



# **Inside the Minds of Serial Killers**



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*Why They Kill*

**KATHERINE RAMSLAND**

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# Introduction

In 2005 in Rochester, New York, Robert Spahalski turned himself in to the police, claiming he had committed four murders. They charged him initially in two while they investigated the other two, and eventually Spahalski was indicted for all four. Reporters covering the case were confused as to whether, if convicted, Spahalski would qualify as a serial killer. He had allegedly committed four murders, to be sure, but he had different motives for each and three had happened in 1990 and 1991, while the fourth had occurred fifteen years later. Three victims were female and one was male; he had known them all and one was a friend whom he had supposedly killed unintentionally while hallucinating on cocaine.

Spahalski's behavior does not fit what has been claimed about serial killers: supposedly they have a "victim type" and they're compulsive, predatory, cannot stop, and suffer no remorse. Spahalski felt badly enough to turn himself in, went for a long period of time between murders, and none seemed either compulsive or particularly predatory. The confusion over Spahalski is understandable, but in fact, when analyzed case by case, serial killers often do not fit into neat categories.<sup>1</sup> The more details we know about each one, the more evident this truth is.

Serial killers fascinate us. We want to know what makes them tick, in part because their antisocial behaviors are so extreme but also because we hope we'll find a collection of causal factors that clearly set them apart from the rest of humanity. Yet unless one singles out a subcategory of serial murderers, such as healthcare serial killers or sadistic lust killers, the lack of uniformity from one case to the next makes a definitive analysis unlikely. Thus, the goal for the current study is not so much to offer an

explanation as to show the various motives attributed to serial murder in their respective manifestations. This provides a basis for taking an approach that will acknowledge the many differences and deflect simplistic generalizations. It's not intended as an exhaustive study, but merely a demonstrative one.

Little previous effort has been made to look at the diverse psychological manifestations of serial killers in the context of comparative cases. As a result, information from outdated studies has been perpetuated, such as the idea that most serial killers have above-average intelligence, that they're only sexually motivated (some even say that only men can be serial killers), that they have a clear victim type, and that they've all been abused as children. While those early studies had their merits for the time, they're not representative of serial killers as a whole. In fact, these ideas were largely derived from studying articulate, imprisoned, white, male American serial killers—and in limited numbers at that. From what I have seen as a researcher, there really is no "profile" of a serial killer, no set of characteristics or causes that provides us with a way to set them apart, and people whose work involves the investigation of serial murder concur.

Former FBI profiler Robert K. Ressler told Sue Russell when she was writing a biography of Aileen Wuornos that there were no hard and fast rules. Too many people, he said, try to oversimplify the psychology of these killers, but for every attempt to state a "truth," one can find counterexamples that undermine it. Some killers have a victim preference, for example, but many do not. While a lot of killers grew up in abusive homes, some enjoyed plenty of privilege and experienced no abuse whatsoever. Generalizations, Ressler indicated, do a disservice to the subject.<sup>2</sup>

The current study is not intended as a way to categorize serial killers for investigative purposes, such as behaviorally organized or disorganized, or for statistical purposes, like figuring out the percentage of sexually motivated vs. profit-oriented killers. Instead, it is intended as an exploration of the development of different serial killers toward their specific goals. Most of the chapters offer cases that illustrate particular motives, but I also approach the subject in terms of whether working with a partner affects the dynamic, what we know about killers who started young, what killers are like in a contained context such as a healthcare community, and what people who have been close to them say about them. I have examined more than a thousand cases of serial murder, looking at several hundred in detail via court transcripts, correspondences, newspaper archives, and true-crime biographies. In the process I have found that there are many motives that drive these offenders, they come from diverse backgrounds, and for almost every claim that has been made about them there are exceptions that weaken or undermine it.

Even the definition of serial murder can be confusing, so let me address it. While it was once the case that any type of incident that involved

a number of murders was called “multiple murder” or “mass murder,” eventually it became clear that some distinctions were needed. The phrase “serial killer” was first used in *The Complete Detective* in 1950, but it’s generally believed that in 1976 with the Son of Sam case, Special Agent Robert Ressler initiated its use for cases on which he and his colleagues were consulting in the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit (now the Behavioral Analysis Unit). Thus, it became common parlance for a specific type of multiple murder incident, as opposed to denoting a spree or mass murder.

The FBI’s official manual indicates that to be a serial killer, there must be at least three different murder events at three different locations, with a cooling off period between events, but the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and some criminologists allow for only two. In addition, some killers bring their victims to the same location at different times. Some experts reserve the notion of serial murder exclusively for sexually compelled offenders, while others also include nonsexual goals. And then there’s the confusion over how to differentiate serial murder from incidents involving spree or mass murder. Thus, to achieve clarity for my purpose, I have defined the various terms thus:

1. Mass murder is a concentrated response to a single event or idea, occurring in one basic locale, even if the killer travels to several loosely related spots in that general area, and there are at least four fatalities.
2. A spree is a string of at least three murders arising from a key precipitating incident occurring close in time to the murders, but the spate of killings is fueled by continuing and associated stress, taking place in several locales and across a relatively short period of time, no longer than a few months; there is no psychological cooling off.
3. A serial killer murders at least two people in separate incidents, with the mental disposition or propensity to kill again. There is a psychological rest period between incidents, which could be considered a time of predatory preparation. He, she, or they also choose the modus operandi and may either move around or lure successive victims to a single locale. They view victims as objects needed for the satisfaction of their goals, and manifest an addictive quality to their behavior, such that choosing murder is a satisfying act.<sup>3</sup>

Serial killers are not all alike. They’re not all male. Some are younger than twelve or older than fifty. They’re not all driven by sexual compulsion. They’re not all intelligent or even clever. A single killer may choose different weapons or methods of operation. I could go on, but the point of this book is to examine specific details involved in how and why some people kill again and again. They might be profit-driven, in search of thrill or self-gratification, or compelled by some other deep-seated desire, fear, or need. Occasionally, serial murder is about revenge or inspired by a delusion. In many cases, the killer is relieving pressure and does not

wish to be stopped or caught. Yet a few do intentionally stop of their own accord or undermine themselves. Some have even professed remorse or killed themselves. While several motives may be present in any given killer, and the categories I've chosen certainly overlap, I have selected cases that clearly exemplify a specific driving ambition (or lack of). Thus a woman who kills for financial gain may also enjoy the act of murder, and conversely, a man for whom murder is sexually gratifying may also rob his victims. Yet I present the former as motivated by profit and the latter as a lust killer.

Since the cases speak for themselves, let's begin.

## NOTES

1. Jane Flasch, "Serial Killer Faces New Murder Charges," [www.13WHAM.com](http://www.13WHAM.com), January 3, 2006.
2. Sue Russell, *Lethal Intent* (New York: Kensington, 2002), pp. 379–381.
3. Katherine Ramsland, *The Human Predator* (New York: Berkley, 2005), p. xi.

## CHAPTER 1

# Jack the Ripper and the History of Serial Murder

### EARLY PREDATORS

Many people believe that London's Jack the Ripper was the world's first serial killer, but this misconception derives from the extensive exposure the case received at the time. The five murders attributed to "Saucy Jack" during his six weeks of terror in the Whitechapel area of London was the first series of linked murders to occur in a major city in such a way that it gained international media coverage. But let's place it in its proper context, so we can see how diverse the methods and motives of serial killers have been throughout the ages. There is little doubt that cultural factors affect the manifestations of serial murder, so it's important to examine the conditions in which these acts have occurred.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest documented serial killers was Locusta, a female poisoner, who put Nero on the throne in ancient Rome. In A.D. 54, Nero's mother employed her to poison Emperor Claudius, and Nero then became emperor. He allowed Locusta to continue, so she refined her trade and became a predator for her own purposes until, after Nero's demise, she was eventually executed. As the Roman emperors declined in power, Christianity took hold and spread throughout medieval Europe, with extensive missions launched by Rome and Constantinople to fend off Muslim attacks around the Mediterranean. Bloodthirsty aristocrats took advantage of the lack of criminal accountability for people of their status to feed their gruesome appetites. The feudal lord ruled and no one dared question his actions.

Gilles de Rais was among the wealthiest men in France during the early-to mid-fifteenth century. He was an ardent supporter of Joan of Arc, her military mentor and personal confidante, and he firmly believed in her apparent miracles. After she was burned to death in 1431, Gilles de Rais' mystical fanaticism took a new turn: He engaged in the practice of magic rituals that included the sacrifice of children. He apparently enjoyed it, and he had his servants gather up children from peasant families for him to rape and murder—often at his dinner parties. When he was tried under torture and threat of excommunication, he admitted to over one hundred victims. Though torture-inspired confessions are suspect, it is a fact that bones were found in several of his castles.

De Rais had a female counterpart just over a century later in the Hungarian Countess Erzebet Báthory, born in 1560. She, too, was accorded a certain amount of latitude as a result of her aristocratic status. When she was fifteen, she married the sadistic Count Nadasdy, the "Black Hero." He taught her how to beat the servants to the edge of their lives. After Nadasdy died in 1604, Erzebet stepped up her cruel and arbitrary beatings and was soon torturing and butchering the girls. She sent her maids to lure children and young women to her quarters, so she could satisfy her lust. She would stick pins into sensitive body parts, cut off someone's fingers, slit her skin with knives, or break her face. In a dungeon, girls were chained to the walls, fattened up, and "milked" for their blood.

When Erzebet turned her sadism toward young noblewomen, she was stopped. After a murder in 1609 that Erzebet tried to stage as a suicide, the authorities investigated. On finding corpses in her castle, they arrested Erzebet. She went through two separate trials, and during the second one, a register was discovered in her home that included in her own handwriting the names of over 650 victims. Accounts of her tortures by witnesses made even the judges blanch, and they could not imagine how a single person had devised so many different types of tortures. Erzebet was imprisoned for life in a small room in her own castle, where she died in 1614.

Legend has it that Báthory once got blood on her hand after slapping a servant girl and believed that it made her skin look younger. To restore her beauty, she made a practice of bathing in the blood of virgins. Whether or not this folklore is based on fact, the countess is credited as the first person on record to be murderously motivated by blood. If the interpretation of the records is to be believed, she is also the most prolific.

Even as the wealthy enjoyed the privileges of their rank, among peasants across Europe certain superstitions spawned delusions that also inspired acts of brutality. The Catholic Church ruled Europe for centuries, despite the fact that science was discovering how the earth revolved around the sun, how the body functioned, and how gravity behaved; philosophers were issuing in the Enlightenment; and Luther was birthing a Protestant revolt. During such religious times, between 1573 and 1600

several men were prosecuted for “lycanthropy”—killing as a werewolf. During one period some 30,000 such cases were reported to authorities. Some people even viewed themselves as being cursed with an animal compulsion, and it was not uncommon to have cases that involved cannibalism or necrophilia, or both. Among the prominent “werewolves” was Gilles Garnier, who claimed at his trial that after he had received an ointment to change his shape into that of a wolf, he felt compelled to stalk and kill children. He tore at them with his teeth and took pieces home for his wife to cook. In 1573, he was burned alive.

Germany had a similar problem with Peter Stubbe, who terrorized the countryside for twenty-five years. According to pamphlets, he claimed that he had an enchanted belt that assisted his “change,” and he too went after children, including his own son. He was tried with his wife and daughter as a “pack,” and all three were convicted of murder.

A century later, during a ten-year span, Marie de Brinvilliers in Paris poisoned more than fifty people, and in 1680 Catherine La Voison, the mistress of King Louis XIV of France, was caught with a priest in scandalous rituals involving infant sacrifice and blood drinking. Their victims were said to number into the hundreds, perhaps more than one thousand.

Poisoning was in vogue during medieval times, and in Italy in 1719, La Tofania was implicated in the deaths of over 600 victims. Germany had Gessina Gottfried, who poisoned people unchecked for thirteen years. There were probably many more serial poisoners who were never caught or documented, because some people turned it into an art and hired themselves out to wealthy people looking to dispatch someone who stood in the way of their inheritance. It was not until the nineteenth century that forensic toxicology was able to definitively determine that arsenic had been used on someone, so poisoning was an easy way to commit murder. Even when arsenic became detectable, there were other poisons. So serial murder and toxicology developed a complex relationship.

Serial killing came to America in the form of a team of cousins—Micajah and Wiley Harpe—who murdered relatives and strangers at whim in the Kentucky and Tennessee territories. They racked up anywhere between twenty and forty victims, including their own children, killed quickly after birth, before they were finally caught and executed.

## MODERN CONDITIONS FOR MURDER

Back in Europe, with the growing sophistication of scientific inventions, industrial technology, and medical discoveries occurring parallel to the waning of religion’s dominance, a certain practice arose in the medical community that inspired a new type of serial killing. Physicians needed cadavers to dissect to advance their knowledge about disease and to teach human anatomy to medical students. So they encouraged the act of grave

robbing. The “resurrectionists” grew adept at spiriting a body from its grave, but a few decided to forego the effort. In Scotland, William Burke and William Hare figured out a way to deliver a body in prime condition, unmarked. They ran a boarding house and they would get their victims drunk and grab them in an arm-lock around the throat or sit on their chests while holding their noses closed. In nine months, they killed sixteen people, selling them to a physician before they were caught in 1828.

Throughout that time, many more poisoners surfaced: Helene Jegado killed twenty-three in France, while across the Channel, Britain’s Dr. William Palmer poisoned fourteen, and in Germany Anna Maria Zwanzinger dispatched eight. Pretty Mary Cotton used arsenic to kill her children, several stepchildren, husbands, and mother. It was a time when many people died of a vague malady known as gastric fever, and when one could collect on insurance policies. So Mary Cotton progressively improved her social status by trading in one family for another.

Even children were becoming cold-blooded killers, and America was shocked by the case of Jesse Pomeroy, 14, arrested in 1874 and dubbed the “Boston Boy Fiend.” His rampage of assault included torture, mutilation, and murder of other children. Also in Boston, in 1876, church sexton Thomas Piper was convicted as “the Boston Belfry Murderer.” He confessed to four brutal sex murders, including that of a five-year-old child, which he claimed he had done under the influence of that era’s pervasive hallucinogenic drug, opium. His excuse proved insufficient to mitigate the crimes, and Piper was hanged.

At the same time, the “Nebraska Fiend” claimed nine lives before he was unmasked as Stephen Richards and arrested in 1879, while in Austin, Texas, five years later, seven women were murdered over the course of a year. The killings ended on Christmas Eve, 1885. While the murders were never solved, evidence in retrospect points to a wealthy politician as “the Servant Girl Annihilator.” An association was also made to a more infamous person three years later when the next set of murders came to light: those of Jack the Ripper.

## “JACK”

Clearly, then, Red Jack was not the first serial killer. However, according to “Ripperologists,” the spate of killings attributed to Jack the Ripper was the first to occur in a major city in such a way as to garner considerable police attention and media coverage. More than three hundred newspapers around the world reported on it. He may also have been the first serial killer to communicate about his crimes with investigators (if he did indeed author any of the letters, which no one knows). Since this spate of killings stands as the epitome of repetitive and compulsive lust murder, which we will examine in chapters that follow, let’s look at the details.

In the Whitechapel area of London's East End, it started on Friday, August 31, 1888, just after 1:00 AM, when Polly Nichols, 42, went out to earn four pence. She was found with her throat cut, her skirt pulled up, her legs parted, and severe cuts into her abdomen. There were also two small wounds to her genitals. Despite the brutality, as she was a prostitute, the killing did not inspire much attention.

The next victim was Annie Chapman, 45, discovered about a week later on the morning of September 8. Her dress, too, had been pulled up over her head, her stomach ripped open, and her intestines draped over her left shoulder. Her legs were drawn up, knees bent and spread outward. The killer had used a sharp implement, like a surgical knife, to slit her throat, nearly to the point of decapitation. Coins and an envelope had been arranged around her and the bladder, half of the vagina, and the uterus had been removed and taken away.

Then several notes arrived between September 17 and 29 at the Central News Office, signed, "Jack the Ripper." One author claimed that he was "down on whores" and would continue to kill them. These notes may have come from journalists seeking to inspire more incidents to report, although some experts claim they are genuine links to the killer, but the moniker was published and it stuck, especially when there were more deaths.

By the end of that month, on September 30, two victims were attacked on the same night. The Ripper slashed the throat of Elizabeth Stride, 45, only a few minutes before she was found, and less than an hour later slashed and disemboweled Catherine Eddowes, 43, who was also quickly found (she was a five-minute walk away from Stride's body). It was clear from this night's work that the killer was growing bolder and more expressive of his mental pathology. With Eddowes, the intestines had been pulled out and placed over the right shoulder, the uterus and one kidney had been cut out and taken, and the face was mutilated with triangles cut into the cheeks. Her eyelids were nicked and the tip of her nose was cut off.

Then came a letter "from Hell" to the head of the Whitechapel vigilante organization, with a grisly trophy: half of a kidney that turned out to be afflicted with Bright's disease—a disorder from which Eddowes had suffered. The note's author indicated that he'd fried and eaten the other half. It was believed that this note was definitely from the killer and he even offered to send "the bloody knife" in due time. He closed with the taunt, "Catch me if you can."

The police realized they had a killer driven by rage, and they were stymied. Expecting something to happen on both October 8 and 30, since those had been the dates in September when the killer had struck, they stepped up patrols; but there were no more murders that month. Still, their instincts about the dates were not wrong; they were just early.

It was the last and youngest victim, Mary Kelly, 24, who took the brunt of this offender's disorganized frenzy. On November 8, she apparently invited a man into her room. She closed the curtains in preparation, and at some point he pulled the sheet over her head and stabbed her through it. He slashed open her throat and then ripped through her lower torso, pulled out her intestines, and skinned her chest and legs. Blood was splattered all over the room. When police arrived, they found a severed breast on the table next to her, along with the tips of her nose and ears. Her abdomen had been emptied and its contents spread all over the bed and thrown against the walls. Her heart, too, had been removed and was missing, and flesh had been cut from her legs and buttocks clear to the bone. Doctors estimated that the frenzy had gone on for around two hours.

The police investigated many suspects, but in the end, no one was convicted of these murders. Some experts believe that there were at least two more, one before the Nichols murder and one after Mary Kelly. Regardless of the final count, the Ripper's brutality marked him as a demented and dangerous man not likely to stop, short of imprisonment or suicide (and some suspects did commit suicide or were committed). Yet the murders did appear to end, even if not with Mary Kelly's death. Whoever the Ripper was, he seems to have gotten away, and his lack of identity has contributed to his fame for over a century.<sup>2</sup>

Red Jack also inspired copycat killings in other places, such as Moscow, Nicaragua, and Vienna. At least one true-crime author believes that he came to America and was instrumental in San Francisco's two "Monster of the Belfry" murders, for which medical student Theodore Durrant was tried and convicted.

Yet even as the Ripper murder frenzy died down, H. H. Holmes was arrested for a murder he committed in Philadelphia and an entirely new serial killer was unmasked. Herman Webster Mudgett, a.k.a., H. H. Holmes, had built a "castle" in Chicago during the development of the 1893 World's Fair. He let rooms to young ladies, locking them in and gassing them to death while he watched. He would then slide them down specially built chutes to the cellar where he had installed a massive furnace, and either burn them to ash, dissolve them in a vat of acid, or strip the flesh from their bones so he could sell their skeletons to medical schools. He confessed to as many as twenty-seven murders, although he later recanted, but some experts believe his victim toll is well over one hundred.

The story was this "castle" he had built, for inside investigators found sleeping chambers with peepholes, asbestos-padded walls, gas pipes, sliding walls, and vents that Holmes controlled from his bedroom. The building had secret passages, hallways that went in circles, false floors, rooms with torture equipment, and a specially equipped surgery. Tourists bought tickets to see it, but the building was burned to the ground. Holmes was executed.<sup>3</sup>

The list of serial killers in the twentieth century and beyond is quite long. There's no room in this book to discuss them all, but we'll look at representatives of the various motives attributed to them. Red Jack was among the category that we understand now as the lust murderer—those killers who apparently are aroused by murder. We turn first to them.

## NOTES

1. Katherine Ramsland, *The Human Predator: A Historical Chronicle of Serial Murder and Forensic Investigation* (New York: Berkley, 2005), pp. 1–105.
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3. Frank Geyer, *The Holmes-Pitezel Case: A History of the Greatest Crime of the Century* (Salem, MA: Publisher's Union, 1896); H. H. Holmes, *Holmes' Own Story* (Philadelphia, PA: Burk & McFetridge, 1895); "The Confession of H. H. Holmes," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 12, 1896.



## CHAPTER 2

# Lust

Lust killers are aroused by the act and fact of murder; some criminologists call them thrill killers. Their motive generally forms from fantasies associated during puberty with anything from underwear to dead animals to body parts. Jerome Brudos in Oregon, for example, was attracted to women's feet, high-heeled shoes, and female undergarments. For a while, he contented himself with stealing shoes, bras, and panties from neighborhood homes, but eventually he spotted an opportunity to engage his fantasies more fully—with murder and the possession of a corpse that yielded a foot. One of the strangest lust killers was Sylvestre Matushka, who engineered a series of train crashes in Hungary during the 1930s, claiming it was the only way he could achieve sexual release. He had eroticized the image of bodies ripped up by machines, but he was caught before he could finish his apparent agenda of one wreck per month.

We've just seen how Jack the Ripper seemed to find pleasure in stabbing and mutilation. Let's look at some of the cases that involved eroticized harm of others, along with theories about how people can act this way.

### SEX SLAVES

Elizabeth Kenyon, a teacher in Miami, Florida, disappeared on March 4, 1984. She was not the irresponsible type and if she had planned to go somewhere, she would have informed someone. Her parents filed a missing persons report, but their suspicions were on a former boyfriend whom Elizabeth had declined to marry—Christopher Wilder, an entrepreneur