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Why a philosophy book about serial killers? For all that, why think about serial killers at all? Haven’t we got enough spiders in our heads without filling up on stuff like that?

I know I do. I’m a recovering serial killer addict. I’ve read more than I can remember – or care to – about such aberrations, both factual and fictional. But I’m older now, and possibly a little wiser; I’ve gotten clean, and shaken my infatuation with moral obscenity. Maybe this is the natural course of things; towards the end of a long and admirable life, much of it dedicated to the prevention of cruelty to children, my father watched little but comedies. When you’ve done all you can, who needs reminding about places so far beyond the reach of goodness?

In graduate school, when I first heard about Milwaukee’s Jeffrey Dahmer, I got a bit frayed. Dahmer lived in a dumpy apartment building much like mine, anonymous and unhopeful. I stared at the pictures of his front door: so far as I could tell, it was made of the same wood-like substance that fronted the entrance to my flat. What causes the man in Ann Arbor to fill his rooms with overdue seminar papers, and the man in Milwaukee to fill his with dismembered body parts?

My thoughts began to foul. In the office of the Rock-n-Roll club where I worked as a “doorperson,” I posted a signup sheet for the Jeffrey Dahmer Fan Club and Recipe Exchange. I pestered any tolerably coherent customer I was able to corner: “Did you hear about that Dahmer guy?” Not entirely my fault; the workplace was not conducive to optimal psychological sanitation. Under the inevitable “Women – can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em,” scrawled on the men’s room wall, someone had
written, in a careful hand, “But you can cut their bodies into little pieces and leave them in the woods.”

Why the nervous laughter? Not merely voyeurism. Even as we drown in an ocean of digitized imagery that both stretches and deadens the imagination, I’m betting the bulk of us don’t have voyeuristic interests quite that prurient. Then maybe it’s because we’re more like serial killers than we care to admit; maybe we’re somehow more producer than consumer. Do we see our own fragile countenances in Ted Bundy’s unholy smirk?

It is tempting to suspect a certain complicity. The victims of serial murder are often persons who have been repeatedly ill-treated before their final victimization: Dahmer’s victims were gay men of color, while Gary Ridgeway, the Green River Killer, targeted prostitutes. (The tragic indifference of the Milwaukee police in the Dahmer case provides emphasis here.) And so far as I can tell, no serial killer has targeted Goldman Sachs executives or derivatives traders. White males are the bulk of serial killers, and white males may well be the bulk of serial fans, so perhaps there’s a kind of collusion.

But when one learns that white males are also the bulk of serial victims, matters seem more complex. Maybe there would be fewer serial killers in a more just society, but injustice can’t explain the peculiar fascination. There are lots of lethal injustices, and lots of complicities: industrial food, tobacco, automobiles, and criminally inadequate health insurance kill far more Americans than serial killers (who are, after all, a sort of statistical anomaly). But these more prosaic inequities don’t make for the same kind of story; names like Bundy, Gacy, and Dahmer are likely to be remembered long after we’ve forgotten which Wall Street megalomaniac spent how much on his office wastebasket.

If forced to guess, I’d say the fascination owes more to difference than similarity. Maybe serial killers are most like science fiction characters, uninvited travelers from some distant moral galaxy. One might begin to appreciate this ethical expanse with a characteristically philosophical bit of rhetorical therapy: it’s not odd to admire someone because they never raise their voice to children or animals, but it is odd to admire someone because they’ve never been a serial killer. A person might, even with the best of intentions, lose their temper with a willful child or unruly dog, but that same person will not become a serial killer, no matter how trying the plague of brat or beast descending on their home. Not even close.

I remember a friend asking, during one of my Dahmer ruminations, “What could things look like to him?” Sort of like a “how the dragonfly sees the world” picture in an elementary science book, all jagged and...
geometric? I can’t imagine. And there’s something legitimately philosophical here, where imagination fails. It emerges with a familiar philosophical expedient: if you want to figure out what something does, find out what happens when that something goes bad; if a tamping rod through the frontal lobes has unfortunate effects on someone’s civility, as it did for Phineas Gage, maybe the frontal lobes have something to do with civility. Likewise, one way to illuminate what is valuable about human persons is to think seriously about departures from full humanity.

This might happen in a variety of ways – if anything is fragile, humanity is. But serial killers have departed the fold in ways that seem quite distinct from more ordinary calamities. They are not dead – not literally, anyway. Nor are they incapacitated in the familiar senses associated with catastrophes like brain injury and disease. In fact, while the serial-killer-as-genius archetype exaggerates reality, it may well be that serial killers – at least those categorized as “ordered” as opposed to “disordered” – often enjoy cognitive capacities not so different from the rest of us.

Yet serial killers are different – and not just a little. The differences need contemplating, even at the risk of cerebral spiders. Consider the moral vastness that separates them from us and, most importantly, consider how those distances may be preserved. The great majority of us reading this volume are not (I expect and hope) likely to visit the outlands that are the subject of this volume. But there are kindred states of more ordinary proximity – government functionaries are much more prolifically homicidal than serial killers – and these regions also desperately need avoiding. Perhaps staring into the moral distance will help us to better do so.
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S. Waller
Bozeman, MT
INTRODUCTION

Meditations on Murder, or What is so Philosophical about Serial Killers?

_The problem of crime is the problem of human existence._

Colin Wilson

Death has pursued philosophers across history, just as they have pursued it. Socrates (469–399 BCE) reassured his followers that doing philosophy is practicing death, and so the diligent philosopher will face death easily. Heidegger (1889–1976) described us as projecting ourselves forward toward death, and gave us the chilling reminder that we all die alone; one’s death is one’s own. Existentialism is an entire school of philosophical thought motivated by the eventual death of all human beings. Questions of death haunt ethical discussions focused on medical care, human rights, and legal punishments. We are all interested in death, for it threatens all of us. But death, for philosophers, has usually been approached as something that happens to us, not as something that killers do. We reflect on the act of dying far more than we reflect on killing – and there is little philosophy that meditates on murder as an activity that might be repeated, or even practiced with care.

One prior work on the topic, _The Philosophy of Murder_ by John Paget, is an 1851 discourse on the methods of murder. The work focuses on “progress” in the arena of killing, specifically, the increasing popularity of
poisoning, as poison was difficult to detect. As poisoning became a more popular means to an end, the “more blatant modes” of killing – crowbars, butchery by knife, or “sudden blows with a ragged stick” – fell from favor, losing disciples and becoming passé. Paget also notes that there are murderers who are not ever labeled as such:

… the thousand and one ogreisms of your petty domestic czar, will wither the greener blessings of the lives of those who sit round his own fireside into hard and dry leaves – nay, shorted those barren lives many years; and yet to him assault and battery may be an abhorrent and impossible thing. The difference, however, it is very apparent, is only in appearances – in the manner of the theft and of the cruelty.2

Clearly, there are many ways to kill! But even this work approaches murder primarily from the point of view of potential victims, and what must be done to stop, and to punish, the killing. There is a gap in the literature of murder; few have examined the killers themselves from a philosophical point of view. Until now.

Here, then, is a philosophy book on practicing death from the perspective – not of dying – but of inflicting death on others. These essays contemplate those who hasten the death of others in a systematic, premeditated fashion: serial killers. This introduction will first tell you a few important facts about serial killers, and then about the essays in the volume.

How Common Are Serial Killings?

It is difficult to know exactly what percentage of murders committed in the United States each year are serial murders. The FBI does not break down murder statistics according to serial or mass murder. Even if they did, a single murder one year might, in the end, be part of a much longer string of killings over a number of years. Experts agree, however, that whatever the percentage (one expert puts the number at 1 percent), serial murder accounts for a very small number of the total number of murders each year in the United States.3 If the 1 percent figure is correct, an American, in any given year, is 150 times more likely to die of the flu and its complications than at the hands of a serial killer.4

If real serial killers are, in the world of kinds of murderers, statistically very small, the same cannot be said for fictional serial killers. If you search
for “serial killer” on major American newspaper sites, you will get many more hits for novels, plays, television shows, and movies that deal with serial killers than articles on actual serial killers. Serial killers hold a fascination in the popular imagination far disproportionate to their actual social significance. You would think we were in the midst of a serial killing epidemic, but, as we have seen, the statistics strongly suggest that this is not the case. All of this points to the fact that we are much more apt to have our view of serial killers framed by fictional popular culture than by criminological research or FBI definitions and categories. Eric W. Hickey, a criminal psychologist, notes that between 1920 and 1959, a total of 12 films were made about serial killers. In the next 30 years, 55 films of this genre were produced, and in the 1990s alone, over 150 serial-killer-themed films were offered to movie-going audiences.

The conspicuous increase in films with a serial murder theme in the 1990s may have to do with the fact that although the crime we call serial murder has been reported throughout the centuries, the term “serial killer” did not exist until the early 1980s. Prior to this time, a serial killer would have been called a “mass murderer,” which, as we will see shortly, is now defined differently from “serial murder” by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other law enforcement agencies. With the identification of “serial killer” as its own class of murderer, it has been possible to concentrate research on what makes a serial killer tick. We thus find much written about the “profile” of a serial killer, as if they all share a common set of traits.

What is a Serial Killer?

With all the competing versions of what a serial killer is, from novels and films to FBI profiles and criminologist typologies, what do we really know and believe about serial murderers? The serial killer is, at least in our collective common sense, qualitatively different from other kinds of killers. We do not, for instance, assume that someone who kills a family member in a fit of impassioned rage is of the same profile as one driven to kill in serial fashion. Nor would we typically characterize a soldier in battle as a serial killer despite the fact that some of the constituent parts of a definition of serial killer would appear to fit with the actions of the soldier (such as killing multiple times over an extended period).

So, what is a serial killer? That is, how do we define the term? How do we know when a killer is acting serially, as opposed to acting as a “spree
killer” or mass murderer? In the 1980s the FBI established a typology of murder. A slightly revised typology appears in the FBI’s *Crime Classification Manual*, 2nd edn. (2006). It lists six kinds of murder with the following definitions:

- **single murder:** “one victim and one homicidal event”
- **double murder:** “two victims who are killed at one time in one location”
- **triple murder:** “three victims who are killed at one time in one location”
- **mass murder:** “one person operating in one location at one period of time, which could be minutes, hours or even days”
- **spree murder:** “a single event with two or more locations and no emotional cooling-off period between murders”
- **serial murder**
  - **prior to 2005:** “three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period between homicides”
  - **2005–present:** same definition as previously but the number of events and separate locations has been reduced from three to two

This categorization system, though it accounts for the number murdered, the location(s), and the timeframe(s) involved, tells us little about the motivations of the serial killer or their psychological profile. Nor do these definitions account for our own emotional response to the acts of a serial killer. The same *Crime Classification Manual* provides us some help with digging deeper into the psyche of the serial killer:

The serial murder is hypothesized to be premeditated, involving offense-related fantasy and detailed planning. When the time is right for him [*sic!*] and he has cooled off from his last homicide, the serial killer selects his next victim, and proceeds with his plan. The cooling-off period can last for days, weeks, or months and is the key feature that distinguishes the serial killer from other multiple killers.6

Now we know that serial killers are calculating, detail-oriented, and precise. But what else are they?

The problem with understanding the thoughts and actions of the serial killer is that there are, in addition to the typologies and descriptions we’ve just seen, numerous other ways that criminologists and law enforcement have categorized the people who commit serial murder. It is not
that the typologies are inherently bad, but that they focus on particular aspects of serial murder to the exclusion of others. It depends on what you want to find as to which categorization scheme is “best.” For instance, one well-known typology, developed by criminology scholars Ronald Holmes and James DeBurger, breaks serial killers into four types (for another typology, see chapter 14):

- **Visionary type:** This type is “impelled to murder because he has heard voices or has seen visions which demand that he kill a certain person or a category of persons.” Whether they are addressed by gods or by demons, these killers are mentally removed from reality and driven by psychotic hallucinations.

- **Mission-oriented type:** This type of killer is far more grounded in reality. Rather than being pressed by hallucinatory commands, these killers have “a self-imposed duty to rid the world of an unworthy group of people. The victims may be prostitutes, young women, Catholics, or any other group he defines as unworthy to live with decent people.… He lives in the real world and interacts with it on a daily basis. Typically when this type of killer is arrested, his neighbors cannot believe that he is the person responsible for the deaths of so many people.”

- **Hedonistic type:** “There are some people who can kill simply for the thrill of it. These people kill not because of a goal in their life to rid the community of undesirables; neither do they kill because they hear voices or see visions. They kill because they enjoy it. They kill because the thrill becomes an end in itself. The lust murderer can be viewed as a subcategory of the hedonistic type because of the sexual enjoyment experienced in the homicidal act. Anthropophagy, dismemberment, necrophilia or other forms of sexual aberration are prevalent in this form of serial killing.” Holmes and DeBurger believe this type of serial killer is psychopathic.

- **Power/control-oriented type:** This type “receives gratification from the complete control of the victim.… By exerting complete control over the life of his victim, the murderer experiences pleasure and excitement, not from the sexual excitation or the rape, but from his belief that he does indeed have the power to do whatever he wishes to do to another human being who is completely helpless and within his total control. This type of serial murderer is not psychotic … and is aware of the rules and regulations that he is expected to abide by. He chooses, however, to ignore them. He lives by his own code and
typically fits the patterns of a psychopathic or sociopathic type of personality. His behavior indicates a character disorder, not a break from reality.”

According to Holmes and DeBurger, “each type is labeled in keeping with the kinds and motives that seem to predominate in the killer’s homicidal actions. Within each of these types, it is apparent that the motives function to provide the serial killer with a personal rationale or justification for the homicidal violence.”

This typology may move us closer to a more precise sense of what serial killers are – their motives, their mindsets, their socially aberrant needs. But even those who have spent a lifetime studying these killers admit that the typologies only go so far in clarifying the phenomenon of the serial murderer. There are always those who seem to slip between or across categories, or who otherwise seem to betray the clarity that typologies suggest. As soon as things get complicated – because they are hard to define, difficult to explain, and not easily settled by the numbers alone – we start to ask why? And it is here that facts end and philosophy begins. A guide to the philosophy in this volume is next.

I Think Therefore I Kill: The Philosophical Musings of Serial Killers

The opening essays feature the words of the serial killers themselves, and these words invite us to do a little philosophy.

The first essay, “Man is the Most Dangerous Animal of All,” by Andrew Winters, brings us a philosophical gaze into the writings of the Zodiac Killer. Never captured, this killer terrorized California as the 1960s came to a close, taunting both police and public through cryptic letters written to the San Francisco Chronicle amidst his killing spree. In this Sartrean essay, Winters casts a phenomenological eye on the words of the Zodiac, showing us how we change when we are aware that someone (especially a killer) is gazing at us. We have a new experience of ourselves when we look through the eyes of another. Zodiac helped us understand ourselves as victims, as pieces on a gameboard that he controls, and when we think of him, still out there, still watching, we again experience ourselves, with a chill.
The second essay, “A Philosophy of Serial Killing: Sade, Nietzsche, and Brady at the Gates of Janus,” is brought to us by well-known expert on serial killers, David Schmid. He focuses on the writings of “Moors Murders” perpetrator Ian Brady. Brady’s 2001 book, *The Gates of Janus: Serial Killing and Its Analysis*, discusses the motivations and justifications for his murders using Sade and Nietzsche, and critiques the actions of other serial killers against the high standards of Nietzsche’s “superman.” Schmid offers us a reading of Ian Brady that reveals intriguing secrets of this contemporary killer, ranging from his *moral relativism* to his likeness to the *Sadean Hero*. These heroes take pleasure in their own punishment, and so have the mental ability to always overcome the most horrific circumstances and triumph – just as Nietzsche’s superman would. In this capacity, they are literally undefeatable, for if we punish them, they delight in our cruelty as they would in their own. Schmid shows exactly how much philosophy can enlighten us about the thoughts and serial killers, and lets us walk through the *Gates of Janus* into the darker side of human nature.

The third exciting essay, Mark Alfano’s “The Situation of the Jury,” features a discussion of how human beings are prone to change their moral judgments when placed in different situations. Working from actual, recent correspondence with “Sunset Strip Killer” Douglas Clark, Alfano shows us how we might be swayed by the manipulative, the mal-intentioned, and the bloodthirsty; we don’t realize just how much we obey authorities, or scapegoat questionable characters in the midst of a messy or smelly environment. The essay showcases the philosophical view called *situationism*: we are very influenced by context, and so the context in which we find ourselves impacts our view as to Clark’s guilt or innocence regarding the eight murders of women in the early 1980s. The situationist dilemma – that we make different decisions when we consider facts against different backgrounds – leaves us unsettled at the end of the essay, and ready for more.

**Can You Blame Them? Ethics, Evil, and Serial Killing**

This unit opens with a fine and quite comprehensive history of serial killers from the ancient world to the present, “Serial Killers as Practical Moral Skeptics: A Historical Survey with Interviews.” Crime writer
Amanda Howard looks at their methods of killing, preferred victims, and means of escaping justice, and notes that many serial killers had a privileged station in life. Howard theorizes that serial killers are motivated by the possibility of acting out hostile urges with relative impunity – that is, power corrupts. History shows that many people with the power to fulfill their fantasies have no moral motivation to do good things, or avoid harming others; they do it simply because they can. In this essay, we think about whether serial killers have no answer to the question “Why be good?”

In a masterful essay “Are Psychopathic Serial Killers Evil? Are they Blameworthy for What They Do?,” philosopher Manuel Vargas argues that serial killers are profoundly evil and yet not responsible for their actions. Evil people, for Vargas, are those who enjoy or desire harm for harm’s sake and not for any other reason. This essay travels through several philosophical adventures, including the human inability to research morality with the sciences (this is why philosophy is so important), and what a psychopath really is. Vargas helps us explore these concepts by looking at rules that are merely conventional (widely accepted, but more easily broken), like “a football team has 11 players on the field at a time” and more serious moral rules, like “babies are not to be harmed for fun.” Vargas suggests that psychopaths suffer from a sort of rule-blindness, so they can’t tell which rules can be broken for fun and which must be respected at all times. We cannot hold the blind responsible for what they cannot see. Their actions are still evil, but we can’t blame them for doing what they do!

Matthew Brophy offers a stunning counterpoint in “Sympathy for the Devil: Can a Serial Killer Ever Be Good?,” in which he makes a case that serial killers can be good, and chooses Showtime’s Dexter as his example-on-trial. He presents evidence of Dexter’s goodness to a jury of you, the readers, with four arguments. First, utilitarians will approve of Dexter’s actions because they produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Second, Kantians too would declare Dexter good, because his actions are universalizable, that is, we wish that everyone would do what Dexter does. Third, we find that Dexter strives to be moderate, that he practices his talents and that he reflects on his actions regularly. Dexter lives the examined life, and he flourishes: virtue theorists must agree that Dexter is good. Fourth, social contract theorists judge Dexter as beneficial to society – as helping to create a society we would all agree to live in. The defense rests. Has Brophy made his case? You are the jury. Dexter awaits your decision!
Dangerous Infatuations: The Public Fascination with Serial Killers

Eric Dietrich and Tara Fox Hall explain “The Allure of the Serial Killer” (and other monsters) by appealing to several facets of human nature. First, we have a need to understand unusual behaviors and explain events in our world. When something out of the ordinary happens, we stop and stare (or we want to, but obey social rules that tell us to stop staring.) Second, we often desire to co-activate positive and negative feelings – this is how we enjoy both horror novels and roller coasters – so we can enjoy being afraid. Third, we are able to situate ourselves within a protective frame through which we can safely view dangerous people and frightening activities. Safe on the living room couch, we settle in for a marathon of Hannibal Lecter. But this protective frame also shields us from our own moral feelings, like empathy for the victim. They argue that humans naturally follow rules, and conforming to social boundaries brings us many fine things in life, from restaurants to poetry slams. But blending in with the crowd can be tiresome and leave us feeling the need to assert ourselves as individuals, as separate from homogenous society. Serial killers break society’s rules and we revel in their individuality. We watch them from inside a protective frame, enjoy our fear, and learn about their deeds in order to understand and explain their unusual, and alluring, behaviors. You may not want to know this much about yourself, but you won’t be able to turn away.

Susan Amper tempts Dexter fans with a new philosophy of killers and heroes in “Dexter’s Dark World: The Serial Killer as Superhero.” She shows us that we relate to Dexter as a good guy because we are allowed to see an intimate portrayal of his daily thoughts and inner struggles. We love Dexter because we too often feel at odds with ourselves, and we too worry about how different we may be from other people. According to Amper, Dexter suffers some of Sartre’s angst regarding his freedom, and represents some of Freud’s concepts of the id, as Dexter wrestles with his insatiable inner drives. We love Dexter because we too struggle with our freedom and our inner drives. Finally, Amper defends Dexter’s actions by comparing them to utilitarian and Kantian standards, showing that we have good reason to love Dexter – a philosophical defense of Dexter’s actions as highly moral, perhaps even heroic.
A Eulogy for Emotion: The Lack of Empathy and the Urge to Kill

What’s love got to do with it? This section looks at whether serial killers feel emotion or not, and how their emotions (present, stunted, distorted, or non-existent) impact their urges to kill.

Is it true that girls are more emotional? Well-known serial killer experts Elizabeth and Harold Schechter feature a fearsome foray into feminism in their essay “Killing with Kindness: Nature, Nurture and the Female Serial Killer.” Evidence suggests that dangerous ladies (like Jane Toppan and Aileen Wuornos) have their own deadly methods. They are, well, more nurturing than those of their male counterparts. Women kill those close to them, and through motherly methods, such as feeding them ... poison. Thus, female serial killers both violate and conform to the stereotype of woman as caretaker. The Schechters take a frightfully close look at the dark side of female caretaking, and remind us that damsels are definitely dangerous, and that not all serial killers are young white males.

So, is it true that boys don’t cry? Chris Keegan’s essay, “It Puts the Lotion in the Basket: The Language of Psychopathy” chills us with words that turn a person into a thing. The speaker of these words, Silence of the Lambs villain James “Buffalo Bill” Gumb, describes his victim not as a living, breathing human, but as a thing that puts lotion on its skin — a thing that does what it’s told. There is not a trace of human emotion here. Why do we shiver? Why are we so repulsed? Keegan explains our urge to recoil through Habermas’ communicative rationality, which is the human ability to take the point of view of someone else, or to stand in another person’s shoes. Without this basic empathetic response, we have nothing out of which to build a moral code, and so we wish to flee. Morality lets us function in a society, with other people: if we cannot relate to other people, then we have no method for understanding good and evil. Keegan argues that serial killers just don’t understand what there is to cry about!

We so often think of serial killers as “cold-blooded” that we take for granted that they kill because they don’t feel for others. In “Are Serial Killers Cold-Blooded Killers?” Andrew Terjesen suggests the empathy-based hypothesis is confused and desperately in need of a philosophical tune-up. Walking us through several classical philosophical techniques, he shows us that the concept of empathy is all but empty. First, he reveals that the word “empathy” has many, many meanings, so determining who has it and who doesn’t is very difficult. Second, many serial killers, real-life
(Dahmer) and fictional (Dexter), seem to form emotional attachments to other people, and might even be driven to kill by these emotions. Third, saying that “killers kill because they don’t feel for others” does not really explain their murderous urges – if they have no feelings, then why kill rather than get a sandwich or go bowling? Fourth, there are cases in which killers kill because they are empathetic with the pain of their victims, like the ladies of Arsenic and Old Lace. Instead of being unfeeling killers, perhaps serial killers kill because they have trouble controlling their impulses. Hmm – have you ever had an urge to kill your boss?

Creepy Cognition: Talking and Thinking about Serial Killers

William E. Deal brings us new research in cognitive science implying that “The Serial Killer was (Cognitively) Framed.” That is, we judge them as more or less morally responsible according to how much – and what kind of – information we have about them. Deal reviews what we know about the biographies of fictional serial killer Dexter and real-life serial killer John Wayne Gacy, and gives evidence suggesting that we see killers as morally responsible only when we are given the right information about their personal feelings and their life choices. In other words, we judge killing to be morally wrong only when it is framed in an impersonal way for us. We know enough about Dexter’s personal life to refrain from judging his murder habit too harshly. If understood in a less intimate cognitive frame, Dexter might seem monstrous; if we knew more about Gacy’s inner thoughts, he might seem a hapless victim, or even a friendly guy. Deal makes us shiver when he tells us the moral of the story: our moral judgments are easily manipulated by how the story is told.

Are serial killers in touch with their animal nature? In “Wolves and Widows: Naming, Metaphor, and the Language of Serial Murder,” Wendy Zirngibl looks at how we name, identify, discuss, and think about serial killers based on their physical or other characteristics, such as their crimes and their methods. She shows us that the nicknames we give them (for example, “Black Widow”) reveal how we associate these killers with certain qualities. What do we mean when we call someone a black widow? Why do we, as a society, do this? What work does naming – or nicknaming – do for us? Zirngibl argues that we tend to associate bestial traits with serial killers through these labels, and also unreflectively and destructively hold animals like wolves to human moral standards.