A COMFORTABLE EVIL:

FEMALE SERIAL MURDERERS IN AMERICAN CULTURE

A Thesis in
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by
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Abstract:
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This is a dissertation about the ways in which American culture understands the behavior of women who commit serial murder. Despite what most people think, female serial homicide is a distinct criminal phenomenon accounting for perhaps as many as 30% of all serial murders. These killers are women who murder secretly over the course of months or years and claim on average more victims than their male counterparts do. They are successful for three reasons: First, cultural mythology holds that serial murder is a crime committed only by men. Second, female killers use traditional gender stereotypes to conceal their crimes. Third, American culture seems to have a great deal invested in believing that, by virtue of their gender, women are simply not capable of committing the crime.

For the most part, the materials used for this dissertation are available in the public record. They derive from interdisciplinary research into theoretical and empirical criminology and sociology, print and broadcast journalism, and true-crime, literary, and cinematic treatments of the topic in American culture. This dissertation suggests that female serial killers in American culture are good wives, good mothers, faithful, submissive girlfriends and lovers, competent nurses and healthcare professionals, good babysitters, responsible landladies, vulnerable hitchhikers—ordinary women who pervert the gender stereotypes they seem to exemplify. Like their male counterparts, they violate
cultural standards not only for appropriate social behavior but also for appropriate gendered behavior. Stories that account for their criminality reflect a divisively gendered cultural ethics that is defined by the ideals of agency. These women are criminals, but the agency they might exercise—erotic, powerful, enraged—is subsumed by the more compelling issue of how they have violated the cultural understanding of womanness. In one way or another, these women have been overwhelmed by their own physiology. Stories about female serial killers are based on an ethics that holds the murderers juridically responsible for their crimes and, perversely, finds them dammingly irresponsible as women.
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Consider:

How I needed a comfortable evil to prevent my knowing what I could not bear to know.

—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
Chapter One: Gender and Ethics in American Culture

In American culture, serial murder generates among the most consistent and constant of social mythologies about evil. Tales of the crimes transcend historical contexts; they mark the nadir of human endeavor and they explain the behavior of individuals who are in every other way lost to humanity. These are moral stories. They allow members of a society to assign motives to their behavior, to recognize responsibility, and thus to create sensible patterns of action from the chaos of ordinary life. Because serial murder is so extreme in its violation of ordinary life, it dictates very clear texts that define specific social mores threatened by criminality. These texts also unite the community against a common and clearly understood enemy. As a crime, serial murder might be rare, but American society needs those particular parables to define what it is not as a culture and, by extension, what it is.

Stories about serial murder reveal as much about American culture as they do about the murderers themselves. These are stories about an “epidemic of violence,” about gender, goodness and evil, biology, psychology, and a culture that seems simultaneously victimized and predatory. The storytellers range from professionals trained in the study of serial homicide—academics, scholars, criminologists, physicians, psychiatrists—to professionals trained in the commodification of cultural phenomena for popular consumption—journalists, members of the entertainment industries, mass-market entrepreneurs. Whether “true” stories or fables, their works combine to form a group of master narratives about serial murder that are undergirded by a subtext about gendered
ethics in American culture at its best and at its worst. They offer us a way to interpret good and evil, right and wrong, based on how we construct what makes men and women fundamentally different from one another.

The classic moral stories assigned by the culture to serial killers describe lone stalkers roaming around the country, striking their victims at random, torturing them, killing them, and desecrating their corpses to fulfill inconceivably perverted sexual fantasies. These are killers who violate cultural beliefs in the sanctity of young women and children. They are monstrous and sane. Above all, of course, they are male and have achieved the dubious status of legends in America: Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Jeffrey Dahmer; Oscar-winning Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter from the movie “The Silence of the Lambs” and Patrick Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho*—all indistinguishable from a host of others in fact and fiction. These are classic serial murderers, stereotyped in coherent social narratives assigned to them by academics, criminologists, journalists, writers, and film-makers. The texts of their stories describe the depth of male deviance; their subtexts define an equally conventional norm of maleness. And as Philip Jenkins notes, they developed within the context of specific “historical moments” in American culture, during the early 1980s and again during the early 1990s, when stories about serial killers could be appropriated to advance the causes of various claims-makers and interest groups both conservative and liberal:

In both the periods during which serial murder was constructed as a major social problem, the offense became particularly valuable for diverse ideological causes. Some were conservative, moralists who saw the crimes of a Bundy or Gacy as emblematic of the sexual hedonism and excess of the recent past. Other activists, however, were located on the left of the political divide, at a time when liberals or radicals saw themselves as particularly embattled because they were campaigning against what were seen as
profoundly unsympathetic conservative administrations at [the] national level. In terms of making and filtering claims about serial murder, these active groups included feminists, during times of uniquely tense gender politics; gay rights militants, and ethnic minority leaders. However ironically, claims made by conservative bureaucratic agencies appealed across a broad political spectrum, but including many left-liberal groups, all of whom had a vested interest in stressing the scope and harmfulness of serial homicide.²

Hence, the vested interests of these cultural agents spawned a useful and persistent mythology about serial murder as an “epidemic” carried by men and inflicted mainly upon women and children, representing America at its worst—violent, vulnerable, and savvy. It gave rise to swift and decisive countermeasures: initially, the FBI Behavioral Sciences Unit in Quantico, Virginia, followed by other profiling agencies both federal and private; legislation designed specifically to protect the victims of serial murder—women and children; and criminological, medical, and psychiatric research specifically focused on male serial killers. Not incidentally, the serial murder epidemic also generated within the popular media a lucrative moral controversy to negotiate via films, television movies, docu-dramas, true-crime accounts, novels, and memoirs. There were serial-killer comic books and serial-killer trading cards to sell; there were serial-killer records to play, taped interviews with Edmund Kemper, Ted Bundy, Henry Lee Lucas, and Kenneth Bianchi billed as “honesty about violence”; and for a while during the early 2000s, there was even an eBay web site devoted to the sale of “Murderabilia,” memorabilia of one sort and another from various notorious murderers in prison. The epidemic provided American journalists with an apparently inexhaustible topic guaranteed to draw readers and viewers. Such a wealth of information, analysis, theory, and merchandise provided an influential text of truth and
fiction, which contained a quiet and dangerous subtext: something at the heart of the culture had gone bad—the proof was everywhere—and it must be made good.

My own interest in women who commit serial murder began with a much larger question about ethics and gender. If stories about serial killers explained the worst in male deviance, what were the parallel stories about women? By extension, what norm of femaleness might lie in the subtexts? At the top of this spiral, who were the good female heroes I could not name? Initially, the literature on serial murder offered very nearly nothing about women who committed the crime. When I could find the stories at all, they appeared in fragments about faintly ridiculous, hormonally imbalanced female psychotics: Belle Gunness, Indiana queen of her own folklore a century after she committed her murders; Genene Jones, the nurse who worked “the death shift” in the pediatric ward of a San Antonio hospital; elephantine Martha Beck and her skinny lover Raymond Fernandez, the “Lonely Hearts Killers” who made it into film noir; and, more recently, Aileen Wuornos, the gun-toting “first” female serial killer whose story earned Charlize Theron an Oscar for her performance as Wuornos in the 2003 film “Monster.” With several others, these were the exceptions that somehow proved the rule: men commit serial murder, and women do not. A few women might kill a lot of people over time, but these women were best seen as anomalies in the context of the crime.

The problem was that, during the course of my research, similar anomalies kept surfacing until I had a body of work that clearly constituted a criminal phenomenon recognized by only a few scholars and criminologists. Even more disturbing was the absence of the crime within the cultural context. Why weren’t more of these women’s stories making headlines for journalists in newspapers and causing controversies between publishers of fiction? Did Theron’s Oscar suggest that American culture might be formulating a more coherent and realistic story for women who commit serial murder? If the stories were in fact being told, what kinds of language had obscured the crimes and the
larger implications of what these women had done? What type of norm defined what the culture had come to understand about women and deviance? In a much broader sense, if women do not commit serial murder, what else do they not do? It seemed to me that the stories of this statistically tiny percentage of women might offer some answers to these questions precisely because their behavior represents the nadir of female criminality in our culture, a baseline example of the very worst our gender can offer and our cultural response to that. Like stories about heroes—or heroines—their stories matter because they are uniquely and profoundly representative, constant over time, and thus illustrative of core beliefs about women that we hold sacred.

Two of the many problems with sorting through the data on female serial killers are that their behavior is not framed as erotic or lustful, and that their murders in many cases seem to be understood, tacitly, as rational acts themselves or as acts that can be explained rationally. Such rationality implies, by definition, that a multiple killer recognizes at least two moral codes: the social mores and norms that define right and wrong by law and by ethics—our cultural ethics—and the separate code of the killer, which applies only to her homicidal behavior. That her behavior is so far beyond ordinary morality is less important than her mimicry of that morality.

In the public sphere, the female serial killer murders at least three people—on average many more than three—and continues quietly to murder over the course of years. She is deceitful, nearly invisible to her would-be victims and the surrounding culture, and cloaked in the raiment of her gender. That this raiment befits traditional female stereotypes, and that most female serial killers murder within the contexts framed by their social roles, is hardly surprising. What better way to subvert the social moral code than to use its rules as weapons? In a nice irony, the transgression of moral boundaries by these female killers evokes the perfect paradox of being female in American culture: the woman recognizes and defines her Self in terms of very rigid gender constructs that determine not only acceptably
socialized behavior but criminality as well. In other words, our cultural ethics also define an ethics of gender.

The crux of the matter for female serial killers involves the social construction of female deviance as an integral part of cultural expectations of the gender. It is not the monstrousness or fiendishness of the murders that affronts the culture, but rather their shocking lack of deviance. These women seem ordinary. The murders they commit shock because they are somehow ordinary in the ways they fulfill conventional stereotypes. It is therefore very difficult to impose a social narrative on the female serial killer when, despite her voicelessness, she seems to embody a quite rational story of her own. The paradox is that her own story is simply a story of a type. The woman herself is subsumed by the comfortable categories that organize female behavior—the working girl, the caretaker, the lover/wife, and the mother.

Because these are culturally engendered stereotypes, they contain a moral dimension that governs right and wrong ways of fulfilling a type. As female serial killers are understood within American culture, their most interesting feature seems to be that, because their crimes appear to be rationally motivated, they are also peculiarly moral crimes, initiated and executed within the parameters of conventional social norms and values. Their violations of womanness are perversely and particularly female, with the caveat that “female” serial murder is largely defined and understood according to the male paradigm. So it is, then, that female serial murder lacks a sexual element, since sexual perversion has been regarded traditionally as an exclusively male domain. And so it is, too, that female serial murder is always explained in terms of gender stereotypes, which accord the crime a predictable set of causes and motives, fit neatly into a Durkheimian analysis of social stresses, and, most remarkably, define the murders as what they are not.

Of the women whose stories follow, only Aileen Wuornos would qualify, arguably, as a “classic” serial killer. The publicity her case attracted, from scholars, people in print and
broadcast media, a documentary film-maker, and finally the major motion-picture industry, makes her case unique in the field of female serial murder. As a type of killer, however, Wuornos is not unique. In 1995, Rosemary West was convicted of the murders of ten young women in Great Britain. In a nation customarily mesmerized by graphic media accounts of serial murder cases, the West case might have been expected to generate in American culture a spate of features about similar cases, and about the larger issues of missing children, media ethics, and shared serial murder (since she collaborated with her husband in the murders). There was no dearth of material; several American cases should have set a precedent for news coverage. Between 1947 and 1949, Martha Beck and Raymond Fernandez swindled at least four and probably closer to twenty women out of their money and then murdered them. Charlene and Gerald Gallego sexually tortured and murdered nine women and one young man between 1978 and 1980; Carol Bundy and Douglas Clark murdered six people in 1980; Judith and Alvin Neelley in 1982 molested, tortured, and murdered at least twelve people; and Faye and Ray Copeland murdered five transient farmhands in Missouri as part of an insurance scam between 1986 and 1989. The infamous Manson family murdered during the 1960s and the less famous Bender family a century earlier. Pairs of women killed: Catherine May Wood and Gwendolyn Gail Graham, Lafonda Fay Foster and Tina Powell, along with their well-known male counterparts, Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, Leonard Lake and Charles Ng, and Dean Corll and his partners.

Perhaps part of the reason the West case did not generate headlines in the United States was the simple fact that it was not an American case. Perhaps, at a more complex level, the American press was already overwhelmed with headline stories and did not need the West case to sell newspapers and air time. Between February 1994 when the first body was found and November 1995 when Rosemary West was convicted and sentenced in Great Britain, American culture was confronting its own very difficult news stories, which seemed to reveal a frightening arbitrariness to the structure of social reality. Unabomber suspect
Theodore Kaczynski was arrested in early April 1994, after eluding federal authorities since 1978. One year later the nation watched and kept vigil as 167 victims, including nineteen children below the age of five, were recovered from the bombed ruins of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

By far the biggest crime stories of the year involved the trials of O.J. Simpson in Los Angeles, California, and Susan Smith, in Union, South Carolina. On June 13th, 1994, Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were stabbed to death outside Ms. Simpson’s home in a wealthy suburb of Los Angeles; two weeks later Ms. Simpson’s former husband O.J.—football hero and television personality—was arrested and charged with their murders. The “trial of the century” eclipsed nearly all other news until the verdict (not guilty) was announced in early October 1995, earning more than twice the air time on network news than the second-leading story—Bosnia—that year.³

In October 1994, Susan Smith strapped her two young sons, Michael and Alexander, into their car seats, aimed the car at a lake, and let them drown. She accused a “black carjacker” of abducting her children at gunpoint and tearfully appealed on national broadcast media for their return, until she confessed to their murders in early November. Like the Simpson case, Smith’s captured not only headlines but the uncertain conscience of the nation. Patricia Williams, a professor at Columbia Law School, wrote for the Nation (13 March 1995, before either trial had concluded):

What are these stories we are telling ourselves? We can’t sequester the public imagination, but shouldn’t we be just a little more careful in how we rush to mythologize our fear, our demons, our mental inventions? Shouldn’t we be a little more careful about digging ourselves deeper into the entrenchment of our division? ... If Susan Smith does die in the electric chair and O.J. Simpson doesn’t, perhaps we as a nation could refrain just a moment before intoning that white women die for their crimes while black men who commit
double homicides don’t. Perhaps we could just make room for a host of competing considerations such as: A woman who kills her children is always more abhorred than a man who kills his wife in the so-called “heat of passion” and/or kills a man he thinks is his wife’s lover. The death penalty is administered variously by state governments, differently in South Carolina and California. Seeking the death penalty is a matter of prosecutorial discretion. O.J. is a star, dadgummit, and nobody likes to see American heroes executed. If O.J. were “Willie” Horton, he’d fry. And if Susan Smith had murdered almost anyone but her own children, she probably would not.4

American culture had been confronted with an ugly picture of itself in these stories. The questions they raised about race, gender, social class, and economic status threatened the status quo of the American Dream and the formulaic assumptions that had kept it intact. In that sense, the West case and its violation of every cultural norm held dear by Americans and Britons alike could not have garnered the kind of media attention that might have led to a deepening understanding of the crime. Americans were trying to understand their own incomprehensible social tragedies.

Even popular culture offered little relief when it came to crime and killers at that particular moment in American history. If anything, the disorders of social realities were reflected in fiction and film, most notably by Joyce Carol Oates’s novel Zombie, published in October 1995 to generally good reviews, and Oliver Stone’s more controversial movie “Natural Born Killers,” released in the summer of 1994. In Zombie, Oates creates the fictional Quentin P., a character based on serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. The story develops from his point of view as a series of journal entries detailing both the banality of his days and the horrors he inflicts on his young male victims. With only Quentin P. as the narrator, Oates offers a view into a world devoid of hope; her protagonist deceives his grandmother, his father, his parole officer, and his psychiatrist. He is successful largely because, in their resolute refusal to face facts, they allow him to be.
Stone’s film “Natural Born Killers” is an indictment of American culture and its glorification of violence. The main characters, Micky and Mallory, are “spree” serial killers who achieve celebrity status courtesy not only of the media within the world of the film, but of the theater audience watching outside and rooting for the pair to beat the system that, according to Stone, created them in the first place. That the audience, too, is part of that system underscores Stone’s point: in American culture, homicidal violence is a commodity. The more formulaic its appearance, the better it will sell. Micky is the young, charismatic, wild-eyed man who typifies the “average” serial killer; his companion Mallory is the predictably skinny and devoted disciple in love with her man and prepared to die—or kill—for him. Like the world of Zombie, the world in which “Natural Born Killers” are bred offers no hope of redemption for killer or victim. Although the movie might have suggested a cultural webbing of murder, media, and sex interwoven with some effort to understand the crimes and the criminals, outrage instead—within the world of the movie and without—took the place of dangerous questions. Rosemary and Fred West, the living versions of Micky and Mallory, would simply have been more of the same to American audiences.

The cases of women like Stella Williamson who murder children—their own biological offspring, their adopted children, and children in their care—illustrate most graphically the gendered ethic that governs cultural narratives about women and serial murder. Until very recently, post-industrial cultures had reduced infanticide to a choice between two evils: either the reproductive physiology of a woman made her peculiarly vulnerable to the commission of child-murder, or the fragile equilibrium of her psyche rendered her similarly vulnerable. In either explanation, the mother of the child was seen as the victim of forces beyond her control—suffocations, drownings, and poisonings notwithstanding—and the culture ignored, or perhaps willfully accepted and reinforced the inherent irony: that the woman was not only a criminal but also a victim of her Self, her own mind and body.
This view created a great deal of confusion within the medical, psychiatric, and judicial fields. There exists today no consensus here in the United States or, to a lesser degree, in Britain and other industrialized cultures, on how to view infanticide. Some scholars define it as behavior related in some physical way only to childbirth, some as the evidence of severe chemical imbalances in the brain that induce psychosis, and some as the inevitable result of a strangely Marxist (and purely female) alienation from modern life. Current clinical research into postpartum psychosis, often cited as a major contributing factor in cases of maternal infanticide, suggests that a direct puerperal link between depression and infanticide might not exist.

The problem is further complicated by the question whether a difference exists between the mother who murders one child and the mother who murders more than one. Is infanticidal behavior understood in terms of victim statistics? The nature of the crime makes accurate data nearly impossible to gather, and contemporary views on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome as either a devastating tragedy or a handy phrase for the inexplicable deaths of infants has made American research into the issues dangerously political. Is a single infanticide more accurately understood if it seems to be the result of physiological or psychological disorders? Are repeated infanticides better viewed as some form of extremely uncommon (how uncommon?) criminal behavior? Does the murder of one child somehow predispose a mother toward more murders?

There are no clear answers to these questions. Medical, psychiatric, and judicial experts have not even an approximate idea of how frequently infanticide occurs in our culture, nor why it occurs. Women like Stella Williamson, Waneta Hoyt, Marie Noe, Marybeth Tinning, Martha Woods, and Diane Spencer, each of whom murdered their children over the course of years, are faced with confused, misinformed, or uninformed juries. Adrift in a sea of contradictory information and inconsistent judicial concepts of
infanticide, the juries are left with an impossible task: how to define the behavior of these women, and where to place them in the social context.

Cultural narratives about women who murder children reflect the ethics of a society that must adjudicate the criminality of these women without implicating itself in their guilt. If the biological imperative is invoked without exculpating the woman, then a series of child-murders can be regarded as the result of female aberration and not the responsibility of a society blinded by gendered ethics. American culture seems so passionately devoted to the ideal of a “maternal instinct” that protects children that infanticide is frequently omitted from research into multiple homicide, and has not been commodified by the entertainment industries. Except for the odd true-crime account, and John Carpenter’s film farce, “Serial Mom,” which features a murderous Kathleen Turner resorting once to pot-roast-as-lethal weapon, murdering mothers do not sell.

In cases of women who murder children, the morass of possible motives and mitigating circumstances addresses the moral and ethical, and therefore gendered, needs of the culture, rather than the crime itself. Juxtaposed with the labyrinthine O.J. Simpson case, also permeated with gender and racial issues at every level, Susan Smith’s case was quite straightforward and was resolved during three quick weeks. Her confession to the murders, combined with her stepfather’s admission that he had sexually abused her for years, simplified the judicial process and provided both the jury and the public with method and motive, and therefore a clear path to justice. She was given life imprisonment rather than the death penalty because, like the Menendez brothers and Lorena Bobbitt, she too was a victim. One wonders whether such rhetoric would have saved a male who had committed exactly those murders.

Should Aileen Wuornos, Rosemary West, and Stella Williamson be regarded as serial killers? If so, they alone are responsible for the deaths of at least twenty-two people since 1923. How many other victims might be “found” if women like these were included in
an empirical analysis of serial homicide? How many deaths might be prevented? The classification of these women’s crimes involves more than semantics. Because empirical data on their crimes is compromised by so many theoretical issues—who are the exceptions and who the rules?—the stories told about these women transcend racial, ethnic, religious, and economic categorizations. They are parables about the gender of American ethics.
Notes


4. Patricia Williams, “America and the Simpson Trial,” *Nation*, 1995, 260(10):337–340. William Horton was a convicted murderer imprisoned for life without parole in 1974 and released on his tenth weekend furlough in the summer of 1986; he did not return to prison that weekend. He was later convicted of assaulting Clifford Barnes and assaulting and raping Barnes’s fiancee Angela Miller ten months after his escape. During the 1988 presidential campaign, incumbent George Bush and the Republican party used Horton as an example of the dangerous liberalism of Democrats like Michael Dukakis, the opposing presidential candidate from Massachusetts, who supported the furlough program. In his own words, Horton was portrayed by Republicans in their ad campaigns as a “racial stereotype: big, ugly, dumb, violent, black.” See Jeffrey M. Elliot, “The ‘Willie’ Horton Nobody Knows,” *Nation*, 1993, 257(6):201–205.


Chapter Two: Serial Murder in America

As rare as the crime is in America—it accounts for at most about 2% of all homicides each year in the United States—serial murder excites an extraordinary degree of fear and fascination in the culture. Within the last twenty years it has been defined, labeled, and quantified by academics, criminologists, print and broadcast journalists, and members of the entertainment industries as a distinct criminal phenomenon that periodically reaches “epidemic” proportions. Statistics most frequently cited during the last fifteen years or so by print and broadcast media confirm this view: according to law enforcement officials, about thirty-five or forty serial killers are active each year in America and claim among them somewhere between four and five thousand victims. In other words, each of the thirty-five killers murders more than one hundred people a year.

If such figures were accurate, then an American obsession with serial murder would be warranted. But research by academic criminologist Philip Jenkins showed that, although there might be about thirty-five serial murderers active each year, they would more likely kill among them somewhere between three and four hundred people, and not the thousands that had been suggested. Obviously no number, however correct, mitigates the facts of these deaths. But also impossible to mitigate is the disproportionate amount of interest that serial murder commands in the culture.

A few academic criminologists—Philip Jenkins, Eric Hickey, Elliott Leyton, Jack Levin, and James Fox, among others—had begun to sort through the myths of serial murder by the late 1980s. Some asserted that women might account for somewhere between 8% and 30% of all serial murders committed in America. Some developed lists,
encyclopedias, and statistical analyses specifically focused on female serial murder. In 1992, even the Behavioral Sciences Unit of the FBI had attempted a comprehensive accounting of female serial murderers active between 1795 and 1992. Whether much of this research clarified points at issue in the cultural context is controversial.

The problem begins with the definition of serial murder, first formulated and articulated during a 1983 Senate Subcommittee hearing on Juvenile Justice as “patterns of murders committed by one person, in large numbers with no apparent rhyme, reason, or motivation.” A four-member panel offered testimony in support of a “Violent Criminal Apprehension Profile” (VICAP) to be established at the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI. Created by Pierce Brooks, a veteran police officer with substantial experience in cases of serial murder, VICAP was meant to facilitate serial murder investigations at the national level. The first witness to testify at the Subcommittee hearing was a woman who has produced a virtual true-crime popular library on the careers of several serial killers. As a one-time acquaintance of Ted Bundy, Ann Rule brought a unique perspective to the issues involved. When asked by Senator Arlen Specter to define the serial killer, Rule explained that “the serial murderer is—I should not say a man, but it invariably is a man, someone who kills one after another, sometimes a month apart, sometimes years apart.... I have yet to come across a female serial murderer unless you consider the female poisoners who do get away for years and years.” Rule’s testimony, which did not provide room for a female poisoner such as Dorothea Puente or Velma Barfield, did provide the first step toward widespread cultural acceptance of the term “serial killer” as gender-specific.

Pierce Brooks’ VICAP profile was based on that same concept of the term. He suggested the following crimes for analysis by VICAP:

- Most murders by mutilation, dismemberment, or torture
- Murders with violent sexual trauma
• Attacks on victims who survive criminal assaults that fit the VICAP crime pattern
• Missing children when there is evidence to believe the child has been kidnapped or will be harmed
• The mysterious disappearance of any person when there is substantial proof of foul play
• Unidentified bodies when the manner of death has been determined to be a homicide

Some serial killings fit Brooks’ profile. The majority do not, most notably the large dark figure of medical serial murders noted by Philip Jenkins. Very few serial murders committed by women would fit the profile, since most women do not mutilate, dismember, torture, sexually traumatize, or kidnap their victims. But the profile, along with Rule’s testimony, is more interesting for its subtext. Poison is among the most common weapons of female serial killers, and Rule acknowledged not only that fact but also that these women “get away for years and years” with their murders. Still, these women were not considered “serial” killers. Among the other witnesses testifying at the Senate hearing were John Walsh, whose six-year-old son Adam had disappeared two years earlier, and Florida senator Paula Hawkins, who campaigned actively for the rights of children and abuse victims. Walsh would learn later that Henry Lee Lucas’s partner Ottis Toole had murdered Adam. This could only confirm what Pierce Brooks had already proposed.

The VICAP computer system began operating in 1985 but, two decades later, the terminology it depends on remains as muddy as it was then. Even specialists in the analysis of serial murder have been unable to agree on a definition of the crime that might apply to both male and female serial killers. The myth still seems to dominate, despite research by a host of scholars that has shown persuasively that the social construction of the typical male serial murderer was largely an imaginative refinement of a more banal
reality: that male serial killers do not typically stalk their victims; that in most cases neither their behavior nor evidence at the crime scenes reflects conventional notions of sadism or sexual perversion; and that they tend not to roam around the country in search of victims.

The FBI came up with thirty known female serial killers for the years 1795 to 1992, hardly a significant figure when compared to their list of 435 male serial killers. But given the problems of definition, the figure seemed unreliable. Eric Hickey had counted thirty-four active between 1821 and 1988. Kerry Segrave included only twenty-five American female serial killers in her book *Women Serial and Mass Murderers: A Worldwide Reference, 1580-1990* (1992). Michael Newton came up with 183 for *Bad Girls Do It!* (1993). Omitted from or alternately classified in most tallies were cases of repeat maternal infanticide, cases that involved women and men killing as teams, and “baby-farmers” active during the 18th and 19th centuries in America.

Research methodologies complicated the matter. The FBI had used two very different sources to compile its list of female serial killers: one was Eric Hickey’s academic text published in 1991 and the other was a search of wire service reports dating from 1977. The theoretical agendas of the agencies involved (academia, print media, law enforcement, and in Newton’s case, popular entertainment) were governed by different criteria and priorities. So, for example, although Stella Williamson’s murders received plenty of coverage in print media in 1980, she did not begin to fit the VICAP definition of the serial murderer the way John Wayne Gacy did. She was omitted not only from the FBI list, but also from Hickey’s cautious analysis of female serial murderers and from Segrave’s reference book.

Like the term “serial murder,” the word “gender” lacks a standard definition in American culture. “Gender” issues dominate nearly every level of social thought, from academically abstract theoretical treatises to popular—and empirical—advertising
campaigns, but whether anyone really knows what gender means, or what it might be, seems open to interesting questions. A few scholars ask whether there actually exists a distinction between “gender” and “sex,” or whether “gender” has not become a meaningless term. These might be debates worth engaging, but the ordinary social construction of reality has not registered more than the concept of two distinct genders, to which can be attributed entirely separate biologies and patterns of behavior. “Gender” is so ingrained in social thinking that it becomes the invisible and even unconscious determinant in the ways theory and research are defined. The fact that Stella Williamson systematically murdered five children over the course of ten years counted less than the fact that she was a mother.

Empirical data on serial murder committed by men and women is compromised not only by fluid definitions of the crime, but by the complicated issue of gender and the way it affects theoretical and empirical research. Accurate statistics and analyses are consequently very difficult to devise. That women do commit serial murder in numbers significant enough to warrant attention seems clear enough, if still controversial. More disturbing is Hickey’s suggestion that, as serial murderers, women remain active longer than their male counterparts, claim more victims, and are less likely to be caught. I wanted to know something about who had been left out of the various tallies, and why. “Who” would be impossible to calculate with finality. “Why” was the heart of the problem.

Serial murder defines the worst version of individual deviance. Its apparent randomness—its lack of narrative coherence—violates not only legislated morality, but the more subjective sense that society is fundamentally safe for its genders. Serial murderers put everyone at risk. When a male serial killer surfaces, the culture responds by placing his behavior within the context of a single criminal phenomenon. His behavior might not be comprehensible in any rational sense, but it can be managed in the social stories constructed by law enforcement, academia, print and broadcast media, and the
entertainment industries. In popular culture, the male serial murderer has become shrouded in myth, but whether fact or fiction, a narrative at least restores the social order of ordinary reality. It identifies victimizer and victim. It lends moral coherence to behavior that is incontrovertibly immoral.

When female serial murderers surface, the social stories of their behavior are quite different from those imposed on male serial killers. Few of the women are perceived with the simplicity that seems to define a Jeffrey Dahmer or a Hannibal Lecter for American culture. A woman is not a “serial killer” but instead an angry lesbian prostitute bent on revenge, a mother suffering from severe postpartum depression, a “Black Widow,” a nurse in the grip of Munchausen’s Syndrome, a greedy landlady, or a bored suburban housewife amusing herself with the murderous version of sadomasochism. American culture requires a different social narrative to explain extreme criminality in women.

A broad foray into literature that addresses criminality in American culture reveals, unsurprisingly, that although gender might govern some narratives, it does so as an oversimplified and often inaccurate moral determinant of social behavior. When Freda Adler and Rita Simon published their books on women and crime in 1975, they brought the issue of gender into the center of theoretical criminology. Written in the wake of the second-wave feminist movement, Adler’s *Sisters in Crime* and Simon’s *Women and Crime* predicted that the rates of female crime would rise as a result of women’s liberation. In theory, women had been emancipated not only from the home, but from repressive social mores that had dictated socially acceptable female behavior. The result of that new freedom, according to Adler and Simon, would manifest itself in every social arena, including criminality. Scholars have since variously declared these claims alarmist, antifeminist, unsound, and potentially well-founded. Such disagreement among criminologists illustrates in brief the central difficulty of placing women into the context of theoretical criminology: no consensus exists among contemporary scholars on even the
most basic issues involving women and crime. The comparison of theoretical or empirical research in criminology requires enormous linguistic compromises from scholars attempting to make sense of the literature.

Most empirical research on women and crime shows that, except for petty theft and prostitution, women commit far fewer crimes than men. Generally, the crimes women do commit are much less serious and violent than crimes committed by men. The rate of female recidivism is also substantially lower than the rate for men. In fact, the numbers are so disproportionate between the genders that some scholars have questioned whether women constitute a statistically significant enough percentage of offenders to justify a body of theory explaining what they simply don’t do very often. In other words, perhaps women are most accurately studied as victims of crime, rather than as perpetrators. Other scholars suggest that gender is perhaps the single most important factor in theoretical criminology. The problem was where to place gender issues in the text and how to treat them. What theory, or set of theories, might explain why—or how—the behavior of women is consistently less criminal than the behavior of men?

These questions are complicated by very real difficulties with the mechanics of gathering data on crime—how much is reported and recorded; how many remain unsolved; and the potential bias women encounter when they commit or report crimes. In Women and Crime: The Life of the Female Offender (1985), Frances Heidensohn outlines three factors that finally account for the “criminal norm.” The first she calls the “iceberg effect”: the amount of reported and recorded crime probably represents only the tip of the iceberg. The second she calls the “dark figure”: of the crimes actually handled by police, only a few are solved, thus leaving “a dark figure of uncleared crimes about which very little detail is available, such as sex, age or social characteristics of the perpetrator.” The third factor involves the potential bias women encounter when they commit or report crimes. Similar problems filter into the corrections systems designed either to punish or
rehabilitate the offenders. Policies can be implemented only when they do not conflict with the economic interests and moral values of larger, more powerful groups. Whether criminologist or criminal, women still do not wield much influence against those larger, more powerful groups, except perhaps as victims.

This critical issue—whether to regard gender as significant or insignificant in the study of criminality—has governed most of the scholarship in theoretical criminology over the last two decades. The debates that have developed from the gender issue are equally important and quite basic to the resolution of the problem. They concern what kinds of crimes women commit, how they commit them, and why. Are women committing more crimes now than they did twenty years ago, or do better research techniques and different judicial procedures account for the apparent rise in female criminality? What, exactly, are the social responses to the female criminal? How is she portrayed to the culture by mass media, and does her media image influence the way she is processed by law enforcement, the courts, and the corrections systems?

Basic controversies over definition also complicate the ways female deviance is understood as criminality. In other words, what counts as a crime? And who is doing the counting? Does the academic research of criminologists carry the same weight in popular culture that an Oscar-winning movie does? Criminal deviance in women can be labeled along a continuum ranging from “immorality” to prostitution, from birth control to abortion-as-murder, or from the “justifiable” homicide of an abusive husband to the “first-degree” murder of that same husband. The criminal justice system must then dispense punishment according to the label, and although the law itself might be impartial to gender, judicial processes are not. The social response to female delinquency favors not criminal sanctions, but processes that reinforce the gender stereotypes of female deviance. Most of those stereotypes involve diagnosed psychosis and consequent therapy of one sort or another, rather than incarceration in penitentiaries. The notable exceptions in these
stereotypes are sexual perversion as psychosis in women, and serial murder as a criminal pathology of women.

The definition of criminality in women and in men is an issue that involves the ways gender is perceived within a society and then translated into theory and research by criminologists. The literature that addresses women and criminology assumes gender as a fact, but rarely defines or quantifies that fact as more than a sex-based difference that illustrates the differences between rates of female and male criminality. More important, much of the literature grows from a theoretical “criminal norm,” which is the standard of criminality established by studies almost exclusively conducted by and focused on men. It proposes that “normal” criminality is the province of men. According to traditional views, women enter that province only as gendered deviants. The rare occurrences of female delinquency, prostitution, abortion, theft, and violent crime are attributed to deviations in the female gender from the “norm” proposed by the male gender. More than one criminologist has questioned the legitimacy of such a “norm” for behavior that is hardly normal for more than half the population of the world. Although it might be acknowledged by scholars as a problem, that criminal norm nevertheless continues to shadow theoretical and empirical research into female deviance.

Whether the criminal norm has been defined in social, psychiatric, or criminological terms, the issue in the debate is less the norm itself than the language used to frame the debate. In much of the contemporary literature on women and criminology, the criminal norm is defined as an oppressive and inaccurate standard devised by the Patriarchy (the State, men in general) to control women and minorities. But more discriminating scholars note that words like “Patriarchy” and “men,” or “women” and “minority,” no longer connote easily defined groups of people. Traditional scholarship notwithstanding, one could argue that they never have.
If the use of language is placed at the center of gendered criminality, then some of
the conclusions of studies like Jane Caputi’s *The Age of Sex Crime* (1987) or Deborah
Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer’s *The Lust to Kill* (1987), which treat “men” as inherently
violent sexual psychopaths, seem as dubious as those of influential studies like Robert
Ressler, Ann Burgess, and John Douglas’ *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives* (1988),
or Robert D. Keppel and William J. Birnes’s *The Psychology of Serial Killer
Investigations: The Grisly Business Unit*, which mirror a VICAP version of the criminal
norm. This is not to suggest that any of this work is useless. Its practical application to
social reality, however, is a perilous venture. Other studies, such as Elliott Leyton’s *Serial
Murder* (2000), an excellent collection of essays by a number of scholars, offer a more
balanced consideration of gender as one component of any serious analysis of serial
homicide.

The lack of a common language in theoretical criminology is complicated by
research methodologies, another set of issues shadowed by the complexities of gendered
deviance. These issues concern how to develop techniques that avoid the problems
associated with norms, definitions, stereotyping, objectivity, subjectivity, and the power
differential between scholar and subject. The central debate concerns quantitative and
qualitative methodologies and is based on gender: Should empirical research on female
criminality be placed into existing theories, or should the research itself be redefined and
theorized only in terms of women? Can the results of research in male delinquency and
criminality be applied accurately to women? The short answer to these questions is yes
and no; some studies of male crime can be applied to women, and others cannot.

Traditional research techniques have been based on the criminal norm established
by studies of male criminality. They involve studies of male juvenile delinquents and
criminals, questionnaires, interviews designed to maintain an objective distance between
offender and scholar, and the clear recognition that the scholar’s research is sanctioned by
the same social apparatus that condemned the offender’s behavior. Often they result in what are termed “quantitative” analyses, or sets of numbers that appear to document some aspect of criminality.

The problem with female criminality and quantitative analyses is not simply that so many studies are undertaken only by men on men. Rather, the problem lies in the assumptions scholars make as they develop their methodologies. Once again, the issue involves the ways gender is defined by those conducting the research. How are subjects chosen for study? Once the subjects have been chosen, are questionnaires constructed in terms of conscious or unconscious biases involving the subjects? Or conversely, does an apparently unbiased questionnaire govern the choice of research subjects? What is meant by “objective” interviewing? How does the perception of power in research influence the scholar and the subject? From the outset, the implication of power in quantitative research places the scholar-as-expert over or against the subjects-as-data.

Unsatisfied with these techniques and the quantitative norm they create, many criminologists have developed different research methods that challenge the validity of conventional methods as well as the statistics they generate. For some, the alternative is “qualitative” work that emphasizes the experiences of the genders and minorities. Like traditional methodologies, this work involves questionnaires, interviews, and statistical analyses, but in most qualitative methodologies the conventional distinctions between scholar and subject become blurred. The goal in qualitative research, therefore, is not objectivity, but a sensitive subjectivity that focuses on the experience of doing research. It is variously termed “transformative,” “integrationist,” and “interactive” and involves a collaboration between scholar and subject.

The debate over qualitative versus quantitative research in criminology is not new, but it has assumed a fresh urgency during the last twenty years because it centers on the issue of gender. Much of the literature in the debate is feminist and geared toward
dismantling techniques that have placed women at the periphery of theoretical and
empirical research. Most feminist stances argue for the inclusion of both genders in new
theories and research, but often the argument dies after a sentence or two. Conventional
feminist scholarship in theoretical criminology is focused resolutely and exclusively on
the ways women have been oppressed by men. Some feminist scholars admit that such
oppression has created in them a greater affinity for female victims than for female
offenders. No doubt their sympathy is warranted, but it also seems precariously close
either to perpetuating the very “criminal norm” that should be revised, or to creating a
separate “norm” as exclusive as the one that has already confounded so many
criminologists.

Whether qualitative research will prove any more successful than quantitative in
eliciting accurate analyses of criminality remains to be seen. Some scholars contend that
qualitative methodologies are truer and more sensitive to the human experience, but that
their very lack of objectivity might compromise the data. How involved do scholars want
to become with their subjects? How does a personal dialogue between scholar and subject
influence the data? Does it create a damaging bias in the scholar or subject? During the
last twenty years, so much scholarly emphasis has been placed on the oppression and
victimization of women and minorities that they begin to seem as voiceless and passive as
they have been in traditional scholarship, an odd echo of Ann Douglas’s influential
argument in The Feminization of American Culture, that somehow women occupy a
strangely sentimental space in American culture that strips them of their own free will.9
That theoretical criminology has discounted the experiences of women and minorities is
indisputable, but it would be a disservice to both genders to ignore the agencies—criminal
and social—that they exercise as individuals in their lives.

Realistically, the cultural resources devoted to serial murder might be put to more
effective use. Philip Jenkins explains:
It might be that a focus on serial murder might have an impact on this type of homicide....accounting for perhaps two or three percent of homicides annually. It might also be that the homicide rate could be reduced still more dramatically by devoting the same resources to (for example) drug interdiction or anti-gang activities. To put the problem in proportion: the total number of victims of serial murder across the United States in a particular year is considerably less than the annual total of homicide victims in Detroit alone. Should resources and activity be directed to a perceived national problem, or might they be better employed in a highly focussed way in one or two major metropolitan areas?\(^{10}\)

As criminologists attempt to answer that question, they must sort through cultural mythologies that complicate their research. Serial murder might be the rarest of crimes but its pervasiveness in popular social consciousness suggests that it also wields extraordinary power as a moral narrative.

In the commercial marketplace, popular treatment of men, women, and criminality draws from the same stereotypes found in traditional academic work. A brief sample of representative titles in the literature conveys the point: *Women Who Love Men Who Kill, Ladies Who Kill, Exes, Mercy, Deadly Medicine, From Cradle to Grave, A Mother’s Trial, Dead Ends, Misery*. The jackets of most of these books bear lurid photographs or illustrations that suggest either evil (Aileen Wuornos’s apparently unrepentant leer on the cover of *Dead Ends*) or pathological lust (a young woman’s hand complete with painted fingernails wrapped around a young man’s hand, which in turn is wrapped around what seems to be a length of pipe or the shaft of a knife on the cover of *Women Who Love Men Who Kill*). The qualities emphasized in much of the popular literature on women and crime are those associated with conventional female stereotypes: the evil woman, the neurotic submissive, the deranged mother, the psychopathic nurse, and the whore.
Similar images prevail in most academic and theoretical work and in journalism and film. According to one study of female stereotypes in criminology texts published since 1965, “vamps and tramps” and “teases and flirts” continued to appear in work published as late as 1990. In her book *My Life Among the Serial Killers*, psychiatrist Helen Morrison presents extensive coverage of her interviews with many serial killers, all precisely representative of the Ripper type. Moreover, as Eric Hickey has observed, violent women are generally regarded as figures of fun, the gravity of their murders diminished in some way by their gender. The surprise ending of the film “Friday the 13th, I” is popcorn fare for adolescents. Actress Sharon Stone was criticized not for her serially murderous behavior in the movie “Basic Instinct,” but for the fact that she was a serially murderous lesbian. By contrast, the movie “Henry: A Portrait of a Serial Killer” was initially banned from many cinemas and from the video rental market as too disturbing for the general public. By 1994, when Oliver Stone released his film “Natural Born Killers,” Micky and Mallory were not only the embodiments of the worst American culture had to offer, but heroes to its younger and wildly cheering audience as well. When Charlize Theron delivered her Oscar-winning performance of Aileen Wuornos in the film “Monster,” it was as a misunderstood victim of society rather than as a woman intent on killing not just once or twice, but seven different times. In a nasty twist, these stereotypes reinforce cultural images of women as victims—of men, of their own psyches, or of their biologies—rather than as acting human beings making rational but ugly choices.

Serial murders committed by men are rare and interesting on a number of theoretical levels. In a macabre sense, the cultural narratives of these cases are useful in how they create order from the very worst version of social and individual chaos. They provide a moral standpoint nearly impossible to transgress for American culture. Those who do transgress that moral boundary enjoy theoretical, literary, and cultural identities as criminals. In the culture itself, evil is personified and punished. In some necessary way, it
is also tacitly, publicly, and vicariously experienced. Was it the brilliant, charismatic character Hannibal Lecter or the living actor Anthony Hopkins who won the Oscar for “The Silence of the Lambs”? Was America more entranced with Aileen Wuornos as a big-screen victim in “Monster” or with the monstrous physical transformation that Charlize Theron underwent to play the role? The dead are buried and mourned, and the “good” society reasserts itself.

Serial murders committed by women are rarer yet, but there are enough cases to define a pattern of criminality among women. Curiously, commercial American culture has not framed that pattern as a narrative of responsibility, perhaps because the idea that women might be serial killers is more threatening to the social order than the very limited reality. Serial murder is a sure sell as long as the formula—plot, motive, characterization, and denouement—remains intact. These are not true stories, but the stories a culture needs to maintain social order. Men victimize. Women and children, and men sometimes, are victimized. The stories of female serial killers are not the true narratives of who was murdered and who did the murdering, but the safer texts of who was not killed and who didn’t do the killing.
Notes


3. ———, Serial Murders, 14.

4. ———, Serial Murders, 37.


6. See Kathleen Daly, Gender, Crime, and Punishment (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).


Chapter Three:
Women and Serial Murder

If existing data serve as a basis for analysis then, of the forty or so serial killers loose each year in America, between three and twelve are women. Of the 16,000 or so homicides committed in the United States each year, these women might be responsible for the deaths of somewhere between twenty and 150 people. Figures like these support the widely held belief that women in fact do not commit serial murder in numbers large enough to warrant serious study, nor enough to warrant the profiling techniques developed by law enforcement agencies.

As Philip Jenkins explains, many studies of serial homicide seem to begin with the assumption, derived from the persistent “Ripper” mythology, that serial killers are driven to murder by powerful and perverted sexualities.¹ This assumption also suggests that violent aberrations in the sexual, or gendered, natures of men and women will manifest themselves in the same ways. In other words, “violent sexual trauma” will look the same whether inflicted by men or by women. Also implied in this assumption is the idea that serial killers experience an erotic arousal during the commission of their murders.

But when women murder, they do not seem motivated by eroticism, nor do their victims typically show evidence of violent sexual trauma. The phenomenon of serial killing, therefore, has been defined and classified as a male violent crime and declared largely the province of male sex killers. Although medical, psychological, and sociological theorists have analyzed the differences between male and female criminal behavior from their various perspectives, most of those perspectives seem to be founded
on the principle of comparison (the “criminal norm”). One begins with the crime and works in reverse.

As spare as the data is, it suggests the following spongy assumptions about women and serial murder:

1. Many serial killings involve sexual sadism, torture, mutilation, necrophilia, and cannibalism. Since most female killers do not engage in these practices, they cannot be considered sex/lust/thrill killers.

2. Women who have engaged in some form of the above comprise such a statistically small proportion of serial killers (an already acknowledged minority of murderers of either sex), that they are best regarded as anomalies (Rosemary West; Charlene Gallego; Judith Neelley; Stella Williamson).

3. The women who make up that statistically small proportion are often part of a male/female team or family group; thus they do not fit the “classic” profile of the lone serial killer (Rosemary West; Charlene Gallego; Judith Neelley; Debra Brown; Faye Copeland; Aileen Wuornos).

4. The motives of women who kill in teams or groups are seen to be influenced by other involved members. (Would Rosemary West have “enjoyed” murder, would she have killed at all, without Fred West at her side?)

5. Some women who murder serially choose as their victims the elderly or the infirm, infants and children, people whose vulnerability somehow mitigates the terminology applied retrospectively to their deaths. These female murderers are usually driven to kill by various syndromes, for example, “Munchausen-by-proxy,” post-natal depression, premenstrual syndrome, and arrested childhood development (Genene Jones, Marybeth Tinning, Aileen Wuornos, Dorothea Puente, Velma Barfield, Rosemary West, and Stella Williamson).

6. Some women who murder serially choose as their victims well-insured husbands, family members, and other dependents. The profit motive of these murders is clearly “rational” and thus is not covered by the term “serial killing” (Belle Gunness, Velma Barfield, Faye Copeland, and Dorothea Puente).
In this list of assumptions are enough exceptions, anomalies, and aberrations to suggest that the current definition of “serial killing” is inadequate at best. At worst it affirms and compounds misperceptions not only about the role in society of the female violent criminal, but also about the cultural manifestations of female sexuality and its criminal expressions. Cultural assumptions about serial murder are based on biological, or gendered, imperatives. According to this way of thinking, men act; women are acted upon. For men, gender proves the ethical rule; for women, it proves only the exception of a female biological sexuality that has no notion of ethics at all. For two very different approaches to the issues, see Helen Birch’s *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, a collection of essays about women who murder and the issues of agency, legal discourse, and socially acceptable femininity; and Lynda Hart’s *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, a book dedicated to “Aileen Wuornos” and to “all the women who have been vilified, pathologized, and murdered for defending themselves by whatever means necessary.” Wendy Kaminer’s *It’s All the Rage: Crime and Culture* treats similar issues in terms of American popular culture. At base, experts in the field have absolutely no accurate idea of how many women commit serial murder, nor how many people should be counted as their victims.

Owing in large part to well-known studies by Freud and Kraft-Ebbing, sexual perversions have been regarded as solely a male dysfunction. What is disseminated by the organs of popular culture, from *True Detective* to *Hustler*, reinforces that assumption. Fetishes that control the perverse scenario—articles of leather, female underclothing, shoes, braids, locks of hair, fur, velvet, handcuffs, whips, rubber—are shown almost exclusively in male fantasies. But in her book *Female Perversions*, Louise J. Kaplan assumes from the outset that female eroticism manifests itself differently from male eroticism, and that female sexual perversions illustrate the graphic differences in precisely how western culture influences sexuality. Applied to the phenomenon of serial murder, her theories provide one
rationale for the different ways women and men commit this particular form of violent crime. Kaplan does not expressly address the crime of serial murder in her research. She does emphasize the importance of a Freudian aspect to her work, especially in terms of childhood trauma and its manifestations in adulthood. Although many serial killers of both sexes were abused in childhood, I have not emphasized the Freudian analysis in Kaplan’s work because it leads easily to the trap I am trying to avoid: the principle of comparison, particularly between the erotic natures of women and men. I would suggest, however (and I think Kaplan’s work reinforces this idea), that female eroticism and the manifestation of its violent aberrations would be profoundly different from those documented in men. This idea leads to the more disturbing issue of “violent sexual trauma” and whether this phrase is an absolute description of clinical data or whether its definition might be subject to interpretation along gender lines. Would “violent sexual trauma” look the same if it were committed by women? Should the term be considered absolute?

According to Kaplan, women’s perversions are tailored to suit female gender roles in society. The more sophisticated scenarios of female sexual perversity involve homovestism, kleptomania, delicate self-cutting, trichotillomania (an extreme manifestation of hair-plucking), anorexia nervosa, and bulimia. Each of these, and others that Kaplan mentions, involves behavior directed toward the cultural stereotype of the submissive, obedient woman and also toward the more difficult concept of the female Self. Each script allows the woman to govern very powerful, painful, and otherwise unmanageable emotions in a controlled and secretive situation. Therefore, to take one of the more familiar perversions as an example, the anoretic starves herself, outwardly appearing ever more wraithlike, powerless, and submissive, while with each lost ounce she gains one more measure of control and permits herself to punish not only her Self, but also the very stereotype she embodies. Kaplan points out that “perverse scenarios are about the ordinary pitched at the level of the extraordinary.” This “ordinariness” of female perversity becomes especially
important in the realm of serial homicide committed by women. If Kaplan’s thesis is accurate—that the perversions of female aggression will fulfill the cultural norms for “womanly” behavior—then it follows that many of the killers will be wives (“black widows”) or nurses (“angels of death”), and that their victims will be chosen within the boundaries of that social role.

Methods of killing support Kaplan’s theory that women conceal their perversions. Most female serial killers use poison as their weapon of choice. Very few use only overtly violent means to murder their victims. Female serial killers do, in fact, fulfill female gender stereotypes in the same ways that their male counterparts—with shows of physical power, rage, strength, domination, and virility—fulfill male gender stereotypes. Female serial killings are Kaplan’s “caricatures of the feminine virtues,” designed to allow these women to express their rage and, at the same time, conform to their places in society.

The motives ascribed to the killers, however, are what finally determine how they are placed into the cultural context. Motives are the stories a culture uses to explain why certain patterns of behavior exist and how they are made intelligible in ordinary life. Extreme criminality in women and men requires some sense of justification and closure—victims must be recognized and avenged. The good society must adjudicate criminality both morally and legislatively to maintain some sense of safety and rightness for its citizens. In American culture, who committed a series of murders is as much an issue as why they were committed. It is not surprising that the motives ascribed to male and female serial killers are quite different. In both cases, however, defining the motive of a crime determines the type of story told about the criminal, and cultural attitudes toward “motive” are mined with ethical pitfalls. For example, in “The Dangerous Individual,” Foucault describes a French defendant who refuses to explain why he committed one rape and attempted another six: “It is not enough for the accused to say in reply to that question, ‘I am the author of the crimes before you, period. Judge since you must, condemn if you will.’ Much more is expected of
him. Beyond admission, there must be confession, self-examination, explanation of oneself, revelation of what one is. The penal machine can no longer function simply with a law, a violation and a responsible party.”2 In American culture, we need an explanation for the act before we can set its moral parameters.

In an alternate view, Paul R. McHugh, Henry Phipps Professor and Director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, explains that the “motive theme distinguishes the psychiatric story from the standard medical case report,”3 and concludes that “all medical students, and eventually the public, need to realize that stories are helpful tools in psychiatry. But if used without reflection on their potential to become myths, medically authorized stories can produce a prolonged misdirection for everyone—doctor, patient, and family alike. Physicians, because they can do much harm with the wrong story, are duty-bound—in ways that poets are not—to check the story against the facts.”4

Although some criminologists dispute the link between sex and motive, Eric Hickey lists “sex sometimes” as the motive for more than half the male serial killers whose careers he examines:

Sex may serve much more as a vehicle to degrade and destroy. Ultimately, by depriving a victim of things she or he holds sacred, such as dignity and self-respect, the offender achieves his most important goal, which is to have complete control over the victim. In short, many of offenders’ stated “motivations” may actually have been methods by which they achieved ultimate power and control over other human beings.5

Hickey’s distinction between method and motive in male sexual homicide reveals as well the cultural bias that expects male killers to be sexually aroused as they murder. For American culture, male eroticism might be part of the method (rape is a crime of “power”
For more than half the female serial killers Hickey studies, by contrast, the first motive listed is “money sometimes.” Hickey explains that, in general, women’s motives “appear to center on financial security, revenge, enjoyment, and sexual stimulation.” Many of the women he studied had been physically and psychologically abused (a common feature in the lives of male serial killers also), which suggested that “women may be motivated to kill in response to a list of unfulfilled needs. Sometimes the needs are economic, and other times they are emotional. For some, the needs for economic and psychological well-being are virtually the same.” Whether female eroticism might also be an “unfulfilled need,” a “method” by which women achieve “ultimate power and control over other human beings” rather than a more passive “enjoyment and sexual stimulation” is not at issue. For American culture, female eroticism explains the Madonna/Whore conundrum: women kill when they are promiscuous, “frigid,” or lesbian. But eroticism does not explain why women murder, and moreover, when such a case does surface, American culture turns resolutely away from the news.

Combined with research geared more specifically toward serial murder, Louise Kaplan’s work on female perversions provides at least one avenue into understanding part of why women murder and why they prove to be so easily stereotyped in American culture. Her work is particularly important because it adds the element of female eroticism, previously absent, to the possible motives for serial murders committed by women. Unlike the VICAP definition of motive for male serial homicide (“with no apparent rhyme, reason or motivation”), women often seem to kill quite rationally and methodically. Their murders frequently lack the obviously violent, overtly sexual dimension; they seem motivated instead by reasons that “ordinary” people—the larger culture—can understand. This “rational” appearance then excludes the crimes of female serial killers from the VICAP
matrix of “organized” and “disorganized” serial killers. It also boxes women into their culturally approved gender roles; as violent criminals, they are made safe, acceptable, and comprehensible. In the end, the female serial killer is simply not bizarre enough to qualify. She has, in Kaplan’s framework, succeeded admirably in the enactment of her perversion; she has deceived everyone:

What makes a perversion a perversion is not the “kinky” sexuality that every adult may enlist to enliven sexual performance. Perversions are those ironic psychological strategies that enlist gender ideals of virility and purity as a means of dissolving, destroying if necessary, all boundaries between one body part and another, one sex and another, one generation and another. That females tend to express these infantile versions of sexuality and procreation in the perversions of purity and males in the perversions of virility has much more to do with primitive social gender stereotypes than with any essential biological destiny of females and males.6

Within the framework of homicidal female perversity, then, women like Dorothea Puente, Belle Gunness, and Louise Peete can lure men with promises of obedience and security, provide for their own financial security, and dispatch their victims neatly and methodically. Their society will view the crimes (when they finally come to light) as “women’s work” of sorts, hardly in the same category as the murders committed by Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer. Stella Williamson, Marybeth Tinning, Debra Tuggle, and Waneta Hoyt can smother or drown their children one after another, avoiding detection over the course of a decade or more, precisely because as mothers they are nothing like John Wayne Gacy. Genene Jones, Terri Rachels, and Velma Barfield, able nurses entrusted with the care of ailing children and grandparents, can dispense death within the guise of their profession, not arbitrarily or irrationally as did David Berkowitz. Rosemary West, Charlene Gallego, Myra Hindley, and Judith Neelley exorcise their own demons as the submissive halves of
teams led by the men who educated them in the methods of murder. More recently we find Aileen Carol Wuornos, the self-described “professional call-girl,” hitchhiking alone down I-75 and shooting the good men who picked her up.

Female serial killers in western industrialized cultures are good wives, good mothers, faithful, submissive girlfriends and lovers, competent nurses and healthcare professionals, good babysitters, responsible landladies, vulnerable hitchhikers—ordinary women who pervert the gender stereotypes they seem to exemplify. Like their male counterparts, they violate cultural standards not only of appropriate social behavior, but also of appropriate gendered behavior. Stories that account for their criminality reflect a divisively gendered cultural ethics that is defined by the ideals of agency. However abused and even crazy they might seem, male serial killers are, by virtue of their gender, perceived as responsible criminal agents.

Female serial killers are different, yet what defines their difference in the cultural context has very little to do with the nature of the crimes they commit. These women are criminals, but the agency they might exercise—erotic, powerful, enraged—is subsumed by the more compelling issue of how they have violated the cultural understanding of womanness. In one way or another, these women have been overwhelmed by their own biology and gender. Stories about female serial killers are based on an ethics that holds the murderers juridically responsible for their crimes and, perversely, finds them damningly irresponsible as women. Their power lies in the ways these parables inform the comfortable evil of an appropriate gendered ethics for ordinary women. For American culture, female serial killers represent, metaphorically, all that women are not.

Following are three stories, moving backward in time, about women who committed serial murder. Perhaps what is most striking, initially, are the differences among them. I begin with Aileen Wuornos, the “textbook” killer, lesbian prostitute, and lifelong victim herself, who murdered seven men over the course of one year in Florida. She is perhaps the
most well-known female serial murderer in recent American history, from the initial reports of the crimes in 1989 through the award-winning performance of Wuornos by Charlize Theron in the 2003 film “Monster,” and for that reason might be expected to represent the rule, such as it is, for how the crime comes to be framed in the culture. Her story captured the public imagination, garnered attention from reporters, scholars, criminologists, and filmmakers, and thus seemed to frame a discourse about the crime. In all venues, from academic criminology to Hollywood red carpet, Wuornos was portrayed as the quintessential “fat, angry, lesbian prostitute,” a stereotype that more than fulfilled the cultural expectations for a woman who is no woman at all.

The second story, about Rosemary and Fred West, ruled British headlines for years during the 1990s and could have been expected to ignite a companion interest in several similar American cases, and perhaps even to have fed off the publicity generated by Wuornos’s case a few years earlier. Most of the ten victims were young women sexually tortured by both Rosemary and Fred, which might also have played into the prurient interests of various entertainment industries—from newspapers to magazines to film—particularly since Rosemary served as the lowest example of female sexuality gone haywire. The case led to significant changes in profiling and law enforcement technologies in Britain, with the FBI helping British officials to set up a large computer network, the Home Office Large Major Enquiry System (known as HOLMES), and yet withal, it generated barely a whisper in the American press. Married and to all accounts a doting wife, “ditsy,” promiscuous, and maternal after a very strange fashion, Rosemary West seemed the antithesis of Wuornos.

Stella Williamson’s story, the last of the three and perhaps the most chilling and most poignant, was also the least known in American culture. Her murders of five babies took place over the course of ten years between 1923 and 1933 in Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, long before female serial murder had been formulated as a crime in American culture. She’d been
well known in the town, had never left it, in fact, and yet no one had ever known she was pregnant nor seen the children. The murders finally came to light in 1980 after her death, when a note she’d left directed officials to a trunk in the attic that held the five bodies, each wrapped carefully in newspapers from half a century earlier. The small-town, never-married diabetic amputee offered yet another glimpse into a story about a female serial killer who bore no resemblance—at first glance—to either Wuornos or West.

Different types of victims—men, young women, babies—and different ways of killing—gunshot, torture, strangulation—different lifestyles, geographical settings, different eras in the culture, and different conclusions to their stories: Wuornos was executed for her crimes; Rosemary West will probably spend the rest of her life in prison; Stella Williamson died a natural death before anyone knew about the murdered babies. What were the links that held these stories together and might allow them to serve as separate examples of this single type of crime? And if they could serve as that, could they then serve as examples of the worst evil of womanhood in American culture? Could an interdisciplinary study of their stories, a synthesis of many different types of expertise and not-so-expertise focused not only on their crimes but on how their crimes came to be understood as the story of a type, explain how the nadir of femaleness informs the norm for women in American culture? What exactly is the comfortable evil American culture cannot not bear to know?
Notes


4. ———, 203.


Chapter Four:  
The “Textbook” Female Serial Killer, Aileen Carol Wuornos, 1989–1990

Current American understanding of serial murder as a criminal phenomenon has developed from various sources in the culture. The “official” definition most frequently cited in mainstream media prevails, despite research by academics and criminologists that suggests that serial murder is not typically committed by men who are driven by violent sexual fantasies that lead to the rape, mutilation, torture, death, dismemberment, and necrophilic and necrophagous violation of their victims. Mass media concentrates its news coverage on sensational killers—like Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, and John Gacy—whose crimes mirror exactly that cultural understanding of serial murder.

The entertainment industries refine the definition with characters like Hannibal Lecter in the movie “The Silence of the Lambs” and Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis’s novel American Psycho. When a Jeffrey Dahmer appears in the wake of such fiction—arrested for every one of those aforementioned violations of sixteen young men—he serves as living proof that the myth is, in fact, a reality that justifies the moral panic surrounding serial murderers and their victims. In 1992, former FBI agent and serial-murder expert Robert Ressler observed that, “We're seeing an upward spiraling trend where one week you have a Jeffrey Dahmer, the next week Donald Evans. It just never stops.... America is going to turn into A Clockwork Orange. The sexual psychopath will become the norm.”¹

In 1993, feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler echoed similar ideas: “Serial killers are mainly white male drifters, obsessed with pornography and woman-hatred, who
sexually use their victims, either before or after killing them, and who were themselves paternally abused children.... Most sex-murderers who stalk, rape, torture, and kill prostitutes (and nonprostitutes, whom they view as prostitutes and as therefore worthy of death), are rarely ever found or convicted.”

In 1994, author Joyce Carol Oates resorted to undeniably frightening and wholly inaccurate statistics to bolster a piece for the *New York Review of Books*, numbers all the more compelling because they bore the imprimatur of FBI authority: of the 15,000 to 20,000 murders committed each year during the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States, 3,500 each year were serial killings; and, “the FBI also estimates that there are at least five hundred serial killers currently at large and unidentified in the United States.”

Such gloomy prognostications from the experts, combined with the general social panic over the phenomenon, would suggest that media coverage of a gender-bending case of serial murder might have been expected to feed the panic and fuel the myth; it might have reinforced existing fears and created new ones; it might even have justified massive expenditures and complicated legislation designed to combat the problem. In the case of a killer like Aileen Wuornos, oft-cited as “America’s First Textbook Female Serial Killer,” one might also have expected media claims-makers to assert that women are not by nature exempt from some version of even this criminal phenomenon—a cruel but not inconceivable bid for gendered equality or gendered blame and guilt, a bid bolstered by serious scholarship into serial murder that suggested that, according to one estimate by Philip Jenkins, “at least a quarter of serial killers are women.”

But Wuornos’s final “appearance” in public, two years after her execution in 2002, came at the hands of Hollywood in the movie “Monster,” in which, according to Chris Orr writing in *The New Republic*, Society (rather than Wuornos herself) is the real monster:
Even as [the film] takes pains to render [Charlize] Theron ugly, it consistently casts Wuornos in the most positive light possible. First-time director Patty Jenkins, while careful never to condone Wuornos’s murders, nonetheless fills the film with quasi-justifications: she did it because of her abuse-filled childhood; she did it the first time because the man assaulted her and, subsequently, because she persuaded herself she was in danger; she did it because she needed money or she would lose the love of her life.\(^5\)

In other words, this “first” case of female serial murder, even at its popular height more than a decade after the crimes had been committed, still resorted to a story about woman, even a serially murdering woman, as victim. As Orr said, “the denial of moral agency is our culture’s knee-jerk response to women who commit horrible crimes.”\(^6\) The fact that Theron was rewarded with an Oscar for her performance reveals, too, that American culture was well-satisfied with this version of the story, one that fulfilled all the stereotypical expectations one would expect of a fat lesbian prostitute badly abused during childhood and hellbent on exacting retribution.

The year of news coverage detailing the Wuornos case from December 1990 through January 1992 reveals that mainstream American culture did not panic at the emergence of the first “textbook” female serial killer. It barely blinked. One might even say that the culture kept its eyes resolutely closed to this “new” breed of female criminal. Media coverage of her case followed an interesting and complicated route, which began with the initial headline banners, quoted at length by Phyllis Chesler in *St. John’s Law Review* in 1993 and worth excerpting here for their capitalistically astonished outrage designed to catch the attention of mainstream America:

TWO WOMEN ARE BEING SOUGHT AS POSSIBLE SUSPECTS IN THE SHOOTING DEATHS OF EIGHT TO TWELVE MIDDLE-AGED MEN WHO WERE LURED TO THEIR DEATHS ON THE FLORIDA
HIGHWAYS.... THESE WOMEN ARE ARMED AND DANGEROUS AND MAY BE OUR NATION’S FIRST FEMALE SERIAL KILLERS. INVESTIGATORS [FEEL] COMPELLED TO WARN THE PUBLIC, PARTICULARLY MIDDLE-AGED WHITE MEN TRAVELLING ALONE.  

From these alarming pronouncements, news coverage of the case moved through detailed stories of abuses Wuornos had suffered in childhood and adulthood to confusing reports of police corruption, Hollywood big business, feminist political concerns, and Christian fundamentalism. None of the coverage, however, attempted to place the Wuornos case into the context of serial murder as a criminal phenomenon. Instead, the case was presented as an increasingly complex anomaly, an approach typical of media coverage in the cases of other female serial killers.

Wuornos’s case should have been a relatively straightforward event for public media to reconstruct. It first received national attention in December 1990, when two nationally broadcast crime shows aired segments featuring composite sketches of two women suspected of murdering eight men whose bodies had been found along Florida highways. Police in Ocala, Florida, sifted five useful leads from the ensuing deluge of telephone calls, and within six weeks they had arrested Wuornos and brought her companion Tyria Moore from Ohio to Florida to serve as a material witness at the trial. Wuornos confessed to the murders of three of the men. She had kept mementos from several of the killings—watches, clothing, tool boxes, suitcases, and the like—which, with incriminating forensic evidence, confirmed her confessions.

As serial murder cases go, Wuornos’s did not provide public media with much grist for the mill: the body-count was low, and the murders themselves lacked the grotesque glamor of torture, mutilation, and dismemberment. Except for a few scattered condoms, there did not seem to be much evidence of a sexual element to the killings. A criminal had
confessed quickly and credibly to at least some of the murders. By January 1992, Wuornos had been tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for the murder of her first victim, Richard Mallory.

According to the fairly predictable course of an unusual or sensational serial murder event, this one should have found its way into the general national panic over serial murder. Wuornos was a woman and therefore a shocking inversion of the stereotype; she preyed on “white middle-aged men,” who themselves were inversions of the typical victims; she shot each victim repeatedly through the back and chest, which suggested not only anger but a violently visible aggression not characteristic of most other women who murder. Her victims were strangers. She had roamed the Florida highways, mimicking the male serial killer drifting geographically to find his victims. On the basis of these facts alone, American culture did indeed seem faced with a new version of the female criminal, and a textbook case of male criminality.

Wuornos’s history might have suggested several avenues for mass media features on “textbook” serial murder and its obverse (what constitutes serial murder but is not classified as “textbook,” for example); on the link between prostitution and women who commit murder (how easy it might have been to link that issue to cultural concerns over battered women who murder); on the link between lesbianism, prostitution, and AIDS; on the effects of child abuse, poverty, and rape as they are carried into the adulthood of a woman turned catastrophically violent. These issues dominated public discourse at the time, and Wuornos seemed to provide an obvious and reasonably sensational channel into new questions and possibilities for research.

In fact, mass media ventured into some of these areas, but the results of their explorations yielded virtually no new information about women who commit serial murder (not surprising since Wuornos was the “first”) and nothing at all about possible links among issues central to women’s gender roles in American culture. Banner headlines
notwithstanding, American cultural ethics dictated very clear stories to be told in mass media about Aileen Wuornos, none of which pegged her as a serial killer. Wuornos’s case served instead as a cultural marker of social attitudes toward acceptable rhetoric about women and crime, or rather, women who do not commit serial murder.

Print media coverage began with the assumption that America had its first textbook serial killer in Wuornos. The vocabulary chosen by journalists seemed to emphasize exactly the qualities American mainstream culture finds unattractive in any woman but might expect to find in a criminal. Wuornos was described as a stocky, sloppy, 10th-grade dropout; a lesbian drifter; a one-time motel maid, prostitute, and ex-convict. According to Sheriff’s Captain Steve Binegar, she was “a killer who robs, not a robber who kills.”

Three weeks after the arrest, a short editorial in the *New York Times* (February 2, 1991) tested a few true-crime monikers for Wuornos: “femme fatale,” “Daytona’s Deadly Dish,” and “that old staple, tried and false: ‘Deadlier Than the Male.’” Public media outlets routinely assign monikers to recognized serial killers. For males, nicknames like “The Butcher of Milwaukee,” “The Night Stalker,” and “The Boston Strangler” generally emphasize the monstrosity or fiendishness of the criminal. But for women killers, as Eric Hickey explains, monikers are either “neutral or trivializing in their relationship to the crimes committed.” Such was the case with Wuornos. In the months of news coverage following the *New York Times* editorial, no moniker of any kind was used consistently for Wuornos in newspapers. *USA Today* (January 13, 1992) and London’s *Daily Mail* (February 1, 1992) each used “Damsel of Death” at least once in headline stories, and this same nickname might also have appeared in supermarket tabloids, but its general reception by media seemed lukewarm.

As a moniker, “Damsel of Death” was a strange choice for Wuornos in any case. Descriptions of her in media stories hardly brought to mind the begowned medieval frailty of a “damsel,” a maiden one might have expected to find in “distress.” In Wuornos’s case, as
in the cases of most other female serial killers, the attempt to coin a nickname began the process of demystifying the crimes and the criminal, a process quite the reverse of what happens when monikers are coined for male serial killers. The types of monikers chosen for women like Wuornos who commit serial murder suggest that their crimes can, in fact, be reduced to a series of smaller issues that can be quantified, qualified, and understood by the larger culture.

Subsequent coverage of the Wuornos case continued the process of demystification by reporting the very real “distress” of Wuornos’s life. Journalists described, with varying degrees of agreement in detail, the “nightmarish life” that had preceded Wuornos’s arrest outside a bar called, of all things, the Last Resort. According to Wuornos, she had been repeatedly abused as a child. At the age of fourteen, she had borne a son she gave up for adoption. Her mother had abandoned her. Her father, while serving time in prison for sodomizing a seven-year-old girl, had committed suicide. Her grandmother had died of cirrhosis of the liver. Her grandfather had committed suicide. Her brother had died of throat cancer. Interviews with her sister and with an anonymous friend revealed that Wuornos was disliked by nearly everyone she had ever known. By March 1991, public media had provided American culture with a very sad, yet fairly typical story of a woman driven to crime by a poorly defined but generally “understood” combination of social and psychological difficulties. Wuornos was a victim, and although news coverage of her case through August 1991 was not sympathetic to her, reports took into account the existence of a tacitly perceived social context for a woman like her. As a serial killer Wuornos might have been unusual, but as a product of abuse, she was not.

In September 1991, *Vanity Fair* published an article on Wuornos by Mark MacNamara, which marked a turning point in the coverage of her case by the media. In “Kiss and Kill,” MacNamara portrayed Wuornos as part of a larger set of social issues that concerned the phenomenon of serial murder only peripherally. MacNamara’s commentary
was distinctly more critical than earlier coverage had been, not only of Wuornos, but also of the police involved in her arrest and interrogation and of the inevitable invasion of writers and Hollywood producers armed with contracts for books, scripts, and films. MacNamara claimed that although a few cases of female serial murder had been documented in the United States, Wuornos was unusual because she “allegedly performed like her male counterparts.” The article, however, did not go on to develop the thesis. Rather than analyzing the case as part of the coherent criminal phenomenon of serial murder, MacNamara instead presented Wuornos’s case as increasingly complicated by tainted police procedure, by Wuornos’s lesbian-turned-platonic relationship with the State’s “star witness” Tyria Moore, by the involvement in Wuornos’s defense of well-known feminist psychologist and would-be biographer Phyllis Chesler, and by the presence of Arlene Pralle, a Christian fundamentalist who would become Wuornos’s legally adoptive mother.

In MacNamara’s article, the lesbian, prostitute, ex-convict, female serial killer, briefly the victim of childhood abuse, was portrayed by various sources as a “Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde,” with “death-row eyes,” as a “female predator who needed money,” as “obnoxious, aggressive, not sexy,” and finally and absurdly, “like the heroine in a country-and-western song.” Chesler, the hopeful biographer, complicated matters further by suggesting that perhaps the men who had died had somehow asked to be shot by behaving in a particularly provocative fashion: “Perhaps these men were especially violent in some way. It could be something they said or did, or something they reminded her of.” This was a strange comment given the reluctance of most feminists to have women viewed as somehow “asking”—by drinking too much or wearing short skirts or flirting—to be assaulted or raped or murdered. The comment also prepared the way for Wuornos’s claim that the men “all deserved it. They all asked for it. Everything I did was in self-defense.” In this article, Wuornos was portrayed less as a victim than as an angry woman bent on revenge.
MacNamara concludes his article with a commentary on Arlene Pralle, the born-again Christian who had lost business and friends as a result of her new friendship with Wuornos, who had spent more than three thousand dollars on telephone calls to Wuornos, and who had started a “museum” to Wuornos in her own bedroom. By the end of the article, the reader is asked to wonder not only about Pralle’s motives but also about those of Wuornos, Chesler, Moore, Hollywood, the Ocala Police Department, and the journalists themselves. What began as a relatively clear serial murder event became complicated in the *Vanity Fair* article by questions about the bureaucracy of law enforcement, big business, feminist politics, and religious fundamentalism—concerns mysterious in their own ways, but recognized by readers as part of the cultural fabric of contemporary America. Wuornos as a female serial killer generated copy that finally seemed too confusing and too strange in terms of what was already known about serial murder, but Wuornos as the criminal center of popular issues already familiar to the culture generated more manageable ideas.

Two long articles about the case appeared in December. The *Los Angeles Times* piece published on December 17, 1991, “A Mother’s Love,” placed Wuornos firmly into the Christian moral framework. It focused on Arlene Pralle’s legal adoption of Wuornos, who was described as “a stocky, hard-drinking 35-year-old who is said to be that rarest of predators, a female serial killer.” Wuornos was also described at the beginning of the article with language comparable to that used in earlier news coverage—as a “pistol-packing blonde who was quickly dubbed the ‘Damsel of Death.’” That the moniker received only spotty national acceptance betrayed what might be called the social agenda of the article, which mixed some of the critical *Vanity Fair* coverage with an acceptably moral stance: Aileen Wuornos was the angry, vengeful victim of abuse. The journalist described Wuornos’s marriage to a 70-year-old man that lasted a month, because “she said he beat her with his cane,” but did not explain that when that marriage ended in court, the judge issued a restraining order against Wuornos to prevent her from beating her former husband.
Augmenting the more sympathetic Christian values, feminist Phyllis Chesler was quoted as well: “Wuornos is not leading a feminist liberation army. But I can understand her actions most deeply in feminist and political terms. What would it mean if women started to defend themselves?” The question was followed immediately with Arlene Pralle’s resolute Christian charity and mother-love, and the article ended with the statement that Pralle and her husband “just want Lee to have a family who cares about her and is not going to hurt her. She has a heart of gold, and even after all she’s been through, she’s given so much to me.” Within a few pages, Wuornos had been “rescued” from a life of abuse, prostitution, armed robbery, and murder, and saved by the traditional social values implied in maternal love, family, and Christianity. Given the title and substance of this article, published a month before Wuornos’s trial began, it was clear that in regard to the “textbook female serial killer,” Christian family values suggested a more acceptable cultural agenda for reporters and their readers than “feminist and political terms” could.

The December 1991 issue of Premiere, a Hollywood glossy, published the single truly critical analysis of the Wuornos case for the popular audience. But in “Let’s Make a Deal,” Malcolm MacPherson also showed how far removed the case had become from the core issue of women who commit serial murder. MacPherson’s article raised questions not only about the seduction by Hollywood of the investigators in the Wuornos case, but also about what could have been among the central issues of the case—the State’s “star witness” Tyria Moore. The potential movie deals had generated some weary interest in national newspapers, but until the Premiere article appeared, no publication had seriously questioned the management, by media or police, of Tyria Moore. Why had she been portrayed, from the beginning, as a material witness and not as Wuornos’s accomplice? Why did the State need this “witness” when it had confessions and physical and forensic evidence linking both Wuornos and Moore to the murders? In fact, Tyria Moore never became an issue in the Wuornos case either in fact or in cinematic treatments. Questions about her complicity and
guilt were not taken up by national correspondents, nor were feature articles published about her, and by the time Patty Jenkins’s film “Monster” appeared in 2003, Tyria Moore had been recast and renamed as the diminutive and entirely fictional “Selby,” a dependent love-interest again with no agency of her own.

During the year that elapsed between Wuornos’s capture and her sentencing, national news coverage of the case was intermittent and riddled with inconsistencies that betrayed a deceptively consistent bias toward gendered ethics that dictate the stories necessary for the stability of a culture under stress. First, the media tested the term “serial killer” as it might apply to Wuornos. The approach worked initially as a novelty, but in the end the Wuornos case was seen as quite distinct in essential ways from the cases of other serial killers. Wuornos herself absolutely refused the label at her sentencing hearing: “First I’d like to say I’ve been labeled as a serial killer, been framed by law enforcement as a serial killer. I’m no serial killer…. What I did is what anybody else had the right to do… . I had no intention of killing anyone…. I told you I was raped and that is what happened in all of them.”9

Second, the possibility that Tyria Moore might have been heavily involved in the murders (she was most often characterized as the “love of Wuornos’s life”) was left virtually unexplored, suggesting that most journalists accepted without much questioning the assumptions and reports of the Florida police. They also gave any consideration of the lesbian issues involved very short shrift. According to Chesler, Wuornos concurred, although Chesler viewed the lesbian angle slightly differently:

Lee does not think of herself as a lesbian; only as someone who fell in love with a woman. She was tried and convicted in a court of law, and not as a lesbian. They barely made reference to that! They didn’t need to. For them to say a woman has killed a man, an upstanding white male citizen has been killed by a whore—I mean, they don’t need to go beyond that it’s so far out.
Being described as a lesbian didn’t endear her further to the jury but I don’t believe it was the determining factor.\textsuperscript{10}

Third, the politically feminist stance adopted by Chesler, and later by Wuornos in her own defense, proved unacceptable both to the jury and to the larger culture. Whether Mallory (Wuornos’s first victim who, according to Wuornos, had raped and tortured her) had served time as a sex offender or whether she had been raped repeatedly by various men signified very little in public consciousness. Wuornos had admitted that she was a prostitute. That confession provided mass media with a straightforward moral text that obviated any need for ethical ruminations.

Finally, the suggestion that Wuornos might have been a victim—of child abuse, rape, poverty, and social indifference—did not prevent media reporters from describing her at her sentence hearing as “confessed serial killer Aileen Wuornos,” “a female drifter,” and a “35-year-old prostitute.” In the course of twelve months, media coverage of Wuornos had returned to its original stance, with barely a flash of interest this time in her “femaleness” as a serial killer.

When the Wuornos case is placed into a broader context of media coverage for the year, other issues emerge that almost surely influenced the way her case was constructed and portrayed. Several events might be seen as particularly influential: the publication of Bret Easton Ellis’s novel \textit{American Psycho} (fall 1990); the release of the movies “The Silence of the Lambs” (February 1991) and “Thelma and Louise” (May 1991); Jeffrey Dahmer’s arrest (July 1991); the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings (fall 1991); the William Kennedy Smith rape trial (fall 1991); and Dahmer’s sanity hearing (January 1992). Each of these events generated a great deal of publicity that in different ways fed into common cultural perceptions not only about serial murder, but more generally about the place of women in the culture.
In the autumn of 1990, just before the national broadcasts about the two female serial-killer suspects were aired, a very public controversy erupted over Simon and Schuster’s last-minute refusal to publish Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho*. Advance copies of the book had been sent to reviewers nationwide, and most agreed that its descriptions of the male serial killer’s crimes were pornographically violent. The book was finally published by Vintage in the spring of 1991, after Wuornos’s arrest, and although debate arose over its literary merit, no one questioned the fact that men like the protagonist existed. “The Silence of the Lambs” was released in February 1991. A year later its national popularity, attributable in part to the charismatic character Hannibal Lecter, earned the film five top Oscar awards. “Hannibal the Cannibal” appeared as the incarnation of a serial murder phenomenon the culture had formulated and understood.

The fictional serial murderers, Hannibal Lecter and Ellis’s Patrick Bateman, generated several well-researched feature articles on their living counterparts, which appeared in major newspapers. On August 1, 1991, two weeks after Jeffrey Dahmer’s arrest, the *Chicago Tribune* carried a report titled “Microscope on monsters at serial killer seminar,” in which the FBI was able to reconfirm what the culture knew already about serial murder from Lecter and Bateman, now proven—again—this time by Dahmer. The seminar had been scheduled four months earlier as a public relations event, before Dahmer had been discovered but after Wuornos had been arrested. As the report said, “it was obviously the specter of Dahmer that drew seven TV camera crews and many more print reporters to the event.” Dahmer served as the eerie center of the seminar; Wuornos was not mentioned at all.

Four days later, in the “Science” section of the *Washington Post* (August 5, 1991), another article on serial killers, “Frighteningly Close to Normal,” reported more of the same: the monstrosity of the serial killer lay in his ability to appear normal while controlling a ravenous appetite for sex, violence, and death. In six features on serial murder, five of which appeared in national newspapers and the other in the women’s magazine *Mirabella,*
women as serial killers were scarcely mentioned. Wuornos was cited by name only once, by Robert Ressler at the very end of a long piece in the Philadelphia Inquirer (September 8, 1991).

The arrest of Dahmer in July—a true media event—followed that autumn by the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas sexual harassment hearings (televised; Thomas shortly thereafter appointed to the United States Supreme Court), the William Kennedy Smith rape trial (televised; Smith found not guilty; victim’s name, social, and sexual history published in the mass media), and the Dahmer sanity hearing (televised; Dahmer found sane), effectively channeled media and public thinking into well-established patterns defined by the language of consensus. One might question not only the chronology of symbiotic media-sponsored events, but also the investment American culture has made in that language of consensus and the stories it tells.

The basic elements for a Wuornos media event existed in the culture: she was a serial killer not without precedent; Joyce Carol Oates, a better writer than Ellis, had contributed her ideas in fairly lurid fashion in her small, strange, literate novel The Rise of Life on Earth (spring 1991), about a female serial killer; “Thelma and Louise” had made a stand for a kind of erotic spiritual transformation initiated by murder; Vanity Fair had billed Wuornos as “a dark version of ‘Thelma and Louise’”; Anita Hill had lost; William Kennedy Smith had won; and Phyllis Chesler had tried at least twice to ignite interest at the national level in Wuornos as a victim of social abuse. Chesler had also worked to gather expert witnesses on issues ranging from prostitution and childhood abuse to rape and alcoholism, as well as lawyers willing to work pro bono in Wuornos’s defense. None was called during the trial.

These separate elements did not coalesce into a nationally perceived media event focusing on female serial murder as a criminal phenomenon. In the more than twelve months of media coverage on the Wuornos case, the definition of the “serial murderer”
conveyed by the media did not change at all in order to accommodate a woman like Wuornos. Other female serial killers (see, for example, Faye Copeland, sentenced to death for the murders of five transient farmhands, *New York Times*, April 28, 1991) were not recognized as serial killers. Oates’s novel was reviewed coolly, was named by the *New York Times* as a Notable Book of 1991, and sank from view. The movie “Thelma and Louise,” as the somehow “light” version of the Wuornos case, generated language similar to what had been used to report the case. The two women were “outlaw princesses” and “killer bimbos” and “road warriors” and “self-styled vigilantes” responding to the “abusive everyman.” But unlike Wuornos, they were also “survivors”—of literal and metaphorical rape and neardrape—who had set out “innocently enough.” Even with the depressing facts of Wuornos’s life available in the public domain, Wuornos was neither understood nor represented as a “survivor” of anything (and particularly not within the frameworks of feminist theories), perhaps because she was never perceived nor portrayed as “innocent enough.” What parallels might have been drawn between the movie and the Wuornos case remained in clever but unexplored subtitles to magazine articles.

That female serial murder was not portrayed by the media as an organized criminal phenomenon suggests not only a basic problem of definition, but also that there might be a general and tacit cultural perception of certain social norms at risk. At the most fundamental level, a number of special-interest groups stood to benefit from the portrayal of the Wuornos case as a non-phenomenon. First were the awkward and unexplained issues of Tyria Moore, her involvement with the Florida police, and their joint Hollywood business ventures. Second, the reputations of agents at the FBI and the Behavioral Sciences Unit in Quantico had gained much of their status—evident in publicity, funding, book contracts, Oscar-winning movies, speaking engagements, magazine interviews, and public seminars—from the social acceptance of a clearly defined dangerous outsider against whom the forces of
good could array themselves. Gaps—one might say chasms—in the logic of the definition of that outsider would have threatened very real livelihoods in various ways.

In the larger and still very material sense, the film makers, book publishers, magazine editors, television executives, print journalists—the personnel of the popular communications industries—all depend for their existence not on critical analysis but on the reinforcement of culturally acknowledged “truths” about social phenomena. Those truths, as they come to be accepted and then affirmed by the media, are reified by complex bureaucratic, political, legislative, and judicial interest groups. A clearly defined and understood moral panic in an odd way creates security in a culture. Villains and white knights may embody a certain sort of mystery, but mystery can be contained. The mystery of female serial killers may have less to do with women starting to defend themselves (to borrow Chesler’s and Wuornos’s words) than with the culture being forced to defend itself from its own irrational assumptions about women, criminality, and ethical responsibility.

Questions that large, of course, can set a society adrift down a very muddy river. In early March 1992, the Daily Record of Morris County, NJ, published an article titled “Why fewer than 3% of serial killers are women.” The statistic had been provided by the FBI; it does not agree with the 15–17% documented by academic scholars of the phenomenon and is quite distant from the 30% some scholars would suggest as a more accurate figure. In this article, female serial killers became “women multiple killers” in the fifth paragraph, and those mentioned quite accurately as “serial killers” were exculpated by “medical” disorders—untreated postpartum psychoses, histories of mental disorders that induced “psychotic rage”—or by greed, or by the nurse-run-amok syndrome, or by “years of sexual and physical abuse.” Ann Burgess was quoted as “professor of psychiatric nursing at the University of Pennsylvania and an authority on sexual homicide:” “Women don’t have sexual deviations—they don’t make obscene phone calls, they don’t flash, they don’t have paraphilias (addictions to bizarre practices, such as having sex with a corpse). . . . It is rare for
a woman to murder more than one person, and they never commit sexual crimes.” The conclusions of the article reinforced its opening contention, that Aileen Wuornos was the exception that “doesn’t prove the rule.” She might have fit the profile of a male serial killer in some ways, but finally, as the victim of various abuses, she was first and above all a woman.

It would be encouraging to imagine that, in the months and years since Wuornos’s initial conviction and sentencing, social agendas had expanded enough to accommodate an ethics focused on redressing some of the imbalances within such fragile assumptions about women like Wuornos. In areas of specialized study, there has perhaps been some progress. A few academic criminologists—Helen Birch, Lynda Hart, Philip Jenkins, Candice Skrapec—have studied the Wuornos case and argued persuasively that it can be placed within the context of female serial killing as a way to begin sifting through cultural myths about gender and criminality.11 Candice Skrapec offers among the best of the analyses, in part by going directly against prevailing norms:

Scant attempt has been made to see how the women who kill repeatedly are like one another, or to see how they compare, as a group, with their male counterparts.... Is there a discrete social phenomenon of female serial murder? The answers require a systematic look at the women and their crimes. I wish...to caution against viewing male and female serial killers as different “breeds.” Indeed, it is a main point of this chapter that while it is tempting to focus on the readily apparent differences between the two, it is misguided to so. I believe that these differences serve to mask more substantive, underlying similarities between male and female serial murderers.12

In Skrapec’s view, men and women might use different methods to kill their victims, but the impulse to murder serially in both genders can be partially attributed to a crippling
sense of powerlessness experienced by the murderer in childhood. Louise Kaplan’s analysis of female sexual perversions examines “soul murders”—the crushing effect of powerlessness in childhood—and suggests new ways of viewing displays of aggressive, even violent and murderous, female eroticism.

Purely feminist theory, as Philip Jenkins points out in *Using Murder*, seems to offer less useful alternatives to existing stories about women and serial murder:

If the analysis lacks scholarly merit, there is no doubt that the theories presented... have been of immense ideological value. For feminists in the last decade, serial murder has been as valuable a rhetorical device as rape was in the 1970s, in confirming that the wrongs suffered by women were quite comparable to the physical atrocities inflicted upon other minorities or relatively powerless groups.\(^{13}\)

If most feminist theory is premised on the existence of the oppressive Patriarchy, then women have been victimized from their first breaths. Lynda Hart’s *Fatal Women* (1994) adapts that stance with some success, yet begins with the following dedication (page v):

FOR AILEEN WUORNOS
AND FOR ALL THE WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN VILIFIED, PATHOLOGIZED, AND MURDERED FOR DEFENDING THEMSELVES BY WHATEVER MEANS NECESSARY

Although sympathetic toward feminist and lesbian issues, the subsequent text does not offer much beyond ideological theory as a way to place the victimized Wuornos into the context of her culture. As a victimizing serial murderer, she is once again almost invisible.
For example, Hart outlines the structure of her book in the Preface. She says of the chapter on Wuornos, “Surpassing the Word: Aileen Wuornos”:

Chapter 8 situates Wuornos in the context of the historical nexus of prostitution and lesbianism, the inheritance from sexology of the lesbian’s propensity for violence, and the law’s ironic use of psychoanalytic “trauma” to prosecute rather than defend the woman who kills. Uncannily, Wuornos is the masculine imaginary’s “dream come true,” her actions constituting a transgression of the boundary between the real and the phantasmatic. Having torn this barrier that preserves the phallocratic symbolic, Wuornos has become the “impossible-real” realized. And for that, I argue, she has been sentenced to death.14

This sort of theory, while useful in an extremely rarefied context, seems a long way from seven men shot in the back and chest in the Florida woods. How would “masculinist” theory fare were it to grapple, so to speak, with “femicide” in parallel fashion?

Even Phyllis Chesler, well-versed in the literature, waffles on the question of Wuornos as a serial killer because Wuornos does not fit Chesler’s definition of the type. In her very long article for St. John’s Law Review, Chesler includes a long section on “Women Killers in Literature, Film, and the Social Sciences” followed by “Is Wuornos a Serial Killer?” She concludes that since Wuornos is not among the “white male drifters, obsessed with pornography and woman-hatred, who sexually use their victims, either before or after killing them, and who were themselves paternally abused children... [who] as adults, scapegoat, not fathers but mainly women, sometimes children, sometimes male homosexuals—who are seen as “feminine” or vulnerable,”15 she cannot fit the description. Like many other feminist theorists, Chesler seems indifferent to the irony that the current definition of serial murder was developed and refined primarily by the very patriarchy she argues against. The polar argument advocated by most feminist theory—men do it and
women do not—plays directly into the definition (for or against) rather than offering any sort of edification or emendation. And for better and worse, most academic studies do not wield the sort of power or seductive appeal for mainstream culture that one finds characteristic of mass media journalism, true-crime accounts, movies, television dramas, and talk shows.16

Wuornos received some exposure in popular media after the close of her first trial in January 1992, although one might argue that much of her story read as marginalia to the same social issues that clouded her original appearance in the culture. In April 1992, Liza Featherstone wrote “The Backlash in Action” for the journal Lies of Our Times, a short critique of media bias in the coverage of the Wuornos case. Chesler’s work was published in the lesbian journal Off Our Backs (1993), along with an interview in which Chesler asked “feminists” to send Wuornos stamps and commissary money; one was also advised that contributions were welcome, and buttons (“I Believe Lee Wuornos”) were available. Another lesbian journal, Frighten the Horses, published an article by Cris Gutierrez, “Aileen Wuornos, Hothead Paisan, and Me,” in which the writer considered the power of the handgun she had just bought for self-defense.

Several true-crime accounts of the Wuornos case appeared, a serial-killer trading card made its way into the deck, and television got into the business with a special two-hour made-for-TV-movie, “Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story” (1992). Michael Newton entered her bio in Bad Girls Do It! (1993), commenting that “she did display a curiously ‘masculine’ tendency to prey on strangers of the opposite sex.” Nick Broomfield, a British film-maker, developed two documentary features, “Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer” (1994) and, after her execution, “Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer” (2004), using a handheld camera to capture less of Wuornos than of the biker-bar culture and voyeuristic audience she seemed to reflect. Wuornos had become a short-lived commodity that, in fact, did not sell especially well in the popular marketplace until Theron’s turn as
Wuornos, the big-screen victim of a big bad society. Even Joyce Carol Oates, who had written so eloquently of Kathleen Hennessy and her murderous, inarticulate rage, jumped ship to write the Dahmeresque—noticed, if not entirely popular—Zombie (1995).

As for mass media treatment of Wuornos since 1992, her case was notable only for its absence from headline or back-page coverage. The last long piece to be published on serial murder in the wake of the Wuornos case appeared in Mirabella (April 1992), a fashion glossy aimed at the American version of the “sophisticated woman.” In “Such a Nice Young Man,” Gini Sikes interviewed Robert Ressler about serial murder and his memoir Whoever Fights Monsters: My Twenty Years Tracking Serial Killers for the FBI (1992). The article recounted gruesome details of murders committed by the likes of Edmund Kemper—charismatic sociopaths who negotiate cultural norms easily and function as apparently well-adjusted young men but whose alter-egos prey on young, vulnerable women. Ressler did not mention Aileen Wuornos even once, nor any other female serial killer. Given the target audience of the magazine, the article seemed intended to terrify rather than to inform. In other words, like most news coverage of serial murder, this piece fed the panic by promoting the myth.

Between 1990 and 1996, the Wuornos case made the national news thirty-four times, and from 1996, only six times. Five of those pieces were reviews of Nick Broomfield’s movie, two of which appeared in British newspapers. The only feature to address the Wuornos case itself was published in the New York Times (October 9, 1994): the Florida Supreme Court had denied all of Wuornos’s appeals and upheld her four death sentences. By contrast, the Dahmer case appeared in national newspapers more than four hundred times, the more recent articles just as sensationalized as those that covered the discovery of his murders during the summer of 1991. How else to treat the murder, by prison inmate Christopher J. Scarver, of such a celebrity? How else to acknowledge the debate over whether Dahmer’s brain should be preserved for science? Racial issues were addressed
(most of Dahmer’s victims were ethnic minorities), as well as the protests of a homosexual community outraged by police and media handling of the case.\textsuperscript{18} His father published an anguished memoir.\textsuperscript{19} And too, there was the auction of Jeffrey Dahmer’s personal “effects” (for example, the tools he used to murder and dismember his victims, and a vat and the refrigerator in which he stored parts of their bodies) to benefit the victims’ families.

Between 1997 and mid-2004, Wuornos’s name appeared 131 times in the index of national newspapers and, with the exception of twenty-four articles about her bid to stop the appeals process and her subsequent execution on October 9, 2002, the coverage was almost exclusively devoted to the two major films and one opera her story had generated. The opera, “Wuornos,” composed by Carla Lucero and staged in San Francisco in June 2001, opened to mixed reviews and sank from sight. Nick Broomfield’s sequel to his first film about Wuornos brought not only Wuornos herself to the screen again, but also Broomfield, as a witness for the defense at her trial. Broomfield hoped to catalyze debate in American culture about both the death penalty and about Jeb Bush’s political hopes for re-election as governor of Florida. He observed:

The point of making “Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer” was to get the debate on the death penalty going. This is particularly relevant in an election year, when you have a president who established a world record execution rate when he was governor of Texas, and when, just a year ago, the president’s own brother, Jeb Bush, signed the execution papers for this woman.\textsuperscript{20}

But Broomfield’s film catalyzed little more than a few largely unfavorable comparisons—in one case “a shambling, pedantic mess, a hamhanded defense of Wuornos desperately in search of an argument”\textsuperscript{21}—to the much more successful and narratively satisfying film “Monster.” And only a few journalists, among them Broomfield, noted that,
although “Monster” was based on Wuornos’s “true” story, Tyria Moore’s name had been changed, there was no mention at all of Wuornos’s adoptive mother Arlene Pralle, and her childhood was left virtually unexplored.

One final scholarly study specifically focused on Wuornos was published in 2004. Written by Stacey L. Shipley and Bruce A. Arrigo, The Female Homicide Offender: Serial Murder and the Case of Aileen Wuornos set out to determine whether Wuornos could be more clearly understood as suffering from antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), a diagnosis more commonly applied to male killers. Using an “instrumental case study method,” which calls for “multiple sources of information rich in context,” Shipley and Arrigo conclude that, while Wuornos could certainly be viewed as a psychopathic serial killer, she was also the victim of every social mechanism or agency—criminal justice, mental health, family, and community—that might have intervened, especially during her childhood, and perhaps even prevented the murders. The irony, of course, is that once again, Wuornos is viewed only and always as a victim, not only of society but of her own psyche.

One would not argue that Wuornos’s case, or perhaps any case, deserved publicity of the sort Dahmer’s case received. A more disturbing critique comes at the cultural level. The democratic rhetoric of American society seems to suggest that this culture longs to transcend the process of condemnation—a necessary but strangely unfulfilling rite—in order to understand something—anything—about why men like Dahmer murder. But why doesn’t the same question apply to women who murder “like” Dahmer? For all her “textbook” visibility, Aileen Wuornos was finally not as visible as she seemed. She told her story, foul-mouthed and raging and crying, and still the words never seemed to catch fire with representatives of the media who might have chosen among several unexplored issues for their material. One wonders whether there yet exists a language that might speak
independent not of serial murder, but of the agendas that inform and damage the gendered ethics of American culture.

Was Wuornos somehow unique in the annals of women who commit serial murder? Do prostitutes “lure” men to their deaths? Was Wuornos somehow a “female” version of Bundy-in-his-plaster-cast, playing on the sympathies of men who might have imagined her stranded alone (was she alone?) on a highway? Does the term “prostitution” encompass, and therefore dismiss in the social conscience, a powerfully sexual aspect of female serial murder? What, exactly, is rape? Can prostitutes be raped? Can prostitutes rape? Could the social agendas on AIDS have figured into her case? How might Wuornos’s lesbianism have affected cultural and juridical perceptions of her crimes? What effect would abuse and alcoholism have on a woman diagnosed as manifesting the emotional development of a three-year-old child with a “borderline personality disorder”? How did such a woman manage to stay mentally organized enough to commit at least seven murders of “white, middle-aged men” probably larger and stronger than she was?

Does the media entertain those sorts of questions in terms of male serial murder? Certainly the techniques involved in “profiling” a male serial killer require exhaustive research into every detail of a crime scene, the backgrounds of the victims, and finally, when he is caught, the social, psychological, and medical background of the killer. The results of this research are, of course, made available to mass media in the interests of public awareness and safety.

As she has been portrayed by popular media, Wuornos fits the existing stereotype of the vengeful female victim too well to justify a change either in the standard definition of a serial killer to accommodate women or in the formulaic thinking that put Wuornos in her place to begin with. The sexual element of culturally understood male serial murder dovetails neatly with accepted beliefs about women’s more passive sexual natures. American society has too much invested, materially and morally, in ethical codes that affirm
the values and value of women as “caregivers” of one sort or another (prostitutes do not count as caregivers) to permit an organized subversion of the stereotype. For example, Wuornos’s new mother, Arlene Pralle, became estranged from her daughter, perhaps because the case did not earn the revenues she hoped would save her horse and wolf farm from massive debt. Broomfield’s film provided what little information there is on Pralle. National newspapers and popular magazines did not offer any coverage of “Mother-Love” gone sour. Pralle has not yet penned a memoir.

Even when the odd scholar chooses to study the female serial killer, the difficulties of sifting through reports of a given series of crimes, adulterated at every stage by various socially accepted norms, are obvious. Women’s victims are often impossible for the media to portray as objects of a woman’s uncontrolled, lustful mania. In the case of Wuornos, when such a textbook construction might have been expected (“white, middle-aged men,” “the prostitute,” “the lure,” and sex of some sort one would assume), public media and its audience seemed willfully blind to its possibilities. Prostitution—women’s work, by and large—is, after all, illegal. It seemed far safer to reduce Wuornos to an emotionally stunted whore who got what she was being paid for, lost control of her temper, used the handy gun because she was angry and, no doubt, in the depths of a “borderline” psychosis that at once caused her behavior and made her fatally irresponsible as a woman—and yet the legally appointed agent of her own death. In the end, it made more sense to maintain that Wuornos was just a textbook anomaly.
Notes


Chapter Five:

By February 1994, when the first of twelve known victims was unearthed from Rosemary and Frederick West’s back garden in Gloucester, England, the groundwork for a cultural panic over serial killers in Great Britain had already been laid. Between 1963 and 1965, Myra Hindley and Ian Brady had murdered at least four children and buried their remains on Saddleworth Moor. The case had caused a national uproar at the time and continued to generate headlines through the 1970s and 1980s as Brady confessed to two other murders and Hindley came up for parole. With the help of the American FBI, officials in Great Britain had established a large computer network, the Home Office Large Major Enquiry System (known as HOLMES); they had developed profiling techniques based on methods developed by American behavioral scientists; and they had created the National Crime Intelligence Service (NCIS), which superseded other British police agencies.¹ These efforts came about in response to a perceived social threat embodied in the sexual predator, a lust-killer whose victims were usually women, children, and homosexual men subjected to sexual torture, mutilations, and then death. With Hindley and Brady, offenders like Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, who killed thirteen women between 1975 and 1980, and John Duffy, the Railway Killer, charged with seven rapes and the murders of three young women in 1986, had confirmed in British culture the need for a coordinated system that could track serial offenders by linking separate police jurisdictions and inquiries into apparently unrelated offenses.² Whether any of these systems could have hindered or prevented the murders committed by the
Wests is difficult to determine, but the systems were essential to the consolidation of
information during the investigation of the case.

In March 1995, Rosemary West was convicted and sentenced in Winchester,
England, to life in prison for the murders of ten young women. Nine of them had been
buried at 25 Cromwell Street, the house in Gloucester that Rosemary and her husband Fred
occupied with their nine children. Most of the victims were found under the floor of the
children’s room in the cellar, under a bathroom, and beneath the patio in the back garden.
The police found a tenth victim, Fred’s first wife Catherine Costello (known as Rena),
buried in Letterbox Field near the village of Much Marcle where Fred had grown up. The
eleventh victim to be found, Catherine’s daughter Charmaine, had been buried beneath an
extension Fred had built onto the house he and Rose had formerly occupied, 25 Midland
Road. Police last found Anne McFall, buried in Fingerpost Field, Much Marcle. She had
been the first of these twelve victims to die, murdered by Fred West in 1967 three years
before he met his second wife Rose. The last of Fred and Rose's victims was their sixteen-
year-old daughter Heather, who disappeared in 1987.

When Fred and Rose wanted to discipline their children, they joked that they had
better behave or they would end up under the patio just like Heather. The family “jest”
found its way to Detective Constable Hazel Savage when a thirteen-year-old girl told the
police officer a horrifying story of sexual abuse at 25 Cromwell Street. Savage had first
heard of Fred West in 1966 from his first wife, as she escorted Rena from Glasgow to
Gloucester to stand trial for housebreaking. In 1992, Savage was also involved in an
investigation into charges that Rosemary and Fred had sexually abused at least one of their
children. Although the case came to trial in 1993, charges were dropped because two
witnesses refused to testify. (The Wests had each been fined in 1972 for indecent assault on
a young woman, Carol Raine, who later testified at Rosemary’s trial.) It was only through
the persistence of D.C. Savage’s search for the missing Heather—who had never been
reported missing by her parents—that the Wests’ murders were discovered. Heather was the first victim to be found, her skeletal remains beneath a concrete patio Fred and Rose had laid in June 1987, just after Heather had “left home.” She had been decapitated. Her legs had been removed at the hips. Her left thigh had been broken into two pieces. Thirty-eight bones were missing from her remains. Two lengths of cord—the sort Fred used in construction work—were found in the grave as well.4

As police discovered the remains of earlier victims, they found that the Wests had subjected the young women to treatment similar to Heather’s and worse. Before she was murdered, Shirley Hubbard’s head had been completely wrapped and encased with tape. Three inches of a narrow plastic tube had been inserted through the mask and into her nostril so she could breathe. The remains of Lynda Gough, Carol Ann Cooper, Lucy Partington, Therese Siegenthaler, Juanita Mott, and Alison Chambers were found in like condition. All the young women had been sexually abused and tortured. Most of their remains were incomplete, which suggested that some of their bones had been kept as trophies. Shirley Robinson was about eight months pregnant with Fred’s child when she was murdered; Anne McFall was six or seven months pregnant, also with Fred’s child, when she was killed. Of the twelve victims, only Fred could have murdered his first wife Rena Costello and his lover Anne McFall.

But according to the testimony of surviving victims (one of whom was Fred’s daughter Anne Marie), the other ten young women had suffered grossly at the hands of both Rosemary and Fred. Before their deaths they had either been caring for the Wests’ younger children, or had been lured from a dark street into accepting a ride from Rosemary and Fred; they endured indescribable sexual tortures inflicted by both Rosemary and Fred in the basement at Cromwell Street; they were decapitated and dismembered; and they were buried in pieces in two-foot square pits. Fred hanged himself in prison on New Year’s Day, 1995, just a few weeks before he and his wife were scheduled to go to trial.
In Great Britain, press coverage of the case began in February 1994 with the discovery of Heather’s remains and continued through Rosemary’s unsuccessful appeal in March 1996. The case carried frightening echoes of the still famous “Moors Murders” of the 1960s, which, according to one source, “despite the time since their convictions, figure in the media more than all the rest of the sex criminals in custody put together.” Hindley and Brady had audiotaped the torture of one of their victims, rather the way Fred and Rose videotaped their own sexually abusive behaviors. The cases seemed to parallel one another so closely in the consciousness of the culture that later rumors—wholly unfounded—ran rife that Myra and Rose had become friends in prison.

The headlines for the West murders were unremitting and lurid: from the byline of Duncan Campbell at the *Guardian*, “Girls were ‘cut up and bizarrely mutilated’” (October 10, 1995); “Tea and job offer followed ‘violent sexual attack’” (October 11, 1995); “Lesbian ‘like moth to flame’” (October 18, 1995); “Laughter while husband had sex with daughter, 8” (October 19, 1995); “Cromwell St victim’s tape mask” (October 25, 1995). As with Hindley and Brady, interest in the case grew not only from the number of victims involved, but also from the perverted sexualities of Fred and Rose. With Fred’s blessing, Rose had been a prostitute with a marked preference for West Indian clients. Her husband had built a peephole into her bedroom door so he could watch; he often listened in on his wife’s assignations with a baby monitor; and he and Rose had videotaped an extraordinary range of sexual acts, most of them perverse by ordinary standards (bestiality, as one example; most of the tapes had been confiscated and destroyed by police in 1993, after the Wests were acquitted of child sexual abuse). Rose also enjoyed sex with women, and bondage and discipline, which only added to the general belief that there were no limits to her perverse sexuality. She seemed as evil as Myra Hindley.

Although British attorneys are prohibited by law from giving interviews and press conferences, and television cameras were banned from the Winchester courtroom, the case
quickly became the equivalent of the American O.J. Simpson case, a grotesque carnival involving British media, paid witnesses testifying at the trial, and infighting among the surviving West children. Police obligingly reenacted, with props, the removal of the victims’ remains from Cromwell Street for broadcast media. One of the West children absconded with Fred’s ashes after his cremation and keeps them hidden in a little room at her house. Rosemary’s life as a married-lesbian-prostitute-mother-and-housewife became the tabloid headlines of several accounts of the case. Various witnesses promised exclusive post-trial interviews with journalists and tabloid reporters in exchange for sums ranging from 750 to 20,000 British pounds. Hazel Savage was removed from the case because she had spoken to a literary agent about writing her memoirs for, as one newspaper suggested, a sum of one million pounds.

On a more serious level, Scotland Yard established Great Britain’s first national bureau of missing persons. Until then, as one journalist observed, “the only national organization dedicated to searching for missing people...was a private charity.” After Fred's suicide, when many Britons felt cheated of justice, Elliott Leyton, among the best scholars to study serial murder, pondered the many suicides of Britons accused of murder and compared these killers to their American counterparts:

American killers do not kill themselves; and their sentences are infinitely more punitive. The answer may lie in the very different “careers”—and thus the implicit moral approval—offered to a notorious killer in the two different countries. In America, he will have the opportunity to give press conferences, to hold court with his various biographers, even to appear as a “star” on national television—to become the celebrity he always wanted to be. In Britain, with the regrettable exception of a few highly publicised cases (the Kray twins and Dennis Nilsen come to mind), he is much more likely to be relegated to a dusty institutional netherworld where he will be despised and ignored.
Perhaps. Fred West killed himself in order to try to save his wife from a conviction. He had never given a single indication that he had, as Leyton later suggests, “much more fully internalised society’s abhorrence of [his] act.” In fact, according to his official biographer Geoffrey Wansell, Fred West had christened himself “the Monster of Gloucester,” and inscribed the moniker on the wall of his cell before he died.

Over the two years of press coverage, which for criminal proceedings in Britain is both legislated and strictly regulated by the Press Complaints Commission, the West case evolved from a brutal tale of missing and murdered children (six of the Wests’ victims were never reported missing) to awkward questions for police about their 95% clear-up rate for homicide—despite 250,000 missing people whose fates were completely unknown—to an embarrassing story of misapplied (or perhaps ignored) media ethics. After the trial, of course, any story could be told, and the sensational nature of the case would sell it.

Three of the better accounts of the case were full-length books written by men who had attended the trial or had access to documents and the taped interviews police had conducted with Fred West. Howard Sounes, the journalist who broke the story and coined its moniker, “the House of Horrors,” published his account after Rose had been sentenced. In *Fred & Rose: The Full Story of Fred and Rose West and the Gloucester House of Horrors* (1995), Sounes sets forth a graphically detailed description of the Wests’ sexual perversions, arrests for sexual offenses, abuses of young women and their own children, and of the twelve known murders. He holds Rose and Fred equally responsible for their crimes.

Like Sounes, Brian Masters attended Rosemary’s trial and published his version, ‘She Must Have Known’ (1996), several months after the trial ended. Masters had also written well-received works on Jeffrey Dahmer and British serial killer Dennis Nilsen and therefore spoke with the authority of experience. In his estimation, Rose was convicted for ten murders she did not commit and of which she was probably completely unaware.
Geoffrey Wansell, a biographer and former reporter, titled his book *An Evil Love: The Life of Frederick West* (1996). Wansell worked closely with the Official Solicitor as well as social workers, psychiatrists, and the West children. He was given access both to the 150 hours of taped interviews with Fred and to Fred’s memoir about Anne McFall, “I Was Loved By An Angel,” written just before he died. As the title indicates, Wansell’s analysis of the case centers on Fred, with Rose as the focus of Fred’s obsession and corruptive influence. These three accounts of the case were responsibly researched and written; all three of the writers regarded Fred as the governing force in the murders. As for Rosemary West, she refused to talk at all to anyone. Except for her testimony at the trial, in which she blamed her husband entirely, she has not said one word to explain either her own behavior or her husband’s.

Stories sold and told by people who had survived a sexual assault (or years of assaults in some cases) by the Wests were obviously less objective and extraordinarily painful to read. They were also remunerative. Anne Marie West said forthrightly that she regarded the profits from her story as “blood money,” although all the West children have “asked for forgiveness for their mother or protest her innocence.”

The deluge of stories about the West case involved not only its history, but its effect on the public. After the trial, many journalists addressed the issue of whether the public had a right or a need to know the details of the abuses and murders committed by Rosemary and Fred. How much of the story should be told? Sounes’s and Wansell’s books were extremely graphic, but Masters said repeatedly in his that some of the evidence given in trial was “too repugnant” to recount. Without the details, Rosemary West seems far more sympathetic, which in fact is Masters’s point; she might have been guilty of sexually abusing children and young women, but Masters argues that those crimes should not have implicated her, with no forensic evidence at all, in the murders as well. All three of the writers include detailed
accounts of media involvement in the trial and how it might have affected the testimony of the witnesses.

Two articles published in the British Medical Journal address the same concerns over public good and the details of the West case. In one, Joshua Rozenberg, a legal correspondent for the BBC, explained that many reports on the West case were “not simply ignored, but shunned—readers and viewers told us they simply did not want to know about the evidence against Mrs. West.” Such attitudes put the press in a quandary—how much of the story should be told, in the interests of the public good? Rozenberg explains:

There are suggestions that coverage of a trial like this could in some way damage public health. It is thought that people with latent tendencies towards sexual violence could in some way be pushed over the edge by reading such accounts. There are fears that Mrs. West’s notoriety could lead others to emulate her.

Richard Morriss, a senior lecturer in psychiatry at the University of Manchester, presented the opposing view:

Censorship of explicit details of cases such as the West trial can have negative effects on the attitudes of the public. There is a danger that censored reports of the West trial sound too much like fiction, anaesthetising the public to these barbaric crimes, with several possible adverse consequences. The public may not report their suspicions or evidence of similar crimes, authorities may become indifferent to the public’s suspicions, immature or irresponsible people may become violent without realising the horror of what they are subjecting their victims to, and the public may start to believe the perpetrator’s claims of innocence and make punitive or dismissive judgments about the victims’ culpability for the crime.
In the larger sense, it was difficult to determine exactly what constituted “the public
good.” The Press Complaints Commission expressly forbids “payment to witnesses or
potential witnesses in current criminal proceeding...except where the material concerned
ought to be published in the public interest.” Is the public interest in the “public good”? Does payment to witnesses taint their testimony during a trial and therefore create a bias either for or against the accused? The West case caused so many problems for the British press that in fact the PCC would review its policies with an eye to clarifying and legislating the relationship between media, law, and public interest.

If the American press had chosen to cover the case, it would not have been handicapped by the same set of regulations that should have governed British coverage. American journalists and media outlets follow “suggested” codes of ethics that, except in cases of libel, are not legislated. But there was scarcely a whisper of coverage in American newspapers about the West case. Between February 1994 and November 1995, the case appeared seventeen times in the major national newspapers. Six of the stories were published in March 1994 after the initial discovery of the victims’ remains at Cromwell Street. In a portent of coverage to come, the Philadelphia Inquirer titled its piece “‘House of Horror’ Brings More Curiosity Than Shock; Death at an English Rooming House” (March 16, 1994). Only the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times reported Fred’s suicide in January 1995. The Inquirer mentioned Fred’s death as part of a larger article on who among the central cast of the case was selling a story (January 22, 1995). On February 15, 1995, the New York Times reported on the upheaval in the village of Dursley where Rosemary spent some weeks during a preliminary hearing, the local chaos caused by both her presence and the influx of media hounds. In October 1995, the Boston Globe published two pieces anticipating the beginning of Rose’s trial later that month, and the Chicago Tribune published one short commentary comparing the West trial to the Simpson trial. Four pieces—two in the Boston Globe and two in the New York Times—appeared in November
when Rose was convicted and marked the last time the West case appeared in the major American newspapers.

More interesting to consider is how the West case was covered in the United States. The text of the case—the story told by the media—was a spare and anemic version of the facts. Predictably, Fred was variously characterized as a “builder” or “construction worker” and “serial murderer” who was “likely to join the ranks of the UK’s most deadly serial killers,” accused of “murdering at least nine women and burying their remains in his garden and cellar,” and then “charged with the murders of nine people found buried in his back yard and more may surface.” After his death, the little remaining coverage focused on Rosemary, “a middle-aged housewife,” “homemaker,” “a plump, nondescript figure in eyeglasses.” One piece published in the *New York Times* (November 23, 1995) dubbed her “one of England’s most infamous murderers.” The *Boston Globe* acknowledged her as “a woman accused of torturing and murdering a string of victims whose hacked-up bodies were buried around her house” (November 22, 1995). Most of the stories included a reference to the sexual overtones of the case, but none of the leads for any of these stories used the term “serial killer” to describe Rosemary West. Every story began, however, by explaining that Rosemary West had been accused or convicted of murdering ten young women, “including her daughter and stepdaughter.” One source appended “a pregnant lodger.” In contrast, leads for Fred West’s features (through the dates of his suicide and Rosemary’s conviction) mentioned his daughter Heather only once (*Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1994) and did not mention his wife Catherine Costello (found April 11, 1994) or his stepdaughter Charmaine (found May 4, 1994) at all.

Paradoxically, the press coverage the West case received in Britain told the same bleak story that the American press did not write about the Wests and their murders. Despite other cases that had set precedents in both cultures, nothing appeared in popular media about women who commit serial murder. Much of the peripheral coverage involved the
ethics of the navel-gazing press itself, as though the admittedly serious questions about paid testimony were more important than core issues the case itself might have suggested. Nothing was written about shared serial murder or female sex offenders. Justice was dispensed, as it usually is in these cases (Charlene Gallego’s plea bargain, two concurrent sixteen-year sentences, for testimony against her husband in the ten murders they committed together, might seem extraordinarily lenient). The offenders were consigned to life in prison or, in America, to death row, and social stability was restored and perhaps even improved in Britain by new legislation geared toward missing children and media ethics. But the phenomenon of shared serial murder remained as repugnant and murky to the public eye as it had been before the Wests’ victims were even imagined. It seemed far safer to write the story of a woman who had violated her role as a woman—or in America, to suggest the invisible text of what women are not.

Shared serial murder—or team killing—presents unique difficulties for scholars and criminologists. Within the context of serial homicide, it is the least understood manifestation of the crime. Philip Jenkins explains that “the importance of group serial homicide is that it provides a social dimension to what appears to be the ultimately individual crime, and thus opens the door to new interpretations based on sociology and group psychology rather than psychodynamics.” But many of the attempts by theoreticians to develop a typology or establish a clear rate of occurrence for it seem to devolve into the inherent problems of defining serial murder itself and, when the crime involves female offenders, into inconsistently applied cultural assumptions about the genders. For example, in an effort to define the “totality” of serial murder, Belea T. Keeney and Kathleen Heide entirely omit shared serial murder from their analysis. Jenkins suggests, as a conservative estimate, that as many as one-fifth of extreme serial murder cases (ten or more victims) in the United States between 1971 and 1990 were the work of team killers, and notes that “the chance of developing a comprehensive list diminishes with less notorious or spectacular incidents.”
Most scholars do agree that shared serial murder nearly always involves the killers’ compulsion to experience both power and pleasure through sexual torture and then murder. In that sense, they would qualify as “hedonists” as well as “power/control oriented” killers in the Holmes and DeBurger typology. Eric Hickey explains:

For some multiple killers, murder must be simultaneously a participation and a spectator endeavor; power can be experienced by observing a fellow conspirator destroy human life, possibly as much as by performing the killing. The pathology of the relationship operates symbiotically. In other words, the offenders contribute to each other’s personal inventory of power.

The stumbling block in Hickey’s description of the crime comes with the word “symbiotically.” Because shared serial murder involves an intimate relationship between or among the killers, the “personal inventory of power” becomes the complicating factor in how agency and responsibility are assigned for the murders. Hickey notes that “in groups of people who kill, there are often a few who play subservient roles. They provide an immediate audience ‘privileged’ to experience or witness the destructive power of the main actors.”

Furthermore, he argues that within his sample of seventy-six offenders responsible for thirty-two cases, “every group of offenders had one person who psychologically maintained control of the other members of the team.” Thirty-eight percent of those cases involved female offenders, yet in cases involving both men and women, Hickey explains that “although women frequently became involved in serial murder as a part of team killing, they generally were not the decision makers or main enforcers.”

When the teams or groups of killers involve female offenders (especially if they are killing with men), typologies become fraught with gender issues so complex that the
definition of shared serial murder becomes compromised by cultural assumptions about both men and women. “Symbiosis,” then, is less an issue of reciprocal interaction between the killers than an arrangement in which the “leader” of the team or group initiates a “disciple” into the business of murder. In their 1991 typology of female serial murderers, Holmes, Hickey, and Holmes explain that “some women kill when they are under the influence of a charismatic leader.”26 All the cases they cite as representative of the type support their hypothesis that men are the leaders or instigators of the murders and women are “followers.”

Such conclusions are perhaps unwittingly based on existing cultural stereotypes not only about gender, but about the nature of sexuality, sexual perversion, and sexual homicide as well. This is an old story: women are sexually passive, men are sexually active; women submit, men impose. Men do it, women do not; or if they do (rarely), someone else forced them to do it. Jenkins explains:

Until very recently, writers (no less than police and prosecutors) tended to assume that a homicidal pair would inevitably follow conventional sexual stereotypes. It would be dominated by the male partner, while the woman would be a manipulated or bullied dupe. This is a natural courtroom defense for the accused woman, precisely because it is likely to appeal to the prejudices and preconceptions of the jurors. However, other cases indicate a much more active role by the female partner.... It remains true that multiple offender cases frequently involve male-female pairs; but the relative importance of participants remains an open question.27

In stereotypical cultural assumptions about serial murder and women, women forego both their agency and responsibility for their behavior and men are held responsible by the culture for acts of deviance so extreme that they could not conceivably have been the acts of a woman.
American culture seems to have a great deal of its identity invested in social constructions that disregard a woman’s choice to murder serially. When she shares the act with a male partner—as did Rosemary West, Charlene Gallego, Judith Neelley, Debra Brown, Myra Hindley, Martha Beck, Carol Bundy, and Faye Copeland—she is more likely to be viewed as the victim of her partner. In her anthology *Women Serial and Mass Murderers*, for example, Kerry Segrave excludes most of these women because they “were guilty of murder in law but were passive participants. [They] were traditional in the sense that they functioned in the stereotypical role of cheerleader for their men. Had they never met [their partners] there is nothing to indicate they would have been petty criminals, let alone murderers.”

Such ideas have found their way into much of the medical literature that addresses shared deviant behaviors. Virtually none of the literature, whether focused on biological or psychological imperatives, specifically targets shared serial murder, but one disorder seems to inform virtually all analyses of the crime by laymen and criminologists alike. It is commonly known as “*folie a deux*” or “shared psychotic disorder” (SPD) by psychiatric professionals, and accounts for serial murder typologies that describe team killers as “cheerleaders,” “disciples,” and “leaders and followers.” The typical analysis suggests that these “disciples” would never have committed murder without the influence of the leader, a single charismatic presence (the “primary”) that somehow caused the follower (the “secondary”) to fall into murderous behaviors not once, but repeatedly.

The three long analyses of the West case by Sounes, Masters, and Wansell include fairly detailed examinations of SPD and links between the West case and other similar cases. Although none of writers believes that SPD exculpates Rose, they share a common interest in how her extraordinary devotion to Fred might account for much of her behavior. Sounes and Wansell also discuss Rose’s father, William Letts, a diagnosed schizophrenic who, according to Sounes, apparently never received treatment. Rose had been characterized by
witnesses as a “Jekyll-and-Hyde,” but the writers do not mention whether Rose might be genetically predisposed toward schizophrenia, which in her father manifested itself in severe mood swings, marked aggression, obsessive/compulsive disorder, and the probable sexual abuse of Rose. Whether a link might exist between schizophrenia and shared psychotic disorder is also a mystery.

Shared psychotic disorder is “characterized by the transference of delusional ideas and/or abnormal behavior from one person to one or more others who have been in close-knit relationships with the primarily affected patient.” According to a recent critical review of the literature, much of the scholarship on SPD suggested until recently that women were more likely to suffer from the disorder, and that the secondary (or follower) would most likely be a woman (subject to the domination of a man), a youth, or a person described as passive or suffering from low self-esteem, sensory impairment, low intelligence, or a genetic predisposition to psychiatric illness. These kinds of assumptions play into larger cultural assumptions that contend that women are more vulnerable to all sorts of influences, whether wielded by figures of authority psychologically or socially.

But the authors of the review found instead that women are no more likely than men to become secondaries in SPD, and that in fact women might more often be characterized as primaries, the dominant member of the team or group. None of the characteristics that seemed to identify secondaries were borne out by the case-studies. More interesting, in terms of the cultural understanding of shared serial murder, is the authors’ conclusion that “it may be that shared psychotic disorder represents the contemporaneous appearance of psychosis in two vulnerable individuals who happen to share the content of delusions by virtue of their shared life experiences and close, isolated communications.” In other words, perhaps team killers gravitate toward each other in a real process of psychotic symbiosis rather than one participant being seduced into committing murder, serially, by another. The implications for women’s involvement in shared serial murder are clear:
perhaps they are more consciously aware of their choices to kill than has previously been assumed.

A formal and overt acknowledgement of women’s active participation in shared serial murder implies that their behavior is organized and motivated by more than transient compulsion or obsession. Hickey’s study of team killers lists four significant motives for their murders: 53% of the offenders reported that they killed for sexual reasons, 40% for money, 44% for enjoyment, and 28% for personal reasons. Forty-one percent of the killers said that they murdered from a combination of motives. Other motives—perverted acts, cult expectations, revenge, and insanity were each cited by fewer than 20% of the offenders. Hickey’s list is useful both for what it suggests and what it omits. It does not indicate that motives might vary along gender lines. In the larger sense, how might these terms—“sexual reasons,” “enjoyment,” “personal reasons,” and “perverted acts”—be differentiated? Would women be more likely to report “personal” rather than “sexual” reasons? Would women be likely to regard “perverted acts” as the province only of men? Hickey says that “team killers most likely had motives of a sexual nature. Rape, sodomy, fellatio, and so on were recurrent forms of sexual acting out.” But whose sexual nature does this “acting out” describe?

Describing motive is further complicated by cultural classifications within gendered sexuality. Were Rose West’s and Charlene Gallego’s sexual abuses of young women the acts of “lesbians” or “straight” women? Was the lesbian relationship between Gwendolyn Graham and Catherine Wood a sexual factor in their murders of nursing home residents? How do the dynamics of female sexuality affect the symbiosis of individual as well as shared serial murder?

Once again, the literature on women as sex offenders is sparse, and much of it still seems to tread the very thin line between traditional patriarchal ideologies and more innovative thinking. Part of the trouble involves what might be termed culturally “appropriate” or “acceptable” sexual behavior in women: what, exactly, is it? For example,
prostitution might be against the law, but as a type of female behavior it is known as “the oldest profession in the world”; prostitutes do not by virtue of their profession qualify as sex offenders. On the other hand, a woman who touches male or female colleagues, students, children not her own—as well as her own—in ways considered “inappropriate” in contemporary America runs the risk of severe legal censure. One has only to remember that if a woman becomes sexually aroused as she nurses her baby, and admits that she is aroused, she is then subject to harsh legal repercussions (losing custody of her child) in some states and to moral reprobation from the culture at large.

The scope of female sex offenses is also difficult to determine, in part because cultural expectations dictate such a wide range of acceptable sexualized behavior from women. As Jean Renvoize explains in *Innocence Destroyed*, recent estimates by scholars have been upped significantly, from around 5% of sex offenders as female to perhaps as many as 25%. Renvoize quotes D.J. West’s work, *Sexual Crimes and Confrontations*: “‘recollections of young males suggest that some 12 per cent may have had sexual experiences with older females when they were under 16, most of them being recalled as non-traumatic or pleasurable.’”34 Rather than being considered “rapists” or “pedophiles” in this context, women are more typically seen by their male victims as experienced sexual partners “initiating” them into their sexuality. In essence, women can disguise their own sexual deviance as any number of sexually expected, if not entirely appropriate, gender roles.

With that theoretical morass in mind, a few scholars have begun to examine the behavior of women sex offenders with varying degrees of success. Adele Mayer’s 1992 study, *Women Sex Offenders*, lists four major types of female sex offenders: rapists, sexual harassers, mother molesters (women who molest their children), and homosexual molestation. While useful as the beginning of a system of classification, this typology also echoes contemporary cultural confusion over issues such as what, exactly, constitutes sexual
harassment, and the perhaps unintentional but culturally charged link between deviance and homosexuality. As for causal explanations, Mayer suggests that offenses can result from a reenactment of early childhood trauma, from sadistic criminal behavior, and from narcissism. Of the three, sadistic criminal behavior manifested as sexual offenses in women has received very little attention from psychiatric, medical, or juridical professionals.

Finally, female sex offenders do not yet have access to a language or story that can explain why they sexually abuse their victims. In treatment programs, most notably Genesis II for Women in Minneapolis, women sex offenders describe their motives in existing cultural paradigms that emphasize the passivity of the female offender: They were forced into committing abuses by their male partners; they were afraid; they had been abused themselves, often as children; they had low self-esteem; or they were angry, vengeful, or jealous, and abused others in order to feel powerful themselves. Most of the women said that their own sexual arousal was not a motivating factor. Most of them also accepted responsibility for what they had done.

At the same time, the language that explains female sex offenders seems to focus on their roles as victims themselves rather than as pedophiles, a role still reserved almost exclusively for male sex offenders. One source states that “there is no evidence to support the notion that these women are intentionally malicious people possessing rigidly structured deviant personalities.” Exactly when does sexual abuse by women offenders become “intentionally malicious”? Would the same question be applied to male sex offenders? The culture seems more comfortable with the idea that female sex offenders are “unintentionally malicious” or perhaps “intentionally” unintentioned. In any case, as some scholars note, the clearly and intentionally malicious sexual element of shared serial murder can be regarded as both motive and method. In that sense, as Hickey explains, “the sexual assaults appeared to be methods of gaining control over victims” for both male and female offenders.
assaults might be seen also as ways for the offenders to gain control over themselves by designing what Louise Kaplan calls “perverse scenarios” that control the scope and context of sexual reality and fantasy.

Why does American culture—along the continuum from feminist to misogynist—disregard the possibility of agency in women who commit sex offenses? Kaplan suggests that in America, commodified sexuality only reinforces traditional gender roles:

These days, the popularization and commercialization of deviant sexualities is achieving the purposes of gender conformity and sexual repression just as effectively as the more obvious and direct methods of suppression that prevailed at the beginning of this century.39

When deviant sexualities are also criminal, the offending women have no recourse to a language that might explain or help in their rehabilitation. At the same time, the culture can use those gender roles to reward “good women” and disavow “evil women.”

Why are these women so nearly invisible to the various creators and purveyors of social reality in journalism, criminology, and the entertainment industries? When sexual abuse becomes sexual homicide, the language remains the same and the stories just as inadequate. Helen Birch describes the textual limbo occupied by women like Rosemary West and Myra Hindley:

It seems that Myra Hindley is damned if she speaks, and damned if she does not. Her attempts to represent herself, to locate an explanation for her actions somewhere between the polarities of victimization and evil, are doomed to failure; at once too subtle (I was obsessed, but I was still a separate person) and too contradictory (I knew what I was doing, but there was a part of me that didn’t belong to me)—possibly even too human: they do not tally with the need to distance ourselves. This is not me; this has nothing to do with me.
I will not countenance her…. The mythology of Myra Hindley reveals, above all, that we do not have a language to represent female killing, and that a case like this disrupts the very terms that hold gender in place.40

Like Aileen Wuornos, these women might be guilty of murder, but they also threaten the most fundamental beliefs this culture holds about womanhood.

In the case of shared serial murder, when method and motive involve radically deviant or perverted sexualities, these beliefs about women also concern the role women play in the culture as sexual selves. When a culture says to its children, “never speak to strangers,” does it mean female strangers or male strangers? When police provide citizens with McGruff safe-house posters meant to provide safe haven for terrorized children walking home from school, do they also explain that the majority of abused children are attacked by family or neighbors, half of whom are women?

Gendered ethics dictate that women are “initiated” by men into sexual perversity; they are not “pedophiles” but “child abusers.” They can be called whores, prostitutes, sluts, and lesbians—as Rosemary West was—or they can be called decent, intelligent women bewitched by charismatic sexual psychopaths—as Charlene Gallego was. In that sense, their sexual perversities cannot be compared with those of Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono who sexually tortured and murdered at least ten women in California, or Robin Gecht and his partners, or Dean Corll and his. The sexual identities of these men were not compromised by their partners, all of whom were male. The murders they committed fulfilled conventional expectations for male deviant sexuality and in that way also fulfilled conventional social formulae that could account for the crimes. As loathsome as the murders were, stories could be told about them and lessons could be learned.

What could be learned from women who flouted—except in their overweening adoration of their lovers—every single safe assumption the culture held for the gender?
Rosemary West was a wife, a mother, a prostitute, a lesbian, and a child abuser, all roles that were variations of the madonna and the whore. The best-selling commodity in her story was not who she was as a serial killer, but who she was as a gendered, sexual self. She never quite made it as the agent of the case, as “mistress” of the House of Horrors. What story could possibly be told that would explain, in a way the culture could accept, why she had behaved as she had? At the moment the clearest story seems to be one about “linkage blindness” among issues within the West case and among similar cases in the larger context. By failing or refusing to link the various aspects of the case into a coherent whole—which would provide a fuller, clearer, and more accurate account of what happened and even why it happened—society can more comfortably accept a Rosemary West.
Notes


3. Authorities believe that Fred, with or without Rose, probably murdered many other women, but Fred refused to discuss the matter before his death. In *An Evil Love*, Geoffrey Wansell suggests that part of the reason Fred kept silent was to save his wife from prosecution (338).


murder is the premeditated murder of three or more victims committed over time, in separate incidents, in a civilian context, with the murder activity being chosen by the offender” (305).


21. Ronald M. Holmes and James DeBurger, Serial Murder (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1988). The authors suggest four categories that might describe variations among serial murderers: visionary, mission-oriented, hedonistic, and power/control oriented. Shared serial murder could also be classified as power/control oriented.


24. ———, Serial Murderers and Their Victims, 178.

25. ———, Serial Murderers and Their Victims, 178.


31. ———, “Shared Psychotic Disorder,” 393.

32. Hickey, Serial Murderers and Their Victims, 195.

33. ———, Serial Murderers and Their Victims, 193.


39. ———, *Female Perversions*, 509.

Chapter Six:  
The Deaths of Children: Stella Elizabeth Williamson, 1923–1933

Among women who commit multiple murder, those who kill children strike at the heart of cultural values. Not so long ago, these women were baby farmers disposing of other women’s unwanted newborns, often killing and burying them rather than putting them up for adoption. These days they are nurses like Genene Jones, baby sitters like Christine Falling, and aunts like Martha Woods—women responsible for the welfare of the youngest and most defenseless members of society. They are also mothers like Marybeth Tinning, who murdered eight of her children over the course of thirteen years, or Marie Noe, who also murdered eight of her children between 1949 and 1968. Of all criminals, the mother who kills her own children evokes in the culture the most outrage.

The process of developing stories that can account for such an offense is complex, and it becomes even more difficult when a mother kills not just one child, but several of her children. Her victims, usually infants, are helpless. They have been entrusted by the culture to the most sacred of cultural myths, the maternal instinct. The outrage generated by a case of infanticide arises only partly on behalf of the victims. In a more diffuse sense, such outrage also implicates the culture itself in the crime: either the woman has betrayed her maternal instinct, or she has been betrayed by the various social agencies that define her gender. Whose fault was it that the woman—whether nurse, baby sitter, or mother—wasn’t caught?

To answer that question, storytellers in the culture contend with value systems in three broad categories. First, they assign meaning to the social value of the maternal
instinct: should it be considered a biological or a gendered imperative? Second, they
determine the criminal value of infanticide: should it be considered a separate and unique
category of homicide? Third, they must frame the story for the cultural marketplace: if a
murdering mother seems to embody the worst in female deviant behavior, what lessons
should be taken from her story? Which lessons, in their larger applications to women who
murder children, will sell?

For storytellers, the process of sorting through the value systems implied by these
issues is messy. In the special case of infanticide, values exist in hostile symbiosis, their
permeable boundaries complicating a tale already unbearable to contemporary American
culture. The social value of the maternal instinct hinges on the value of gender identity; is
there a “paternal” instinct that might be expected to protect children endangered by their
mothers? In American jurisprudence, infanticide—mothers murdering their children,
typically within the first year after birth—is not a separately legislated type of crime; in this
country, murder is murder.

Finally, the whole machinery of community values becomes implicated in the
business of telling stories about women who murder their children. From coverage in print
and broadcast media, to longer accounts geared toward mass popular culture, to scholarly,
literary, and fictional treatments, the central issue is the same: storytellers must develop and
reflect a value system that justifies the story itself and at the same time justifies public
interest in the story, without giving the community the sense that it is somehow guilty of
complicity in the deaths of its children.

The social construction of an appropriate story for this type of criminality might be
complicated, but the end result is not. Late in 2003, a controversy in Great Britain erupted
involving Sir Roy Meadow, a pediatrician world-renowned for his work on Sudden Infant
Death Syndrome and Munchausen’s syndrome-by-proxy. Had his expert testimony during
numerous trials of mothers for the murders of their children resulted in the wrongful
imprisonments of hundreds of innocent women? Had the drug Cisapride, now banned, caused their deaths? Or were the deaths of hundreds of children best attributed to SIDS? According to Meadow, “one death of a child in a family was a tragedy, two were grounds for suspicion, and three, unless proven otherwise, were murder.”¹ The telling point for American culture is that this story, which broke in Britain in January 1999, warranted only one mention in The New York Times on February 8, 2004. No other national American newspaper picked up the story.

Despite rhetoric in the culture that seems to embrace, at every level, the validity of different, context-specific truths, the context of serial murder committed by women yields one master narrative that tells the only truth that seems to matter. Women who kill children violate every aspect of their socially approved gender identities. They are presented as the inversions of their sex: physically unattractive, deceitful, promiscuous yet frigid, psychotic, and completely isolated from the larger culture. They suffer from Munchausen’s syndrome-by-proxy or from postpartum depression. If these women are victims, they are victims of their sex. The men involved with them, however peripherally, are presented as dupes and fools, themselves inversions of their own socially approved gender identities. This type of parable seems to be necessary to American culture, in part because it restores a moral balance knocked askew by multiple killers who were women. In the end, the story seems to say, these are not women at all.

In many ways, the stories told about Stella Williamson’s case are typical of other accounts of maternal infanticide. Her murders were discovered in August 1980, fifty years after they had been committed, and created a sensation in local and national news media. Coverage of the case exploded quickly into headlines and just as quickly subsided. During the course of that one month, however, news coverage distorted the available facts of her case to restore order to the cultural beliefs about the maternal instinct and to reinstate appropriate gender identities that Stella Williamson had violated.
One year later journalist Michael VerMeulen developed a much longer and more detailed story about Stella Williamson and her world for a popular magazine called *Philadelphia*. This two-part version of her story, which appeared in November and December 1981, was built on and extended the distortions initially framed by news media. VerMeulen complicated his story with speculation about the involvement of Stella’s mother in the murders and implied that the small town of Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, was also somehow responsible for the murders. This series of distortions culminated in a reaffirmation of the maternal instinct, in an indictment of women who betray that instinct, and in the establishment of a safe, acculturated distance between places like Gallitzin and the more enlightened community of the audience.

The case disappeared again from literature on women who murder until it was resurrected by Michael Newton in the early 1990s for three publications on modern serial murderers. These publications—sensationalist and ghoulish “reference” books—are marketed to a mass popular audience that subscribes to the master narrative of women who commit serial murder. For that reason they provide the most refined version of that narrative. The lessons to be learned are self-evident, and the questions that might have been asked have been edited out. In the three paragraphs of her entry, the same text in all three volumes, Stella Williamson is presented as a caricature of womanhood, a typical offender of her sort and, as a female, almost a footnote to the larger story of serial murder. Newton’s summary of her case represents not only Stella Williamson’s final appearance in print, but also the final verdict of the cultural value system that had judged the mysteries of her stories and put them to rest.

The ugliness of a case like Stella Williamson’s seems to demand from the culture a very rigid, if complex, value system, which in turn requires a master narrative that will accommodate stories like hers. In that sense, her case at least suggests the master narrative that also applies to other women who murder children. But Stella Williamson’s crime never
garnered the kind of attention that can produce a mass-market true-crime book of the sort that Marybeth Tinning’s case had earned. Stella’s story was short and, like the stories of most female multiple murderers, outwardly unremarkable. She was judged to be a female anomaly in the contexts of both genders, and a ridiculous and rather pathetic representative of her criminal brethren. Removed from the strictures of cultural value systems, however, Stella Williamson’s story reveals an intriguing subtext. How much does American culture have invested in a master narrative for women serial murderers that does not question its own assumptions? Which questions cannot be asked? More important, why at so many levels can they not be asked?

* * *

Stella Williamson was born on January 22, 1904, when her parents were in their forties. Their first child, Arthur, had been born sixteen years before, and their second, Howard, six years after that. Stella was their last child and only daughter. Like her parents, Stella would spend all her life in Gallitzin, Pennsylvania, in the house her father Alfred had built himself and deeded to his wife, Dessie. Stella would live through World War I, Prohibition, the Depression, and World War II. She would eventually own a car, a telephone, and a television set. She would bury both her parents and her brothers, and live through the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Hippies and feminists, draft dodgers and soldiers, and the multitudes of a fragmenting culture would captivate the nation during the last two decades of Stella’s life.

Gallitzin, at the highest point of the Allegheny Mountains in central Pennsylvania, took its name from an eighteenth-century Russian Roman Catholic priest and its life from the mountains that isolated the town from Philadelphia to the east and Pittsburgh to the west. Between 1850 and 1904, the construction of three railroad tunnels through the mountains—literally beneath the town—boosted its population and brought work to its inhabitants. The
mountains also sustained the coal-mining industry until 1953; more than three hundred coke ovens were operated there until early in the twentieth century. During Prohibition, the mountains sheltered moonshiners from revenuers. If the town seemed remote from its lowland counterparts, it could at least claim some distinction as a nexus of mountains and human industry.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Gallitzin lost much of the population it once had supported. The coke ovens were shut down. Strip-mining replaced the deep mines for a while, until the mountains had yielded the last of the coal still cheap enough to justify the labor. The two shirt factories in town refused to accept unionized labor and were closed down. Five hotels shut their doors when no one stopped in town anymore to stay. Descendants of the immigrants from Ireland and Poland who had settled the town a century before remained, tending houses that had been built from red brick or wood. They lived close by one another, their windows giving onto screened porches and unfenced backyards that blended along the mountainside. They knew each other’s cars and each other’s license plates. They still drew their livelihoods from the mountains and the railroad, which expanded its tunnels beneath the town and kept commerce flowing east to west and back again. In 1964 the National Park Service established a National Historic Site, just outside town, commemorating the Allegheny Portage Railroad. Summer tourists came to see the tunnels and to walk the trails in the 1500-acre park.

Alfred Williamson, Stella’s father, worked as a carpenter for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Her mother, Dessie, kept the house and tended her children long after they had grown up. Her older brother, Arthur, left home to marry in 1937 when he was forty-nine. Howard, the younger brother, began traveling for the railroad when he was seventeen, but did not move out of the house on Forest Street until he married in 1931 at the age of thirty-eight. Stella never left home. She attended school through the eighth grade and then stayed home to help her mother, first with the family and housework, and then with the boarders
taken in after Alfred’s death in 1930. For pocket money, Stella washed and mended the boarders’ clothing and occasionally did embroidery for people in town. She never married.

For anyone who might have wondered, Stella seemed to live a quiet and rather private life. Like many of the girls in town, she had had suitors, among them a young man named Howard Drass. But he was from a devoutly Catholic family, and hers was resolutely Methodist. Late in his life he married a Catholic woman; they never had children. Stella was courted also by one of the first boarders to move in, a man named Bert Blackburn, but she refused both his marriage proposal and the gift of a graveyard plot next to his in Union Cemetery. He died in 1964 and was buried next to the empty space he’d kept for her. She also refused to marry Guy Schrack, her companion for forty-three years, but later accepted his gift of gold and diamond rings, which she wore on her left hand.

At the beginning of their courtship, Guy was married and lived with his wife across the street from Stella. Later, in 1937, he moved into the Williamson house. Together he and Stella kept the house at Forest Street and waited, not long, for Guy’s wife to die of uterine cancer. Five years later they saw Dessie, Stella’s mother, buried next to Alfred in Union Cemetery. She died testate; in 1938 she had used the printed form prepared by the state of Pennsylvania to record her last wishes. The document was not typed; the handwriting is very large, here and there cramped into space too small for what she had to say. At the end of the form, the last four lines of her wishes have been forced into the top margin of the second page. She named her sons as executors. Stella’s old friend Bert Blackburn, boarding at Forest Street when Dessie made out her will, was one of the witnesses. Dessie said:

That The home I leave to my Daughter, Stella Williamson as Long as she remains single and I farther Direct that The money on Waiver in the First National Bank of Gallitzin or any other monies waived is to be the Property of Stella Williamson also without any Division or reservation.
That in case of marriage of my Daughter Stella Williamson then in that event, the Property and all other assets, accept the money above mentioned as waived, is to equally Divided into three shares among my three children.

That in case of circumstances arising such as sickness, accident etc which prevents or entails a hardship on Stella Williamson in maintaining the home while single, then in that case Permission is given for all three to Dispose of it share & Share alike.4

Dessie’s signature at the end of the will was written in different, much darker ink, and the handwriting seems smaller and shakier. Perhaps she had dictated her wishes to someone else, who then wrote out the conditions for her. In any case, she had provided some support to her unmarried, unemployed daughter, while at the same time providing for her much older and employed sons if circumstances changed. When Dessie died in January 1942, the value of her estate totaled $2,390.33.

Stella and Guy stayed in the house on Forest Street. They took in boarders to supplement Guy’s pension from the railroad; they worried through Stella’s diabetes and her hysterectomy in 1963. They tended a large garden on Stella’s half of a small farm Arthur had willed to her and Howard. They endured the amputation of her left leg five years before her death. On Sundays, Guy pushed Stella in her wheelchair up Forest Street and over to the United Methodist Church where Guy ushered and Stella was a member of the Women’s Society. In Richland Cemetery, twenty-five miles away from Gallitzin, the two are buried side by side, next to Arthur and his wife Florence.

Stella died before Guy did. Her obituary and funeral notice appeared on August 28, 1980, two days after she died, in the Altoona Mirror. They were notable only for their simplicity. Three days after her burial, Guy found Stella’s will. What little she had to bequeath, Stella left to him: the house on Forest Street, worth $20,000; her half-share of the
small farm from Arthur, worth $7,500; $1,350 in savings bonds she and Guy had bought between 1945 and 1947; her $50 half-interest in their 1964 Chevrolet and $75 half-interest in their 1972 Oldsmobile; and the contents of her house, worth $250. Altogether it added up to about $30,000. She had written her will twenty years before, in 1960. Enclosed with it was a note she’d written at the same time. She must have imagined that Guy would be the likeliest to find it among the papers in her dresser, although she addressed it to no one. It was sealed in a white envelope. On the front, Stella had written: “To be opened after my burial.” Guy opened it and read:

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Today I started to bleed and I want to make things right if anything should happen to me. In the attic in an old trunk you will find babies I had to Howard Drass thirty years or more. How I got away with I don’t no but I did so I don’t want anyone else to be blamed for something they know nothing about. This is one reason I could never marry anyone else. I have have lived a good life since so as God is my judge this is the truth.

Stella

He never wanted me. Only something to play with and I was a fool in his hands.

On a separate sheet, Stella wrote:

To whom it may Concern I being of Sound mind leave all my personal belongings to Guy Schrack and he is to live in my Home it is a toss up between him and a Certain party and the Best one win
Guy telephoned his friend Francis Lenz, the town undertaker, who had known the Williamson family since his own childhood. Francis Lenz called the district attorney. Stella’s life became a public affair.

From beginning to end, the press coverage of the Williamson case lasted one month. It received attention from local, national, and international news services intrigued by the spinster who had lived for fifty years with the remains of babies stored in the attic. The print media would report what information could be had and, in that way, tell a story about Stella Williamson’s life. The element of human interest in the case—its mystery—would determine what kind of story could be told. In the chasm between fact and truth lay the social values that would fashion the story. What sort of woman had Stella been? In the larger cultural context, what sort of woman could have found herself in such circumstances? As a mouthpiece for cultural values, the press would frame the answers to those questions in its reports.

Two days later the first accounts of the story were published in local papers. Stella’s letter was not released by the authorities, but they had announced at a press conference the previous day that the corpses of five babies had been found in the trunk, wrapped separately in newspapers bearing dates between 1923 and 1933. Four of the infants seemed to have been newborns. One could have lived about eight months. A picture of the Williamson house accompanied the long article published in the Altoona Mirror on September 4, 1980. Friends and acquaintances had been interviewed and quoted. All were shocked. Forensic pathologists and anthropologists would be consulted. As for Stella herself, she was a spinster “whose weight appeared to have hovered around 270 pounds.” She had had a leg amputated, and she refused the help of neighbors when she was sick. She “doted on” the
children of an acquaintance and was “quiet as a chestnut.” Trips to the garden she worked with Guy and to church were “apparently the extent of Miss Williamson’s social life.” Police were calling the babies’ deaths “suspicious.” The county coroner called the case “bizarre.”

Another Pennsylvania newspaper, the Scranton Times, presented similar coverage that day, adding that authorities presumed the babies had been killed “the day of their birth or shortly thereafter,” and that Miss Williamson “never said they were hers.” Details of her biography, elicited from a “long-time acquaintance” of Stella’s, echoed the same details: “never married,” “confined to a wheelchair since a leg was amputated,” “frequented a Methodist church.” “But,” the article concluded, the woman speaking “didn’t know Miss Williamson well.”

As coverage of the case continued during the next few weeks, these became the significant details of Stella Williamson’s life. Her story was augmented only by speculation that her mother might have served as midwife during the births, and in the end by the letter itself, published in newspapers without Howard Drass’s name or Stella’s accompanying will. In the Altoona Mirror Stella remained “a large woman [who] never appeared pregnant.” No one could remember a long-term boyfriend. Said one friend, “We didn’t talk about that kind of thing.” The focus of most reports shifted to the babies themselves and to the men charged with investigating their deaths. The most visible to the media was Dr. Wilton Krogman, a nationally-known forensic anthropologist who would attempt to reconstruct what had happened fifty years before. Quoted in the Altoona Mirror on September 5, 1980, he said of the babies, “Holy Moses, that means they’re mummified.... My God, it’s almost a collection.” Several articles noted that, during the 1940s, Krogman had helped investigate the deaths of five babies found buried at a Chicago baby farm.

Analysis of the babies’ remains would take a month to complete. They were moved to Philadelphia by helicopter and later to Lancaster, where Krogman would join
Philadelphia Medical Examiner Halbert E. Fillinger in the investigation. In less than a week, the case had drawn attention from national and international media, and just as quickly it dropped from the newspapers until Krogman and Fillinger completed their work. A photograph, published on September 6, 1980, in the *Scranton Times*, brought coverage of the case to a temporary close. In it, Krogman is holding a laboratory model of a child’s skull. The only accompanying text is the brief caption, marked by a resonant typing error that labeled Stella a “spinister.”

On October 2, exactly one month after Guy had found Stella’s letter, Krogman and Fillinger met in Lancaster and unwrapped the babies’ remains for the first time. Krogman hoped the remains would be intact enough for him to determine whether the babies were related. He also hoped to establish their ages when they died, and when and how they had died. In the end, what was found in the bundles answered only some of the questions. The babies’ skulls were in fragments, which meant that Krogman could not determine with forensic exactitude whether they were siblings. There was no forensic method of determining their sexes because they had died too young. But Krogman could confirm what the newspaper wrappings suggested, that the babies had died between 1923 and 1933. From the little evidence remaining, Krogman believed that the babies had been well-fed and healthy. He could estimate their ages with some accuracy. Two of the infants were newborns who might have lived several weeks, and two were three to six months old. The eldest had lived perhaps as long as a year. For two of the babies, he could not list a cause of death. For the other three, the cause was clear: they had been strangled and suffocated with thin strips of toweling. One child had suffered what Krogman called “a non-fatal crania-cerebral injury.” Remnants of a noose were still looped around the neck and stuffed into the mouth of the child who had lived long enough to learn to walk.

The findings of the investigation leaked their way into the press before Krogman and Fillinger could release an official statement. Once again, headlines of the local newspapers
and back-page spots in the national newspapers echoed the familiar taglines—baby deaths, attic, trunk. The first article appeared on October 8, 1980, in the Philadelphia Bulletin, and attributed its information to “a source close to the investigation.” The headline read: “Baby deaths seen natural / Pa. study of 5 in trunk indicates no foul play.” The piece itself contained more speculation than substantiated fact: two of the babies were “stillborn”; the others “only lived for months,” which suggested that all of the infants “might have died of natural causes”; X-rays had revealed no evidence of fractured bones or skulls. As the story began to circulate, Stella’s previously nonexistent love life became populated with the “many boyfriends” she’d had during the 1920s and 1930s. In her letter, still not released to the public, she was reported by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette published the next day (which credited the Philadelphia Bulletin for the information) to have asked God’s forgiveness and to have said that she’d been in love with a man.

On October 10, 1980, Cambria County Coroner John Barron held a press conference in which he released the findings of Krogman’s and Fillinger’s investigation as well as the contents of Stella’s letter. The news made the front page of the Altoona Mirror that day: “Coroner’s Verdict: Murderer Strangled 3 Gallitzin Babies.” The article itself is a mixture of contradictory information, misquotes of Stella’s letter, and confusion about the age of the eldest child—two years old in one paragraph and nine to twelve months old a newsprint-inch later.

Regional coverage of the Williamson case ended with two long articles published on October 11 by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Scranton Times. Both of the pieces began with Stella’s plea for forgiveness and both acknowledged that, although she claimed “responsibility” for the babies’ remains, she did not clearly confess to murder. In the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, front-page coverage was centered beneath the photographed X-ray of the eldest child’s remains. The caption read: “This is an X-ray of one of the babies found in Stella Williamson’s attic trunk. The infant lived between 9 and 12 months and died of
strangulation and asphyxiation. A noose-like cloth can be detected around its neck.” The bold-face headline read: “Baby deaths: Spinster acknowledges guilt.” The text of the piece opened as “a haunting tale of love, sorrow, shame... and murder.” Friends and neighbors were credited with remembering the Stella of the 1920s and 1930s as a “chestnut-haired woman who bounced from boyfriend to boyfriend.”

But in the end no one really knew what had happened to the babies fifty years ago. Everyone who might have known—Stella’s parents, her brothers, and Howard Drass—was dead or, in Howard Drass’s case, too ill to communicate with the police. The story came to a close. For the New York Times, the Altoona Mirror, the Scranton Times, and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Stella remained the woman “who lived in the Forest Street house all her life and never held a job,” the woman who had been “hospitalized for vaginal bleeding [which] resulted in a hysterectomy” and, later, “died a chubby, reclusive, one-legged spinster.” The officials investigating the “bizarre case” and members of the press agreed: despite the headline proclamations, no one knew whose babies they were. No one had ever seen them alive. No one knew who had killed them. No one knew why they had died.

Towards the end of that month, on October 29, the remains of the babies were placed together in a plywood box and buried in the potter’s field behind the county nursing home. The resident Catholic priest of the home officiated. The county coroner, the director of the nursing home, its chief of security, the head of maintenance, and two grave diggers stood by. There were no reporters.

* * *

The story of Stella Williamson’s life established by press coverage reveals more about the culture of its audience than it does about Stella. The subtext of her story—what remains unsaid and unacknowledged, and what therefore becomes distorted in the reports—creates a moral tale in which murder is distanced from, and yet defines, the ordinary social
value of gender. That subtext begins with her unremarkable obituary, which is remarkable for its omission: Stella had lived with Guy Schrack for forty-three years. Although their union was never sanctioned by church or state, she wore the rings he had given her, and when she died she left him everything she owned. In the small town of Gallitzin, they had been known publicly as a couple for nearly half a century. Something about the union, however, seemed inappropriate in the context of social norms. Stella could have married Guy. That she never did so was apparently better left unacknowledged in the newspaper. If Guy survived Stella as her “longtime companion,” he would do so privately. In print, at least, Stella would remain a modestly respectable spinster.

Her letter proved to be more difficult to manage. She had not in fact asked God for forgiveness, and she had not said that she had loved a man, as one newspaper reported. If she meant the letter to be a confession, she had not confessed fully or precisely. If she meant it to mitigate what she had done, she had not explained enough. The most that could be had from the letter, and it was quoted repeatedly, was her open plea for forgiveness, cast as though she were begging a vague Everyone for absolution. She had lived a good life since the murders, she said, if God were to judge her. In the judgement of the press, her life had been a mystery but surely worth the small mercy of one doubt: perhaps she had not committed those murders; perhaps the letter did not mean at all what it seemed to say. This seemed a fair compromise: that a woman could conceal five pregnancies and then murder at least three of her children seemed beyond belief, more likely the product of irresponsible sensationalism than sound reporting.

The investigating officials were portrayed with the same combination of reticence and righteousness. Weighted with credentials and experience, Dr. Wilton Krogman received the most attention. He had worked with Eliot Ness in Chicago; he had written the authoritative text for the study of forensic anthropology; he had studied mummies in Egypt; and he had worked the baby-farm case in Chicago during the 1940s, assembling the
skeletons of five infants found buried in a backyard. His expertise was beyond question. More interesting, however, is that not one reporter questioned Krogman about the history of baby farms and their place in American culture. Even the briefest of explanations would have placed the Williamson case into a very different context involving issues of gender, maternity, and homicide. In that context, the “bizarre” case would have been part of a larger and gender-specific criminal tradition rather than the anomaly it appeared to be.

Gender was not treated as much of an issue in the Williamson case, except for the fact that Stella had apparently, however briefly, been a mother many years before. Press coverage did not consider the problem of the maternal instinct in any depth. By omission, however, there was a subtext to the reports that held gender at its core. Stella had been clear in her letter about one thing; the babies had been born to one man, she said. She also said that she had been a fool, a plaything for him. On the surface it seems obvious that two people were involved in what happened during those ten years of pregnancy, birth, and murder. Whether the father of the babies had a hand in the murders is less an issue than why he was so carefully channelled out of the reports. The implications for a cultural narrative are curious and complicated: are fathers, by nature, less involved in baby-making than mothers? Does their gender create a critical difference between mother-love and father-love? Is there no “paternal instinct”? In Stella’s story the answers did not matter. Other stories in American culture might be awash in gendered rhetoric, but in this case there was no compelling reason to ask the questions.

The quietly moral subtext of Stella’s story as reported by the press was punctuated by strange grotesqueries. Wilton Krogman spoke of the case as though it were an amusing textbook exercise, a two-dimensional circus lacking any human element. The photographed X-ray of the eldest child’s remains, complete with directions for finding the noose around its neck, no doubt sold newspapers, but at the expense of compassion and dignity. Like so many victims of homicide, the babies were exploited by the press and its public and then
consigned to limbic anonymity. Their burial, miles away from the woman who had kept them close by her for so many years, was not reported to the public. They had served their purpose as the unnamed center of a moral tale in which good was finally made to prevail, more and less, over evil.

As a cultural narrative about women and multiple homicide, Stella Williamson’s story was not unusual. Text and subtext described a predictably deceitful female, hinted at probable psychoses (postpartum depression and nymphomania) unique to women, and cast the murderer as a female anomaly, the mother who betrayed her maternal instinct. The story divided Stella’s life into two distinct halves. Before the note was found, she had been a dull, small-town woman. After the note she became a travesty of womanhood in all its guises.

It would be thirteen months before the Williamson case was treated again in print, this time as a two-part story entitled “In Stella’s Attic” by Michael VerMeulen, published in the monthly magazine *Philadelphia*. VerMeulen’s version of Stella’s story was apparently drawn from newspaper accounts, from interviews with some of the people who had known Stella and her family, and from conversations with the officials who had worked on the case after she died. It was a long story filled with details that had never seen print. Howard Drass lost his anonymity; Dessie’s and Stella’s photographs were published; other things stored in the trunk came to light; and the babies’ burial became public. It was also a story that took cultural values scattered among the newspaper stories and wove them into the most fully developed version of the master narrative for the Williamson case. That narrative, and the moral lessons to be learned from it, began not with the story itself, but with the art and text on the cover of the journal.

The cover of the November 1981 issue read: “THE PORN BROKERS/Charting the Growth of the City’s X-rated Economy,” but the illustration was more arresting. It featured a postcard of the Philadelphia skyline, concrete office blocks and a watchtower thrusting upward. Protruding from the picture and beyond its frame, larger than life, were the bare
legs of a woman, spread open to the buildings and bent at the knees. Her thighs obscured most of the sky. On her feet she wore the white close-toed high-heeled shoes of a fan dancer, with straps across her ankles and buckles at the sides like a little girl’s Sunday-school Mary Janes. The rest of her body, one must imagine, lay prone behind the frame of the picture, or perhaps did not exist at all. Above the title of the journal, the Williamson case received top billing among other pieces in the issue: “The Babes in the Attic / Remembering Jonestown / Fathers with Custody, Mothers Without / Katz of the Sixers.” A small banner atilt in the corner said “HEAT / A Cold-Weather Special Section.” This was a magazine geared toward popular entertainment for residents of Philadelphia. Such publications conventionally dispense with the formal documentation required of more scholarly work. Vertiginous cliffhangers and evocative illustrations serve the more useful purpose of keying an audience into versions of truth it can recognize and affirm.

Although there was no overt link between the cover art of the November 1981 issue of Philadelphia and VerMeulen’s story about Stella Williamson, there was a discomfiting parallel between a near-bodiless, anonymous woman opened promiscuously to a city and the recluse who had been laid open to a town. Even the list of features seemed uncomfortably pointed: Jonestown, with Jim Jones and his helpless and doomed congregation, and fathers better suited to care for their children than mothers. In this context, the Williamson case could serve as an object lesson on gender and evil, with Stella, her mother Dessie, and even the town itself as antagonists.

The penciled illustrations scattered through the text of VerMeulen’s story recalled not only the cover art of the journal but the photographs published with the original news stories. The sketches were predictably grim: Stella’s dilapidated house stood isolated in a nonexistent landscape; from the attic, the skulls of the children stared sightlessly through a window; in the foreground, a thin and weary Guy wheeled a heavy, smiling, and crippled Stella along the street. She wore a dress hiked up over the stump of her amputated leg, and
pinned to the dress at the center of her chest was a ceramic heart. In another sketch, a group of men stood around the trunk, one of them lifting the lid. Outside the picture and yet part of it, boxed and numbered, the skeletons of the children encircled the men. A third illustration showed the skeleton of a baby lying on its back inside a box filled with paper and a long piece of rope or string. Just beside it were two hands not quite holding a living baby, its eyes open and directed toward the box in which the skeleton lay, its limbs flailing the air.

The text of VerMeulen’s story was perhaps predictable: Gallitzin was a backwoods town; its inhabitants were the unsophisticated and benighted souls who somehow witnessed a tragedy they never saw. Local officials were “grown mountain boys” who spoke in an “aw-shucks mountain twang.” The Williamson house had “admitted defeat, its last coat of fresh paint a distant memory; what was white is gray with age or peeled back and bare and horrible.” Dessie was a monstrous, mean-spirited gossip who ruled her husband and her three children with a will of iron; and Stella was the fat, diabetic, lonely spinster who slept around, had her babies, killed them perhaps with her mother’s help, and finished her life as an embarrassment to womanhood:

Some say she grew indiscreetly flirtatious late in life. Occasionally she rolled her wheelchair between men’s legs, and she always talked dirty by Gallitzin standards. Such behavior only alienated her further from friendships other than with the men she controlled.7

VerMeulen ended Part One of “In Stella's Attic” with proof of three murders and the following hook:

Three of the five babies hidden and forgotten in that ancient trunk had been murdered. They knew that much now. All they needed to find out was: who and why?
Another thing in, or rather on the wrappings of baby #1 is an instructive article; “Her Penitence” is all that remains of the title. It begins: “Pretty Irma Tarrant has learned that the girl who plays fast and loose with conventions still has to pay—quite as women in old-fashioned days....” The maggots got the rest.8

Combined with the cover art and the illustrations, the necessary truth was self-evident. Stella Williamson broke the rules and, in the cultural narrative, the murders of the babies involved more than her own transgressions.

For VerMeulen’s larger audience, Gallitzin was presented as a place morally distanced from the social norm. He described the town as “a broken, sullen community, shrinking with age and hollow.” In the master narrative, Gallitzin was in some way responsible for the circumstances of the murders. How, VerMeulen implied, could so many people in such a small town have missed the simple facts of one woman, five pregnancies, five births, weeks and months of lives, and five deaths? The town spoke for itself: if only we had known, some said. We had no children, said others; we would have taken them. More terrible: what if we were there while she was doing it, murdering a child, or what if we were there just afterward and didn't know? The anguish of these thoughts, all attributed either to friends or relatives of the Williamsons, was undercut by VerMeulen’s subtext: how could you not have known? Given the general level of ugliness, misery, and ignorance in the town, he seemed to say, this story was not surprising.

It became even less surprising as VerMeulen characterized the Williamson family. Rumors about Dessie’s involvement in the murders were published in the initial press coverage of the case. Although they were dismissed by the police, they laid the groundwork for VerMeulen’s creation of her character. She appeared first in his piece in the description of a photograph found in the trunk with the babies. Dessie was “an elderly woman in a gingham blouse and a long black skirt sitting outdoors in a wicker chair and staring sternly
into the camera, the lens recording in piercing detail her scowl and the vertical lines between her angry eyes.” Whether the photograph of Dessie published with the text was the same one VerMeulen described is harder to determine. Dessie wears the same clothing, sits outdoors in a wicker chair, and looks directly into the camera, but she has been caught half-smiling, as though being photographed this way is embarrassing and a little awkward, or perhaps amusing to her. One hand holds the fingers of the other hand loosely in her lap.

Interviews revealed that Dessie was “‘strict, overbearing, nasty, and the type of woman you’d even cross the street to avoid,’” a “compulsive gossip obsessed with reputations.” According to her daughter-in-law, Marie, the only way to manage Dessie’s venom was to respond in kind. VerMeulen explained that Marie Williamson remembered “a lot for an 81-year-old woman.... She is blunt,” he said, “and she is fair.” Marie’s memories of both Dessie and Stella seem to have informed much of how VerMeulen interpreted his material. That Dessie was bitterly disappointed in Howard’s choice of a wife and furious that they had eloped only emphasized her cruelty in VerMeulen’s text. Marie had won the battle those many years ago by telling Dessie that she knew about “Dessie’s several bastard relatives, about the cousin in the next county living with a black man.” If Dessie ever criticized her again, Marie told her she would “‘paint Forest Street black’” with her name. This was yet more proof of the power it took to keep Dessie in line. There was no hint in the text of the possibility that Marie might somehow have deserved Dessie’s dislike. Instead, as a wife Dessie had somehow managed to have the house her husband built with his hands deeded to her, a suspicious move during an era when women did not even have the vote. As a mother she was obsessed with her children, domineering and rigid about their upbringing.

Proof of the abnormal degree of control Dessie exercised over her family came from two sources. Her two sons had not finally left home until very late in their lives; Arthur was forty-nine and Howard was thirty-eight. More telling, according to VerMeulen, was the fact that Stella, the adored baby of the family born after one or two miscarriages, the longed-for
girl in a houseful of men, never left home. He credited Dessie for keeping Stella in the house even after Dessie’s death in 1942:

Assuming that Stella’s mother Dessie knew about the babies in the trunk, her handwritten will is chilling: in it, she promised that the house would belong to her daughter Stella as long as Stella remained single. She must have known that Stella, rather than deal with the reality of the attic, would not marry, and so the mother who controlled her daughter almost totally in life did so even from her grave.9

VerMeulen described Dessie’s will as “elegantly handwritten,” a document that left Dessie’s spirit, he said, “free to walk through the walls of 310 Forest and haunt her baby with the reach of her powers, even from the grave.” He had seen a copy of Dessie’s will, and he quoted from it. But the cultural values that dictate a master narrative required something of a manipulation of the evidence to get to the necessary “truth”; sloppy handwriting became elegant, and Dessie’s motives, with the wisdom of hindsight, were presented as frightful. According to the values of this story, Dessie must surely have known about the babies—Stella could not have hidden five children from her mother—and was therefore, to the end, a travesty of her gender. It would be inconceivable, in the master narrative, that Dessie could have been anything else.

In terms of the social values constructing the story, then, whatever kindnesses Dessie might have shown during her life had been subsumed by the larger question of her role in Stella’s life and in the babies’ deaths. For everyone involved in the story—the writer, his audience, and the people charged with finding out what had happened—there was a clearly understood way to examine the case that conformed to an acceptably moral version of truth. If Dessie had been involved in the murders, then she would be perceived and presented as an inversion of her gender rather than as one of its approved representatives.
In interviews conducted by VerMeulen a year after the case was closed, three of the investigating officials agreed that Dessie had probably been involved in the murders. VerMeulen’s version of their commentary underscored the lessons to be learned. Trooper Lawrence Malesky, one of the group who opened the trunk the first time, said, “‘My personal opinion: her mother had a lot to do with it. She might’ve been trying to hide it, the fact that her daughter had those babies.’” Perhaps murder seemed more appropriately presented at one remove, a guilty grandmother intent on avoiding public shame rather than a remorselessly homicidal mother. Goldblatt, the forensic anthropologist who had examined the babies’ remains, expressed similar ideas. “‘It’s very difficult,’” he said, “‘to imagine anyone with so little maternal instinct to destroy not one, but five babies. And if Stella lacked maternal instinct, where was the grandmother’s instinct? Where was Dessie? Did Dessie in fact kill the babies? Against Stella’s wishes?’” County Coroner John Barron also wondered about Dessie’s role: “‘Who killed them? I don’t think Stella did. What does that mean? I don’t know. I just can’t see a mother killing her own children after she kept them for so long. If Stella did, did she do it to spite her mother? Did her mother kill them to spite her?’”10 By the end of the piece, Dessie seemed guilty of more than one crime, beginning with the betrayal of her wifely and maternal instincts and ending, perhaps, with her involvement in the murders of the only grandchildren she would ever have.

Whatever involvement the Williamson family might have had in the murders—VerMeulen pointed out that all were living in the house during the years the babies were born and died—the responsibility for the killings finally had to rest with Stella herself. She had kept the babies for fifty years inside a trunk, which sat in the attic underneath “about two feet of neatly folded blankets.” The trunk was littered inside with the “shards and flotsam of lived and unlived lives”—various papers, some dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, a certificate of membership for the Francis Scott Key Memorial Association issued to Stella’s father Alfred in 1908, Dessie’s photograph, a pair of high-button shoes,
crumbling pieces of wallpaper, a coupon book from World War I, insurance and tax receipts, and a Certificate of Award given to Stella by her school at the end of her year in the fifth grade. In the top tray of the trunk there was also a poster from the National Orphan’s Home in Tiffin, Ohio. Two of the babies had been placed in the tray; three were in the larger space beneath it.11

VerMeulen described the examination of the babies’ remains in some detail. Medical Examiner Halbert Fillinger had arranged to have the process filmed as a sort of memorial to Krogman’s skill; VerMeulen did not say whether he watched the videotape himself. He did explain that when the officials unwrapped the third bundle during their examination of the remains and found the unmistakable evidence of murder, everything about the investigation seemed altered. He quoted John Barron: “‘The atmosphere changed—it changed from going through the motions, seeing what you’re going to find, to, all of a sudden, wow! Everybody was kind of choked up. This was something. This was really something.’”

To make matters more difficult, the officials learned from the last bundle to be examined—the first child to have been born—that someone had unwrapped and rewrapped this baby’s body, enclosing newspaper from 1925 inside newspaper from 1923. Krogman said, “‘The only thing I could think of was they reopened it to see how far it had decomposed. Or to look at it again. It may be that it was exposed because it was the first one and there was the element of curiosity or, furthermore, the element of remorse.’”12 These are fairly ghoulish explanations for what the officials saw but they suited the story that seemed to be emerging. A normal woman, even a homicidal woman with some sense of decency, surely would have let the dead rest in peace. Krogman used the pronoun “they” as he mused on the unwrapping and rewrapping of Stella’s firstborn. For him, as for most of the people involved in the story, it seemed to become increasingly necessary to imagine that Stella had probably not acted alone in the murders of her children.
Pragmatically, it seemed impossible to imagine that Stella could have concealed her pregnancies, and then the babies, in a house she had never left. In terms of the master narrative, the likeliest abettor was Dessie. VerMeulen traced several similarities between the personalities of Dessie and her daughter Stella. Both suffered from diabetes. Dessie had nearly lost the toes on one foot to the disease; Stella did lose her leg. Both were overweight. Both were remembered for their vicious tongues, but at least Stella had manifested a fondness for some of the children in town. Both called their mates “Father.” Stella’s photograph, published beside her mother’s, shows her wearing the flowered dress of the penciled illustration, the jewelry heart pinned at the center of her chest. Her expression is very like her mother’s, caught nearly smiling, seemingly bashful and embarrassed, looking straight into the camera.

But as the principal character in the drama, Stella garnered more attention than her mother. As the proprietor of the boarding house after her mother’s death, she was also a thief who took pocket change from her guests. Said Stella’s sister-in-law, Marie: “‘She took everything she could get, and she didn’t give you nothing. And she was begrudging as hell. If you got something she didn’t, she’d begrudge it down to where it weren’t nothing. I ain’t nice to say it, but she could get the most hateful look on her face when she wanted something.’”13 VerMeulen later suggested that arrangements at the boarding house were at best unconventional:

The room rates were said to be reasonable, but there were other prices these men paid. They did the dishes and the other menial chores, always while the ladies of the manor looked on. Dessie bossed and bullied them, telling them what to do and when and how to do it. After she died her daughter stepped effortlessly into that dominant role. Sometimes Stella didn’t just stop with her lodgers’ silver, she appropriated all their money, doling them a few dollars for pocket change. But they must have liked it, because they stayed.14
He explained that all the men who came to live with the Williamsons were “quiet, diminutive, docile” and therefore, one is left to imagine, not the type to protest against mistreatment by their landladies.

In VerMeulen’s version of Stella’s story, none of the men involved in her life count as more than textual props. They scarcely receive any attention from either the investigating officers or VerMeulen himself. As the officials searched for explanations of what had happened fifty years before, only Coroner John Barron wondered, however briefly, about Stella’s brothers and father: “‘Was someone else involved? Did the brothers do it? I don't think the dad fits into it. I don’t find him a figure ’cause nothing changed when he died. Maybe he was just aware of it and that was about it.’”15 Not one of the officials mentioned Howard Drass, the man Stella identified as the father of all five babies. If Stella is to be believed, he knew her for ten years more intimately than anyone else did then or perhaps would again.

VerMeulen’s story would end, necessarily, as a moral reflection of cultural values that were essentially, though tacitly, gendered values. According to Sergeant W. J. Pudlinder, who had been involved from the beginning in the investigation, “‘The moral of the story is everything is not all bad or all good. You can draw two conclusions: either Stella Williamson is a no-good so-and-so who kills children, or she is a good Christian lady who goes to church and bakes cookies. It shows that no one ever knows.’” Perhaps no one ever knows which way a woman will go, but that there are two mutually exclusive ways, good and evil, is perfectly clear within the context of the master narrative that informs social morality. In this context, the moral of the story is less the issue than the moral story itself, as Wilton Krogman explained: “‘We are born with free will. We have the right to choose. One has the right to choose the path of rectitude or the path of evil. I need not point out which path Stella took.’”16
As for her motive, if she indeed killed the babies, Medical Examiner Halbert Fillinger said:

“The fascinating thing is there’s no apparent anger here; much homicide has to do with anger. There’s no avarice here; much homicide has to do with avarice. This is a series of deaths that have almost been forced on someone, apparently by circumstances; more tragic than anything. She has no reason to be angry with those children. They haven’t lived long enough to give her any reason to be angry. It’s an unusual motivation and it elicits a lot of sympathy for the mother of the children, who was placed in such tragic circumstances that this appeared to her to be the only solution.”17

Of the explanations offered, Fillinger’s reflected a socio-deterministic approach frequently cited in larger cultural contexts to explain a wide range of anti-social behaviors. The “circumstances” he suggested had been partly defined in the story by the character of small-town life, by Stella’s status as an unmarried woman who was no longer a virgin, by a domineering mother, and by the difficulties women had obtaining effective birth-control devices during the 1920s and 1930s. His comments on the relationship between anger and murder hinted at the broader cultural hope that anger is a matter of rational choice for mothers. He seemed to suggest that a combination of factors created a trap for Stella, and that the only way out that she could perceive was through the irrational murders of her children.

VerMeulen concluded his story with accounts of visits to the three cemeteries that hold the remains of the immediate Williamson family. Removed from the attic (“that place out of sight sucked of light”) and from the trunk (“that unholy tomb”), the babies themselves were put properly, if luridly, to rest in the last paragraph of the story:
Here, on top of a ridge of clay with their brothers and sisters, the forgotten and the never known, under Allegheny sunsets that start with the pink of an infant’s blush then turn blood-red then are devoured by the blue hungry night, at last Stella Williamson’s pitiable litter received the only blessings that matter to the dead, the sacraments of darkness and quiet and peace. It was quiet, and it was dark, and it was cold.18

VerMeulen’s Capote-esque version of the parable, then, had been substantially lengthened, but its substance remained essentially unchanged. The story seemed to have found its form and voice, its inescapable center of truth and the shape of that truth. It seemed to take its form, as Capote said of his novel *In Cold Blood*, the way an apple is an apple or a pear a pear and nothing else.

Stella Williamson’s last three appearances in print, ten years after her death, were briefer and more ignominious, and in that sense reflect for the culture the most refined version of the master narrative. She was among the few women listed in Michael Newton’s *Hunting Humans: An Encyclopedia of Modern Serial Killers*, published twice in 1990. The original book was an oversized hardback put out by Loompanics Unlimited, a small press located in Port Townsend, Washington. Its catalogue lists all sorts of specialized texts ranging from manuals for lock picking and assembling homemade guns to tourist guides for national oddities (for example, fainting goats in Montana). Newton’s second and third accounts of the Williamson case are identical to the first. The second appeared in an abridged version of *Hunting Humans*, republished by a popular paperback press and aimed toward the mass true-crime market.

Newton used Stella’s story the third and last time for another Loompanics publication in 1993 entitled *Bad Girls Do It! An Encyclopedia of Female Murderers*. It is an oversized paperback, its glossy front cover a garishly colored knock-off of Warhol pop art. The large cover illustration is of a young white woman with very black hair arranged to her
neck in a 50s version of a wavy bob; she wears opaque black sunglasses and a black and yellow striped T-shirt. Her mouth is painted deep red, thinly outlined in black, and is partly open to accommodate the cigarette hanging from it. She is a moll, projecting the hard-bitten looseness, danger, and soullessness expected of a woman gone bad.

To compile this volume, Newton returned to the newspaper indexes and to folklore and myth for his data. The thrust of his introduction inverted the cultural narrative of multiple murderers—they are women as well as men these days—but changed nothing about the expected moral story:

Perhaps, at last, equality means stepping back and learning to appreciate the brand-new crop of misfits, much as men have done throughout recorded history, from Robin Hood to Jesse James, John Dillinger to Richard Speck. Belle Gunnes was a sister, after all, and sisterhood is powerful.

Sometimes, in fact, it's powerful enough to blow your head clean off.\(^{19}\)

Newton sidestepped the implicit contradiction in his work. Given their history and context, the women he included in his encyclopedia can hardly be regarded as a “brand-new” type of criminal. The only sort of context that mattered in sensationalist work like Newton’s was the one that reflected the values of the culture these women had violated.

Newton’s version of Stella’s story consisted of three paragraphs that echoed the initial news coverage of the case in 1980, before her letter was released and before VerMeulen’s story was published. Compared to most of the other entries in the volumes, her text was strangely mute, perhaps because there was nothing sensational enough about the case to sell, or perhaps because there was simply not much of a case to begin with. Stella was “unmarried and reclusive” and she had “never quite recovered” from the amputation of her leg. He mentioned the letter, and the babies’ “pitiful remains” in the trunk in the attic,
and concluded with a comment attributed to Coroner John Barron, who apparently said, “Everybody involved is deceased. But we have to make sure the obvious is the truth. We have to make sure it’s not a coverup.”

In the company of long-term killers like Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy, Stella hardly qualified as monstrous; she had been too quiet and reclusive. Her fiendishness was a problem, too; the victims, apparently her own children, had been disposed of, wrapped up, and packed neatly away in a trunk. She’d been a solitary church-going amputee who had the remains of her five babies stored in the attic. There was nothing else to say.

* * *

In his version of Stella Williamson’s story, Michael VerMeulen returned repeatedly to a line he used first when he described Dessie’s will. “We leave our lives on paper,” he said, as though paper creates a record and thus defines a human being. In a sense he was right. Individuals create papers—certificates and deeds, licenses and wills. Newspapers publish stories and journals publish articles. Authors write reference books of one sort or another. In the strange symbiosis of social values, these records feed from and back into one another and the larger culture. They tell the stories that maintain some sense of social order in what often seems to be a deeply disordered social reality.

But someone must tell the story, interpret the records, endow paper with coherence and meaning. Does the story offer some deeper truth? How does choice govern a story? Which of the details matter? How should they matter? What does an audience need to know to make sense of a story? What kind of sense should it be? VerMeulen’s account of Stella’s life, like those in the newspapers and in Newton’s encyclopedias, fulfills the conventional cultural narrative expected of stories like hers. Stripped of its particular details, it could serve as the frame for other stories about homicidal women. Curiously sexless, physically unattractive, manipulative, deceitful, and psychotic, these women have stepped beyond their
gendered boundaries and into a text that at once denies their womanness and yet holds them hostage to it.

The moral of the story is this: in American culture, women like Stella are presented as the fragmented accidents of tragic circumstances, imbalanced hormones, neuroses, psychoses, and loose principles. Women who take rather than give life are not women. In the cultural context, they violate what is most female in themselves. They seem to threaten not only the gendered identities of women, but of men as well. A parable restores the balance. How much more palatable for society to believe that these women are freaks, and that the men they ensnare are docile and weak, than to imagine the questions that might yield a different and perhaps darker tale.

Was Dessie involved in the murders? Given Marie Williamson’s characterization of her mother-in-law, it seems possible that Dessie would have managed nearly anything to keep the reputation of her family clean—including seeing to the burial of the babies’ remains if she had known about them. She ran a boarding house, after all, populated with transients who couldn’t be supervised twenty-four hours a day.

Dessie is remembered by some of her neighbors as having been particularly fond of children. In the summers, when they came to paint her house, she spirited the younger boys away from scraping and puttying and into her kitchen for lemonade and cookies. She entertained friends in her house as the babies were being born and murdered.

She was also a very heavy woman with a bad foot. Did her health keep her away from the attic and ignorant of what had been stored in the trunk? Did it prevent her from seeing to the burial of the babies’ remains?

Could Stella’s father Alfred, the devout Methodist, and her brothers Arthur and Howard have known about the babies? Could they have ignored the odor of decomposition, still unmistakable in 1980, leaking from their attic?
And what of Howard Drass? Could he have been intimate with the same woman for ten years and not recognized, at least five different times, that she had been pregnant and had given birth?

Were the babies Stella’s children? In her letter she said they were.

Did Stella confess to murder in her letter? It seems so. She accepted sole responsibility for what had happened. She made no distinction among the babies, not by name or sex. She did not claim that two of the infants, the two whose cause of death could not be determined, had died naturally.

What did she mean in the last part of her will, in that strangely coy mention of a “Certain party” who might be allowed to live in her house after her death?

Could she have hidden her pregnancies? She was obese. Her neighbors explained that she didn’t “dress”; she never wore anything except loose housedresses. Medical literature documents cases of unsuspected full-term pregnancies in obese women.

More disturbing, the youngest of her children could have lived as long as several weeks, and the eldest at least nine months. How did Stella keep her babies hidden and quiet until she killed them?

Perhaps the trunk held nothing more than “flotsam.” It was an oddly disordered collection of things, especially when the neat pile of blankets on top of the trunk and the carefully wrapped babies inside are considered. Why these things and not others? Were they in the trunk already and simply brushed aside to make room for the babies? Or did they mean something about the way lives were lived and remembered? Consider the subtext, the things not in the trunk: there were no baby clothes, no baby blankets, no love letters or corsages, no obvious mementos of a long love-affair. Why had the babies been wrapped in newspaper and not in some of those blankets stored on top of the trunk? Why was the poster for the orphanage in the trunk, and who put it there?
Whatever the answers, Stella seemed to have managed her own life and death, and the lives and deaths of her children, fully aware of what she had done.

In the context of social values, what sort of ethical responsibility should the press bear for the stories it tells? How should the culture assign meaning to stories written hurriedly, under time constraints, for profit, and by people who often seem benumbed by their experiences with murderers and their victims?

In Stella’s case, the only answers these questions yield are based on speculation and guesswork rather than demonstrable fact. But in their own way, the questions themselves form an alternative narrative that involves a different set of possibilities. Perhaps Stella was depressed to the point of psychosis; perhaps she was sexually active as well as reclusive; and perhaps circumstances combined to make her behavior seem, if not inevitable or pardonable, at least explicable. Perhaps, also, Stella murdered her children because she chose to. Perhaps those murders expressed not only her rage, despair, and resignation, but also her sense of power, control, and eroticism. In the darkest sense, perhaps a different version of Stella’s story is precisely the tale of a moral woman imposing her own sense of order, goodness, and evil on the quiet chaos of her life.
Notes


3. The following account of Stella Williamson’s life and death derives from newspaper accounts, an article by journalist Michael VerMeulen, the entries on Stella Williamson in reference books on serial murder compiled by Michael Newton, and copies of wills provided by the state of Pennsylvania, as listed below. In-text citations of newspaper articles are documented here.

Newspaper accounts, in chronological order


**Journal article**


**Reference books**


**Pennsylvania**

• Victor B. Bako, Registrar of Wills and Clerk of Orphans’ Court, Cambria County, Ebensburg, PA: Wills and papers on file for Dessie Williamson and Stella Elizabeth Williamson.

4. This is the unedited text of Dessie Williamson’s will. The complete text of the will, filed in Cambria Country, PA, was not published.

5. This is the unedited text of Stella’s letter, quoted by news media and by Michael VerMeulen. The will, filed in Cambria Country, PA, was not published.

6. Information in this paragraph comes from Michael VerMeulen’s article.


12. ———, 235.
15. ———, 238.
16. ———, 237.
17. ———, 237.
18. ———, 239.
Chapter Seven: A Comfortable Evil

Nothing in the stories we tell about female serial killers can fulfill our cultural expectations for the traditional story we’ve come to expect about serial murder. If, as Philip Jenkins says, the mythic embodiment of the serial murderer is “compulsive, irrational, rootless, driven by lust, obsessive, and ultra-violent,” then women like Aileen Wuornos, Rosemary West, and Stella Williamson simply cannot qualify as representative of the type.¹ If their stories advance a given political agenda, as the stories of many of the more famous cases of male serial murderers have done at particular moments in American history, then it is historically and consistently an agenda based on the idea that women are, above all, victims, and curiously passive agents in their own narratives. Even when the case of a female serial murderer grabs global headlines, she is presented as nothing like her male counterpart and, in fact, as nothing like a woman. Like medical serial killers, who, Jenkins says, “account for the vast majority of serial murder victims and yet garner only a miniscule amount of notice,” female serial killers, who (one imagines) account for very few serial murder victims, operate at the deepest level of a cultural psyche precisely because they are invisible.² The stories we tell about them, like the stories we tell about medical serial killers, are best told as exceptions to the rule:

These are not stories of investigation, detection, mindhunting and profiling: at best they are tales of offenders being caught by dumb luck or confession. The forces of rationality simply do not win in such tales. Nor…do we usually know the scale of the offenses, whether (for instance)
Amy Archer Gilligan killed a hundred patients, or three, or none at all. Worse, the stories are not just frightening in the sense of offering a mild frisson, they are authentically nightmarish in posing an uncontrolled and uncontrollable danger that could befall any one of us, or any member of our families. Going into a hospital or old people’s home is traumatic enough in the first place, without having to suspect that any dose of medicine might result in death at the hands of a malicious doctor or nurse. Medical murder is too real, too authentically terrifying, to be channeled and sanitized in the form of popular culture treatments.³

Serial murder committed by women is authentically terrifying as well. These are our lovers, nurses, babysitters, and mothers. Unlike classic tales about serial murder, true stories about these women seem better left untold.

The cases of Aileen Wuornos, Rosemary West, and Stella Williamson seem to be, at least superficially, very different from one another. Their victims—seven middle-aged white men, ten young women, and five infants—had nothing in common. The methods the women used to murder them—gunshot, sexual torture, and strangulation—were poles apart. And if the dangerous realm of motive could be imagined, there seemed to be everything to consider from rage to sexual arousal to shame. No doubt the specific details of each case—the precise identity of each victim, where and when and how each died, and even why—matter essentially when it comes to the empirical business of solving a crime and dispensing justice. But in the larger view, these cases are no different from the cases of hundreds of other women who have chosen, and will yet choose, to murder serially than they are from each other. They got away with murder because they used their gender roles—prostitute, wife, and mother—to commit their crimes, to justify them, and then to hide them. At this moment in cultural history, this is a curiously complex story about agency and victimhood in which these killers seem to use their gender to play both ends of the question and yet, in a fierce irony, wind up without a story of their own to tell. It is the culture itself, in all its
variety, that at once confers agency on female serial killers and yet denies them their essential femaleness, as though the culture were the final arbiter of what counts as true womanhood.

In the end, the stories we tell in American culture about female serial killers do, indeed, share a common text that reveals as much, and perhaps even more, about us as it does about them. The Wuornos case, as the “textbook” gold standard and best known of the stories, offers the most fully realized text and yet, even after the full-blown cinematic version of her story claimed its awards, we are left with very little of Wuornos herself. In a review of the film “Monster,” Kenneth Turan notes that neither winning director Patty Jenkins nor winning actress Charlize Theron bothered to mention Wuornos herself in their acceptance speeches. He says:

To anyone who’s seen “Monster” and the Broomfield documentaries, this forgetting of Wuornos is not surprising. It is in fact indicative of what’s most worrying about Jenkins’ film. Despite its superficial somberness, the picture’s Hollywood heart shows in its simplification and standardization of Wuornos’ story into a familiar tale of the bad things that happen to Women Who Love Too Much. Given how far “Monster” departs from the complexities of Wuornos’ real saga, it’s to be expected that the filmmakers have had little trouble forgetting she even existed.⁴

Nick Broomfield, whose documentaries on Wuornos offered perhaps the least mitigated version of her voice, further noted that Theron won her Oscar on Wuornos’s birthday, February 29, a leap year—not that she was alive to celebrate anything.⁵ Patty Jenkins confessed that, as she was writing the script for “Monster,” she saw Wuornos as both victim and villain:
“What was so interesting for me was that it didn’t seem like there was something wrong with her genetically. The first thing that struck me when the story broke was the defensive, wounded look in her eyes; she didn’t seem like somebody with a bloodlust. For me it was like a war story; you were looking at this person who was pushed to a place where she was capable of doing this. I thought it was heartbreaking.”

One reviewer of Jenkins’s film noted that the title of the film, a classic moniker for a male serial killer, does not explicitly refer to Wuornos:

[It refers] to a tall, red ferris wheel she was simultaneously attracted to and frightened of as a child. Whether you read this as a phallic reference or merely a metaphor for the grown-up world, its meaning is pretty clear: Society (or just male society) is the real monster here. For anyone who’s missed such hints along the way, the film’s message is encapsulated toward the end by its only entirely sympathetic character, a kindly old Vietnam vet played by Bruce Dern. “What you’re feeling right now,” he tells Theron, “is just guilt over something you had absolutely no control over.” Theron concurs: “You know I feel like I never had a fucking choice.”

In every scenario, Wuornos herself is co-opted by stories that hold at their core that she has been so deeply victimized that she, herself, is not to be trusted as the narrator of her own story. As her execution date approached, she chose to be interviewed by Broomfield rather than hold a final press conference. During the interview, she claimed she murdered for money, and then said, when she thought the camera was off, that she was lying because she was tired of waiting to die. One reviewer observed that at this point, “Aileen couldn’t be trusted to tell the electric chair from a dentist’s chair.”

One wonders how she could have been able to mediate between her own comprehension of her agency and reality, and the agendas of so many people around her
whose priorities actually had nothing to do with her. It is telling that in more scholarly work about the Wuornos case and her portrayal in the film “Monster,” she becomes both the ultimate “un-woman” and at the same time, the ultimate victim of her own gender:

An unfolding irony of Monster lies in how Wuornos, severely damaged by male violence, adopts a pose of male bellicosity. Determined to quit hooking, she endures a round of fruitless job interviews that invariably end in humiliation; next, we see her in a bar, tossing back shots of whiskey and boasting about how she dissed the interviewers. By having a woman act it out in near-caricature, Monster captures the essence of both male braggadocio and the deep insecurity beneath it. This film about two road-tripping lesbians is really, at its heart, a film about men.¹⁰

In this version of the story, then, Wuornos’s entire ethos as a woman has completely disappeared. She mattered more as an imitation of a man than she did as an “authentic” woman. Philip Jenkins notes that Wuornos may have been dubbed the first “textbook” female serial killer precisely because she was “a publicly identified lesbian, who (according to the mythology) might be expected to succumb to distinctively male behavior patterns.”¹¹

Conversely, she can also be said to represent the worst in cultural victimization of women:

It seems no accident that the intersection of rape law, the efficacy of the self-defense plea, and prostitution would occur at the site of a lesbian, who can be deemed an aberrational male-hating outsider, a figure who is marginalized from “normal” women’s experiences. By capitalizing on the case of the “mad” lesbian, the paternalistic judicial system can reframe the crime(s) committed in the course of Wuornos’s life, in order to, as has been historically the case, ignore rape, provide no forum for a prostitute to vindicate the violence done to her, and reframe self-defense as barbarous acts
of premeditated murder. By focusing on Wuornos’s deviant sexuality, heterosexuals can allay their worst fears—the fear, for instance, that the woman with no rights left to her by society, the woman that men are “free” to abuse and violate under the law, can and may strike back. Moreover, heterosexual men can continue to defer the notion that “ordinary” heterosexual women may want to similarly unleash their anger at being raped.12

It should be argued that heterosexual men are scarcely the only members of the culture to defer the notion that “ordinary” women, whether homo-, bi-, or heterosexual, might prefer to speak for themselves. What emerges from the various stories told about Aileen Wuornos suggests that, at its heart, American culture trusts neither Wuornos nor itself to tell this particular story as more than a story of woman abused—victimized—in every way imaginable both by the culture and by her own essential self. She is not, in the end, of us.

Like Wuornos, Rosemary West received a great deal of public attention once her crimes came to light and, like Wuornos, the woman herself remains nearly voiceless, her story subsumed by other stories that point back to a culture affronted by the notion that she might even have a voice and a story to tell. Her husband’s brother John committed suicide in 1997 while on trial for the rapes of two young women, both of which apparently occurred at Rosemary and Fred West’s house on Cromwell Street where so many of their victims were buried. According to one doctor, John West “‘bore the burden of being associated with his brother…. By his own account he was not at all prepared for what came to light…. His world collapsed in February 1994. He blamed the loss of his physical health and also the loss of his job on his brother.’”13 Rosemary is mentioned once in the article as appealing her life sentence to the European Commission on Human Rights, arguing that she did not receive a fair trial. When Fred West’s collection of home videos (some showing Rosemary
having sex with several different men) and interviews were auctioned off, her solicitor said that “her view was that the videos were for personal use and she did not want them commercially exploited. They were not made for public consumption but she has no real control over them.” Nor will she have any control over the story planned to be made by Portman Entertainment and broadcast on British Television Channel 5.

In 1998, a full-length staged production based on the West murders premiered at Hampstead Theater in London. The lead character in “Terms of Abuse” was not drawn from Rosemary West but from the only surviving victim of the long series of murders, Caroline Owens. In the end, though, the central issue of the play is neither the murderers nor the victims, but rather the intrusion of the media into real-life dramas. One journalist, Lyn Gardner, interviewing the playwright, Jessica Townsend, said: “I would not be sitting in the Hampstead Theatre’s dressing room interviewing an unknown playwright if she’d written a nice little drama about pig farming. We both acknowledge that I am only here because Terms of Abuse draws heavily upon the West case for its inspiration, and the publicity machine is playing Townsend’s Gloucester connection for all it’s worth.” That it is a connection several times removed matters less than how Townsend appropriates the material she needs in order to make a statement about the case.

In an interesting observation, Gardner nods towards the strange symbiosis of fact and fiction that dictates public understanding of the West murders. Caroline Owens had sold her story to a newspaper tabloid, The Sun, which published it the day after Fred West’s suicide and before she testified at the West trial:

Why do I find Townsend’s fiction on the right side of acceptable, even though some aspects of it make me feel uncomfortable? Is it because Terms Of Abuse is exceptionally well written and The Sun isn’t? Or that I think it offers the psychological insights that the newspaper report can never supply? That it makes me think I might be able to understand why these things
happened? Is it simply that I am prepared to give something that I believe to be art the benefit of the doubt?17

These are excellent questions and argue for a multi-as well as interdisciplinary approach to the study of serial murder and particularly to serial murder committed by women. The point is not that The Sun was a less trustworthy source than Townsend’s fictionalized account of the murders, but that it, too, along with Rosemary and Fred West, the victims, reporters, police, jury, and judge, was a player in the story, an agent in how this particular tale came to be told.

Both the Wuornos and West cases offer a multitude of ways to interpret and present a story about women who commit serial murder in part because the crimes generated a tremendous amount of coverage. As one reviewer said:

Every time a major crime is committed in an unexpected quarter, by a GP, a child, or a mother, there follows a period of soul-searching. It’s as though the crime reflects the dark heart of our society. Because we give women special status as nurturers and accord them the virtue of passivity, we tend to take it personally when a woman commits a violent act. A woman like Wuornos is demonised. She seems to represent the death of innocence…. Rose West…has always been more confusing as a demon figure than her late husband Fred. This is perhaps because a sexually deviant and murderous male can be classed as an outcast; while a female and a mother is at some level one of us. We prod about in their stories, searching for a glimmer of understanding.18

Even Stella Williamson’s case garnered its fair, if brief, share of publicity, and although one finds it difficult to imagine that an Oscar-winning movie of her life will ever make it to the big screen, it would be interesting to see whether her undeniable agency, her own voice, could stand as the arbiter of her story. It is far easier to imagine that, like
Wuornos and West, Stella Williamson’s story would be reduced to the formula that makes serial murder committed by women the comfortable evil we cannot bear to know. As one clinical professor of psychiatry put it in a review of the films about Wuornos:

> The origins of Wuornos’ homicidal binge have never been satisfyingly elucidated. One could, for instance, blame a conflation of her horrific childhood, a genetic predisposition toward psychopathy and a periodic dissociated state after barely escaping death from her first victim’s depredations…. One underscores, however, that the overwhelming majority of women who have suffered the same terrible backgrounds and degrading experiences as Wuornos’ do not kill. Indeed, it is far more likely they would die at the hands of some malevolent misogynist. Given a confluence of problems, what finally tipped the scales to precipitate Wuornos’ road kills? A forensic psychiatrist told me that after years spent studying the minority of the mentally ill who murdered, he never had been able to tease out the “X-factor” separating them from the majority who did not. I do not believe Wuornos demonstrated the diabolic signatures of true serial killers like Ted Bundy and Ed Gein. The X-factor of these hideous entities has proven even more resistant to discovery.\(^\text{19}\)

How the series of murders committed by Wuornos—as well as those committed by West and Williamson—could be regarded as anything less than diabolical requires quite a feat of the imagination, indeed, and one that the victims and victims’ families would not possibly share in the truest sense of these stories.

The most disturbing irony is that the stories we need to tell about these women hold at their heart the belief—perhaps even the faith—that they are, above all, victims themselves rather than agents of their own reality and thus in some profound way different from us, less womanly, less human. Aileen Wuornos, the fat lesbian prostitute without a heart of gold, murdered seven men because they were vulnerable to an angry woman determined to
avenge herself. The “moral” of her story was multifaceted and reinforced long-held beliefs in the evil of prostitution, the catastrophic effects of child abuse, the diseased social systems that failed her at every level, and finally the ravages of some personality disorder-turned-psychosis that no doubt contributed to her crimes. She was a victim of every possible ill that could be imagined. Her story was an object lesson for American culture in what could go wrong in some strangely deterministic universe that could witness her murders, hold her responsible, and execute her for them, and yet hold her wholly irresponsible as a woman. To the end, she herself could not tell her own story except to ask a question in the music she chose to be played at her wake, a Natalie Merchant song called “Carnival”: “Have I been blind, have I been lost inside myself and my own mind, hypnotized, mesmerized, by what my eyes have seen?”

Rosemary West, the good wife gone bad, was a victim as well—of her husband Fred, of her apparently voracious and twisted sexuality, of “folie a deux” and her own personality disorders of one sort and another, of the British press, and for some, perhaps, of the British judicial system that, after Fred’s suicide, needed someone upon whom to pin the long and terrible series of murders. That she spent twenty years negotiating a very complex reality indeed, that she was an agent in the creation of that reality rather than its victim, that she succeeded in the guise of “good” wife simply underlined what couldn’t be true rather than what was true. She was less a serial murderer than she was a bad wife. To date, the only words she has spoken about her crimes since her conviction have been to say that she is innocent.

And Stella Williamson, the mother of five children who apparently never saw the light of day even though they undoubtedly lived long enough for her to have taken them out for a walk—she was a victim, too. Perhaps it was postpartum psychosis that caused her murders not once, but five different times over ten years. Perhaps it was a domineering mother, an indifferent lover, or a town so small that it could afford to blind itself to its
inhabitants rather than witness the series of small tragedies unfolding under its nose. Whatever the case, the moral of Stella Williamson’s story reminds us that real mothers, true mothers, do not murder every single one of their children, even when the last thing they have to say on earth is that, in fact, they do.

What does our culture gain from these stories we tell about women who commit serial murder? At the deepest level, the stories reinforce what we need most to believe is true about women: that we are nurturers and caretakers, wives and mothers, nurses and doctors, and babysitters and teachers and that, when something goes so badly awry in our lives that we resort to murder over and over again, then surely it must be that we failed, somehow, as women, though surely through no fault of our own. Are there better stories—truer stories—that could be told about women? If so, they might begin with the uncomfortable premise that female serial killers are not good women, but simply ordinary women, responsible agents in their own realities and quite capable of telling their own stories if we acknowledge that the language they speak is not so foreign after all.
Notes


3. ———, 11.


14. Duncan Campbell, “Victim attacks West video sale; Mass murderer’s archive may be used in TV documentary after pounds 25,000 deal with Official Solicitor,” The Guardian, April 7, 1997, 3.

15. ———, 3.


17. ———, T:12.

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