At Death’s Door: Understanding Our Fascination with Serial Killers and the Limitations of Empathy

by

Joanna Gerber
Class of 2022

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Sociology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2022
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 2
Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 3

**Chapter One: Why We Love Serial Killers** ...................................................................................... 6
  Serial Killers vs. Other Violent Criminals ................................................................................................. 18

**Chapter Two: Killer Representations in Media** ................................................................................. 28
  The Dangers of Empathy .......................................................................................................................... 29
  Des ............................................................................................................................................................ 30
  Mindhunter ................................................................................................................................................. 40
  Who is Susceptible? .................................................................................................................................... 48
  Forgiveness and Cancel Culture ................................................................................................................. 58

**Chapter Three: The Conflict between Empathy and Punishment** ..................................................... 67
  Empathy: The Good and the Bad ............................................................................................................... 70
  Are You Insane? And Other Things Not to Say to a Serial Killer .............................................................. 76
  Should I Stay or Should I Go? .................................................................................................................. 77
  The Intersection of Empathy and Contempt .............................................................................................. 86

**Conclusion** ............................................................................................................................................ 88

**Bibliography** .......................................................................................................................................... 97
Acknowledgments

Perhaps it’s strange to dedicate a research paper about serial killers to one’s parents, but I’ve never been one for the traditional. Mom and Dad, this is for you. I am the person I am today, the person full of bad humor and irrational anxieties and a knack for cooking and the insatiable need to always understand why, because of you.

Dad, thank you for believing in me beyond what is sometimes rational, and for being impressed by everything I do. I roll my eyes at it, but I appreciate it, too.

Mom, thank you for holding me to the same standards to which you hold yourself. You encourage me and tell me you’re proud, but you never coddle me or settle for less than my best. When you tell me something is good, I know you mean it from your very core. I know Grandma would be proud of us both.

Thank you to Jonathan Cutler for advising me through this process. As I’ve said before, the process you helped me create was the only way this paper ever could have been written. Thank you for assuring me, time and time again, that of course I would finish my thesis, and for knowing far before I did that the question would reveal itself. And of course, thank you for texting me an article and captioning it: *Nietzsche. Made me think of you.* I laugh about it to this day.

Lastly, thank you to Greg Goldberg. Readings from your class *Disgusting? Revolting!* are what initially caused me to start thinking about empathy and serial killers in the same breath, which ultimately inspired me to take on this project. For a thousand reasons, I’m so grateful that I did.
Introduction

*The imp of the perverse. Rubbernecking. Guilty pleasures.* Our culture is so full of forbidden desire that we have created whole new vocabularies around it. Despite its ubiquity, though, this fascination with the forbidden is rarely questioned. There is relatively little research into where it comes from, and the role that ethics plays when engaging with stories of cruelty and violence. In this paper, I aspire to understand the roots of the modern cultural fascination with serial killers and the effects of this fascination on those who engage with true crime.

In Chapter One, I explore the question at the root of it all: why are people so fascinated by serial killers? Distilled to the simplest explanation, the fascination derives from identification with those committing the crimes, and horror at what we and our loved ones have the ability to become—or what we already are.

Chapter Two analyzes portrayals of serial killers in popular media, and how the viewers and protagonists relate to them: as friends, enemies, subjects of study, or reflections of the self. These examples reinforce the proclivity for identification discussed in Chapter One, and begin to show the dangers associated with it. Although empathy is usually framed as a distinctly positive trait, understanding and sympathizing with killers often takes the focus off of victims and results in the empathetic person losing support from loved ones, as they become more and more entranced by the killer.
The three-part miniseries *Des*, a show about infamous British serial killer Dennis “Des” Nilsen, and *Mindhunter*, a Netflix series about the FBI Behavioral Science Unit, highlight the ethical quandaries in our culture’s fascination with serial killers, while simultaneously leaning into that fascination. Throughout my close-readings of Des and Mindhunter, I will further explore the idea of fascination with serial killers through the lens of identification, and the way that representations of serial killers in popular media still warn against fascination and place judgment on those who choose to develop relationships with the killers themselves. Ultimately, I will attempt to understand who is most susceptible to the charms of serial killers, and whether those relationships are inherently dangerous.

In Chapter Three, ethics are at play as I reckon with my own proclivity for empathy and forgiveness—the reckoning that inspired much of the early stages of this paper. Why, I asked myself, do I care about the intent behind murder, since the victim has been killed regardless? Ultimately, I came to realize that it’s rooted in a deep-seated desire to empathize with and understand people. It’s rooted in the belief, perhaps a fierce naivete, that most people do not innately want to cause pain to others, and that the killer (or otherwise violent offender) must have some explanation for their actions, something that will help me understand, something that offers a hope that they could repent and choose never to do it again.

As my research unfolded, however, I began to reconsider what I thought was one of my core tenets. Focusing too much empathy toward the perpetrator often negates the victims’ (or, in the case of murder, the victims’ families’)
desires, despite my belief that engaging with harmdoers may prevent them from perpetuating that same harm in the future.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.” Phrased narcissistically, then, Chapter Three is an examination of my own intelligence, as I consider both the benefits and the drawbacks of offering empathy to those who commit the most heinous acts of violence.
Chapter One: Why We Love Serial Killers

As a child, I would ask my parents to tell me stories, and I would always tell them, “there has to be a princess and a wicked witch, and the wicked witch has to win, and the princess has to die at the end.” Only years later did I realize that this fascination with the macabre and villainy was not unique to me. In his book “Why We Love Serial Killers,” criminologist and author Scott Bonn sets out to explore this phenomenon. Here, we find our first of many examples of a common trope: the serial killer-obsessed individual. This person seizes on the public’s interest in the incomprehensibly awful, and in doing so, leans into their own indulgences. Similar to the childhood stories I always requested, Bonn compares his own fascination with serial killers to the way he always roots for his favorite movie villains—but he describes them as “generally tormented and misunderstood souls who I know will ultimately be destroyed.”1 It’s safe to have a soft spot for movie villains because they always lose, and our hero always gets their happily ever after. But it becomes more complicated—ethically and internally—to acknowledge our loyalty to villains in real life, when their victims don’t get those same happily ever afters.

So where is this fascination rooted, the cryptic desire to understand and even witness the success of these murderers? Bonn notes a number of potential sources of this fascination, some of which seem contradictory. In the preface of the book, he speaks to “an innate human tendency to identify and empathize with

all things—whether good or bad—including serial killers.”\(^2\) Just a few pages later, however, Bonn refers to “the dark nature of society itself and its powerful appetite for the macabre.”\(^3\) This suggests a “dark” fascination among the population that seems almost opposite to the innate empathy Bonn previously refers to. But perhaps both can exist—perhaps serial killers allow us to engage with the parts of ourselves we’re most horrified by, by projecting that horror (which is also fascination) onto others.

That’s certainly what serial killer David Berkowitz, known by the self-given moniker “Son of Sam,” believes. He believes that part of society’s fascination with violent criminals is the belief that “perhaps everyone has the potential, under the right conditions and circumstances, to do terrible, horrendous things” and that people deeply want to understand \textit{why} these desires exist.\(^4\) In this regard, human identification and empathy are born \textit{from} the “dark nature of society” that Bonn refers to—which is to say, we see the worst versions of ourselves in serial killers, versions of ourselves we consciously believe we could never become, but perhaps subconsciously fear we could.

Generally speaking, it’s easier to empathize with and forgive someone who you have some sort of preexisting relationship with—whether it’s someone you know, or someone you have a lot in common with and thus identify with. Serial killers who look like they could be your next-door neighbor fall into this category,

\(^3\) Bonn, \textit{Love Serial Killers}, 9.
especially when they allow us to engage at a distance with our own subconscious fears and desires.

Personally, I find myself developing some semblance of empathy for serial killers after considering the definition of psychopathy. Many serial killers receive a psychopathic diagnosis, but not a mental illness diagnosis, so very few successfully plead guilty by means of insanity. Psychopaths are able to distinguish between what is socially deemed right and wrong, but are not “bothered” by committing acts that they cognitively know are wrong. In Bonn’s words, “psychopaths understand that they are subject to society’s rules, yet they disregard them in order to pursue their own selfish interests and desires.” I find this framework dissatisfying. It’s certainly not untrue, but it does feel overly simplified. Some societal rules are incredibly arbitrary, or even unethical. For example, queer and interracial marriages used to be illegal, and in Pennsylvania it is technically illegal to sing in the bathtub. Knowing something is legally or socially wrong is not always enough. Murder, of course, is not comparable to my previous examples, as it infringes on the safety and the rights of others. Still, I question what it means that psychopaths “know” the difference between right and wrong if they’re incapable of emotionally understanding why harm is wrong. This is not so different from “knowing” that it’s illegal for me to sing in my bathtub, but not understanding why on an ethical or emotional level. Psychopaths shouldn’t be held to different legal standards than anyone else—regardless of their

---

5 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 54.
6 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 66.
own personal understanding of their crimes, the actions are still egregiously
violent and cause just as much harm as they would if they had been performed by
someone deeply empathetic. But writing them off as acting just “to pursue their
own selfish interests” seems to undermine the fact that they are literally incapable
of empathy and emotionally understanding why these actions are innately
harmful.

This realization forced me to reckon with why I feel a semblance of
empathy toward these people who are incapable of empathy, incapable of
understanding the harm that their murders inflict. Serial killers’ lack of empathy
often causes them to view their victims as “commodities” or objects, rather than
people. And as horrible and objectifying as that is, it feels less unethical than
someone who truly viewed their victims as humans, was able to comprehend their
pain, and still chose to act. However, I also suspect that part of my empathy is
rooted in a common belief that we can be the one to “change” a killer, that with
the proper guidance and support they can learn empathy and love just like anyone
else.

I think about the love letters that Manson and Dahmer, among others,
received while in prison, and the young women who cried hysterically when
Bundy was put to death. Although hybristophilia does exist (specific sexual
attraction to people who have committed crimes), many people’s attraction to

---

7 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 67.
serial killers may come from the desire to fix them, and the belief that they can make the killer a better person. This is a dangerous belief, but a natural one. For non-psychopaths, it’s difficult to imagine what it’s like to be physically incapable of empathy. It seems natural to project our own proclivity for empathy onto those who don’t feel it, believing that deep down, they are capable.

Bonn says we turn serial killers into “celebrity monsters” — and in some ways, I think this is a good description. Their names are certainly widespread, and we’re interested in the tiny facets of their lives, from the mundane to the gory. But I also think that Bonn’s use of the word “monsters” undermines a key detail about society’s perspective on serial killers: sometimes, we take the monstrocity out of them. We romanticize them, we idealize them, we say “how could someone who seems as normal as this do something like that?” Even supposed professionals fall into this trap. Bonn spends an early segment of the book detailing what exactly makes someone a psychopath, and notes that they can often emulate empathy extremely well, and do an extremely good job at manipulating their victims as a result. He later spends a full chapter discussing the relationship he has developed with David Berkowitz in recent years, describing him as “genuinely warm, candid, and engaging.” He says he was “moved” by Berkowitz’ “vulnerability, humility, and remorse.” Now, this very well may be true—Berkowitz has certainly taken far more steps than the average serial killer to express genuine

---

9 Vavra, “Why People Romanticize.”
11 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 105.
12 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 105.
remorse for his actions, and since committing his murders, has shifted away from his Satanic beliefs and become a deeply religious man. But still, I found it eyebrow raising that even the criminologist writing this book about murderers being skilled manipulators seemed quick to believe in Berkowitz’ authenticity and repentance. We all want to believe that we could never be fooled by manipulation or lies—but maybe we also want to believe that even the cruelest people don’t necessarily have to remain so.

Bonn describes serial killers as fulfilling the same role for adults as movies about monsters do for children: they frighten people, but in a controlled environment. The fear is enjoyable, because it’s “confined” to media and stories—once again demonstrating the incomprehensibility of these crimes. They are so egregious that most people can’t even realistically fear becoming a victim, because the level of atrocity feels almost fictionalized. And yet, other arguments as to why we as a society are so infatuated with serial killers say almost the opposite: that the chilling idea of “that could be me” is what holds our attention. I think the combination of these factors enhances the fascination: the all-but-certainty that this horror is controlled and distant, combined with the edge of reality, the knowledge that technically, this could happen to any of us. This would also explain, as mentioned above, why people often direct less anger and spite directly toward serial killers than toward other criminals: because we struggle to see them as real people.

13 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 189.
This theory applies to the average crime junkie, but some go far beyond this—and trying to understand their psyche is both more challenging and more disconcerting. These are the people who Bonn refers to as “serial killer groupies,” whose interest in serial killers delve into obsession—sometimes even of a romantic variety. These groupies tend to correspond with and establish relationships with serial killers. The groupies’ obsessions differ from those of the typical person, because the intent behind their obsession tends to be more about self-gratification. Put simply, many of them strive to learn “intimate details” about the crimes that are not publicly known, in order to satisfy their own need for attention and resolve their insecurities by making them feel special.14 Some of these people even believe that they fall in love with the killers, who, in their eyes, are simply “misunderstood.”15

And yet, perhaps these people aren’t as dissimilar from other crime junkies as both Bonn and I first posited. There is an emerging industry of art produced and sold (secondhand) by serial killers while they are imprisoned, and there is a wide market for such products. One of the most interesting roles is that of the person who chooses to sell this art for the killer. They must “first befriend an incarcerated killer and gain his trust before requesting his art or other items for sale,” and these relationships are not disingenuous.16 Often, the sellers are attracted to the horrific nature of the killer’s crimes, and eager to form a relationship with them. Biographers seem to operate similarly, as do researchers

---

like Bonn himself who strike up personal relationships with killers simply out of a deep and insatiable curiosity. Proximity to horror has a strong pull on people; some are simply more forthcoming about that pull than others.

Bonn closes out the book with an attempt to summarize our attraction to serial killers. We’ve already established the rush of excitement they evoke in us, in addition to a drive to understand the incomprehensible. But Bonn notes additional, sociological explanations to society’s love for serial killers. He refers back to Durkheim’s concept of anomie, in which social rules that dictate individuals’ behavior are either unclear or simply not present. Anomie leads to deviance, which can include violent behavior such as murder. Bonn argues that society’s depiction of serial killers as “evil or monsters” minimizes anomie, since it provides clear explanations for their actions, whereas humanizing them and treating them as somewhat ordinary citizens would suggest a great capacity for deviance within a society. Bonn criticizes these depictions of serial killers as inhuman, since they paint the concept of evil as something objective and clear-cut. This allows members of society to other the serial killer, to eliminate the killer from society, and to disidentify ourselves from such people and behavior.

This disidentification allows us to paint ourselves in a better light—no matter how horrific our actions are, it’s easy to acknowledge our comparative goodness. The societally imposed image of serial killers “provides the public

17 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 144.
18 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 216.
19 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 218.
20 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 223.
with a reference point for judging the acceptability of its own behavior,” and that bar is set “very low.”21

Jody Roy, an author who studies the concept of hate within American culture, explains that in every story, there are active, dynamic characters, and there are “satellite” characters who remain static.22 We don’t learn much about satellite characters other than their role in relation to the lead character(s). With Jeffrey Dahmer as her primary example, Roy points out that serial killers are always given the lead role in stories of murder, while their victims are strewn in the margins, with little known or remembered about them by the general public. We are a culture that loves happy endings. We like to watch our heroes succeed, and no matter how close a protagonist of an action movie gets to being killed, they always manage to make it out alive.

I wonder if this is one of the appeals of glorifying serial killers, and treating them as the main characters: because we can’t bear to grow attached to someone who we know won’t make it to the end of the story. Or, framed oppositely, we want to be rooting for the person we know will come out on top. Yet, this is too simplistic in and of itself. As we’ve established, many people experience a natural inclination to secretly root for the villain of every story, but can do so safely when they know the monster in the movie will never actually win. In real life, there is no certainty that the monster won’t win, so we “overtly deplore the killers’

---

21 Bonn, Love Serial Killers, 222-3.
actions” in order to assuage our guilt for being so deeply invested. Our society simultaneously degrades and dehumanizes serial killers while sensationalizing them, and elevating them to what both Roy and Bonn describe as celebrity status. The degradation makes sense; the US prison system (and general culture) vilifies poverty and nonviolent crime, and of course this extrapolates to violent crime that goes against every moral bone in our bodies. However, most minor criminals are not afforded the fascination and borderline adoration that serial killers are. So what makes them different?

Much of it seems to be the thrill and horror of identification. Their crimes are so horrific, so nearly unimaginable, that it seems almost impossible to conceptualize of these people as, well, people. But Roy is quick to remind us that serial killers are humans like the rest of us, that they are “of ‘us’ no matter how rigorously we deny them.” The relationship between us and them is an “intimate” one we cannot escape. And so we lean into our own darkest fears by engaging with their crimes, justifying our fascination by simultaneously degrading them.

In Amanda M. Vicary and R. Chris Fraley’s study Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers? they explore the gendered appeal of serial killers to women. Women are more likely to fear becoming the victim of a violent crime than men are, despite the fact that men are

---

23 Roy, Love to Hate, 109.
24 Roy, Love to Hate, 89.
25 Roy, Love to Hate, 89.
realistically more likely to be the victims.26 But unlike other authors, Vicary and Fraley don’t chalk up the true crime fascination to a simple desire to engage with one’s fears. Instead, they demonstrate that women are drawn to true crime books partially due to “potential survival cues” that can be found therewithin.27

A large part of our draw to serial killers, as Bonn discusses, is due to the shameful appeal of their apparent monstrosity. Indeed, a study performed by Wiest found that “the most common word used in the news and popular media to describe a serial killer is ‘monster.’”28 But serial killers aren’t just monsters—they’re treated as celebrities, too. Celebrity status is determined by “what members of a culture celebrate:” actors and musicians are celebrated due to their “beauty, wealth, fame, recognition, and success;” athletes demonstrate “competition, teamwork, and individualism;” entrepreneurs teem with “intelligence, perseverance, and achievement.”29 Similarly, serial killers demonstrate some qualities that are esteemed in American culture: ambition, independence, and intellect. Portraying serial killers as what Wiest calls “fantastic monsters” and focusing on the killers in the news more than their victims demonstrates our hunger for individualism and superlative action:

[It] indicates a high value for these killers and may suggest a culture that values the individual over the group and in which even deviant versions of

27 Vicary and Fraley, “Captured by True Crime,” 82.
29 Wiest, Creating Cultural Monsters, 331.
cultural ideals may be celebrated (e.g., setting a record for murder victims or pulling off a daring prison escape). (Wiest 338)

Media coverage often frames serial killers’ actions in the form of achievements, referencing the “worst” serial killer an area has ever seen, their wit, or their ability to confound law enforcement.\(^{30}\) The unprecedented nature of their crimes makes them all the more impressive, in a deeply disconcerting way.

Across much of the media written by people with personal ties to killers, one notable theme comes up: the struggle to reconcile the knowledge of someone’s crimes with the version of themself they portray to the world at large. In Helen Prejean’s *Dead Man Walking*, she writes of Pat (Elmo Patrick Sonnier, the man on death row that she has begun corresponding with), “I begin to think of him as a fellow human being, though I can’t for a moment forget his crime, nor can I reconcile the easygoing Cajun who writes to me with the brutal murderer of two helpless teenagers.”\(^{31}\) This directly parallels a comment that FBI agent Holden makes to infamous killer Ed Kemper in *Mindhunter*, and the feelings that Liz, Ted Bundy’s ex-lover, shares about Bundy throughout *The Phantom Prince*.

We are conditioned to believe that acts of violence are performed by a certain group of people, people who are not polite, or kind, or funny, or wise, or caring. People who are sadistic and creepy and disgruntled. This is why it’s easy to not

\(^{30}\) Wiest, *Creating Cultural Monsters*, 335.

even consider empathy, until you actually have an idea of who the person who committed the act of violence is.

Serial Killers vs. Other Violent Criminals: Racialization and Stereotypes in Cultural Perceptions of Crime

As mentioned above, our obsession with serial killers hasn’t extrapolated further to include all criminals. Many representations of other killers (be they in fictionalized media or our own subconscioues) still rely heavily on ingrained stereotypes of what a killer “should” look like. This likely plays into why we find serial killers so fascinating; the experience of identifying with the criminal is so far removed from the broader trope of the criminal as “other.”

Figures 1 and 2 respectively depict police sketches of David Berkowitz (Son of Sam) and Ted Bundy, alongside photographs of the killers themselves. The drawn images are starkly racialized. The broad nose and mouth of Berkowitz’s sketch and the hair texture of Bundy’s are both suggestive of Black men—a demographic that has been unfairly stereotyped as the violent offender for centuries, and victimized by the US justice system. This is evidenced by their vast overrepresentation in US prisons.\(^{32}\) These police sketches indicate, alarmingly, how ingrained these biases are. Even after bystanders saw and described a white man, police sketches (by fault of the sketch artist, witness, or both, we can’t be

---

sure) still depict men who harbor traditionally Black features that the true perpetrators did not possess.

Figure 1

Figure 2
Plenty of media remains that steers far from romanticizing violent criminals, and instead veers in the opposite direction: fearmongering and dehumanization. Netflix’s documentary series, *Inside the World’s Toughest Prisons*, is a prime example of this. The premise of the show involves journalist Raphael Rowe traveling to prisons across the world, pretending to be an inmate as he exposes what life behind bars is really like. Rowe is a sympathetic host, having been wrongly imprisoned for murder for over a decade of his life. Unlike shows where we see the protagonist begin to identify with the killer, or where the protagonist even is the killer, the appeal of *Inside the World’s Toughest Prisons* is watching the protagonist become the victim. Note that most of the nations he travels to, including three of the four in season one, are home to predominantly people of color. The first episode of the first season, meant to hook people on the show, takes place at a prison in Honduras, where gangs composed of fierce-looking men covered in tattoos dominate the prison’s social hierarchy.

This show does not exist to challenge the archetype of what a prisoner is “supposed to” look like. Instead, it leans into that archetype. The main focus is not on the prisoners themselves, but on the potential threat faced by our protagonist. The most infamous serial killers garner at least a portion of their fame because they contrast so starkly with what we have been told a killer should, or will, look like.

When it comes to the representations of individual killers, there are two types of portrayal that the media tends to utilize: either inhuman monsters (evident
in the coverage of Jack the Ripper) or the unsuspecting boy-next-door (such as Ted Bundy).\(^{33}\) For killers like Dennis Nilsen and Jeffrey Dahmer, the drive to kill was interwoven with a sense of loneliness, a desire to create companions out of the ones they killed.\(^{34}\) While murder is clearly an ineffective and disturbing way to make friends, this justification appeals to some sense of empathy in the general public. Instead of being a sadistic monster, the killer is now framed as a misguided loner. This alone does not explain society’s interest in and empathy toward serial killers; school shooters are often framed similarly, and given much less of the same consideration. But I believe the key difference lies not in the killers themselves, but in their victims. Almost everyone knows a child, be it their own, or a niece or nephew, of schooling age. And thus, almost anyone can picture their loved one being the victim of a school shooting. Serial killing is so much less predictable in terms of timing, location, and victim selection that it seems harder to imagine oneself or loved ones being killed in such a way.

A curious distinction lies between the fascination with individual serial killers and the fascination with true crime more broadly, especially of the “who dunnit” variety. Michelle McNamara’s book \textit{I’ll Be Gone in the Dark} transcends traditional genre restrictions, as it straddles the line between true crime and memoir—evident even in the book’s subtitle, \textit{One Woman’s Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer}. As much as the book is about the Golden State Killer’s

\(^{33}\) Wiest, \textit{Creating Cultural Monsters}, 329.

crimes and the search for his identity, it’s just as much about McNamara’s self-described obsession with the case, and with true crime overall.

We’ve seen that the draw toward learning about individual killers stems from a combined sense of horror and fascination, and a strange sense of double identification: that this person could be us, if we chose to live out our most taboo fantasies, and that this person looks and acts like everyone else, at first glance. But what I will be referring to as the “detective genre” of true crime (ie, trying to identify a yet unknown perpetrator) holds an entirely distinct appeal for its fanbase. Throughout I’ll Be Gone in the Dark, McNamara insists that her desire to identify the Golden State Killer is because he will have lost his power once he has been identified. Many individuals who are invested in the detective genre of true crime, McNamara included, insist that they don’t want to learn a single thing about the killer’s history or personality; they simply want to catch him and be done with it.

But clearly not everyone agrees with McNamara. Take the media coverage surrounding Robert Durst. For many years, Durst was presumed to be guilty of murdering three people: his first wife, a “longtime confidante” of his named Susan Berman, and one of his elderly neighbors. He was convicted in September 2021 of Berman’s murder, but this resolution did not remove Durst from the public eye, or result in a loss of interest in his life. He made headlines on several major news outlets including Forbes and NBC when he contracted Covid soon after his

conviction, and his New York Times obituary was about 2,400 words.\textsuperscript{37} For comparison, activist and writer bell hooks’ was approximately 1,300 words,\textsuperscript{38} actress Betty White’s was about 1,700,\textsuperscript{39} and actor and comedian Bob Saget’s barely broke 1,000.\textsuperscript{40} Durst was given a larger spotlight in death than some of America’s most renowned celebrities, his infamy elevating him to the height of public interest. So perhaps for some, like McNamara, the fascination with true crime lies solely in the detective work. But for others, the detective work may simply be a means to an end: a new murderer we can get to know, like Bundy and Dahmer.

The detective genre also places more weight on the crimes themselves, rather than some weight on the crimes and some on the offender themself, since the offender hasn’t yet been identified. In both the detective genre and the known-criminal genre, I’ve noticed heightened dramatized language when describing the crimes, treating these violent crimes as an adventure sequence for an enthralled audience to follow.

One of the most popular examples of this is the true crime podcast \textit{My Favorite Murder}, hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. Fans call themselves “Murderinos,” a glib name that seems to minimize the severity of the topics discussed, and the podcast’s catchphrase is “Stay Sexy, Don’t Get

\begin{flushleft}  
\textsuperscript{37} McFadden. “Robert Durst”.  
Murdered,” often abbreviated to “SSDGM.” The “humor aspect” of the podcast attracted some fans, intrigued by this spin on a typically dark topic. At first, I was put off by it. I still am, to be honest—but perhaps that’s only because it requires confronting the uncomfortable truth that choosing to engage with true crime media means that, on some level, we derive pleasure from it. Kilgariff and Hardstark are just more honest and up-front about that pleasure than others. Anyone creating true crime media feeds into the sensationalism and fetishization of these stories on some level, because that’s how they sell. McNamara is no exception.

Much of I’ll Be Gone in the Dark is written like a thriller. Paragraphs end on dark cliffhangers, and charged language fills the page: “nothing signals terror like a teenage girl’s wild, unrestrained scream in the night.” The detective genre focuses on the story more so than the characters. It’s about drawing up a profile of the suspect, and playing detective. While the two genres have plenty of overlap in their respective fanbases, those who love anything to do with true crime, the two genres cater to incredibly distinct audiences.

While watching Netflix’s Mindhunter and BritBox’s Crime, both of which focus on the roles of law enforcement officials in profiling and catching serial killers, I noticed a distinctive trend about the detective genre that differs radically from the fascination of individual killers. People who are fascinated with individual killers want to understand the who. They want to try to understand who

---


42 Michelle McNamara, I’ll Be Gone in the Dark, 93.
the perpetrators are at their core, not just what drove them to violence. They want to understand them holistically, because they find it nearly impossible to imagine an authentic human being with a family and a life and a childhood who could commit such horrific acts of violence. This fascination and attempt to understand is evident in the popularity of books like *The Phantom Prince*, the book Elizabeth Kendall wrote about her relationship with Ted Bundy, and *My Friend Dahmer*, the book-turned-movie by Derf Backderf, a childhood friend of Jeffrey Dahmer’s who recounts his time growing up with the soon-to-be killer. The detective genre, on the other hand, actually aims to do the opposite. Instead of getting to know the killer, they want to understand him in *only* the broadest terms: a profile they can draw up in order to determine suspects. Personal details are irrelevant to their goal, and the moment the person’s identity comes into light, it becomes, for many detectives, a moot point. This is the perspective McNamara takes, and the perspective that DI Ray Lennox, the protagonist of the BritBox television series *Crime*, takes once he has identified the serial killer who he has been after for years. He wants to know about the man’s crimes, but not the man himself: “We will come to know everything,” he says, “not about Gareth Horsburgh, but about the sick, short-eyes nonce we know as Mister Confectioner.”43 At this point in the series, much remains unknown about the Confectioner’s crimes—including the location of many of the bodies. Lennox takes an entirely victim-centric approach, with little regard for the identity of the murderer himself other than details that

---

can contribute to further solving his crimes. He and Holden Ford, one of the FBI agents in the Netflix series *Mindhunter*, both devote much of their focus to drawing up criminal profiles: general characteristics that the murderer is likely to have, in order to determine and eliminate suspects. Once the killer has been apprehended, Holden and the other members of the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) care about his life only in the context of understanding his crimes and better identifying future criminals.

At least, that’s what they insist. However, as the show progresses, Holden seems to stray from the detective genre into the individual killer fascination—a dangerous step for an FBI agent. The detective genre, ultimately, is about apprehending violent offenders and solving crime. Even when it’s treated as simply an interesting puzzle, a game played by those without training or expertise, it has a clear goal, one that its devotees deem noble. It’s about avenging victims and bringing justice to harm-doers. Now, that’s a complicated perspective to take in modern times, when it’s becoming more and more evident that the US prison system is ineffective and does not deter recidivism. But regardless of the form of punishment, identifying violent offenders is generally universally agreed to be important. By stepping out of the detective genre and investing in the criminals’ broader lives and personalities, Holden developed the self-indulgent fascination that is innate in a fascination with individual killers, and as a result, found himself manipulated by them, sometimes even empathetic toward them. In short, I believe the detective genre of true crime takes a more victim-centric outlook on crime, with less interest in the criminals themselves and a greater likelihood of
preventing crime and identifying perpetrators. The individual killer fascination, on the other hand, tends to be simply self-indulgent fascination—one that is not inherently immoral or detrimental, but is frequently cast as more victim-focused and empathetic than it truly is.

This is why the answer to Bonn’s question of “why we love serial killers” is both so sought after and also somewhat irrelevant: for many people, it’s tied up in shame. Many are able to recognize that their fascination with true crime is sensationalist, perhaps fetishizing, and even undermining to victims. Seeking a logical explanation, one that delves into our own psychology and identification, helps justify an interest, even an obsession, that for many, is clouded with shame or discomfort.
Chapter Two: Killer Representations in Media

True crime reads like a good story. It has “interesting characters, a sense of urgency, [and] tension that is (in most cases) released when the mystery is solved at the end.”44 It’s understandable that people are drawn to it—yet, this doesn’t explain why people find it more appealing than fictionalized versions of similar stories. Emily Dworkin is a trauma researcher and assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. In her analysis of our cultural fascination with true crime, she stresses that it is entirely “normal to enjoy experiencing difficult emotions in safe ways, like rollercoasters and horror movies and sad films,” and that some people even utilize true crime as a tactic to work through their own trauma, as a sort of exposure therapy.45

Dworkin warns about the potential dangers of true crime: a gross overestimation of how common these crimes truly are (ie, extremely rare), overlooking violence that is more common and less discussed (violence against women of color and trans women, whereas true crime tends to center white women as the victims), and potential victim blaming (a tendency to imagine oneself in the victim’s shoes and calculate what could have been done to avoid the situation). However, with the exception of the last example I listed, none of these


criticisms of true crime center the victims or their families, nor do they postulate how the true crime genre may feed into the egos of often narcissistic perpetrators. Indeed, while Dworkin does warn fans of true crime that their obsessions could lead to paranoia and a misconception of what modern-day crime truly looks like, she neglects to mention the opposite issue of paranoia, the issue that so much serial killer media centers on: seduction.

The Dangers of Empathy

Empathy is typically framed as a laudable trait, one that fosters connection and strengthens a sense of community. But it serves a different role when the recipient of empathy is not someone one typically wants to identify with. In this section, I will explain how empathy can actually harm the person expressing it, and lead to a disconcerting and harmful sense of identification with the offender, through the lens of two different TV shows about law enforcement and serial killers: Des and Mindhunter.
Detective Chief Inspector Peter Jay is a sympathetic character. The show opens with a scene representing his dilapidated family life, mid-divorce and struggling to get permission to see his children. He looks nostalgic as he dejectedly says, “surely I’ll see them [the kids] before [summer]?” When only silence ensues, he pleads, “Please. I miss ‘em.” He asks a bit more firmly a minute later, but only to a mutual friend of his and his ex-wife’s—not the ex-wife herself, or anyone with genuine power over the situation. He’s decidedly non-confrontational, presented as someone who is somewhat submissive in his personal life. This already frames him as someone open to manipulation and seduction.

DCI Jay is part of the team that apprehends Dennis “Des” Nilsen. Des confesses to his crimes almost immediately: he killed at least a dozen men in his home, usually having met them in a bar or on the street and lured them to his house for sex. Later, Jay’s boss remarks that he thinks Des may be lying about some of the details of his confession, and Jay says, “There’s something… I believe him.” A gut feeling, a strange instinct to trust someone who has already deemed themself the apex of untrustworthiness and manipulation. As the show progresses, Jay occupies a strange role, fitting into both the trope of the seduced

---

47 Des, s1e1.
man, vulnerable to the allure of the killer, and the trope of the “straight man,” warning the other seduced man to beware the killer’s charm.

That man is Brian Masters, an author who finds himself so intrigued by Des’ crimes that he begins writing to him in prison and proposes to Des that he becomes his autobiographer. Brian’s identity as a gay man is introduced off the bat, offering a curious perspective into his fascination with Des. It later becomes apparent that Brian’s sexuality allows him to understand the experience of being seen as deviant, and he identifies with Des for both this reason and due to their shared sexuality. However, he still seeks to put distance between them. “Someone who knows our world, our community, needs to write this,” he tells his scornful lover.  

The implication is that if a non-queer person wrote about Des, they would conflate his violence with his sexuality, and smear the reputations of gay men as a whole. Despite Brian’s identification with certain elements of Des and the way people perceive him, he is careful not to suggest too many similarities between them.

For the most part, though, Brian’s fascination with Des seems to be deeply rooted in a sense of identification. The following is an excerpt from a conversation between Brian and his lover:

Brian: That’s what makes it so fascinating: the dichotomy between this seemingly normal, unobtrusive civil servant and the nature of his crimes. It just seems so hard to fathom.

---

48 Des, s1e2.
Lover: What’s there to fathom?

Brian: What makes most of us go one way with our lives and others like Nilsen go so far in the other direction.

Lover: Probably because he’s evil. (Des, s1e1)

The lover’s easy dismissal of the question demonstrates his belief that Nilsen’s cruelty is innate, whereas Brian implies that he believes anyone has the capacity to become a violent killer. Brian’s phrasing suggests that both groups of people (the “most of us” and the “others like Nilsen”) begin at the same place in life, and some sort of external factor “makes” each group “go” a certain way. Which is to say, Brian believes that he could have become Des, and he wants to know what makes the two of them different.

As Brian and Des develop a closer relationship, it becomes clear that Brian feels a need to be respected by Des. Perhaps this is a strategic tactic, so that Des will feel more comfortable opening up to him and providing content for his book. However, Des was already opening up easily, suggesting that Brian’s inclination to befriend him has different intentions. Perhaps it’s simply that Brian finds it impossible to break from typical conventions of politeness when faced with a man who, despite all he’s done, presents as polite and mild-mannered. This would explain why Brian shakes Des’ hand when offered, despite previously telling a friend that he didn’t expect he would do so, and why Brian begrudgingly agrees to give Des his tie for the trial when Des asks to borrow it, hoping to make a better
impression in court. But it doesn’t explain a moment that stood out to me as one of the strongest nods toward Brian’s personal identification with Des.

“I don’t even know if you’re married,” Des remarks to Brian.49 “No, no,” Brian quickly responds.50 But instead of stopping there, which is the truth, and more than Des needs to know, he adds, “But I do have my emotional attachments,” and smiles slightly.51 This is a somewhat clear allusion to his sexuality, using the phrase “emotional attachments” while adamantly maintaining his distance from marriage. It suggests that he wants Des to know that he is gay, a detail they have in common. Initially, I assumed that this followed the theme of Brian’s eagerness to identify with Des. While it certainly does, I think it begins to present a new form of Brian’s identification as well: identification with the victims.

Later in the episode, as Brian is about to leave, Des says, “I do want to thank you, Brian.” “For what?” Brian asks. “Your company,” Des responds.52 Brian looks startled, even alarmed, by this remark, and leaves without responding. The idea that Des could see him as a friend was off-putting. This could be for numerous reasons. The first and easiest conclusion to jump to is that he is afraid that Des sees the two of them as too similar, and worries what it says about him for a serial killer to deem him a friend. This response parallels the negative feedback Brian has been receiving from DCI Jay, the press, and his partner for

49 Des, s1e2.
50 Des, s1e2.
51 Des, s1e2.
52 Des, s1e2.
developing a relationship with Des. However, the second possibility is that Brian is concerned that Des sees him not as a parallel to himself, but a parallel to his victims. The biography of Des that Brian eventually publishes is titled “Killing for Company.” Thanking Brian for his “company” alludes to the idea that Des feels a similar desire for closeness to and control over Brian as he did to his victims.

Specific serial killers are fascinating due to their charm, so antithetical to the versions of themselves that we hear on the news. Des utilizes his charm and geniality to easily influence Brian and Jay’s perceptions of him. Both develop some semblance of respect for him, particularly Brian, though he attempts to pretend otherwise. The disconnect between how the killer behaves in daily conversation and how they behave behind the scenes is so drastic that it’s almost possible to forget who the killer is when we aren’t watching. Almost.

The first time Des appears on screen, he is on a bus, apparently coming home from work. He enters his small, second-story apartment where we are introduced to his dog. Already, we empathize with this man who looks like us or someone we know: the typical working-class city dweller, perhaps a bit lonely, with an ineffable love for his pet. Even when he begins to speak openly about his crimes as the detectives question him, he doesn’t lose his calm, slightly regretful, demeanor. It’s “actually a relief to get this off my chest,” he tells the detectives, implying a sense of shame. He demonstrates pity for the men he picked up, describing the drug epidemic in London as “really… a disease” and “very sad,”

53 Des, s1e1.
and says that “a friendly face goes a long way.” The unsettling implication is that he took pity on the men he eventually killed, and believed he was doing them a favor, at least at first, by providing that “friendly face.”

Nevertheless, his sympathy isn’t just an unsettling detail; it also works in his favor. We, as audience members, along with characters in the show like Jay and Brian, have an easier time liking someone who seems to have some decency in them, like the capacity for empathy and regret. Perhaps we as viewers are able to forgive ourselves for taking a slight liking to Des, because we can justify our inclinations by noting his apparent guilt.

When his lawyer asks him why he committed the murders, he responds “Well, I don’t really know. I was sort of hoping you could tell me that.” This is a real quote spoken by Dennis Nilsen.

But the most disconcerting element of Des’ appeals to morality is that he uses that moral compass against the people around him, bringing up uncomfortable questions of who deserves respect, and what distinguishes victim advocacy from exploitation.

Des says he’s surprised by people’s “attraction to the macabre, because all of us have skeletons rattling around in our cupboards.” This may be true, but at the same time, it’s a gross oversimplification; most of us, unlike Des, don’t have literal skeletons in our cupboard. Still, the way that “all of us” can marginally relate to Des may actually heighten this attraction, rather than diminish it.

54 Des, s1e1.
56 Des, s1e1.
Brian says: it presses the question of why some of us turn out one way and others turn out so radically different, when we all have the capacity for some level of cruelty within us. Des highlights the similarities between himself and typical people, perhaps as a tactic to alleviate his own guilt, or further that of others.

He also criticizes the “self righteous public condemnation” he receives while “simultaneously everyone’s talking about it… consuming it, and indulging in it, at an arm’s length.”\(^57\) This is an astute summary that likely resonated with and evoked discomfort in the viewers of the show; after all, we chose to watch this show in the first place. We are the consumers he is criticizing. Indeed, every episode opens with a screen reading “this is a true story,” backed with eerie music, as if knowing that this is a real murderer who killed real people heightens our pleasure.

Des builds up a sense of reliability and trustworthiness by framing himself as deeply regretful and sympathetic to his victims. When DCI Jay asks at one point if he deliberately withheld the name of one of his victims that he claims to suddenly have remembered, Des acts affronted. “I want these people identified and laid to rest just as much as you do, Mr. Jay,” he says indignantly.\(^58\) It’s a guilt trip, Des’ way of implying it’s offensive to accuse him of not having the men’s best interests in mind—despite the fact that he killed them.

The most disconcerting part of Des’ moral appeals is that he’s usually somewhat correct. When Brian expresses horror over Des masturbating over his

\(^{57}\) Des, s1e1.
\(^{58}\) Des, s1e2.
murder victims, he says, “Brian, if you are more disgusted by what I did to a corpse than what I did to a living man, then your moral system is upside-down and needs overhauling.” 59 Later, after Brian finishes his first draft of the book, Des says that Brian should include their names, despite Brian’s argument that he “wanted to respect their privacy.” Des responds, “Well, I think it’s disrespectful not to name them. I robbed them of their life, please don’t rob them of their identities.” 60 While directed at Brian, this sentiment could be a critique of many true crime fans. One of the most frequent criticisms of the genre is its focus on the perpetrators, rather than their victims, whose names are often overlooked or forgotten.

As the series continues, Des’ helpfulness begins to deteriorate as he grows “sick of helping people who take advantage of [his] good nature.” 61 This arises after Jay dismissed Des’ concerns about his dog, saying he hadn’t had time to check on the dog due to how busy Des’ case was keeping him. This disconcerts the viewer, as we’re inclined to be sympathetic to Des. The dog is an appeal to our empathy, highlighting the fierce affection and loyalty many humans feel for their pets. This moment marks a sharp shift in Des’ behavior, as he stops cooperating with the detectives and maintains that he is innocent until proven guilty, despite having previously confessed to the murders and provided information on the bodies’ whereabouts.

---

59 Des, s1e2.
60 Des, s1e3.
61 Des, s1e2.
At this point, the show seems to be reminding us of the nuance between good and bad. It forces us to uncomfortably identify and empathize with Des, as we’ve been told throughout life to treat everyone with respect, assume anyone is innocent until proven guilty, and not take generosity taken for granted. Often, Des makes strong arguments—like his criticism of Brian caring more about the treatment of dead bodies than living ones, or urging him to identify the men as a signifier of respect. But hearing the voice of reason come from the murderer himself forces us to question our ethics whether we agree with him or not. This characterization of Des frames him as neither entirely good nor entirely bad; sometimes, he’s the violent offender, but other times, he is the voice of reason, criticizing our own shortcomings.

Shows like Des exist to cater to our macabre pleasures, and yet they are self-critical. Characters like Brian’s lover and, later, Jay, criticize the characters in the show that are deeply relatable to us, like Brian, writing the books that we love to read (as evidenced by the fact that we are watching this show). And yet, they warn against themselves. Despite his initial interest in and trust of Des, Jay quickly takes over the role of the rationalizing “straight man” (a particularly interesting use of the trope when juxtaposed against gay Brian), critiquing Brian for his dynamic with Des, and pressing him to report any information Des tells him to the police. Jay sneers at Brian “You’re… fucking fascinated by him.” But this begs the question: why is fascination viewed as a negative attribute?

---

62 Des, s1e2.
At times, fascination can evolve into denial of someone’s crimes, or even approval, as evidenced by the women who write love letters to infamous prisoners. But sometimes, fascination does not equate to condonement. As Brian walks into the court building, members of the press shout at him, “Masters! What’s it like being friends with a serial killer? What’s it like rubbing shoulders with a murderer?”

But this isn’t Brian’s intention. “Make no mistake,” he says to Des, regarding the book he’s writing about him. “This isn’t a celebration—it’s a warning.”\textsuperscript{63} Without associating with serial killers, the victims’ stories would never be thoroughly told. That being said, it’s often unclear whether telling victims’ stories is truly the intent of the associates. Indeed, Brian doesn’t initially name them in his book, and he continued to visit Nilsen in prison for a decade after the book’s publication.

This sort of criticism certainly forces a lens of self-awareness upon fans of true crime, particularly those who choose to broadcast their interest. It’s led to the creation of podcasts like \textit{My Favorite Murder}, whose fans unabashedly call themselves “Murderinos” and the hosts frame their fascination as just that: a fascination, without any altruistic intentions. It’s refreshing, if disorienting, to see people embracing their love for true crime so honestly, and likely beneficial to fans of true crime to consider the root of their interest. But this doesn’t necessarily aid victims, in the end. Brian still went on to maintain a relationship with Des, and

\textsuperscript{63} Des, s1e3.
the societal embrace of true crime leads to often flippant portrayals of what ought to be deeply disturbing behavior.

Mindhunter

Just as Brian’s fascination with Des results in an uncanny degree of empathy for and connection with Des, Special Agent Holden Ford falls down a similar path with infamous serial killer Edmund (Ed) Kemper, also known as “The Co-ed Killer.” Kemper presents himself as genial and eager to help Bill and Holden in their studies of what they will later in the series deem serial killers. When he and Holden sit down for the first time, Kemper immediately says, “So, how can I help?” Now that he has been identified and detained, having turned himself in several years ago, Kemper positions himself on the side of the heroes, rather than maintaining his role as villain. Villains, no matter what sort, rarely look like the dark-hooded, monstrous silhouettes we frequently imagine them as. Portraying them as genial, even helpful, can influence viewers in various ways. Of course it can lead to the glorification of killers by highlighting their charm, intellect, and even apparent kindness (Kemper, for example, insists on getting Holden an egg salad sandwich from the canteen at their first meeting, despite Holden’s protests that he doesn’t need one). But generally, the content of these shows warns against such glorification through the skepticism and judgment of other characters. Instead, it suggests that this duality of personality must be

---

inauthentic and manipulative, which Bill Tench, Holden’s superior, insists is the only reason Kemper is acting so agreeable. “He’s saying everything you want to hear, just like he did with the shrinks in the institution. He knew just enough to talk his way out, then he went hunting. Don’t be stupid about this,” Bill warns. “I know thesefuckers. It’s only a matter of time before he hits you up for privileges.”

The truth typically lies somewhere in the middle. Oftentimes, these killers exist in a duality that most of us deem incomprehensible: they can be cold-blooded killers, murdering without guilt or shame. Obviously, this behavior is inexcusable and can’t be overlooked. But that does not mean that their kindness can’t also be authentic. Ted Bundy, for example, performed heinous acts of violence on dozens of women—and yet he was still capable of love. One might outweigh the other, but it’s dangerous to assume that all positive attributes of serial killers are inauthentic. This blinds us to the truth that people who have done horrible things may have positive traits, and breaks down the dichotomy between pure good and evil. As John Wayne Gacy’s attorney put it, “When he was good, he was the best of good. But when he was bad he was the worst of evil.”

Detective-focused media about serial killers warn viewers how easy it is to be charmed by a killer, yet the implied dangers are leagues away from those posed by Princing and Dworkin. Rather than warning people that a fascination with

---

65 Mindhunter, s1e2.
66 This is, of course, a subjective statement, but one I will return to with evidence later in the piece (see page 79)
killers may cause them to infer false statistics and become paranoid, it suggests the opposite. That is, it implies that those who become fascinated with serial killers may eventually come to be perceived as one of them. It can also be inferred that these shows imply that fascination leads to identification, but that’s something of a chicken-or-egg dilemma: were these people attracted to the killers due to a sense of personal identification in the first place, or did that develop as a result of the fascination? I am inclined to believe that there tends to be at least a degree of identification that leads to an initial fascination.

When the fascination results in a relationship between the killer and the fascinated subject, the identification escalates and ultimately shifts others’ perceptions of the fascinated individual. At the end of Season One of *Mindhunter*, Holden receives a phone call from a medical facility in California, informing him that he has been listed as “medical proxy” to Ed Kemper, who attempted to take his own life the previous night. Holden is filmed sitting on a plane flying to see Kemper in the hospital.

After an unsettling visit with Kemper, to be discussed later on, Holden has a panic attack in the middle of a hospital corridor. When he eventually comes to, he calls Bill who then flies out to California to see him in the hospital and take him home safely. The show flashes to a clip of Bill on the plane, an almost exact replica of the clip where Holden was flying to see Kemper—but this time, Holden occupies the role of the killer, and Bill is the savior. As evidenced in Figures 3 and 4, Bill’s role is an almost identical replica of Holden’s role in the previous

---

68 *Mindhunter*, s1e10.
 episode. Thus, Holden has become Ed Kemper, warning that proximity to a killer can threaten one’s own identity. When Holden and his girlfriend break up, she reminisces about the versions of themselves they were when they first met. “You were so sweet. And curious,” she says. “I’m still… curious,” Holden responds, implicitly acknowledging the loss of innocence that has derived from his recent work.

Along with warning him that he has the capacity to grow harsher and rougher around the edges, more like the killers he is befriending, the situation also reminds him of his vulnerability to the killer. His relationship with Kemper is what ultimately landed him in the hospital in the first place. Befriending a serial killer is portrayed as both a threat to the subject (in this case, Holden)’s safety, and to the safety of those around them. They become more and more like the killer they have befriended, and personally suffer as a result.

*Mindhunter*’s Holden and Des’ Brian share a notable characteristic in their relationships with serial killers: both challenge the killer to his face, yet seem to defend and support him behind the killer’s back, when other people challenge his inauthenticity. It’s reminiscent of the trope, “no one can insult my family except for me,” with the serial killer replacing the insulted family member. When informed that Kemper attempted to take his own life, Holden responds, “That’s, that’s impossible. I can’t think that….”

His surprise felt like denial, similar to when people refuse to believe that their loved ones have died by suicide or a drug overdose. The pseudo-familial connection only grows stronger when Holden

---

69 *Mindhunter*, s1e10.
arrives in Kemper’s hospital room. “You came,” Kemper observes. “You made it hard not to,” Holden replies. This line from Holden demonstrates a feeling of either obligation to or care for Kemper, if not both. For whatever reason, Holden felt compelled to fly across the country after learning that he was Kemper’s medical proxy. But once he gets there, Kemper asks if the two of them

Figure 3

Figure 4
are friends, and Holden responds, “In the context of our work together, sure.” His answer is calculated, close enough to a yes to appease Kemper, and yet impersonal enough to placate his own concerns about not wanting to befriend a killer, or be seen as someone who would do that. But, just as Des does to Brian, Kemper coerces Holden into giving him what he wants by appealing to the conventions of generosity and consideration that he has been raised with.

When Holden explains the “behavioral profiling” that he and Bill have been doing, Kemper asks what they have learned about his psychology, and Holden refuses to answer, claiming it’s too early in the process to respond thoroughly. Kemper counters this argument with a guilt trip, suggesting that his relationship with Holden is transactional: “Not so early that you can’t babble about it to the press. And you pretty much admit that I started you down this path. So, I believe you owe me an explanation, Holden.” His tactic is successful: Holden concedes, and offers Kemper some of the insights they’ve had regarding his behavior. Holden clearly believes that Kemper is deserving of some degree of respect and that their relationship follows typical transactional patterns. He succumbs to Kemper’s argument that Holden “owes” him an explanation, bringing up challenging ethical questions of reciprocity and obligation. It’s unclear whether Holden’s relationship with Kemper (specifically flying to California to see him in a time of difficulty and acquiescing to his requests for information about the research) is predicated on ingrained moral values that Holden can’t break out of or

---

70 Mindhunter, s1e10.
71 Mindhunter, s1e10
on empathy for Kemper specifically. My inclination is to believe it’s the latter. Early in season one, Holden poses the idea that violent criminals are violent due to negative experiences in their upbringing. While he doesn’t say this excuses or mitigates the severity of their crimes, it’s a significantly more empathetic look than the other police and FBI agents, who dismiss the idea that such aberrant behavior may be cultivated, rather than innate.

One of the most notable parallels between *Des* and *Mindhunter* is the way that the man who subjects himself to the serial killer’s charms and develops a relationship with him eventually comes to occupy the role of victim, in the killer’s eyes. Des alludes to the fact that one of the appeals of killing was the ability to keep these people with him, having come to enjoy their company so deeply. Kemper articulates the same sentiment, explaining to Holden, “The only way I could have those girls was to kill them, and it worked. They became my spirit wives; they’re still with me.”72 This is a warning to Holden: for months, Kemper has been sending him letters, attempting to reestablish contact, until ultimately he made a suicide attempt and listed Holden as his medical proxy. These actions demonstrate increased desperation to “have” Holden, and demand his company and care. Kemper says so explicitly, telling Holden, “I could kill you now, pretty easily… Then you would be with me in spirit.”73 He proceeds to place his hands on Holden’s shoulders, an apparent threat, before pulling him into an embrace. Holden yanks himself out of Kemper’s grip and flees the room, hysterical,

---

72 *Mindhunter*, s1e10.
73 *Mindhunter*, s1e10.
proceeding to have a panic attack in the hallway that incapacitates him for days. The interesting element is his refusal to share the details of what caused his panic attack.

He later confides in his colleague Dr. Wendy Carr, seeking advice on how to manage his mental health moving forward. But even with Wendy, he doesn’t share the full picture. She asks what he was doing immediately leading up to the panic attack, trying to understand what caused it, and he simply says “I went to see Kemper.” Wendy responds, “By yourself? Panic attacks are often brought on by feelings of acute vulnerability. Psychopaths are extremely manipulative, and he knows you so he would know exactly your areas of sensitivity. Did he threaten you?” And at this point, Holden effectively lies. “No. Not exactly. He… hugged me.” This is a curious moment, rooted in either shame or loyalty. Holden is either embarrassed that he was so effectively seduced by Kemper’s charm that he ultimately fell victim to his manipulation, or his pseudo-fondness for Kemper makes him wary of spreading negative information about him, even if doing so would benefit his own (Holden’s) safety.

Earlier in my research process, my primary focus was on empathy and forgiveness, and how much or how little of both ought to be afforded to serial killers. Initially, I was strongly in the pro-empathy camp. But now I am forced to reckon with the dangers of empathy, and the way that it can put one’s own reputation and stability at risk.

---

74 Mindhunter, s2e1.
Who Is Susceptible?

True crime media attracts significantly more women than men. At the time of writing this, the first three results of the Google search “who watches true crime” are titled “The Sad Reason Women Are More Obsessed With True Crime Documentaries Than Men Are,” “Research Reveals Why Women Love True Crime,” and “True crime: Five reasons why women love it.” But women are notably lacking representation in true crime media itself—even media that focuses on characters’ growing fascination with serial killers. This leads me to question why the few women who are portrayed do not fall subject to the killers’ charms (antithetical to societal tropes and statistics on who watches true crime), and what makes men like Holden and Brian susceptible.

*Mindhunter* is notably lacking in female characters. Indeed, in season one, the only recurring female roles are Dr. Wendy Carr, the psychologist working alongside Bill and Holden in the FBI behavioral sciences unit, and Holden’s girlfriend, Debbie. In season two, Bill’s wife, Nancy, receives more screen time, as do Wendy’s lover, Kay, and several women from Atlanta who are proximate to the Atlanta child murders. So, outside of crime victims, victims’ communities, and love interests, Wendy is the only recurring female character. Based on expectations of women’s attraction to true crime, it may be initially surprising that Wendy is portrayed as one of the least interested in and susceptible to the killers’

---

manipulations. However, this makes more sense once fascination is viewed as a type of seduction.

By depicting the men seduced by the killers’ charms as more effeminate or less “macho,” it grows evident that the subliminal messaging of many of these shows blames specific people for their vulnerability. Being a less masculine man is deemed dangerous, even unethical, once it becomes equated with susceptibility to serial killers’ seduction. Thus, the killer is not held entirely accountable for their own manipulative behavior; part of the blame is placed on the “kind” of person who is manipulated, which is demonstrated to be queer or effeminate men. By highlighting these men’s identification with pathologically violent killers, queerness itself becomes pathologized.

Interestingly, there is never an explicit suggestion that these men may have any sort of sexual or romantic interest in the killers who have attracted their attention. Plenty of attention is given to women who fall in love with or pine after serial killers, to the point where it has become a relatively common media trope. But Mindhunter’s Holden, Crime’s Ray, and even Des’ Brian—who is canonically gay—are never presumed to be romantically interested in the killers they become so charmed by. Instead of the killer being perceived as the object of these men’s relationships, the obsession with the killer seems to occupy the role that a relationship otherwise would. For Holden, Brian, and Ray their relationship with a killer (or, more broadly, their obsession with their murder-centric careers) is a point of tension in their romantic relationships. Brian’s lover is judgmental about the fact that Brian has a relationship with Des, while Debbie, Holden’s girlfriend,
and Trudi, Ray’s girlfriend, are more bothered by the amount of time and focus their partners put into their work, which currently revolves around cultivating relationships with killers. In both situations, though, the romantic interest shows concern regarding the depth of relationship with the killer.

When Brian’s lover receives a phone call from a dog’s home informing him that Des’ dog, Bleep, has been put down, he relays the information to Brian with an air of disapproval. Brian instantly grows defensive, insisting that he’s helping Des in order to gain his trust, actions that his lover scornfully refers to as “doing errands” for him. “Oh, come on,” Brian sighs, but does not directly retaliate. Instead, he says that someone who knows the queer community needs to be the one writing this book, in order to tell the story accurately. “Just make sure it’s not him [Des] who’s writing it,” the lover says, before leaving the room.76 He does not appear to feel romantically threatened by Des. Rather, he disapproves of the person his lover is becoming, and sees Des as something that inhibits their relationship (both in terms of the amount of space he takes up in Brian’s thoughts and in the way befriending a killer changes his view of Brian). Brian, for his part, is so deeply focused on his mission of writing this book and getting to know Des that he neglects to truly engage with his lover on the matter, too engrossed in his work. He reveals more enthusiasm in his onscreen conversations with Des than with his actual partner. The killer is the new, interesting thing, reminiscent of the attractive new lover in a married person’s affair— but this one isn’t a secret.

76 Des, s1e2.
In *Mindhunter*, Debbie expresses frustrations with Holden’s similar behavior, voicing her annoyance at his lack of interest in her studies as a graduate student of sociology and obsession with his own work. In one episode, he asks Debbie what she is reading. He doesn’t ask out of spontaneous interest; he had a challenging day at work and sought out Debbie’s company, but she stressed that she had to study and didn't have time to engage with Holden that night. By asking about her work, he manages to get the company he craves without being berated for distracting her. But when attempting to engage with her discipline, he immediately applies Debbie’s reading (Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) to his own work.\(^77\) This could be construed as a way of demonstrating interest, and furthering his understanding by applying it to his own life. However, it becomes apparent in the next episode that this isn't the case. Rather, Holden seems to only care about his conversations with Debbie when they directly tie to his own work. When Debbie remarks that she’s considering dropping out of her graduate program, Holden says, “I thought you loved this stuff.” Debbie takes offense at his use of the word “stuff,” and the feeling is only exacerbated when he tries to redeem himself by referencing the theorists that she has been reading and misremembering their names. “I knew it,” Debbie says, “In one ear and out the other, little Debbie’s stuff… You perk up when you talk about something that has to do with your work, but the rest of the time….”\(^78\) This is a recurring theme in the relationship. In the final scene between Debbie and Holden

\(^77\) *Mindhunter*, s1e8.
\(^78\) *Mindhunter*, s1e9.
before they break up, they get into an argument in the grocery store over the way they discuss Holden’s work. Holden complains that Debbie “[runs] this commentary” on everything he says or does, and Debbie retaliates, “I was talking about your work. That’s how we communicate, right? You talk about your job, I give my opinion.”79 This is a breaking point. For the first time, Debbie acknowledges the growing schism between them, as she recognizes that her position in Holden’s life is usurped by his fascination with his career.

Crime’s protagonist, DI Ray Lennox, has a nearly identical interaction with his girlfriend, Trudi. Ray’s mental health devolves over the course of the show, as the trauma from a childhood assault he experienced bleeds into his work until he can’t focus on anything else. Trudi grows exasperated with how absent—both physically and mentally—he has been, and finally snaps, “Do I need to become a murderer, or a coke dealer, to get your undivided attention?” “It’s not the fucking Gas Board,” Ray responds, referring to Trudi’s place of work. “That’s right,” she snaps back. “You belittle me and my career, you fucking prick. You have no idea of the things that are going on with me at the moment. No idea.”80 When she criticizes him for undermining the importance of her work, he storms out of the house and returns to work, despite his hours for the day being long over. Ever since they caught the serial killer known as Mister Confectioner, work has turned into a place of refuge for Ray, the space he seeks out when overwhelmed. It occupies the role that a partner or a family typically would.

79 Mindhunter, s1e10.
80 Crime, s1e5.
In all three of these situations, the obsession with the serial killer prevents these men from having stable relationships at home. But what makes these specific men susceptible, when their colleagues are able to live somewhat ordinary lives and carry out relationships untainted by their careers? The absence of traditional masculinity may be the answer. Each of these men has a foil (or several): someone who sees the killer as manipulative and unsettling, and has no desire to cultivate a relationship with him. For Holden, these are his colleagues Bill and Wendy. Bill is the traditional male archetype. He is gruff, devoted to his wife (though struggling to perfect his work-life balance), and encourages his son to play sports and get dirty. Notably, he once joked about his young son engaging in a game of “smear the queer,” demonstrating his distance from the queer community. Wendy is an academic, cool and logically driven. As discussed earlier, she is the only significant female character in *Mindhunter*, and she is a lesbian.

Her sexual disinterest in men arguably renders her immune to the charms of the serial killers, which are parallel to romantic seduction.

Holden’s susceptibility to Kemper’s charms could be read as an implication of queer sexuality, particularly since his relationship with Debbie deteriorates at the end of season one. However, I believe that instead of implying that Holden and men like him are homosexual, these shows are suggesting that they are incapable of sustaining any sort of healthy relationship, queer or otherwise. See Brian, a canonically queer man whose straight-thinking foil is his gay lover. These shows criticize queerness in a broader sense of the word, challenging any opinion that
deviates from the prescribed perception of serial killers as evil, insane, and utterly incomprehensible. Holden and Brian, moreso than Ray, are painted as “queer” characters in a sense, but more so politically than sexually. They are unable to disentangle themselves from the fascinating lives of the killers they get to know, and are viewed by the people around them (coworkers, lovers, and, in the case of Brian, the press) as aberrant and potentially evil, as if the serial killers’ minds are contagious. This is a direct parallel to the homophobic rhetoric that views homosexuality as a potential contagion.  

Often, the seduced men are those who the audience finds it easiest to identify with. This is true by nature, in that anyone watching a show about serial killers clearly has some interest in the subject. But the similarities don’t end there. These characters are often educated, creative individuals (Holden, the recent college graduate dating a sociology student, or Brian, the biographer pursuing a career in writing), who are more thoroughly developed and relatable than other characters. By demanding that the viewers see themselves as the criticized protagonists, they are forced to reckon with their own ethics and identities. Is it wrong to develop such a deep fascination with a killer, and potentially take them at their word? Are our own relationships being threatened by what we initially saw as an innocuous, if macabre, interest in a television show?

---

Perhaps. But it should also be noted that, as discussed previously, the framework of these concerns is comparable to that of homosexuality as contagion. Proximity to a person does not always equate to adoption of their behavior.

Although in these instances, men were portrayed as the ones falling victim to the killers’ charms, this is uncommon: the vast majority of true crime fans are women, as stated above. The only extended study on why women are so infatuated with true crime is Vicary and Fraley’s aforementioned study, “Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?” In this study, they demonstrate that women are drawn to true crime books partially due to “potential survival cues” that can be found therewithin, as women are more likely than men to fear being victims of violent crimes. Every article I’ve read about why women in particular are so drawn to true crime cites this article, reinforcing the belief that part of women’s attraction to crime resides in their own fears and desire to learn how to avoid these circumstances. (This also evidences the lack of research that explores women’s fascination with true crime.) Psychotherapist Liza Finlay says that true crime appeals to women because it validates their fears and teaches them to protect themselves. She also believes that “women watch true crime so they don’t feel quite so alone.”

82 Vicary and Fraley, “Captured by True Crime,” 82.
84 Liza Finlay quoted in Laura Grande, “Here’s Why Women.”
85 Liza Finlay quoted in Laura Grande, “Here’s Why Women.”
Finlay means that women find comfort by watching other women experience their shared fears, it’s also plausible that part of the connection that women find in true crime is by developing relationships not with the victims or other female fans, but with the male perpetrators.

It’s no secret that some women claim to fall in love with the world’s most infamous killers. There was Carol Boone, who married Ted Bundy in the courtroom in the middle of his trial (since two people can legally declare themselves married in a courtroom, so long as there is a judge present). There were the dozens, if not hundreds, of women who fawned over Ted Bundy and protested his execution. Unlike hybristophilia, sexual attraction to violent criminals due to their violent acts, these women are attracted to Bundy due to his traditional good looks and charms, which make his actions even more mysterious and unbelievable to many. Scott Bonn said that Ted Bundy “looked like the boy next door, and that is frightening because if the boy next door is a serial killer, it means anyone is potentially a victim.” This observation opens up a new reason that many women are so infatuated with media about these killers: because the killers remind themselves of people they know. It’s not that they are specifically attracted to killers, but that they are attracted to a kind of man who some of these killers embody. This archetype is often referred to as the “softboi,” men who emphasize their distaste for mainstream interests, highlight their own emotional


openness, and often utilize these seemingly harmless traits to manipulate women into sleeping with them.  

A prime example of this in popular media is in the 1989 cult classic *Heathers*. Jason Dean (“J.D.”) is simultaneously the protagonist’s love interest and the film’s villain. He is introduced as a sympathetic character: something of a loner, his mother died when he was young and he now moves constantly from school to school due to his father’s job. He’s painted as a suave, seductive character, the traditional “dark and brooding” type. Many fans of the movie and musical glorify him, sympathetic to his family issues to the point of excusing the three people he kills individually and his attempts to bomb his entire high school. Professor of forensic psychology Dr. Katherine Ramsland seeks to explain this infatuation with killers and implies a maternal component:

Some females see the little boy in these killers and want to nurture it.
Some believe they can influence a man as cruel and powerful as a serial killer to mend his ways. Some confuse brutality with masculinity. They think the serial killer they love is an alpha male who will protect them.
With the media’s help, these killers become larger-than-life, and the aura suggests that they’ll deliver *more* than an average man might. They’re viewed as exceptional in every way, intellectually, sexually, and emotionally. (Ramsland)

---

88 Max Benwell, “What is a softboi? You might be dating one—and you don’t even know it.” September 5, 2019, [https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/sep/05/softboi-what-is-it-instagram-q-and-a](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/sep/05/softboi-what-is-it-instagram-q-and-a).
Ramsland’s analysis is certainly influenced by heteronormativity and tropes about femininity, and thus should be considered critically. But to an extent, Ramsland is parroting back tropes about masculinity that have been socially deemed attractive. Whether that be the “little boy” inside, fragile and hurting (like a classic “softboi”) or the “cruel and powerful” man they see as an “alpha” (the traditional portrayal of virile masculinity), Ramsland suggests that killers may not be attractive due solely to their crimes, but due to the “exceptional” light they are painted in. They are deemed superlative in every way.

Trying to “fix” a “broken” partner is not a new concept. It’s something that young girls are often warned against before they even know what that means. And when the brokenness is exaggerated to the ultimate degree, any desire to mend will be exacerbated likewise.

Forgiveness and Cancel Culture

The funny thing about empathy is that, depending on one’s belief system (be it religious, innate, familial, or anything else) it can be read as wildly radical or deeply traditional. In Truman Capote’s nonfiction novel\(^{89}\) *In Cold Blood*, the well-loved Clutter family is brutally murdered in their own home. They live in Holcomb, Kansas, a traditional, religious town where everyone knows everyone. A town that you might expect to be adamantly in favor of the death penalty, due to its conservative residents, the horrendous nature of the crime, and everyone’s

\(^{89}\) “nonfiction novel” is a term used to describe books that retell true events while adding fictional dialogue and utilizing traditional storytelling techniques
adoration of the Clutter family. And for many, this assumption holds true.

However, I was taken aback by the immense empathy displayed by certain members of the community—in particular, Bonnie Clutter, the wife and mother of the family’s brother, Howard Fox. He implores his community to stop insisting that the murderers ought to be hanged, pointing out that “the deed is done and taking another life cannot change it.” Instead, he tells them to “forgive as God would have us do” and “give prayers that he may find his peace” by asking God for forgiveness.

His sister, violently killed in her own house. And he still remains convinced that her murderers deserve forgiveness—due to his belief in God. But what if you don’t believe in God, or an afterlife? Here, Howard Fox’s logic falters, and the nuanced concept of cancel culture emerges.

One of the largest issues with cancel culture on an interpersonal level (rather than in reference to celebrities or others in positions of extreme authority) is that “canceling” often seems to be more for the sake of the person doing the canceling than for the canceled person themself. It’s an easy way to wash one’s hands of the harm-doer, and to ensure that one isn’t associated with the deemed “bad guy.” However, this tactic leaves the canceled person stranded, without a support network to help them better understand the flaws in their actions and ways to improve.

---


People who commit heinous deeds are, in fact, still people. And, as I have discussed throughout this paper, this is one of the most terrifying things for people to wrap their heads around. In Cold Blood hammers in this point, introducing the murderers as sympathetic characters before we have any idea of the role they will soon come to play in this story. The very first chapter about the murderers, Perry and Dick, begins with the sentence, “Like Mr. Clutter, the young man breakfasting in a café called the Little Jewel never drank coffee.”92 Like Mr. Clutter, it opens. From this very first line about Perry, the reader is unable to write him off as an inhuman monster. Often, people tend to “tell ourselves that the doers of heinous wrongs are monsters, in no way like ourselves.”93 By framing Perry first as a man just like Mr. Clutter, sitting in a café with an aversion to coffee, we deconstruct the “boundary” between good and evil people, forced to reckon with the fact that “all human beings are [likely] capable of evil, and that many if not most of the hideous evildoers are warped by circumstances.”94 We are forced to identify, on some level, with those who we spend much of our lives being told are evil, inhuman.

Pity is not the goal of this analysis, nor, of course, is excusing murder. Instead, I pose this perspective as a path toward humanization and preventing future harm. However, this ties back to the earlier question of who will put in the energy to talk to harm-doers, help them understand the effects their actions had on other people and find ways to prevent them from doing it again. While this is no particular person’s responsibility, more people will go out of their way to help

92 Capote, In Cold Blood, 14.
93 Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought, 450.
94 Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought, 452.
someone with whom they identify than with a total stranger, a person with whom they seem to have nothing in common.

Professor of Law Dan Kahan refers to the theory of consequentialism in criminal law, which “focuses on the future societal benefits associated with punishing a particular offender,” and this wording gave me pause.\textsuperscript{95} It’s no secret, especially among those left-of-center, that the current US prison system is ineffective and does not lessen crime (including future offenses among people who have already committed crimes). However, transformative justice is a far cry from mere prison reforms;\textsuperscript{96} it deconstructs the idea of carceral punishment altogether. The challenges that arise with the concept of forgiveness regard its effect on victims: does forgiveness and second chances provide more potential for a safer, more empathetic culture, or does it simply prioritize the comfort of those causing harm rather than those who have been harmed?

No individual person ought to be held responsible for someone else’s actions. I don’t believe it’s any specific person’s duty to help their friend or sibling or peer become a better person. But once you take religion out of the picture, the role of God suddenly must become the role of another human being. Forgiveness and reform are no longer abstract concepts provided by a higher being; they are in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Transformative justice is a “political framework” that strives to prevent violence without enforcing new measures of violence in doing so. Transformative justice processes:
\begin{itemize}
\item 1) do not rely on the state (e.g. police, prisons, the criminal legal system, I.C.E., foster care system (though some TJ responses do rely on or incorporate social services like counseling));
\item 2) do not reinforce or perpetuate violence such as oppressive norms or vigilantism; and most importantly,
\item 3) actively cultivate the things we know prevent violence such as healing, accountability, resilience, and safety for all involved.”
\end{itemize}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the hands of the people who were harmed and the people who choose to engage with the harm-doers. This shifts the idea that harm-doers are capable of reform from a pleasant theory into an immense challenge. Who dictates when a person has learned “enough”? Is it betrayal to engage with a friend’s abuser—even for the sake of helping prevent future harm?

I find myself constantly thinking back to the case of Lisa Montgomery, a woman put to death on federal row in January of 2021. Montgomery’s childhood was a sickening series of abuse—physical, psychological, and sexual—at the hands of countless friends of the family, relatives, and partners. Her mother trafficked her for plumbing and electrical work on the house, and her mother’s husband (Montgomery’s stepfather) frequently raped her. In her teens, she confided in a cousin who failed to report her situation to anyone. When Montgomery’s mother divorced from her second husband, both she and Montgomery testified to the husband’s sexual abuse. The judge “scolded” her for not reporting the abuse sooner, but neglected to do anything about it himself.97

But I just spent a paragraph focusing on the suffering of Lisa Montgomery, and I haven’t yet said a word about Bonnie Jo Stinnett—the woman who Lisa Montgomery strangled to death before cutting her eight-month fetus out of her womb and kidnapping the child. Stinnett was left bleeding out on her kitchen floor before being found by her own mother.

---

Stinnett was from the small town of Skidmore, Missouri, a town not unlike Holcomb, Kansas: a tiny town where everyone knows everyone, and many people who are born there never leave. A friend of Stinnett’s “says she's read the descriptions of Montgomery's abuse, but it mostly just makes her angry. She says it's not as if all the other people of Skidmore lead idyllic lives free from abuse, poverty and other destructive tragedies.” She’s “sick of hearing” about Lisa Montgomery’s history of abuse and trauma, whereas the focus should instead be on Stinnett’s suffering—which, in the many conversations and legal discussions that attempted to remove Montgomery from death row, was often not the primary topic of conversation.

Much of Skidmore’s population was aghast at the idea of removing Montgomery from death row (and, more broadly, at any of her legal defense). They seem to believe that a refusal to punish Montgomery in this way is akin to excusing her behavior, or at least punishing her appropriately. This is a clear example of the belief that punishment should serve as a form of “shaming” and having to suffer the harm that the perpetrator forced upon someone else, in addition to “instilling aversions” to crime. And this opinion is a logical one. “An eye for an eye” is a natural response, especially when your eye, or the eye of your loved one, was the first one lost.

Hundreds of people in Skidmore felt personally vindicated by securing Lisa Montgomery’s execution. Hundreds would have felt betrayed—or, more

---

98 Lussenhop, “Lisa Montgomery.”
specifically, would have felt that Bonnie Jo Stinnett had been betrayed—if she had been let off. So, perhaps this is what Kahan means when he refers to “future societal benefits associated with punishing a particular offender.” The friends of the victim feel that Montgomery has been somewhat avenged, and it is now ensured that she will never cause harm again.

In his book *The Mind of a Murderer*, Dr. Richard Taylor helps to explain what practical purposes are served by understanding the psychology of murderers and the intent behind killings. In particular, the chapter “Psychotic Homicide” emphasizes the role that “systemic failures” play in homicide rates. He cites the case of Simon Grachev, who had a “long history of mental illness” and had been placed in psychiatric hospitals in the past, along with threatening his family and his psychiatrist with knives. After almost a decade of relative stability, Grachev felt himself beginning to relapse. He and his mother both reached out to medical staff and requested that he be hospitalized; Grachev went so far as to admit that he was concerned he “‘might harm his mum.’” However, no psychiatric beds were available, and as they waited the next two days for one to open up, he stabbed his mother to death.

In psychotic homicides (homicides that occur while a person is in a psychotic state, having delusions about reality), medical professionals’ ability to understand the intent and the mindset behind the murder can be a key way of

---

preventing future murders of a similar variety. In Grachev’s case, he was aware of the warning signs, and asked for help. Had the proper resources (a hospital bed and medical assistance) been available to him, his mother’s death could \textit{and would} have been prevented.

In theory, a college campus culture that leans away from the current practices of cancel culture would have similar effects. A friend and I were recently discussing the rhetoric around shaming people who remain friends with perpetrators (“perps”). “Even if we don’t owe it to the perpetrators, we owe it to society,” she said, in response to whether or not it should be deemed ethical to remain friends with someone who has caused harm. Ethical, not mandatory. In my experience, it is widely accepted that no one is \textit{obligated} to stay close with someone who has caused harm, but often, cancel culture deems it \textit{unacceptable} to do so. My friend’s comment was an interesting one. We, as a general society, owe it to that same society to permit abusers to retain friendships. We owe it to ourselves to allow abusers to have trusted people remain close to them. In doing so, we can potentially prevent harm from reoccurring by allowing abusers to maintain relationships from people who they can learn from. As conversations critiquing the prevalence of sexual assault and violence become more commonplace, more people will engage in these conversations and learn from them before causing harm in the first place.

Of course, it’s naive to assume that all abusers and violent criminals want or are willing to learn, as is it naive to assume that they necessarily have friends and relatives who will talk to them openly about consent and safety. But in the
case of many, learning and changing future behavior is a real possibility, one that
I’ve seen firsthand.
Chapter Three: The Conflict between Empathy and Punishment

The dictionary definition of empathy is apparently simple: “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” But the idea of “[sharing] the feelings of another” highlights one of the greatest difficulties of empathy: identification with the other. Several sociology theorists refer to people’s tendency to construct those who perform unimaginable horrors as “monsters” so as to distance them as much as possible from our sense of self. Leo Bersani describes this phenomenon as a “tactic of self-avowed purification.” Thus, much of the societal inclination to dehumanize and harshly punish criminals is not due to the professed reasons of establishing safer communities and deterring future crimes. Instead, much of it is due to a perception of these criminals as irredeemably other, and thus a willingness to lean into these sadistic and vengeful impulses that are usually quashed. Lawyer Susan Bandes emphasizes the presence of emotion in legal reasoning, despite its claim to be “rational” and objective. In reality, she concludes that “it is driven by a different set of emotional variables, albeit an ancient set so ingrained in the law that its contingent nature has become invisible.” Some emotionally driven responses are perceived to be rules, including internal biases regarding race and socioeconomic status and the “desire

104 Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 58
for revenge.” Legal decisions are always made partially through emotional reasoning, but the jurors and judges making these rulings often don’t recognize subjectivity and emotion for what they are.

Thus, bringing the humanization of criminals into discussion is an important consideration, particularly when the defendant is not part of a privileged group. Listening to and attempting to identify with the voices considered to be “other” may actually result in more just rulings, since the defendant will be considered more thoroughly as a person, rather than a perpetrator already presumed to be guilty.

That being said, “empathy” may not always be the correct term for perceiving someone's humanity. The humanization of violent criminals serves two, seemingly contradictory, purposes. The first is a semblance of identification. Removing “disgust” from the equation forces us to examine ourselves for the same capabilities, and “confront the fact that we might become them”—or worse, that “we already are them.” The second, however, is a horror that urges us to appropriately allocate our blame.

Humanizing criminals doesn’t necessarily cause people's hearts to soften, or to identify so strongly that they no longer want to punish the harm-doer. In court, humanization is what establishes offenders’ accountability and culpability for their actions. Too often, people see someone commit a heinous act and

---

109 Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought, 451.
conclude that only a “crazy” person could have done such a thing.\textsuperscript{110} In legal terms, though, the label of insanity removes culpability, as it implies a lack of ability to distinguish or choose between right and wrong.

Charles Krauthammer was a political columnist, often pegged as conservative (though his ideologies were too varied to pin on one party). Despite disagreeing with many of his perspectives, I am in agreement with his blunt acknowledgement that just because “a defendant's conduct can be characterized as 'bizarre' or 'shocking' does not compel a finding of legal insanity.”\textsuperscript{111} By claiming that anyone who commits an act that is “inhuman” or “vile” must be insane, we are inherently claiming that they are not responsible for their own actions. Or, simply put, that argument states that the more horrible someone’s action is, the less responsible they are for committing it.

Rarely are serial killers designated as legally insane. They generally have personality disorders, but are capable of distinguishing between what is deemed to be morally right and wrong. Careless use of the word “insanity” merely perpetuates the desired othering of the violent offender, but discounts their intentionality and thus accountability.

Thinking through empathy as a form of humanization and identification suggests that empathy is a productive emotion for both the giver and receiver. It puts the most accountability on the harm-doer, as discussed above. But recognizing our own capacity to become the harm-doer, the othered “monster,”


holds us accountable, as well, in that it forces us to look at ourselves more critically and gain a heightened awareness of our own thought processes and behaviors. Some psychiatrists dismantle implication of the word “evil” as an all-encompassing identifier, and instead use it to describe merely a feature of someone’s personality. Which is to say, “the person in question may be narcissistic, perhaps abused by a parent, or even charming, affectionate and intelligent, but also in some sense evil.” Viewing these abominable traits alongside perpetrators’ histories of trauma and expressions of kindness and care is one of the reasons people close to them sometimes remain close, even after they perform acts of violence.

**Empathy: The Good and the Bad**

“*His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve. That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life.*”

—Dan A. Turner, from the letter read at Brock Turner’s sentencing hearing

Before I knew the term for “transformative justice,” I questioned whether or not I was a rape apologist. I didn’t know how to reckon with my innate belief in forgiveness and certainty that most people are capable of growth, while still

---

believing that people deserve to be punished for harmful actions and not simply left to roam.

In 2015, Brock Turner, a 19-year-old student at Stanford University, sexually assaulted an unconscious 22-year-old woman behind a dumpster. He was spotted by two passing cyclists, who called out to him to stop, pinned him down so he couldn’t escape the scene, and hurried to check on the young woman. A year later, after countless protestations and defensive statements from Brock Turner and his father, Dan Turner, the sentencing came: a mere six months in jail, despite having been charged with “assault with intent to commit rape of an intoxicated or unconscious person, sexual penetration of an intoxicated person and sexual penetration of an unconscious person.”

I hated the premise of Dan Turner’s letter. He alluded to “the dangers of alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity” without referring to sexual violence. He did not mention the survivor once. Instead, he lamented his son’s waning appetite, and waxed rhapsodic about what a driven and high-performing student he once was. These were the reasons he believed that Brock’s punishment was too “steep” a “price to pay.”

Nevertheless, I found myself agreeing with the conclusion Turner reached, even if I disagreed with every step that led him there. The potential for lifelong incarceration as a result of one action, no matter how horrific, felt wrong to me. Completely eliminating the potential for reflection, reform, and improvement

---

from the moment the act of violence was performed felt antithetical to my nature, yet I was afraid to put this into words, for fear I was negating the harm done by Brock Turner, or excusing his actions by implying he had potential to learn and do better. But I am not suggesting that this treatment ought to be unique to Brock Turner. I’m not suggesting that his action was “not bad enough” to merit such a punishment; I’m positing that no action is inherently so terrible that it proves an inability to grow.

A consideration that came up for me while reading *In Cold Blood* alongside Dan Turner’s letter was the distinction between forgiveness and denial among the families of those who have caused harm. Turner’s letter, as mentioned above, did not once allude to sexual violence or the harm suffered by the victim of Brock’s rape. He insists that his son “has never been violent to anyone including his actions on the night of Jan 17th 2015,” actively denying the idea that his son could be capable of such violence. He is either lying or in denial; regardless, he veers far from forgiveness. What I pose as an ideal is less forgiveness, and more empathy and belief in a capacity for change. This belief first requires discomfort. It requires anger, or disbelief, or horror, or all of the above, at the person you love, and only then can growth ensue. You cannot reckon with an action if you don’t believe that it demanded a reckoning in the first place.

In her article “What Should We Teach Children About Forgiveness,” Patricia White distinguishes between what she deems “the strict view” of
forgiveness and a more nuanced version.\textsuperscript{115} The strict view demands forgiveness in any situation in which someone has been wronged, and establishes forgiveness as the ultimate goal of any conflict. White is critical of this view for a number of reasons, mainly oriented around the person who has been harmed. Firstly, forgiveness can be an extremely difficult, painful experience for the victim. It forces them to “dwell on unpleasant aspects of the experience” by recalling the conflict as the harm-doer asserts their repentance.\textsuperscript{116} Choosing to forget the experience and leave it behind altogether, White posits, may be an emotionally safer and more comfortable choice for some people. She additionally points out that, in situations where the harm-doer and the harmed are strangers to one another, the act of “forgiving” is unnecessary; the two people have no relationship, and thus will not benefit from a semblance of reconciliation. Note that White’s definition of forgiveness emphasizes the harm-doer’s desire to restore people’s previous perceptions of them, to be seen exactly as they were before causing harm.

But White’s second criticism of forgiveness is when someone is “‘beyond the pale,’” or has done something so heinous that forgiveness seems impossible, if not unethical.\textsuperscript{117} Is forgiving someone who is not remorseful akin to “[condoning] the wrongdoer” and “[compromising one’s] own values?”\textsuperscript{118} First, I want to call attention to how quickly White concedes that “a case might perhaps be made for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[116] White, “What Should We Teach,” 58.
\item[117] White, “What Should We Teach,” 61.
\item[118] White, “What Should We Teach,” 62.
\end{footnotes}
thinking in this way [that they are beyond the pale] of moral monsters, the Hitlers, the Pol Pots, the serial killers” of the world, who she describes as “operating outside the bounds of any civilised society.”

This directly opposes the view posed by Martha Nussbaum, which I believe is both more accurate and insightful. She criticizes the perspective that Nazis were “unique, disgusting monsters,” because that prevents people from engaging in self-reflection regarding their own potential, albeit dormant, capacity for evil.

White occupies an interesting place in this discourse, because, broadly speaking, she is relatively in favor of forgiveness. And yet, she is quick to agree that perhaps some people aren’t worthy of forgiveness. It is unclear where she draws the line, suggesting that it is not “ethically desirable to think like this about all people who have wronged us, even if badly.”

She doesn’t point to a line where “bad” becomes “bad enough to qualify as beyond forgiveness.” Granted, it’s perhaps impossible for anyone to draw a clear line between those who they believe are and are not deserving of forgiveness. But what makes her (or at least, the people toward whom she is orienting her argument) so willing to write off the serial killers of the world? Is it the repetitive nature of their behavior, or simply a gut feeling that is extremely difficult to counteract?

These ethical questions quickly shift into legal conundrums, when debating whether or not someone is “abnormal” enough to be absolved of a guilty verdict.

---

121 White, “What Should We Teach,” 62.
Legally, the answer lies under the “not guilty by reason of insanity” defense, which dictates that if the defendant was unable to comprehend what they were doing at the time of the crime, or was unable to distinguish between right and wrong, they cannot be declared guilty. But how do people tend to look at people who perform criminal acts due to mental abnormalities, but cannot be legally deemed insane? Jeffrey Dahmer, for example, was diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder, which “focuses on social irresponsibility with exploitive, delinquent, and criminal behavior with no remorse.”\textsuperscript{122} He was able to distinguish between right and wrong, but seemingly didn’t feel the guilt or shame that usually inhibits people from performing such radically immoral behaviors. In another case, Lee Watson, the murderer, had a history of lying, was a victim of bullying his entire life, and had deep “sexual frustration and misogynistic hostility.”\textsuperscript{123} He laughed when retelling the story of the woman he murdered, after brutally assaulting her (both sexually and otherwise physically). At his hearing, the expert challenging him said that, since part of the intent of the murder was to acquire sexual gratification, then Watson’s actions were intentional and he must be deemed responsible for his behavior. But I’m stuck on the definition and use of the word “intentional,” and the somewhat arbitrary lines that are drawn between “intentional” and “unintentional.” Like Dahmer, Watson was able to distinguish between right and wrong, without comprehending it on an emotional level: he said that “‘what happened is atrocious’” but he personally feels no guilt, shame, or


\textsuperscript{123} Taylor, “The Mind of a Murderer,” 58.
horror from having committed such a violent act. He feels entirely removed from his actions (but is still able to recognize them as objectively “atrocious”). This feels like a somewhat arbitrary line between sanity and insanity. What does it mean to understand right and wrong, without an innate moral compass that (on a large scale) allows you to distinguish between the two? The prospect of accountability becomes much more challenging when working with minds that don’t submit to notions such as guilt or shame.

Are You Insane? And Other Things Not to Say to A Serial Killer

In both the Mind of a Murderer and in Des, I was reminded of how flippantly people use the phrasing that someone must “not be in their right mind,” and similar rhetoric. The forensic psychiatrist in Des concedes that “strangling people is not normal behavior,” so that may technically qualify as a “mental disturbance,” but this is far from insanity. Instead, this returns to the discourse around the subjectivity of morals. Yes, Des is clearly disturbed by typical standards—but in this case, “disturbed” only means that he is unperturbed by and willing to perform acts that horrify the average person, and that the average person would never seriously consider doing. But it does not mean that he is insane. That would suggest that he is either unable to comprehend what he is doing, unable to distinguish between right and wrong, or experiencing a false reality (ex: perceiving an innocuous person as a violent threat). He was none of these things;

---

even he comes to this conclusion in the end, noting that he thinks the jury came to the correct verdict. When mental illness and violent intentions are conflated, this harms people for a number of reasons. The myth of mental illness causing people to act violently is perpetuated, which further stigmatizes discussions surrounding mental health. Additionally, chalking one’s deliberate cruelty up to “insanity” actually removes accountability from that person, and hinders conversations about how to get them to act differently moving forward.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Elizabeth Kendall is, in many regards, an entirely typical woman. Her struggles included raising her young child after divorce, the loneliness of being a single mother, and, later, alcoholism. She fell in love with a charming man who sometimes treated her well and other times took her for granted, and she accepted his dramatic apologies every time. They broke up, then got back together, then broke up, then got back together. She wanted to get married; he pretended he did, but wouldn’t commit. Liz Kendall lived the same love story and made the same mistakes that many of us have. She also spent years of her life in a relationship with Ted Bundy. With the context I have after reading her memoir The Phantom Prince, I struggle to reach a conclusion on whether or not Liz’s behavior was “ethical,” and how accountable she was for it. One of the most complicating factors is the manipulation and gaslighting rampant in all of Ted’s behavior
toward her. Liz’s daughter Molly describes Ted’s ability to “seize on just the right things to say to hook [Liz] into his toxic drama again,” and as a lonely woman seeking a stable, loving relationship, she was eager to believe that this time would be better than the last.\textsuperscript{125} Anyone who has experienced a painful breakup knows how easy it can be to fall back into a relationship that you have every reason to believe will be unsuccessful. How hearing the words you most want to hear from someone, words that make you feel wanted, can result in you making decisions that, objectively, you know aren’t a good idea. Liz is shockingly easy to identify with, in this regard. It’s just that her “toxic partner” is more than manipulative, more than a potential cheater—he’s a violent murderer. As the name \textit{Ted Bundy} spreads across the nation, Liz rocks back and forth on her perceptions of him, between confidence that he could never commit such horrific crimes and an unsettling feeling that he most certainly \textit{had} committed them. She reached out to the police on several occasions when details of the murders seemed to point to Ted, answered their questions honestly, and allowed them to put a trap on her phone (that identified the source of incoming calls) when Ted escaped prison. She certainly was not entirely complicit in his behavior. Yet, when he finally confessed to her (after years and years of violence; he only admitted to Liz that he was “sick” and that “there [was] something the matter with [him]” in 1978, after his final murder), her response was shockingly empathetic.\textsuperscript{126} “‘I love you,’” she told him, “‘I just don’t know what to say.’”\textsuperscript{127} Here I come to a bit of an impasse. On

\textsuperscript{126} Kendall, \textit{The Phantom Prince}, 260-261.
\textsuperscript{127} Kendall, \textit{The Phantom Prince}, 261.
the one hand, I have been advocating that most people are deserving of empathy and love, so long as their violent behaviors are not being excused or encouraged, and that receiving such care is one of the few possible ways that someone can learn to change their behavior. On the other hand, this feels like an almost disturbingly accepting response. The response to “I’m a serial killer and rapist” being “I love you” felt almost like forgiveness—and that forgiveness wasn’t Liz’s to offer. I don’t think that continuing to love someone who has done harm is inherently bad (or preventable—love isn’t a switch you can turn on and off). But I do think that blind support and a lack of verbal criticism is decidedly wrong, as it detracts from the severity of harm suffered by the victims.

Well into her adulthood, Molly, Liz’s daughter, attempted to join a support group for those whose families and friends had been impacted by violent crime—however, she was denied entry to the group, after being told that her relationship to crime might upset other members (particularly since one of the members had a direct tie to one of Bundy’s victims). This decision made sense, yet seemed to overlook Molly’s needs—complicated by the fact that she was a victim of Ted’s as well, having been molested by him on several occasions in her childhood. Additionally, unlike her mother, by the time Ted was sentenced to death, Molly had completely stopped loving Ted, and forgotten how it felt to love him. She reflects, “I forgot everything good about him. He had so much going for him, and at the core of it all was this hidden, evil, subhuman being.” She acknowledges that she did love him, and that he loved her and her mother as well.

But she finds reconciling those feelings with the knowledge of who he was and what he did nearly impossible. “He’s crazy,” she tells herself, “and being sane, you will never understand crazy.” Like so many others, Molly utilizes the word “crazy” as synonymous with “unfathomably horrific.” But unlike the legal definition of insanity, Molly does not remove culpability from Bundy when calling him crazy. She uses it derogatorily, as if implying that his actions are what make him “crazy,” rather than vice versa. This phrasing also makes it easier for her to “let go” and stop trying to analyze his psyche. By framing Ted as an unanswerable question, or a question only that can only be answered with “because he’s crazy,” Molly was finally able to stop spiraling, and trying to figure out how the Ted she knew and the Ted that the rest of the country knew could be the same person.

Molly and Liz took similar approaches to their perceptions of Ted, although they went in opposite directions. Molly came to terms with the horrors of Ted’s behavior, and as a result, stopped loving him and erased almost all of his positive traits from her mind. Liz, on the other hand, had a much more difficult time truly believing that Ted was guilty, because she was so attached to the man she (thought she) had fallen in love with. Both women found it nearly impossible to hold both views of Ted as the truth: socially, we are not conditioned to believe that people can hold good in them while also holding so much bad.

Psychologically, it’s easier to view one as truth and one as a lie.

---

129 Kendall, The Phantom Prince, 286.
130 Kendall, The Phantom Prince, 286.
Before Ted was executed, his attorney contacted Liz. He told her that “one of his last wishes was for [Liz and Molly] to be told that he really had loved [them]. Because, as she put it, ‘he knew you would wonder, given the circumstances.’” 131 People who do terrible things can still love. Liz believes that Ted truly loved her—and I think I do, too.

But being capable of love does not make someone an inherently good person, something that Molly seems to believe more than Liz. Their respective perceptions of Ted as a terrible man, or a good man who did terrible things, determine whether or not they have any desire to love and care for him. This begs the question, if Liz had come to terms with Ted’s actions years earlier than she did, would she still have loved him?

When Molly was denied entry into the support group, she instead asked if any of the members of the group would be willing to receive a letter from her. Eventually, one woman said yes: the mother of one of Ted’s victims. Molly expressed her grief to this woman, how she had mourned the loss of Ted’s victims throughout her life. In response, the woman told her that she had often wondered how Liz and Molly were doing. Molly described the response as a healing experience; for so long she had “feared that [the victims’ families] hated [Liz and Molly]; far from it, she had hoped we were able to heal.” 132 I don’t know exactly how much this woman knew. I don’t know if she knew that Liz was one of the first people to go to the police about Ted, or that she repeatedly contacted police over

---

the next several years. I don’t know if she knew that Liz still continued to keep in touch with Ted, that she slept with him and allowed him to stay in her house when he was out on bond. I don’t know if any of this would have changed how she felt. I do, however, know that this demonstrates some sort of natural inclination toward empathy. Not a universal one, but a genuine one.

It’s easy to empathize with Molly, who was a young child at the time of Ted’s crimes, manipulated by him and (inadvertently) by her mother, who stood by him. But it’s more challenging to take a stance on Liz’s position. What interested me more than Liz herself was how her relationship with her closest friend, Angie, shifted once Liz allowed Ted to stay with her until his trial.

Angie told Liz that “she was sorry, but as long as [Liz] was going to have anything to do with Ted, she didn’t want to have anything to do with [her]. “She said she could not support [her] while [she] made what she considered a very dangerous mistake.”133 I have already established that no one owes empathy or support to violent offenders (with the exception of their right to a psychiatrist or psychologist). But prior to The Phantom Prince, I had not breached the idea of whether or not people owe empathy or support to those who are sucked into the offenders’ orbits. Of course, the idea of “owing” empathy is a flawed one, as true empathy cannot be constructed out of obligation, nor should relationships be transactional in nature. By “owing empathy,” I simply mean: do we expect person x to empathize with and support person y, and would we view person x as unethical or unkind if they chose not to?”

133 Kendall, The Phantom Prince, 179.
Unlike Holden and Brian (both of whom garner frustration from their loved ones, which, in Holden’s case, ends the relationship altogether), Liz does not choose to become acquainted with a murderer. Ted is already a deeply meaningful and significant player in her life by the time his crimes come to light. This makes it more difficult for Liz to abandon her relationship with him: because doing so feels like abandoning every memory she’s ever shared with him. We are not conditioned to believe that someone can do something as horrific as kill—repeatedly and for pleasure—while still maintaining authentic, loving relationships. Some actions are viewed as so inherently bad that they become all-encompassing and define the person performing them. Serial murder is one of them. Thus, by accepting that Ted has done these things, Liz is effectively rewriting her entire past, something she is, at this point, unable to do. Angie’s actions don’t seem to account for this, and instead leave Liz to reckon with this apparent dichotomy alone.

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, when Catherine Martin is kidnapped, her mother uses Catherine’s name again and again during her televised plea that the kidnapper return her daughter. She flashes photos of Catherine’s childhood, and the FBI agents remark on how clever it is to appeal to Catherine’s humanity, making it (theoretically) more challenging for Buffalo Bill to see her as just an object to be used.¹³⁴ In theory, the same tactic works in the other direction: to

humanize the killer is to make it more difficult to treat them with cruelty that is generally viewed as inhumane.

In conversations about mental illness and unhealthy relationships, I commonly hear the phrase “it explains, but it doesn’t excuse.” Recently, I’ve been thinking about how the actions of serial killers cannot fit into this neat little box, because… nothing seems to explain. And that’s why people are so desperate to understand. There’s a strange drive to comprehend the incomprehensible.

I think some of the empathy given to serial killers (I’m particularly thinking about the relationship between Holden and Ed Kemper in Mindhunter) is a level of denial. Or at least, an inability to emotionally reconcile the person doing harm with the person we see (whether it be on TV, or someone we know personally). Even if intellectually, we know this person has done harm, it’s incredibly difficult to envision, whereas we have a much easier time envisioning the, for lack of a better phrase, everyday harms we’re conditioned to expect: domestic violence, shootings with obvious motive, etc.

In Melissa G. Moore’s book Shattered Silence: The Untold Story of a Serial Killer’s Daughter, she spends just as much time detailing her stepfather’s abuse as she does discussing the issues she has with her own father, serial killer Keith Jesperson. Robert (the stepfather)’s abuse is much more conventional than Jerperson’s serial killing. Robert is physically abusive toward Moore’s mother, and lashes out furiously at the children over incredibly mundane things such as taking leftovers out of the fridge that he had been planning to eat. After Moore’s
mother placed a restraining order against him, he showed up to their house, broke in, and began to violently assault Moore’s mother. It’s harder for me to believe that Robert is deserving of empathy or capable of growth than it is for me to think those things about some of the serial killers I’ve spent the semester researching. Why?

Serial killers are inherently living a double life: the life they show on the surface, that keeps them out of prison for however long it lasts, and the secret life of murder that they learn to hide. As a result, it’s easier to see them as two separate people: the “normal” version and the “evil” version (note that I don’t say good and evil, because often, the “normal” version has plenty of flaws—just flaws that are more typical, and easier for the average person to conceptualize).

We empathize because we cannot understand, and because we cannot understand, we find it difficult to believe what we intellectually know to be true. Put simply: I think we afford serial killers more empathy (and general interest) than other criminals because a piece of us is in denial that this person really committed that act.
The Intersection of Empathy and Contempt

Throughout the early episodes of Mindhunter, I noted a tendency that some of the police officers had to utilize empathy as an excuse for contempt. As Holden explains why he believes it’s important to understand the workings of violent criminals’ minds, many of the cops scorn him, calling them “monsters” and insisting that some people are just crazy. Much of this is under a guise of sympathy for the victims. Perhaps “guise” is too strong of a word; the sympathy for the victims is authentic, but they seem to genuinely derive pleasure from mocking and scorning the criminals in the same breath. In *Mindhunter*, the circumstances are different than most of the other cases I’ve observed. These are people with no personal connection to the crimes, and it’s also one of my first forays into looking at law enforcement officers’ perspectives—most of whom are white and (presumably) middle class men. Much of their criticism seems to come from a place of superiority that resembles high school bullies more than a caring defense of the victims. This is one of the more authentically sadistic approaches I’ve seen. I’ve used the word “sadism” in other contexts throughout my writing and discussions thus far, but that hasn’t been quite right, because I’ve been referring to revenge sadism—a desire to watch someone suffer *as payment* for suffering they caused you/someone you care about. The way many of these cops express contempt seems much more impersonal, like this cruelty could extend further into other people, but they project it onto the criminals because they know that won’t be societally frowned upon.
Sometimes, though, the role of empathy for victims is authentic in inhibiting any sort of empathy for the offenders. When Holden and Bill talk to a former LAPD officer about trying to understand the psychology of criminals, he brushes them off with disinterest that evolves into disgust. There is an unidentified killer on the loose, and this man seems far more focused on catching him than understanding him (not necessarily seeing the overlap between the two—which is a crucial oversight). His empathy for the victims clouds any interest he may have in trying to understand the murderer’s motives. He says to Holden, “This woman was devoted to her child, tried hard, and some stranger came along and[…] What does a broomstick in the ass of a dirt-poor single mom mean?”

The first couple of episodes of *Mindhunter* did force me to pause, and question why I am so dedicated to creating empathy for those who have done the unthinkable. I don’t believe that *everyone* should necessarily share and demonstrate this empathy, but the cops’ reactions (sneering, deriding, mocking criminals of all varieties) is so commonplace that I’m striving to reframe the dialogue around those who commit harm. Which is to say, not everyone has to come down on the side of empathy, or even psychological analysis, but to not even consider those reactions as viable options seems to deny both the criminals and ourselves some sort of innate humanity.
Conclusion

A unique kind of fame derives from being associated with a serial killer. For some, it’s nightmarish, as they realize that the person they’ve loved for years has been a violent killer all along. For others, it’s exciting. It’s someone they knew, but didn’t care enough about to mourn this loss of innocence and devolution into violence. Derf Backderf falls firmly into the latter camp.

Backderf says that the idea for his graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer* came to him almost immediately when the news of Dahmer’s crimes broke to the American public. The two men grew up together, attending high school in the same small Ohio town where they were something close to friends. Close to, but not—this is an important detail. Backderf and his friends were “fascinated by this strange guy” whose sense of humor primarily revolved around throwing fake epileptic fits and mimicking “the slurred speech and spastic tics of someone with cerebral palsy.” In hindsight, Backderf wonders how “Dahmer could get away with such bizarre behavior”—an almost humorously conceited remark, seeing as how he and his friends encouraged and engaged in this behavior alongside Dahmer for the next two years.

Despite innocent claims about catharsis and personal reckoning, I believe that Backderf was at least partially driven to write this book because of the fame (or, at the very least, infamy) he knew it would bring. He’s careful to not only paint Dahmer in a negative light, but also his own perceptions of Dahmer, so he

---

appears to be proximate to the killer, and thus a reliable narrator, without being mistaken for a sympathetic bystander. In an interview about the book, he says that he and all of his friends had “that one moment where we said, ‘holy, wow, there’s really something wrong with this guy.’” In the book, he paints this moment in detail, as Dahmer silently chugs a six pack of beer in a ten-minute drive to the mall. Backderf describes this moment as “disturbing,” and says, ‘my instincts just said, y’know, get away from this guy.”\(^\text{136}\)

With the hindsight that we have, as readers familiar with Dahmer’s crimes, Backderf’s retelling of this moment seems like an ominous prediction of what was to come. But, without knowing what Dahmer would soon become, this reads as a harsh and unsympathetic portrayal of someone struggling with serious alcoholism. On multiple occasions throughout the book, Backderf employs this tactic: explaining something in an eerie or ominous tone that can be seen as foreshadowing, but also could have been a somewhat innocuous action, not at all unique to Dahmer. In one scene, Dahmer goes fishing with a friend of his. The friend tells him to throw back any fish that he catches, but Dahmer instead takes out a small knife and hacks the fish apart into tiny pieces. When his friend, alarmed, asks why he did that, Dahmer responds, “I just wanted to see what it looked like.”\(^\text{137}\)

The drawing on that page is disturbing; Dahmer’s face is cloaked in shadow, and the perspective is as if we are looking up at Dahmer from the

\(^{136}\) Derf Backderf, “My Friend Dahmer,” 47.

\(^{137}\) Derf Backderf, “My Friend Dahmer,” 78.
ground, with him towering over us. We are put in the perspective of the fish—or, more broadly, the victim (see Figure 5).

But I have to wonder, how unusual is it for a high school boy to be fascinated by the internal structure of an animal? Hacking it up with a knife is, of course, inherently violent, but how many children salt slugs just to watch them squirm and die? How many kids cut worms in half because they’re curious to see if they’ll regrow? Backderf’s tales of Dahmer capitalize on dramatized and inflammatory language and visuals. He calls Dahmer “the most depraved serial
killer since Jack the Ripper” and paints the somewhat typical experiences of alcoholism and fascination with dissection as threatening signs of a killer-to-be. Backderf seems to derive pleasure from the story he knows he can tell unlike anyone else, but does so with overwhelming bias. He attempts to establish his credibility as an author by emphasizing the thoroughness of his research tactics and the fact that he chooses not to write about the parts of Dahmer’s life that he didn’t personally know about, like his younger brother, and yet clear subjectivity still seeps into the entire book. Specifically, despite Backderf’s admittance in interviews that “he’d unwittingly played [a role] in encouraging parts of [Dahmer’s] pathology,” the book seems to entirely absolve Backderf of responsibility.138

Comments to this point riddle the novel, ones that relieve Backderf of any personal accountability while still claiming a significant role in Dahmer's high school life. No one, of course, is responsible for the fact that Dahmer became a violent murderer except for Dahmer himself. But Backderf spends much of the book detailing the social conditions that led to Dahmer’s depressed and isolated life, and the feeling that he had no one to turn to when initially battling his violent urges. He ends part one of the book by placing the blame fully on the adults in his life:

I’m often asked why I never spoke up. Why I didn’t try to get Dahmer help. You have to remember, this was 1976. You never “narced” on a

classmate. It simply wasn’t done. Besides, my friends and I, we were just clueless small-town kids, wrapped up in our own lives. And none of us had a hint about what was really going on in his head. A better question is… where were the damn adults? (Backderf 66-67)

While Backderf’s explanation makes sense, I still find it telling that he offers no caveats, nor any form of regret for not speaking up sooner. Instead, he pushes the blame onto the absent adults, who likely had reasons of their own. Backderf says that the teachers never took a particular interest in Dahmer, figuring that next year he would be someone else’s problem. But to an extent, isn’t that what teachers do with all students? They had no way of knowing that the quiet, antisocial boy in their classroom was struggling with angry parents in the midst of a failing marriage and repressing unspeakable violent urges. His parents most certainly neglected him, too focused on their own fights, but even had they been more attentive, I highly doubt they would have been able to see their son for what he would become, nor do I think he would’ve told them what he was feeling. This is speculation, of course. But what is certain is that Backderf is quick to push accountability onto the adults in the situation, but refuses to even criticize the behavior of himself and his fellow teenagers. Backderf says that, before joining his group of friends, Dahmer was a “social [invalid]” who lacked friends and
usually went unnoticed— and that those who did notice him “had little but contempt” for him.\textsuperscript{139} He moves on from this quickly, and doesn’t bring up this treatment when attributing part of Dahmer’s outcome to circumstance. He again insists that only “the adults” are to blame.\textsuperscript{140} This is a clever tactic, though, in elevating the reader’s view of Backderf and his other friends. By demonstrating how cruelly other students treated him, Backderf and his friends’ mocking and joking, while sometimes insensitive, looks friendly and inclusive by comparison.

It seems that Backderf attempts to victimize himself, claiming he was wary and even fearful of Dahmer, despite having substantial social power over him. He tries to paint this social power as fear, by framing what was arguably bullying as instinctive apprehension. Backderf and his friends eventually came to call themselves “The Dahmer Fan Club,” with Dahmer as their sort of mascot. Their inside jokes derived from his behavior mocking epileptic fits, and they created jokes where he was the punchline, such as sneaking him into yearbook photos for clubs he was not a part of. To Backderf, he “didn’t register as a real person,” just as a running joke.\textsuperscript{141} And yet, he still claims that what warned him off of Dahmer was some eerie premonition, rather than just typical teenage exclusion and not wanting to be friends with “the weird kid.” Backderf recalls, “Dahmer was never asked to join us [to hang out after school], even though I drove right past his

\textsuperscript{139} Backderf, My Friend Dahmer, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{140} Backderf, My Friend Dahmer, 11.
\textsuperscript{141} Backderf, My Friend Dahmer, 119.
house on the way to pick up some of the other guys. Some instinct warned me off. I was always wary of Dahmer.”

He appropriately puts an extreme amount of blame on the adults in Dahmer’s life, who neglected and overlooked his misery. In particular, his parents’ tense and unhappy marriage put a massive strain on him, worsened by the fact that they were unaware of the effect their fighting had on their son. But he emphasizes that there was “something creepy” about Dahmer that “some instinct” warned him to stay away from. I find it telling that Backderf finds it so easy to blame the adults for turning a blind eye to Dahmer’s depression and unusual behavior, but claims that his “instincts” were somehow able to predict that this man could have turned into a serial killer, rather than admitting that perhaps ostracizing and excluding the “weird kid” at school may have detrimented his mental health further. Backderf craves association with Dahmer, but only from afar. He doesn’t want to claim too close of a proximity, nor is he willing to take accountability, even when he forces it upon others. If we return to Figure 5, the image of the fish, this wariness is evident, yet apparently misplaced. I don’t believe that Backderf found Dahmer authentically frightening. I think he found him strange, perhaps even unsettling, but avoided him out of simple high school politics, rather than any sort of intuitive self-preservation instinct.

But perhaps this need to exclude was exacerbated with time. Unlike those who develop relationships with killers after they have been caught, there is no

---

142 Backderf, My Friend Dahmer, 60.
143 Backderf, My Friend Dahmer, 60.
shame in Backderf’s association with Dahmer. As a result, Backderf is able to frame himself as celebrity-adjacent while still scolding Dahmer’s actions—but only if he is careful not to frame himself as a friend or defender of this man. “Pity him,” Backderf says in his foreword, “but do not empathize with him.” This may be a reminder just as much for himself as for his audience. It’s often harder to entirely reject someone who you know personally than to do the same to a complete stranger, even if their behaviors are identical. For most readers of My Friend Dahmer, this is likely the first time they are viewing Dahmer as a person, a child, outside of the killer he became. For Backderf and his friends, the opposite occurred. They were forced to rewrite all of their memories of a seemingly harmless, albeit strange, classmate after learning who he became. So perhaps it’s understandable that Backderf skewed too far in the direction of dislike, afraid that otherwise, he will turn into someone seduced by a killer’s sympathetic background. While he still seems to lack some self-awareness, he is at least aware enough to avoid the trap that many others succumb to: viewing a villain as a friend.

Granted, he doesn’t completely vilify Dahmer, either. Reviews at the beginning of the book feature words and phrases like “empathy,” “sympathy,” and “how sad you feel for the monster himself.” Without that nuance, it’s unlikely that the book would have been very interesting at all. The fascination with serial killers, be it romantic, platonic, or even voyeuristic, is strengthened when they become people in our eyes, rather than inhuman killers.
This perspective of killers as people is one I have always skewed toward, naturally wary of language like “monster” and “crazy” as a means to dismiss. I wonder if my inclination toward empathy has some biological root: if humans, to a degree, are conditioned toward kindness and warmth because that’s how we develop safer, closer-knit communities.

There’s a good chance that I’m wrong about that, and that my drive for empathy and compassion was rooted in a naivete that cannot wrap its head around all-encompassing evil, or malicious intent without guilt. Throughout the process of writing this paper, I’ve begun to dismantle that naivete, having read interviews and researched quotes from killers who speak of their actions proudly and callously. Empathy, I have come to realize, can be a strength, but it can also be an Achilles heel. The part of me that desperately wants to believe that empathy is innately human is the same part of me whose curiosity is never satisfied, the part of me that is constantly asking why?

But another part of me, just as authentic, derives a morbid sort of enjoyment from books and shows about serial killers, isolated from any academic pursuit. I criticize Brian, and even Backderf, partially because I see myself in them: desperately attempting to explain the inexplicable, to claim proximity to the heinous, to justify an inarticulable fascination that is rooted deep within me.
Bibliography


Benwell, Max. “What is a softboi? You might be dating one—and you don’t even know it.” September 5, 2019, [https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/sep/05/softboi-what-is-it-instagram-q-and-a](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/sep/05/softboi-what-is-it-instagram-q-and-a).


Jiménez, Jesus and Alan Yuhas. “Bob Saget, Comic Who Starred in the Sitcom


