How serial killers captured popular culture

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Three famous on-screen serial killers: Joe Goldberg from Netflix's You, Jeffrey Dahmer from Netflix's Dahmer, and Dexter from Showtime's Dexter. Credit: Photo illustration: Monica Jimenez

Serial murderers aren't all the same. The FBI distinguishes between "disorganized" serial killers, who strike without planning or logic and often don't cover their tracks, and "organized" killers, who do plan and

cover their tracks, often cleverly and meticulously.

Beyond that, Tufts lecturer Brett Nava-Coulter teaches his students about four basic types:

- Missionary serial murderers, such as Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, kill to accomplish a social or political goal.
- Visionary killers suffer from psychosis, or a break with reality, and often believe an external power is making them kill people. They are often "disorganized" in the FBI classification.
- Hedonistic killers end lives mainly for the pleasure of the experience, whether that's lust, thrill, or comfort.
- Power/control-oriented killers–well, you can probably guess.

Despite the popular image of the white male killer, many serial murderers in the U.S. are in fact not white, Nava-Coulter said. They just don't make headlines as often because serial killers usually target people of their own race and non-white victims generally attract less media interest than white ones.

Serial killers are overwhelmingly male, though. Female serial killers, or "black widows," who often kill multiple spouses to collect insurance money or successive children to remove competition for attention, make up only a small percentage of the group, according to Schaffhausen. (Killing one's spouse and children at the same time is technically not serial murder.)

And it's actually the least recognized serial murderers who kill in the greatest numbers, Schaffhausen said: medical killers or "angels of death," trained health care professionals who deliberately end their patients' lives for pleasure, power, or a misguided desire to end pain.

Go to a costume party this Halloween and you might see the black plastic

butcher's apron donned by the titular killer of Showtime's Dexter or the stalker's baseball cap and black backpack that Joe Goldberg wears while trailing the objects of his affection (and murderous jealousy) in Netflix's You. Both shows are hits: Dexter was recently revived for a ninth season and the fourth season of You premieres in a few months.

You might also see costumes inspired by real killers whose lives are popular on screen. There's the brown leather jacket Zac Efron wore in Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil and Vile to portray actual serial killer Ted Bundy (a role later played by James Marsters and Chad Michael Murray), or the signature aviator glasses of real-life murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, sales of which have surged since this fall's Dahmer–Monster became Netflix's second most-watched show ever.

"You can get serial killer trading cards. There are T-shirts, there are calendars, there's a whole massive industry of folks who are fascinated by this," said Tufts lecturer Brett Nava-Coulter, who has taught the course The Sociology of Violence for nine years. "I'll be honest with you, I include serial murder in my syllabus because it draws students to the class." ("Serial killer" is the popular term, but "serial murderer," which specifies the intent to take a life, is more accurate.)

Novelist Joanna Schaffhausen has found that people want to read stories about serial killers. "They're highly marketable," said Schaffhausen, who majored in psychology at Tufts. "I'll get reviews from people who say, 'I wouldn't have picked this [book of yours] up if it didn't involve a serial killer.'"

Why do so many of us love to watch, read about, collect images of, and even dress up as people who kill other people—specifically, at least three and often many more people, one after another, in a ritualistic spree? (To learn more about the type of serial killer the media tends to portray, and where this figure fits into the larger serial murder

landscape, see sidebars.) And why are our depictions of such killers, whether fictional or real, getting steadily more nuanced and relatable?

The answer lies partly in our individual psychology, but also in our culture and our history as a nation, according to Schaffhausen and Nava-Coulter.

A modern phenomenon

People who commit multiple murders have been around since the beginning of the human race, but the figure we know as a serial killer is a unique creation of the modern age, said Nava-Coulter.

"In the ancient world, you probably met a hundred people in your lifetime. You had your clan or tribe, and there just weren't a lot of strangers," Nava-Coulter said. "Serial murderers are able to operate because they prey mostly on strangers."

Modern society has given rise not only to anonymous crowds that serial murderers can blend into, but also to countless marginalized or vulnerable people who are easy targets–think homeless people, drug addicts, or sex workers. "The groups of people who are the most ostracized, that's who serial murderers tend to prey on the most," Nava-Coulter said.

The United States in particular, although it comprises only 4 percent of the world's population, has birthed more serial murderers than any other country, Nava-Coulter pointed out. Nobody knows exactly why, but possible explanations include features of American society such as easier gun access and poor mental health treatment. "There's also an interesting argument that we are a sociopathic culture to begin with. And so that then leads to serial murder," Nava-Coulter said.

Psychology of an organized serial killer

Does the organized type of serial murderer most commonly featured in the media suffer from any particular psychological disorders? Tufts lecturer Michael VanElzakker, who teaches Psychopathology, weighs in.

Antisocial personality disorder

Some criteria: Failure to conform to laws and social norms, hurting or mistreating others, lack of remorse

Example: Richard Kuklinski, who was likely a combination of antisocial and paranoid personality disorders. "He killed many people, but was not the kind of serial killer featured in movies that commit ritualistic murders," VanElzakker said. "Rather, he made a career out of his lack of empathy as a contract killer."

Although many serial murderers score high on psychopathic traits such as lack of empathy and lack of anxiety, Van Elzakker said, this disorder is linked more to low-level, impulsive crimes as opposed to planned, manipulative murders.

Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD)

Some criteria: Preoccupation with details, rules, and order to the extent of missing the point of an activity, perfectionism that interferes with task completion, devotion to work at the expense of leisure and friendships

Example: Dennis Radar, who called himself BTK (bind, torture, kill). Radar was thought to have OCPD as well as sexual sadist paraphilia, a condition in which someone experiences sexual arousal in response to

the pain or suffering of others

"With the sort of ritualized murders that people sometimes associate with the term 'serial killer,' OCPD is one that sometimes happens," VanElzakker said. "Of course, the huge majority of people with OCPD do not hurt others."

Borderline personality disorder

Some criteria: Poorly developed self-image, intense and conflicted close relationships, frequent mood changes, risk-taking, hostility

Example: Jeffrey Dahmer, diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, schizotypal personality disorder, and a psychotic disorder—although many could debate those diagnoses, VanElzakker said.

Schizophrenia

Some criteria: Delusions, hallucinations, incoherent speech, diminished emotional expression

Example: Serial murderers categorized as disorganized by the FBI

Someone with schizophrenia is much more likely to be the victim of violence than the perpetrator, VanElzakker pointed out. "If a person with schizophrenia does commit an act of violence, it is more likely to be that they are scared, hallucinating, or delusional rather than having some kind of a devious plan they are acting out," he said.

Serial killer as celebrity

One element of modern society, especially in the U.S., helps explain the rise of serial killers and our attraction to them. "That very term and all the things we think of when we hear 'serial murder'—that's a consequence of the invention of media and celebrity," Nava-Coulter said. "Serial murderers are infamous. They are celebrities in and of themselves."

Jeffrey Dahmer is a prime example of the celebrity serial killer, with the new Netflix series depicting him as young, intense, and compelling, and spawning countless admiring and pitying social media posts. "We glorify them in a way that I think is despicable," Nava-Coulter said.

"And they are really drawn to that. The desire for notoriety through being a nefarious person can be a motivating factor."

Just like well-known actors or singers, famous serial killers have fan followings, said Schaffhausen, who has spent countless hours researching serial murder and interviewing victims and their families. Usually women, these fans send their chosen murderers gifts and underwear, and plead to marry them. "For whatever reason, some women find them sexy," Schaffhausen said.

These fans might have fallen for the superficial charm of the sociopath, Schaffhausen theorized, or they might be desperate for any kind of attention or human connection. And a growing number of them want to believe that the murderers have been gravely misunderstood and are worthy of our pity and love.

"There's a push right now to think some of these guys were framed or were innocent all along," she said. "Especially lately as conspiracy theories are really having a moment, humans don't want to accept the truth for what it is. They want to see some bigger truth."

Mystery of a real-life monster

Besides tapping into our culture of celebrity worship, serial killers play into our attraction to the macabre, which jolts us out of the mundaneness of life, Nava-Coulter suggested. "It's a thrill we can't access day-to-day, and there is something alluring about that," he said. "And the more grisly something is, the more it exits the realm of reality and enters the realm of fantasy, and the more fascinated we are by it."

We consume serial killer stories for the same reason we watch scary movies on Halloween, Nava-Coulter suggested: to spark excitement, shock, and fear. "They are Freddy Krueger, they are Michael Myers," he said, referring to the metal-clawed villain from Nightmare on Elm Street and the masked boogeyman from the Halloween movies. "They are real-life monsters."

When introduced into a work of fiction, murderers immediately increase the dramatic tension, making any story a matter of life and death, said Schaffhausen, who includes killers in several of her novels.

"Serial killers are inherently high-stakes from the get-go," Schaffhausen said. "In a traditional mystery where someone is found dead, you want to find out who did it, but you don't really fear for anybody else in that room. But with a serial killer, anyone could be a victim."

Serial killers are also compelling because despite their high exposure, much about them is still unclear. "You can have layers of mystery with a serial killer that you maybe can't with others," Schaffhausen said. Even after their capture, their motives and the number of people they've killed may be uncertain–which plays into our fear of the unknown and gives us the ultimate puzzle to solve. "What causes a serial killer? Where do they come from? How do we stop them? The short answer is, we don't know," she said. "And we definitely want those answers, and we'll make

them up if we don't have them."

The monster on our side

That impulse to make up the answers might explain the growing number of shows that position serial murderers as the protagonist and place us within their point of view.

Dahmer and Extremely Wicked may glamorize serial killers, but Dexter and You take it a step further, humanizing them as we hear their internal monolog and feel their emotions. They are orphans who experienced early trauma; loving partners who protect women and care for children; and model citizens who bring donuts into the office and tenderly repair old books.

"We like books. We like hanging out in a bookstore, which is what Joe does. And so when people in the show come in and deface the books, we're like, 'Oh no–go get 'em, Joe!'" Schaffhausen said. "You're like, 'You know, Joe, this isn't great. But also, she seems like kind of a bad person, so maybe she has it coming?'"

The people Joe kills are usually destructive people who manipulate and abuse others. And Dexter's victims are almost always murderers who have killed brutally and gotten away scot-free. "So even though what they're doing is wrong, we root for them. We don't want them to get caught," Schaffhausen said. "We want them to continue their mission."

Nava-Coulter calls this the "monster who fights for our side" phenomenon. "The lure of that is here's someone who's going to protect us, who is himself a bad person, but who is going to use that to get at those other bad people," Nava-Coulter said.

The desire to punish wrongdoers as severely as possible runs deep in

American society, Nava-Coulter said, pointing to the country's use of the death penalty, which has been abolished in many other nations. "It exists as a way to give the ultimate punishment to someone who we've decided has committed a very heinous crime," he said. "And so here, essentially, Dexter is the state, killing someone who has aggrieved society in some way."

Transgression and redemption

It is telling, however, that Joe kills people whose main offense is getting in his way. The victims haven't killed others or done anything that would merit a death sentence—and yet fans of the show still root for their killer. This suggests that it's not justice we're most interested in, but retribution. "Maybe we've had a passing thought of, 'God I'd like to run that person over with my car,' or 'I wish someone would kill them,' but we would never really do it," Schaffhausen said. "Well, a serial killer goes out and does it."

People are drawn to serial killers because they are the most extreme version of the antihero—think meth cook Walter White from Breaking Bad or the cranky, pill-popping star of House, M.D.. "They're transgressive," Schaffhausen said. "They're doing things that most of us feel morally bound not to do—even if it's just being rude or aggressive to get what we want."

By breaking moral and social rules, onscreen serial killers allow us to experience that power and freedom vicariously—and to see it rewarded. "They succeed because of their antisocial traits, and there's something cathartic for us in watching that," Schaffhausen said. "And I think there's also a tension because part of us is waiting for that to backfire."

There's also a tension that comes from the awareness that we are aligned with a serial killer—and that we are enjoying it. "We ride along with the

serial killer and we kill with them, and then we have to sit there with that, like 'How do I feel about the fact that this is my window into this story?'" Schaffhausen said. "You get this moral ambiguity, which is very interesting and compelling. That's why these shows and books are so beloved."

We watch serial killers in order to become them—and yet we also watch in the hope that they will become more like us. "You're waiting for the antihero to see the error of their ways and embrace goodness fully. You're always secretly hoping they're going to come around," Schaffhausen said. "And you'll see that glimmer—they do a good thing, show a genuine emotion, make a human connection—and it's like, 'They can be saved!'"

That hope is one of the most powerful forces in fiction, according to Schaffhausen: "The one thing Americans love harder than anything else is a redemption story."

Reality check

Still, Schaffhausen finds the media's obsession with serial killers to be "a little creepy," she said. "Like, do we really need five new Ted Bundy specials every year? There's really nothing new to say."

That's why many of her mysteries don't involve serial killers—and when she does include serial murder in her plots, she sticks to what she's found in her research. "I like to write what's true, and it's challenging because there's a lot we don't know," she said. "There's never any satisfying answer in my books, 'Well, this is why he was like this.' And some readers definitely don't like that."

Schaffhausen also tries to keep the focus on the victims. The main character of her Ellery Hathaway detective series was inspired by a

woman who escaped Ted Bundy and helped investigators find him; the killer, on the other hand, is almost never seen. "There is a downside to glorifying the bad guy," Schaffhausen said. "They're not something to aspire to."

Nava-Coulter agreed, pointing out that sensationalizing serial killers can spawn copycat killers, with others committing similar murders to achieve that same fame. "It's natural for people to be interested in serial murder for lots of different reasons, but you should avoid media that sexualizes, sensationalizes, or in any way glorifies the murderer," he said.

The fascination with serial killers also often ignores the real-life consequences of their actions, he said. "We are insulated from the fact that these are real people they murdered, folks who had families, hopes, dreams, and a path in their life. And they were robbed of that by someone who committed a heinous act for their own profit or sexual pleasure."

Nava-Coulter understands the popular fascination with serial killers and enjoys true-crime shows himself, he said. But he said we should focus on shows and movies—fictional or not—that honor victims and their loved ones, aim for accuracy, and never let viewers forget the truth.

"I think it's incumbent upon the writers, producers, and those who are creating media around this to remind the viewer at all times, 'You know this was real, right?'" he said. "'And what they've done is unimaginably awful.'"

Provided by Tufts University

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