

JUST AS DEADLY

You've heard of Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy. But have you heard of Amy Archer-Gilligan? Or Belle Gunness? Or Nannie Doss?

Women have committed some of the most disturbing serial killings ever seen in the United States. Yet scientific inquiry, criminal profiling, and public interest have focused more on their better-known male counterparts. As a result, female serial killers have been misunderstood, overlooked, and underestimated. In this riveting account, Dr. Marissa A. Harrison draws on original scientific research, various psychological perspectives, and richly detailed case studies to illuminate the stark differences between female and male serial killers' backgrounds, motives, and crimes. She also emphasizes the countless victims of this grisly phenomenon to capture the complexity and tragedy of serial murder. Meticulously weaving data-based evidence and insight with intimate storytelling, *Just as Deadly* reveals how and why these women murder – and why they often get away with it.

Dr. Marissa A. Harrison is a research psychologist, author, and professor at Penn State Harrisburg. Her studies on serial murder and human sexuality have been covered in popular media such as *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *Time*.

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Marissa A. Harrison
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“Dr. Harrison has clearly demonstrated her expertise on female serial killers. Her seminal work will stand the test of time, scrutiny, and reliability. Her scholarship, insightful analysis, and penchant for detail make this book the best on the market. Excellent reading for those interested in why and how women become serial killers.”

Dr. Eric W. Hickey, author of *Serial Murderers and their Victims, 7th Edition*

“Dr. Harrison’s masterfully crafted book is a comprehensive, engaging, and thought-provoking insight into female serial homicide. Through the interesting case studies provided, the reader gets an in-depth understanding of the factors that can contribute to serial homicide in females.”

Dr. Clare S. Allely, author of *The Psychology of Extreme Violence*

“Fascinating, ground-breaking, and long overdue. Harrison fills the inexcusable gap in the serial murder literature with her own original research on female killers, in what is sure to become a seminal work in criminology. A must-read.”

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“There are countless books on male serial killers but very little on female serial killers. Using a range of perspectives, Dr. Harrison’s book corrects this deficiency and documents the similarities and differences between male and female killers. Highly accessible, extensively researched, and valuable to professional and lay reader alike.”

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Enzo Yaksic, author of *Killer Data: Modern Perspectives on Serial Murder*

Just as
Deadly
*The Psychology
of Female
Serial Killers*

Marissa A.
Harrison

Pennsylvania State University



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This book is dedicated to Kenneth Cutting, Dora Beebe,
June Roberts, Chelsea McClellan, Bert Montoya, Tami Lynne
Tinning, Linda Slawson, Josephine Otero, Dolores Davis, and
George Shaw, and all the victims and their loved ones.

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Preface

Late one night in 2015, I received an email from Sarah Kaplan, a reporter writing for *The Washington Post*. She had written around 11:00 p.m. asking if we could connect before 4:00 a.m. the next morning. She had read an academic paper about female serial killers in the United States that I had recently published in *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, and she wanted to talk about my findings.

As a professor just doing her job, I was surprised, but grateful someone had actually read my research. And I was still awake, so I emailed her back around 2:00 a.m., ready to talk even at that late hour. My phone rang instantly. When I answered, I believe I said something to the effect of, “Wow, it really is you . . .” Reading the impactful journalism that resulted from our conversation was one of the first times I realized just how much interest there is in the topic of serial murder.¹ Then, a few months later, I did an interview with journalist Emily Anthes that appeared in her *New Yorker* piece, “Lady Killers.”² That’s when I really knew how eager people are to learn about the who, what, why, where, and how of serial murder.

I did not set out in my career to study murder or serial murder, per se. Academic psychologists and psychology students are interested in exploring the many facets of human behavior and mental processes, and I am an evolutionary psychologist with a degree in biopsychology (now frequently called “behavioral neuroscience”). My research has typically

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focused on male-female differences in sexual psychology that stem from the vast differences in reproductive biology. My research interests have included attraction, kissing, and declaring love. When I started in this field, I did not foresee a path of research geared at understanding women who perpetrate cruel and barbaric murders of innocent people – killers whom researchers have called “sadistic human beings devoid of empathy, morality or conscience.”³

So, how did I end up pursuing this line of study? Years ago, my friend, colleague, and licensed psychologist Tom Bowers of Penn State Harrisburg was studying mass murder with his clinical research team. Since all behaviors and mental processes can be viewed through an evolutionary psychological lens, I partnered with him (i.e., invited myself into the project because it was so interesting) to collect data and analyze reported triggers for mass murder. We found that almost all mass murders in our sample were perpetrated by men triggered by a status threat.⁴ Men went on a murderous rampage because of job loss, economic loss, and being bullied. Read from an evolutionary standpoint, this makes sense. A threat to – or loss of – status would have had profound reproductive consequences for males in our ancestral environment (i.e., over millions of years of human evolution). We are not, of course, saying that people evolved to kill large numbers of helpless victims. Rather, we attempted to explain the evolved psychological forces that may have played a part in creating such unbridled rage with such tragic results.

At the time, I had a student named Erin Murphy taking several psychology courses with me. She was, as I recall, both a criminal justice and a psychology major. Since she knew I was on a team studying murder, she approached me and asked if I would do an independent study with her on serial murder. I said “okay!” with no hesitation.

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The topic was immediately interesting, and Erin, a top student who demonstrated diligence and commitment, was the first to tell me about the paucity of research on female serial killers. When I investigated the topic myself, I corroborated her conclusion. With Tom and Erin's help, I designed a project to collect data about female serial killers who committed their crimes in the United States. Because of the marked lack of empirical (original) research on the topic, we attempted to fill in knowledge gaps by collecting broad data on demographics, background experiences, crimes, motives, and victims. Moreover, we attempted to examine mental health issues, which had been largely ignored in previous female serial murder literature. Because I am not a clinical psychologist, I brought two additional people on board to help interpret and present the mental health issues we found reported in female serial killers: a fantastic M.A. clinical psychology student, Lavina Ho (now a Ph.D. student who will likely graduate by the time of press), and Claire Flaherty, a clinician and licensed psychologist from the Penn State Hershey College of Medicine.

A testament to people's interest in serial killers, it was striking how detailed Erin's fellow psychology students wanted her reports to be when updating our undergraduate research class about her findings. Because this was a general, nomothetic endeavor, we were aiming to document aggregate data and present averages and frequencies. Still, my bright, dedicated, and very curious students wanted to hear all the details, as horrific and disturbing as they were. I recall Erin vividly presenting murder cases with methods ranging from poisoning to fire, and about victims ranging from infants to the elderly. The listeners hung on every word and asked for more, at times even prompting Erin to ask, "Are you sure?" In one instance, when the students pressed for more information, Erin described burning bodies. The students recoiled

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and literally yelped in horror. One said, “I can’t unhear that!” And yet they always asked for more.

Why is this topic so interesting? It occurred to me that, viewing interest in murder through an evolutionary lens, it is perhaps adaptive – conducive to survival and thus reproduction – to attend to, learn about, and understand damaging and deadly behavior so you yourself can avoid it. What is interesting to us outright (in evolutionary terms, our *proximate* motivation) might be serving an unconscious, evolved survival mechanism (our *ultimate* motivation). Psychologists have studied this phenomenon, called *morbid curiosity*,⁵ noting humans’ strong tendency to attune to negative and even disastrous events. Subsequent to my work with Erin, I worked with M.A. clinical psychology student Erika Frederick (who has since graduated), studying morbid curiosity in relation to interest in serial murder so that we could better understand this phenomenon.⁶ As a result, in addition to talking about serial murderer psychology, this book talks about the psychology of interest in serial murder.

It remains puzzling why there is a decided lack of research, particularly empirical endeavors, regarding female serial killers – a point I stress throughout this book. Perhaps this trend reflects the fact that serial murder itself is rare. Although a challenging task, Garry Rodgers, a retired forensic coroner and homicide investigator, estimated the probability of being murdered by a serial killer in North America as .0004%.⁷ Rodgers emphasized that you would have a better chance of winning the lottery than encountering someone like Ted Bundy. Moreover, among serial murderers, only about one in six are female, mirroring overall homicide trends.⁸ Going from this, we can estimate you have about a .000067% chance of being the victim of a female serial killer.

Yet, as of this writing, fewer than one in six legitimate research papers and books on serial murder are about female

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serial killers. Almost all research investigates male serial killing. While there are far more male serial killers documented, the scientific examination of female serial killers is still disproportionately less frequent. I cannot with certainty explain why this is, although I discuss several reasons why it might be, including a societal perception that women ought to be nurturing and are therefore incapable of such heinous crimes. Indeed, I will bet that you have heard of Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez, and that you can even recount at least some of the nature and circumstances of their crimes.

But have you heard of Amy Archer-Gilligan?

§

Amy Archer-Gilligan was a serial killer. She was lauded for opening and running what can be considered one of the first nursing homes in the United States. Most patients who chose to live in her facility in Connecticut were elderly men who, in exchange for lifetime care, paid a lump sum of money or a weekly fee. On May 8, 1916, Archer-Gilligan was arrested. The following day, the *Hartford Courant*, a renowned Connecticut newspaper, ran the front-page story: “Police Believe Archer Home for Aged a Murder Factory.”⁹

It was the keen investigative work of *Hartford Courant* journalist Aubrey Maddock that brought Archer-Gilligan’s crimes to light. Maddock was the first to uncover the statistical improbability of so many deaths occurring under Archer-Gilligan’s care – 64 since the home had opened, and 48 occurring between 1907 and 1916. These were exceedingly high numbers considering the home’s limited capacity.¹⁰ Knowing that arsenic had been found in the exhumed bodies of victims, Maddock traced Archer-Gilligan’s purchases. Arsenic poisoning creates widespread organ failure and is a painful, gruesome way to die, and Maddock discovered that Archer-Gilligan had bought a large amount of arsenic from

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Mason's Drug Store in Windsor, Connecticut, just before each death.¹¹ She had also bought a lot of morphine, which I will talk about later. Maddock brought his findings to the police, resulting in her arrest.¹²

It was estimated Amy Archer-Gilligan killed at least 20 elderly and infirm people. Moreover, she had somehow gotten named as the beneficiary of their life insurance and other resources. Investigators also found that she had obtained loans from victims right before they died, and that she had suspiciously withdrawn money from their bank accounts. Her victims included some who had died shortly after paying a substantial boarding fee for long-term care in her home.

Due to legal entanglements involved with presenting all the evidence, the prosecution decided to try Archer-Gilligan for the murder of Franklin Andrews only. In court, she defended herself, saying, "Of course a large number of the inmates died. Most of them were old and feeble when they came under my care."¹³ But her logic did not hold, considering the evidence: the statistical improbability of so many people dying in such a short time in her care; her purchase of a large amount of arsenic; the fact that arsenic was found in the victims' remains; and the fact that she benefited from their deaths. On July 14, 1917, she was convicted on one count of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.¹⁴ Wearing a black dress and a mourning veil, she sunk into her chair and wept as she heard the sentence. As she was led out of the courthouse, she reportedly clung to her daughter, moaning "Oh, Mary, my darling child!" over and over between convulsive sobs.¹⁵

On appeal, Archer-Gilligan was awarded a new trial due to errors made in the first. This time, in July 1919, she pleaded guilty and the sentence was changed to life in prison.¹⁶ In 1924, she was declared insane and was committed to the State Hospital at Middletown, Connecticut, where she remained for the rest of her life.¹⁷ Archer-Gilligan died of old age at

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Connecticut Valley Hospital on April 23, 1962, at about age 91, but her murderous deeds were memorialized forever in the popular play *Arsenic and Old Lace*.¹⁸

In a story about Amy Archer-Gilligan, in 1919, *The Daily Arkansas Gazette* asked, “Do women commit cold-blooded murder? Do women kill, as countless men in every age and clime have killed . . . with calm premeditation?” *The Gazette* added, “It can be demonstrated by mere adduction of fact that women kill just as men kill, or as other animals, male and female, kill.”¹⁹ This statement from more than 100 years ago speaks precisely to the purpose of this book.

§

Throughout the following chapters, I infuse case studies of female serial killers to illustrate themes such as background factors, victim characteristics, and mental health. I also include a few case studies of male serial killers to illustrate discussion points. For the cases I highlight, I have assembled the facts myself from publicly available, original sources. For some, I report directly what clinicians or criminologists have stated, with appropriate attribution. From my interactions with students, colleagues, and general audiences, I understand they expect these details when reading or hearing about serial killings. Hearing a name, the details of the crime, who the victims were and how they died, and conjecturing on an individual’s murderous motives all hammer home the terrifying reality.

Yet I would be remiss if I did not emphasize that, in psychological research, we who engage in nomothetic research (i.e., studying large samples of people to create generalized understanding) have an ethical imperative, and make great efforts, to protect the identity of participants.²⁰ In my research papers, for example, even though we have analyzed information available to the public, I do not provide the names of serial killers whose data we used to create our reports. However, we do our

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best in every project to describe our exact methodology so the results can be replicated if desired. Stated another way, if you replicate our methods you are going to find the same cases we did to include in your own research.

Furthermore, giving the name of a killer might reinforce the notoriety they may have sought through their crimes. As information-age scholar David Brin said in his appeal to the media, “Killers want notoriety. Let’s not give it to them.”²¹ Nonetheless, I validate that, for plausible psychological reasons I describe later, many readers genuinely wish to hear real-world case studies of serial murderers and their victims, not just statistics. Accordingly, I offer the disclaimer that the cases presented in this book may or may not have been included in our collective data.

This book is a science-based endeavor reporting on female serial killer psychology and crimes. For case studies, I always consulted primary sources and have provided links to them in notes. I gathered the information presented herein from various valid, reputable sources accessible via the internet, such as the Associated Press, newspaper archives, national and local news websites, historical societies, court documents, censuses, and marriage and death records. Where I describe previous research derived from academic sources or data-based or reference-based books in the field, I provide abbreviated notes; there is a References section at the back of the book, complete with academic source information.

At no point in the research or writing of this book did I draw from other college’s databases, internet blogs, student projects, or opinion or nonprofessional posts. Unfortunately, in my many years of serial murder research, I have encountered too many books and blogs that provide no sources for their information. Similarly, some pieces appearing in popular blogs have taken data from my own work and presented it as their own or misattributed my findings to others. The

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information in this book is derived from empirical data, and the findings have been published in reputable, peer-reviewed scientific journals. To use someone else's data without citing them is not good science or form. To present cases without citations is just storytelling and may perpetuate myths. This book is based on science. We psychological scientists are empirical and practical, and we take critical care to attribute findings accurately to others.

The information provided in this book, unless otherwise specified, is about female serial killers who committed their crimes in the United States. It is possible that these descriptions do not apply to women who committed serial murder outside the USA, but, in a contemporary sample, I believe that one would find similar demographics, means, motives, and victims outside this country. This is an empirical question. To understand the topic more fully and accurately, future endeavors should explore female-perpetrated serial murder in other Westernized and non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) cultures.²²

As you will find in the pages to come, I do not interview, otherwise interact with, or diagnose those with psychological conditions or those who have committed crimes. Serial murder is rare, and gaining access to interview serial murderers is exceedingly difficult. So I am quite happy to have been a data wrangler for well over 20 years. Moreover, I am a science writer, and more than 20 years ago I had to scrap any ambitions of crafting artful articulations in my writing endeavors. I do not purport to write in an eloquent style like the gifted Stephen King or Nancy Gibbs (a shout-out to two of my favorite writers). You will not get details about a dark and stormy night where the merciless butcher (insert dramaturgy here). I report just the facts. The reader's imagination can take it from there.

In all my years of exploring this disturbing topic, however, I have never become desensitized to the sheer awfulness of

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planned murder. Rather, I have become more sensitized. Reading about and studying these crimes is jarring. The murder of anyone is horrible; these crimes usually involve the deaths of people who are very young, very old, or helpless. These victims suffered horribly and unnecessarily. Documenting these crimes can take a toll on any author. After I wrote the description of violent serial killer Dana Sue Gray's crimes and elderly victims for this book, I had to take the remainder of the day off. The same thing happened when I wrote about baby Chelsea McClellan, who was killed by serial killer Genene Jones and whose mother Petti McClellan-Wiese became a fierce advocate for murder victims. The murdering women whose stories appear in this book often brutally killed people who trusted them, with many victims incapable of fighting back.

The most common motive of female serial killers is monetary gain. What is the price of a life? According to Amy Archer-Gilligan in the early 1900s, the price of a life was a few thousand dollars in boarding fees or insurance money. Apparently, she deemed that it was worth poisoning older, often lonely people with arsenic.²³ Arsenic poisoning is cruel. It causes pernicious vomiting, severe diarrhea, kidney failure, encephalopathy (disease of the brain), multisystem failure, and death.²⁴ Her victims suffered before they died. That is not something one can get used to reading or writing about.

In the pages that follow, I stress that female serial killers are among us and can murder as many victims and just as cruelly as any male serial killer. I extend the caveat that the information herein is disturbing, but I endeavor to guess the reader is well aware of that fact. I present descriptive information on female serial killers, a comparison of the crimes of female and male serial killers, and my take, from an evolutionary point of view, on why people might find this phenomenon so fascinating. I also cover traumagenic and other psychological

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perspectives where I derived them from evidence-based literature. If we document incidents, patterns, antecedents, and consequences of serial murder and view the phenomenon through various psychological lenses, we increase the chance of prevention, or at least early detection.

We do not yet understand serial murder fully. But we do understand for a fact that women can be just as deadly as men.

You're the monster no one sees coming.

– US District Judge Thomas Kleeh to
Reta Mays, convicted serial killer and former
nursing assistant, at her sentencing for
murdering seven elderly veterans in her care.¹