

One

What Is Serial Murder?

Introduction

Serial murder has become a topical area of immense interest to many in the United States. Of course, we believe there is no country in the modern world that does not have serial killers in their populations. We certainly found that to be true in the research we have done for this third edition of this book. To that end, we have added a separate chapter on serial killers in foreign countries.

When we wrote the initial edition of *Serial Murder* in 1985, we were examining the extant serial murderers of the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. At that time, murderers such as David Berkowitz, team killers Ken Bianchi and Angelo Buono, Ted Bundy, Albert DeSalvo, and Ottis Toole emerged as the most infamous characters in the study of this emerging form of fatal violence. In the first edition, we ignored the early serial killers of this country, as well as those who killed sequentially for the mob, the so-called hit men. We included them in the second edition, however. In this third edition we have elaborated on the serial killers who kill for monetary gain, including those who kill for organized crime.

What was the state of serial murder in the United States in the 20th century? Estimates were wide and varied. For example, the media reported that there were as many as 5,000 victims in this country in the early 1980s. The FBI estimated that the numbers were much less. The FBI's estimate was based on interviews with unnamed incarcerated serial killers. The FBI interviews done by the initial researchers for the FBI—Roger DePue,

John Douglas, Roy Hazelwood, Robert Ressler, and others—were never made public, and the validity of their conclusions is suspect. Their estimate of the extent of serial murderers at that time was 35. The true number was and is still unknown. It is not 5,000, but certainly it is more than 35. We believe we can safely say there are at least two serial killers per state; in some states there are many more than two. But again, we will probably never know conclusively.

The “Night Stalker”

Richard Ramirez

Born 1960

Why will the truth never be known? Serial killers practice their fatal acts of predation in a much different manner from traditional killers. First, their acts are not usually done in the course of other crimes. The acts also usually are not committed in the company of others, although there are a few serial killers who are team killers. Serial murderers do not usually call the police and tell of their crimes, although this sometimes happens. For example, one man in prison for murder, Edmund Kemper, after undergoing therapy sessions for several years and serving a sentence which in effect guaranteed him to spend the rest of his life in prison, confessed to authorities that he had killed at least nine people (Riley, 2009). Had he not confessed, would we ever have known? Probably not.

The point to this whole discourse is that there are many serial killers who are unknown and will never be known. Many will die with their secrets buried with them, be it in prison or at liberty living in a quiet neighborhood.

Degrees and Definitions of Terms

Although we are concerned mainly with the term *serial murder*, other important terms are used in this book that need to be defined: *homicide*, *murder*, *the degrees of murder*, *manslaughter*, and *justifiable and excusable homicide*. After we finish these definitions, we turn to the terms *serial murder*, *mass murder*, and *spree murder*, which are three forms of *multicide*.

Homicide or Murder?

For the purposes of this book, the terms *homicide* and *murder* are used interchangeably, but let us define both. Quite simply, murder is

the unlawful killing of one human being by another human being. Animals do not commit murder. As for homicide, Dr. George Rush, a noted criminologist from California, in his *Dictionary of Criminal Justice* (1997), defines *homicide* as “any unlawful killing.” The key word here is *unlawful*.

When is it lawful to kill? Killing in self-defense is one example, and capital punishment and killing in times of war are others. While it is not the purpose of this book or this section to enter into a debate on abortion, some use it as an example of homicide while others would say that abortion is the lawful taking of a human life.

The “Hillside Stranglers”

**Ken Bianchi and
Angelo Buono**

Bianchi: Born 1951

Buono: Born 1934—**Died**
2002

Degrees of Murder

Offenders can be charged with murder in the first degree or murder in the second degree. What are the differences in these degrees?

With *murder in the first degree*, the killing itself must be contemplated ahead of the act of the murder itself. The person who plans the murder is thought to have the mental ability to plan to kill. Murder in the first degree is not spontaneous.

The term *murder in the second degree* contains the element of malice beforehand but without premeditation or deliberation. There are two types of malice: *expressed* and *implied*. *Expressed malice* occurs when one person kills another in the absence of any apparent provocations. *Implied malice* occurs when a murder results from negligence on the part of the killer.

Manslaughter

Manslaughter is the killing of another without malice or intent to do harm. When one kills someone without malice but with the intention to murder, such as in the heat of passion, the charge is *voluntary manslaughter*. When one kills someone without malice but with an element of negligent behavior, the charge is *involuntary manslaughter*. An example of involuntary manslaughter is if someone drives while intoxicated and unintentionally kills someone.

The “Freeway Killer”

William Bonin

Born 1947—**Died** 1996

Justifiable and Excusable Homicide

There are occasions when someone takes the life of another human being and the crime is considered *justifiable homicide* or *excusable homicide*.

The “Campus Killer”

Ted Bundy

Born 1946–Died 1989

An example is self-defense, when a person uses fatal violence when her life is in danger. *Excusable homicide* is the unintentional killing of another human being. There is no malice aforethought and no negligence involved in the act itself. The person acts in a prudent fashion in the same manner as any other person in a similar situation. In the dis-

ussion in this book of any type of homicide, the elements of justifiable or excusable behavior, manslaughter, and the degrees of homicide will always come into the conversation.

Serial Murder: A New Threat?

When we read the chapters on serial killers and serial killers in foreign countries, we will note that serial murder is not a new or strictly American phenomenon. In our history, for example, which only goes back a few hundred years, there have been killers who have killed in a sequential fashion but who have not been called or termed serial killers. For example, “Billy the Kid” was an icon of the early West. A gunfighter, he was born in New York City in 1859 and moved to New Mexico when his widowed mother remarried when he was a young child. He turned to the life of an outlaw, and was alleged to have killed 21 men, one for each year of his short life.

“Billy the Kid”

William H. Bonney or

William McCarty

Born 1859–Died 1881

“Billy the Kid,” whose real name was either William H. Bonney or William H. McCarty, was killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett on July 14, 1881. There are two accounts of the killing of Billy, but in both scenarios Sheriff Garrett shot Billy with two shots from his own gun. In one account, Garrett shot Billy after Billy tried to shoot Garrett. In another account, Garrett shot Billy after Billy tried to stab Garrett. Regardless, Billy died as a young man, a serial killer with 21 “notches on his belt.” “Billy the Kid” is buried in a grave with two of his comrades. There is a single grave marker atop their grave. It is marked with the names of William H. Bonney (“Alias ‘Billy the Kid’”), Tom O’Folliard, and

Charlie Bowdre. The grave marker has been stolen three times since it was installed in the Old Fort Sumner Cemetery in New Mexico. The gravesite has now been enclosed within a steel wire cage to prevent it from being stolen again (Fackler, 2003).

Jesse James was another outlaw of the early West who lived a life of crime. Through their involvement in bank robberies, stagecoach robberies, and even robberies at a state fair, James and his brother Frank James, along with other James gang members, spread terror throughout Missouri in the late 19th century (Yeatman, 2001). How many people did Jesse James actually kill? The number is unknown, but certainly it is more than the baseline number of 20 offered in an official definition (Wellman, 1986). Jesse James died when he was 34 years old, shot by a former member of his own gang, Robert Ford, as James adjusted a picture on the wall. Ford had been involved in secret arrangement with the governor of Missouri. He had been offered a \$10,000 reward for the killing of Jesse James but received only a portion of the reward. Ford was later killed in a bar he owned in Colorado in 1892 (Ries, 1994).

Yet another early serial killer in the Old West was John Henry “Doc” Holliday. Born in 1851, Holliday was a dentist, gambler, and gunfighter (Roberts, 2006). Probably most famous for his allegiance with Wyatt Earp and his long-lasting but stormy relationship with “Big Nose Kate,” he admitted to killing 50 men. Doc Holliday died in bed of complications from alcoholism and abuse of laudanum (tincture of opium), which he took to ease his tuberculosis. He was 36 when he died (Tanner, 1998). Holliday is buried in a fenced-in plot in Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

There are other “nontraditional” serial killers who murdered untold numbers of victims but whom we never think of as serial killers. Mob figures in Chicago, New York, Boston, and some other large cities in the 1920s and 1930s certainly emerge as serial murderers. Frank Abbando, Albert Anastasia (of Murder, Inc.), Al Capone, Carlo Gambino, and Abe “Kid Twist” Reles are all names that bring to mind numerous and untold numbers of dead victims. Their motivation to kill was different from most modern-day serial murderers, but not too unlike that of serial killers “Billy the Kid” and Jesse James.

Serial Murder

Serial murder is the killing of three or more people over a period of more than 30 days, with a significant cooling-off period between the

killings (R. Holmes & S. Holmes, 1998a, 1998b, p. 18). Historically, there have been important contributions to the identification of what serial murder actually is and how it differs from mass murder and spree murder. Some of these books are those by Eric Hickey (*Serial Murderers and Their Victims*, 2006), Steve Egger (*Serial Murder: An Elusive Phenomenon*, 1991), Elliot Leyton (*Hunting Humans*, 1986), and Philip Jenkins (*Using Murder*, 1994). Levin and Fox (*Mass Murder*, 1985), and R. Holmes and DeBurger (*Serial Murder*, 1988) were all received as landmarks in serial murder literature. These academics were the early leaders in the examination of serial murder and serial killers. New books have been published on the cases of more-recent killers. Tomas Guillen's *Serial Killers: Issues Explored Through the Green River Murders* (2007), for example, tells the story of tracking Gary Ridgway, the "Green River Killer," through the last 23 years. Steve Egger has updated his *The Killers Among Us* (2002). There are many other new books by those who are interested in the serial killer phenomenon.

Regardless of the irrationality of suspected personal vulnerability, serial murder has attracted and continues to attract immense attention. The killers in the late 1970s and the mid-1980s became household names: David Berkowitz, Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas, Wayne Williams, and others became famous. Books have been written and movies made. The killers have become societal icons. But now, 20 years later, those killers have been replaced by others: Gary Ridgway (the "Green River Killer"), Dennis Rader (the "BTK Killer"), Angel Resendez (the "Railroad Killer"), and many others. We have moved into the 21st century with new killers. Soon, they will be replaced by others, who will become the new "stars" of the serial killer world.

The "Candy Man"

Dean Corll

Born 1939—Died 1973

As we have moved from the 1970s to the present time, we have learned many things. We have learned, for example, that not all serial killers are alike. There is a general and erroneous belief that all serial killers are alike and that they kill for the same reason: sex. In fact, they differ not only in their motives, but also in their anticipated gains. In other words, serial killers murder untold numbers of victims to realize different types of satisfaction.

In our research we have found that motivations and anticipated gains will vary from one type of serial killer to the next. There are

several types of serial killers, including visionary, mission, hedonistic, and power control serial killers (R. Holmes & DeBurger, 1985, 1988; R. Holmes & S. Holmes, 1998b). The distinguishing factors that separate one type of killer from the others are the anticipated gains and the killer's basic motivation. In other words, what does a serial killer hope to realize from the killing of the victims? Is it nonmaterial (psychological) or material (money)? Will there be psychological or sexual payoffs from the abduction, killing, and disposal of the victims, or will there be pay for the murder of a selected person from one who wished the victim dead? In such a case, the serial killer may be a professional hit man. Richard Kuklinski, known as the "Ice Man," reportedly killed more than 100 people; many of the murders were paid hits (Bruno, 1993). Eric Hickey adds another category of serial killer: the "place-specific" killer. This is not a separate type based on psychological aspects, but on geographical location of the murder act itself.

An initial distinction to be made among serial killers is predicated on geographical mobility. Does the killer live in an area and kill in that same area? If that is the case, then the killer is geographically stable. If the person travels and kills, then the person is geographically transient. There are a variety of examples of the two types of serial killers predicated only on spatial mobility. Ted Bundy and Henry Lee Lucas were transient types. Dennis Rader and Gary Ridgway were stable types.

Myths of Serial Killers

When any social and cultural phenomenon occurs, rumors and myths immediately arise. This has happened with serial murder. The bad thing about these myths is that they often are responsible for spreading incorrect information and information that regresses the understanding of the issue itself. Tom Harris's books, especially *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1989), have awakened a dormant interest in this dark side of human behavior that we all possess. With his characters Francis Dolarhyde and Hannibal Lecter, we can see the abyss from a safe perspective, the abyss developed from the dark brain of Harris. Both authors have shared time and meals with Tom Harris. As I (RMH) sat across the table from him and watched him drink his wine, I wondered where these words of fatal violence and personal atrocities reside. My wife and Steve's mother once said to him, "I don't read any of your books. They scare the

Salem, Oregon 97110

July 28th, [redacted]

Dr. Ronald M. Holmes
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky 40292

Dear Dr. Holmes,

In writing to you this day, it is my hope that you will consider meeting with me sometime in the future, in connection with the research you are doing. My name is [redacted] I am a convicted murderer, and am presently incarcerated with [redacted] life-term, at the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem, Oregon. I came to know of your name, as well as about your present research efforts, through a letter you wrote to an acquaintance of mine, [redacted] who shared your letter and vice versa with me. Telling him that I was interested in contacting you, his [redacted] gave your address, raising no objection to my writing to you, although your initial correspondence was to him.

My reasons for wanting to speak with you are varied, and in part selfish, but still, I think, commensurate with your research needs. I will probably spend the rest of my life in prison for the heinous crimes I committed — the torture, murder of [redacted] young girls — and it is a gut-wrenching thing to have to face the fact, daily, that she destroyed not only the lives of my innocent victims, but pretty much my own life as well. For six years now, she's endured the brutally painful exercise of facing myself, facing what I allowed myself to become, re-living all the dark, twisted, and ugly pathways I followed in becoming a destroyer of human life. Not a moment of that has been easy or pleasant, and, despite much reflection and self-examination, in no way do I claim to be an expert on the psychology of my own past. But I do know the feelings that I sought, I know what I was feeling when I made the most crucial and damning decisions of my life, and I know what I was thinking and feeling when my aberrations manifested in the form of violent, destructive behavior.

I have shared little of these reflections with anyone, Dr. Holmes, very simply because she had no previous desire to do so. But, over the past two or three months — especially after having read numerous articles pertinent to Dr. Jerry Kerk's anti-psychopathy efforts — I have felt the need to "spill

Letter From an Unidentified Killer

[REDACTED]
Salem, Oregon 97110

my guts," so to speak, in the hope that what I can share about myself may be "d toward some positive end, even if it be by way of a woefully negative example. And it is for this essentially self-centered reason that I write to you today.

I write with no illusions about what you can do for me, and I expect nothing. You are a professor doing research, and I am a convicted murderer who is fully aware that any future involvement with you will gain me nothing in the way of freedom or treatment. For reasons of personal peace of mind, however, I am willing to cooperate with you, should you decide that I might be of help to you.

If indeed you do decide so, I would ask that you observe only one restriction, this being that you hold my name in strict confidence, protecting my identity in all your future conversations, as well as in any future publications. As for everything else I share with you, you have my express permission to use all of it as you will. Honor this single restriction, and I, in turn, assure you that I will be totally honest and forthcoming in responding to your every question.

In closing, I wish you good luck in your research, and hope that I may hear from you directly in the near future.

Respectfully yours
[REDACTED]

Address:
[REDACTED]

Salem, Oregon 97310

Letter From an Unidentified Killer (Continued)

Note: In this letter, a suspected serial killer has written wishing to be interviewed. Intelligent, charming, and charismatic, this person and Ronald Holmes have carried on a 10-year relationship. From the killer's writings and the interviews, valuable information has been gathered in an attempt to get inside the mind of a killer.

hell out of me." He replied, looking over the rim of his wine glass, "They scare the hell out of me, too!"

What do we know about serial killers? How much of our knowledge is gleaned from the myths of serial killers? How much is true and how much is false? Why do we "need" to know all about the serial murderer? And how much do we know that will help us in the detection and apprehension

of the serial killer? What did we learn about serial killers from Ted Bundy? When we interviewed Bundy in Florida before his execution, how much truth did he tell us? What did he not share with us? When we talked with Douglas Clark, the "Sunset Strip Killer," how much of what he told us was true? When Danny Rolling, known as the "Gainesville Ripper," was apprehended, how much of what he told the police was the truth? What about Gary Ridgway, the "Green River Killer"? From these and others comes information that we hear and interpret as truth, but that can also be the source of myths and misinformation.

There are some basic myths about serial killers that we need to address:

- **Everyone is at danger from a serial killer.** There is a common saying that one stands a better chance of winning the lottery than falling victim to a serial killer. This is probably true. This is especially true if one is not the same type as the "average victim" or "the ideal victim" of a serial murderer. For example, the very old are usually not victims of serial killers. Young men in their prime years and in good physical condition are usually not victims of serial killers. It is also true that serial murderers are more prevalent in certain areas of the county, thus making one living in those areas more likely to be a potential victim to serial murder. For example, if one examines the literature, one will see that serial killers are more prevalent in the coastal states than in inland states, and more prevalent in urban than rural areas.

- **The Federal Bureau of Investigation is involved with all serial murder cases.** Actually, the FBI is relatively rarely involved in the investigation of a serial murder case. On television, we see shows such as *Numbers*, *Cold Case*, *Dexter*, and *CSI* featuring scenarios where the FBI rushes in and solves the serial murder case when the local police, because of incompetence or inexperience, are unable to resolve it. The same can be said of many fictional books, e.g., the James Patterson books that feature his character Alex Cross, or others like the aforementioned *Red Dragon* (T. Harris, 1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1989). From these and others of the same ilk, we get false messages. The interested reader could do research on her own and find that Ted Bundy was apprehended by a local Pensacola police officer (Rule, 1980), that Wayne Williams in Atlanta was apprehended by the local authorities (Dettlinger & Prugh, 1984), and that David Berkowitz was arrested by a New York detective (Leyton, 1986; Terry, 1987). And the list goes on. The FBI has done little if anything to clear up this myth, and why would they want to?

- **Serial killers all come from abusive backgrounds.** This could be an easy explanation for the serial killer mentality. While it might stand true for many serial killers, it is by no means true for all. Ted Bundy, for example, was a victim of illegitimacy (Rule, 1980). However, there are many males as well as females who are illegitimate and who never resort to violence, much less serial murder. Bundy remarked to us during an interview that he was never abused in any fashion despite what some reports may have said about him. There is no verifiable evidence that would substantiate the claim of abuse. And anyone saying “all” is a sign for caution.

- **All serial killers kill for sex.** We know now, at this stage of the scientific investigation of serial killers, that many serial murderers kill for purposes other than sex. Take, for example, women who kill sequentially. Aileen Wuornos killed for money. Nannie Doss killed for money (C. Wilson, 1998). Genevieve Jones killed for power and control (Elkin, 1989). Richard Kuklinski killed for reasons of creature comfort (Bruno, 1993). Cleo Green killed because spirits commanded him to do so. Joseph Kallinger killed because a head, “Charlie,” commanded him to do so (Schreiber, 1983). There are many who do kill for sexual purposes, of course, but even with these killers sometimes there is a mixture of a sexual and other motivations.

- **All serial killers abused animals and set fires as children.** In some instances, serial killers exhibit these kinds of behaviors when children. Jeffrey Dahmer, for instance, tortured and killed animals as a child (Davis, 1995; Martingale, 1993). Ottis Toole admitted to being a pyromaniac as a young boy, an interest that followed him into adulthood. These interests are certainly not present in all serial killers, however. Also, there are some people who were abusive to animals and showed an interest in fires who do not show an emerging interest in serial murder (Henry Ott, personal interview, Louisville, Kentucky, March 17, 2008).

- **Serial killers come mainly from the United States.** Even this commonly held belief is untrue. In our research for this book, we were amazed at the number of serial murderers from Europe, especially the United Kingdom. If we take into account the differences in population, there are as many serial killers in England as in the United States. We also found that serial killers are present in every country we examined. There may be a problem in the reporting of serial killers in certain countries, but every continent, with the exception of Antarctica, is well represented.

Here are some other myths concerning serial murder (Egger, 2002, pp. 14–16):

- **There is an epidemic of serial murder in the United States.** In the early to mid-1980s, some people believed that as many as 5,000 victims a year fell prey to serial killers (R. Holmes & DeBurger, 1985). This created a pandemic fear, although this number was unsubstantiated by reliable research and data. How many are there? As we said earlier in this chapter, no one knows.

- **Serial killers are inspired by pornography.** The day before Bundy was to be executed, he was interviewed by Dr. James Dobson, a media minister of the Christian group Focus on the Family. During that interview, Bundy was careful to state that pornography fuels the flame of fantasies and aberrant thoughts that already exist in the psyche of the serial killer. Dobson later spread the word that Bundy stated that pornography plays an integral role in the formation of the serial killer. There is a tremendous difference between these two points of view.

- **Serial killers want to be caught.** There are really few examples of serial killers who wish to be apprehended, although Edmund Kemper comes to mind as such a serial murderer. He called the police after his last kill and turned himself in (Cheney, 1992; Damio, 1974; West, 1974). Timothy Krajcir confessed that he killed nine women in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Illinois, Kentucky, and Missouri. He added that he only confessed because after therapy in prison he felt bad about what he had done (Wolfson, 2008). One serial killer stated that he felt bad about the murder of two 12-year-old girls. He said, “I feel bad, but don’t let me out. I’ll do it again” (Authors’ files). Ted Bundy told us that he did not go to Florida to kill so that he would be caught and thus stop his killings. He said that the reason he went to Florida was that he knew Florida had the death penalty, and if he was caught for his crimes he would be executed. He added, “The greater the risk, the greater the thrill” (Authors’ files).

There are other stories and myths concerning serial killers. We could write an entire chapter just on this topic, but suffice it to say that myths cause confusion and spread little truth (Egger, 2002, p. 14). Perhaps as the science and knowledge of serial murder increase and findings become more valid, we can move beyond the half-truths and rumors of the serial killer.

Conclusion

Although murder and manslaughter captivate the attention of most Americans, the particular type of murder—serial murder—is of particular concern. Within the following chapters, we will address such topics as the serial killers, the role of victimology, investigation, and female serial killers within each type of serial killer. Motives and gains will be examined that lend themselves not only to academic examination, but also to identification of distinguishing characteristics that lead to identification and apprehension or resolution.

Case studies will also follow in various chapters. These case studies will highlight types of serial killers to illustrate the serial murderer himself or herself, as well as the unique traits and elements of that particular type.

We do not think that serial murder will stop. The world is too violent a place for that to happen. What we can hope, though, is that society can develop a better knowledge base of the etiology of the serial murderer, early identification of a serial killer personality development, and better scientific and investigative techniques to apprehend this offender before more victims fall prey to his cruelty. This is what we hope for, and maybe this is all we can hope for. Will we always have the killer in our midst? Perhaps that is our destiny.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you believe to be the most accurate number of serial killers active in the United States today?
2. How many victims do you believe fall prey annually to serial murderers in the United States?
3. Who was the first serial killer of which you were aware? Under what circumstances did you learn of this person?
4. Are the serial killers of the 21st century different from those of the 1970s and 1980s? If yes, in what ways?
5. Discuss the most common anticipated gains of the male serial killer and of the female serial killer.

