



# The Serial Killer Files: The Who, What, Where, How, and Why of the World's Most Terrifying Murderers

By Harold Schechter

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THE DEFINITIVE DOSSIER ON HISTORY'S MOST HEINOUS!

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Rigorously researched and packed with the most terrifying, up-to-date information, this innovative and highly compelling compendium covers every aspect of multiple murderers—from psychology to cinema, fetishism to fan clubs, “trophies” to trading cards. Discover:

**WHO THEY ARE:** Those featured include **Ed Gein**, the homicidal mama's boy who inspired fiction's most famous *Psycho*, Norman Bates; **Angelo Buono and Kenneth Bianchi**, sex-crazed killer cousins better known as the Hillside Stranglers; and **the Beanes**, a fifteenth-century cave-dwelling clan with an insatiable appetite for human flesh

**HOW THEY KILL:** They shoot, stab, and strangle. Butcher, bludgeon, and burn. Drown, dismember, and devour . . . and other methods of massacre too many and monstrous to mention here.

**WHY THEY DO IT:** For pleasure and for profit. For celebrity and for “companionship.” For the devil and for dinner. For the thrill of it, for the hell of it, and because “such men are monsters, who live . . . beyond the frontiers of madness.”

**PLUS:** in-depth case studies, classic killers' nicknames, definitions of every kind of deviance and derangement, and much, much more.

For more than one hundred profiles of lethal loners and killer couples, Bluebeards and black widows, cannibals and copycats— this is an indispensable, spine-tingling, eye-popping investigation into the dark hearts and mad minds of that twisted breed of human whose crimes are the most frightening . . . and fascinating.

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### Editorial Review

#### From the Inside Flap

##### THE DEFINITIVE DOSSIER ON HISTORY'S MOST HEINOUS!

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### WHAT IT MEANS

### ORIGIN OF THE TERM

One reason people tend to think that serial murder is a frighteningly new phenomenon is that, until about twenty years ago, no one ever heard of such a thing. For most of the twentieth century, the news media never referred to serial killers. But that isn't because homicidal psychos didn't exist in the past.

Indeed, one of the most infamous American serial killers of all time, Albert Fish, committed his atrocities around the time of the Great Depression. After his arrest, his unspeakable crimes were covered extensively by the newspapers. Nowhere, however, is Fish described as a serial killer. The reason is simple. The phrase hadn't been invented yet. Back then, the type of crime we now define as serial murder was simply lumped together under the general rubric of "mass murder."

Credit for coining the phrase "serial killer" is commonly given to former FBI Special Agent Robert Ressler, one of the founding members of the Bureau's elite Behavioral Science Unit (aka the "Mind Hunters" or the "Psyche Squad"). Along with his colleague John Douglas, Ressler served as a model for the character Jack Crawford in Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter trilogy.

In his 1992 memoir, *Whoever Fights Monsters*, Ressler writes that, in the early 1970s, while attending a weeklong conference at the British police academy, he heard a fellow participant refer to "crimes in series," meaning "a series of rapes, burglaries, arsons, or murders." Ressler was so impressed by the phrase that, upon returning to Quantico, he began to use the term "serial killer" in his own lectures to describe "the killing of those who do one murder, then another and another in a fairly repetitive way."

In thinking up the term, Ressler also says he had in mind the movie-matinee adventure serials of his boyhood: *Spy Smasher*, *Flash Gordon*, *The Masked Marvel*, etc. Like a child looking forward to the latest installment of his favorite cliffhanger, the serial killer can't wait to commit his next atrocity.

That is Ressler's version of how he came to invent the phrase that has now become such a vital part of our language. There is just one problem with the story. There is documented proof that the expression "serial murderer" existed at least a dozen years before Ressler supposedly invented it.

According to Jesse Sheidlower, editor of the major new revision of the Oxford English Dictionary, the term can be traced as far back as 1961, where it appears in a citation from Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary. The quote, which is attributed to the German critic Siegfried Kracauer, is:

[He] denies that he is the pursued serial murderer.

-first documented use of the term "serial murderer," as it appears in Merriam-Webster's 1961 Third New International Dictionary

By the mid-1960s, the term "serial murderer" had become common enough, at least overseas, that it was used repeatedly in the 1966 book *The Meaning of Murder* by the British writer John Brophy.

Jack the Ripper, still unidentified and still the most famous of all serial murderers, was not altogether true to type. The typical serial murderer kills once too often and gets caught.

-from *The Meaning of Murder* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966), p. 189

It's possible that, during his visit to England (where Brophy's book was originally published), Ressler picked up the term, perhaps subliminally. To give credit where it is due, it was evidently Ressler who altered the phrase from "serial murderer" to the slightly more punchy "serial killer."

In any event, if he can't really be credited with coining the expression, Ressler certainly helped introduce it into American culture. Surprisingly, it did not enter into common usage until quite recently. The earliest published example of the phrase "serial killer" that the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary have been able to come up with is only twenty years old. It comes from the article "Leading the Hunt in Atlanta's Murders" by M. A. Farber, published in the May 3, 1981, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*.

Here, reprinted for the first time, is the passage containing the first known published use of the term "serial killer":

Someone, raising a question that trails Brown from forum to forum, asks about race and the murders. Some Atlantans fear racial violence if a "serial" killer is discovered to be white.

## DEFINITIONS

Since the term "serial killer" was invented to describe a specific type of criminal, you'd think the definition would be clear-cut. However, confusion surrounds the term. Even the experts can't agree.

Let's start with the official FBI definition:

Three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period between homicides.

-FBI Crime Classification Manual (1992)

This definition stresses three elements:

1. Quantity. There have to be at least three murders.

2. Place. The murders have to occur at different locations.

3. Time. There has to be a "cooling-off period"-an interval between the murders that can last anywhere from several hours to several years.

The last two characteristics are meant to differentiate serial killing from mass murder, in which a suicidal, rage-filled individual slaughters a bunch of people at once: a disgruntled employee, for example, who shows up at his office with an automatic weapon and blows away a half dozen coworkers before turning the gun on himself.

There are several problems with the FBI definition. In one respect, it's much too broad, since it can be applied to homicidal types who aren't serial killers: professional hit men, for example, or Western outlaws like William "Billy the Kid" Bonney, who is said to have gunned down twenty-one men before he reached the age of twenty-one. "Mad bombers" like Ted Kaczynski also meet the FBI's criteria. But none of these types match the common conception of a serial killer.

In another respect, the FBI definition is overly narrow, since it specifies that a serial killer has to commit his crimes "in three or more separate locations." To be sure, some serial killers range far and wide in their search for prey. Ted Bundy, for example, murdered women in several different states. Others, however, prefer to do their dirty work in one place. John Wayne Gacy, for example, turned the basement of his suburban split-level into a private torture chamber and even disposed of his victims' remains at home, stashing them in the crawl space until he ran out of room.

The main defect in the FBI definition however, is what's missing from it-namely, any sense of the specific nature of the crimes. When Siegfried Kracauer first used the term "serial murderer," he was discussing the character played by Peter Lorre in Fritz Lang's classic movie, *M*: a repulsive, moon-faced pervert who preys on little girls. A few years later, John Brophy used it to describe killers like Jack the Ripper and Earle Leonard Nelson, the infamous "Gorilla Murderer" of the 1920s who strangled and raped several dozen women across the United States and up into Canada. And when Robert Ressler and his colleagues in the Behavioral Science Unit adopted the term in the 1970s, they applied it to homicidal psychopaths like Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Edmund Kemper. In all these cases, there was one common thread: a strong component of depraved sexuality.

Recognizing this fact, some experts stress the sexual motivations behind serial murder, defining it as the act of ultraviolent deviants, who get twisted pleasure from inflicting extreme harm on their victims and who will

keep on committing their atrocities until they are stopped.

Of course, there are criminals who match this profile but who can't be considered serial killers for one simple reason: they are caught after committing a single homicide. An example is James Lawson, described in the book *The Evil That Men Do* by Stephen Michaud and former FBI Special Agent Roy Hazelwood (another member of the FBI's original Mind Hunter team).

A convicted rapist, Lawson was sent to a California state mental institution, where he struck up a friendship with a fellow inmate, James Odom. The two men began sharing their fantasies of rape and murder, encouraging each other's sickest impulses and forming a bond based on their mutual depravity. No sooner were they released than they decided to put their dreams into action. Abducting a twenty-five-year-old female convenience store clerk, they drove her to an isolated location. First Odom raped her in the backseat while Lawson watched.

Then Lawson went to work on her with his knife.

I wanted to cut her body so she would not look like a person, and destroy her so she would not exist. I began to cut on her body. I remember cutting her breasts off. After this, all I remember is that I kept cutting on her body.

-James Lawson

Fortunately, the two men were traced and arrested in short order. However, Lawson's case raises an interesting question. There's no doubt that he had the mentality of a serial killer; his confession makes that brutally clear. How many women would he have had to butcher before qualifying for that label? "Three or more," according to the FBI definition. But that number seems arbitrary. Let's suppose that, over the span of several weeks, the police in a small California town had found the remains of two female victims, killed and mutilated in the same way. Wouldn't they be justified in suspecting that a serial killer was on the loose?

These flaws in the FBI definition are rectified in another, more flexible one formulated by the National Institutes of Justice, which many authorities regard as a more accurate description:

A series of two or more murders, committed as separate events, usually, but not always, by one offender acting alone. The crimes may occur over a period of time ranging from hours to years. Quite often the motive is psychological, and the offender's behavior and the physical evidence observed at the crime scenes will reflect sadistic, sexual overtones.

-National Institutes of Justice

#### CATEGORIES OF CARNAGE: SERIAL/MASS/SPREE

Though people sometimes confuse the terms and use them interchangeably, there are important differences between serial murder and the other major types of multiple homicide, mass murder and spree killing.

For the most part, serial murder is a sex crime, a fact that accounts for its distinctive features. The classic pattern of serial murder is a grotesque travesty of normal sexual functioning.

Most people who haven't had sex for a while begin to crave it more and more. They daydream about it. In vulgar terms, they grow increasingly horny. If unattached, they eventually seek out a willing partner. Once

they've gratified their sexual urges, the need subsides for a certain period of time.

In a parallel way, the serial killer spends his time fantasizing about dominance, torture, and murder. In effect, he grows horny for blood. When his twisted desires get too strong to resist, he goes prowling for unwitting prey. His excitement reaches a climax with the suffering and death of the victim. Afterward, he experiences a "cooling-off" period. (This is somewhat of a misnomer since it is during this lull between crimes that the killer's bloodlust begins to build again. It would be more accurate to describe it as a "cooling-off/heating-up" period.) During this time, he may make use of "trophies" he has taken from a murder scene to relive the crime in his mind, savoring the memory of his victim's suffering.

In short, their unspeakable acts are a source of supreme pleasure to serial killers, who achieve the highest pitch of arousal—even to the point of orgasm—by inflicting savage harm on other human beings. Because doing terrible things feels so good to them, serial killers try not to get caught, so they can keep on enjoying their atrocities for as long as possible.

### Mass Murder

Apart from the fact that they both involve multiple homicides, mass murder and serial killing have almost nothing in common.

Whereas the serial killer is often described as a predator, the mass murderer is stereotypically defined as a "human time bomb." Though there have been a number of female mass murderers, the great preponderance are male. In general, the mass murderer is someone whose life has come unraveled—who has been thrown out by his wife or fired from his job or suffered some other humiliating blow that pushes him over the edge. Filled with an annihilating rage at everything he blames for his failure, he explodes in a burst of devastating violence that wipes out everyone within range (a phenomenon that has entered slang as "going postal," a sardonic tribute to the number of US Postal Service workers who seem to have perpetrated such acts).

If serial murder is, in essence, a sex crime, mass murder is almost always a suicidal one. In blind, apocalyptic fury, the mass murderer has decided to go out with a bang and take as many people with him as possible. Typically, once the bloodbath is over, the mass murderer will either end his own life or provoke a fatal shoot-out with the police ("suicide by cop," as it is called).

Someday before I kill myself, I'll bring some people down with me.

-Sylvia Seegrist, mass murderer

Since his intention is to blow away as many people as possible, the mass murderer almost always uses firearms. This is in marked contrast to most

serial killers, who (with notable exceptions like David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz and Zodiac) prefer the sadistic "hands-on" thrill of stabbing, strangling, mauling, and mutilating.

A key element of mass murder is that, by definition, it occurs in a single location. Indeed, it is this factor, as much as anything else, that amounts for the devastating nature of the crime. The mass murderer is someone who—like a suicide bomber—detonates without warning in a restaurant, a playground, a schoolroom, an office, or even (as in the 1999 case of Larry Gene Ashbrook) a church, turning a safe, familiar setting into the scene of a corpse-strewn massacre.

Though mass murderers don't exert the same morbid fascination as serial killers-largely because their crimes are less sensational and sexually perverted-they often run up substantial body counts. Charles Whitman, for example-the Texas Tower sniper who, on August 1, 1966, barricaded himself on the observation deck overlooking the University of Texas campus and began picking off people below-killed fourteen victims in the course of his massacre. And even this grim total was surpassed by the case of James Huberty, one of the worst mass-murder episodes of modern times.

### **James Huberty and the McDonald's Massacre**

The site was significant: a suburban McDonald's restaurant. This all-American symbol of happy family life and material satisfaction represented everything that James Oliver Huberty had struggled so hard-and failed so miserably-to achieve.

His life had been difficult from the start. His mother, a religious zealot, became a missionary and abandoned her family when James was only seven. Raised by his father, he grew up lonely and resentful, a boy whose sole companion was his dog and whose only interest was guns.

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