to be inspirational, regardless of who perpetrated them.

That said, the media regrettably does sometimes cross the ethical line from news reporting to celebrity watch—from giving the basic facts about an offender to reporting on superfluous details about that person's life and lifestyle. For example, from the extensive media coverage of Stephen Paddock, the gunman who killed 60 and wounded hundreds more at a Las Vegas music festival, we learned about his enjoyment of karaoke, his favorite casino games, his shoe size, and even what he ordered from room service at the Mandalay Bay Hotel just prior to the shooting. His relatives and acquaintances were frequently interviewed by the press. *The New York Times* methodically sifted through visual recordings in order to trace his every movement in the days leading up to the massacre. The relentless digging into the gunman's recent and distant past did not uncover the truth about his motive, but in the process of seeking answers, the news media did inadvertently humanize a most undeserving individual.

Of course, some observers have suggested that compiling a biographical profile of a killer may help us to identify future assailants—a clear case of wishful thinking. The level of published details about the Las Vegas gunman went so far as to include a high school yearbook photo depicting him standing among tennis teammates. Is his having played tennis in any way relevant? Is a passion for tennis now to be considered a potential red flag for mass murder?

There is a middle ground between concealing the perpetrator's identity entirely and dissecting every part of his or her life in detail. The news media would be wise, for example, to limit coverage of the assailant to the essential facts (e.g., demographic characteristics, details about the weapons used and their acquisition, motive, and criminal justice processing), while avoiding gratuitous details about the offender's background and planning process that add little or nothing to our understanding of events.

Similarly, the media should only publicize excerpts from the writings or recorded statements of mass shooters—just enough to characterize intent without giving them a public platform for their ideas and beliefs. Moreover, referring to a killer's online posts or journal as a “manifesto”—a term typically used to describe a policy statement of a prominent individual—only suggests that it is an important document and a must-read. The one thing that Dylann Roof, the gunman who killed nine congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, got right was in insisting that his racist writings should not be called a manifesto.

As for showing images of mass killers, a simple headshot is appropriate. Publishing photographs in which an assailant has deliberately posed with a weapon in hand designed for dramatic effect—such as when *The New York Times* chose to place the Virginia Tech shooter’s selfie on the front page above the fold—serves only to promote the assailant as a powerful individual.

Finally, rather than featuring visuals and audio reflecting vulnerability and suffering—such as gripping cellphone videos of frightened people running from the scene, recordings of chilling screams amidst the sound of rapid-fire gunfire, and heart-wrenching images of grief-stricken families with tears filling their eyes—the news media should emphasize strength and resilience. For example, coverage of the citizens of El Paso standing in line to donate blood in the wake of the Walmart massacre relayed the message that the assailant didn’t win in the end and that the community survived. Furthermore, highlighting the heroic deeds of first responders or bystanders in the face of crisis similarly offers a positive spin—one that many readers and viewers prefer over disturbing and detailed reports concerning the carnage (Levin & Wiest, 2018).

SENSITIZE, NOT SANITIZE

Author Lonnie Kidd might have recklessly, albeit unwittingly, put a stamp of approval on murder with his failed attempt at satire. His 1992 book *Becoming a Successful Mass Murderer or Serial Killer: The Complete Handbook* might easily be misunderstood as a murder how-to (and why-to) book by people looking for an excuse to kill. In a section entitled “To Get Rid of Your Children, Your Spouse’s Children, Others’ Children,” for example, Kidd (1992) suggests:

You will have no problem finding lots of brat children to kill. They are also easily convinced to go off alone with you. You could easily beat them to death. Kick and stomp their little faces and heads into the ground! Hear them promise to be good little boys and girls; but, you know better! They will continue to be little brats if you do not do away with them. (p. 100)

In a disclaimer, Kidd (1992) argues that his book is “a way of calling attention to very serious phenomenon [sic] in a satirical manner” (p. 1). Notwithstanding the legitimacy of his avowed objective, not all of Kidd’s readers would possess the sophistication needed to get the joke. Those who are already predisposed to mayhem and murder might instead find plenty of encouragement in the pages of Kidd’s troubling manual.

In the pages to follow, we certainly do not strive to enhance multiple murder celebrity. Rather, we hope to shed light—but not a spotlight—on the motivation and character of these vicious killers. We appreciate the important distinction between analyzing the gory details of a crime and glorifying the image of the criminal. At times, we describe the sickening circumstances of a multiple murder, but always with a purpose—to remind us that these killers are monsters, undeserving of celebration and fanfare.

At the same time, we must be nothing less than candid about what atrocities modern-day serial and mass killers have committed. Leaving out the gruesome details might reduce the reader’s discomfort, but it would inadvertently minimize the horror of the murders and maximize sympathy for the perpetrators.