

Serial Murder, Social Memory and Contemporary Imagination

James Sheptycki dissects the self-mythologising memoirs of a serial killer.

Serial killing and serial killers seemingly occupy a central place in social memory and contemporary imagination. Many books, films and other artefacts relating to the phenomenon litter our cultural landscape and that is why, in casual conversation, criminologists are frequently asked questions about the topic. Just such an artefact, a book entitled *The Gates of Janus*, came recently to me. Subtitled 'serial killing and its analysis' and penned by 'the Moors Murderer' Ian Brady, it is the kind of book that is bound to pique the curiosity of potential students of criminology and may therefore be the source of many questions. A few observations here then, putting this account into a criminological context.

It is worth pausing to recognise that the book has, as it were, 'multiple voices'. The introduction is provided by Colin Wilson, who in addition to having published a number of books in the occult and true crime genres (also under the Feral imprint) had a long-term correspondence with the imprisoned Brady. The afterword, penned by Peter Sotos (a contributor to the Feral House book *Apocalypse Culture II*, a digest on conspiracy theories) draws on what is known from the trial evidence of the forensic details of the Moors Murders. The latter manifests fascination with the fetishisation of sex and death. It is the pornography of violence and the violence of pornography. The book is set in context in a forward by Dr. Alan Knightley.

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Brady sought to glamorise the logic of the Maquis de Sade in the setting of late 20th century England, though his reality was more seedy. As an individual Brady was both banal and extraordinary, but the crimes he committed were real. Ian Brady and Myra Hindley were jailed for life in 1966 for the murders of Lesley Ann Downey (aged 10) and Edward Evans (aged 17). At that time Brady was also jailed for the murder of John Kilbride (aged 12). In 1987 the pair confessed to killing Pauline Reade (aged 16) – whose body was subsequently recovered on Saddleworth Moor, Lancaster, and 12-year old Keith Bennett, whose body has never been found. The story of these children and their families has been overshadowed in cultural memory by the story – or, more accurately, the multiple stories – of those who killed them.

The Gates of Janus was published in 2001 by Feral House, of Los Angeles, California. It came into my hands late in 2002 at which time Myra Hindley was dying after 36 years in prison. Brady himself was demanding the right to die and on long term hunger strike in Ashworth Special Hospital, Merseyside, stabilised on a nasal drip. The intertwined life stories of the two, the psychological journey of their relationship (from obsession to hatred), their joint career as murderers and child sex abusers and their (much longer) subsequent careers as the incarcerated personification of pure folk devilry was slowly coming to a close. It is possible to read this book as Brady's parting shot. Indeed, a letter from Brady written not long before the book's publication is quoted in the introduction. It says, in part, "My life is over, so I can afford honesty of expression; those with a future cannot. If I had my time over again, I'd get a government job and live off the state . . . a pillar of society. As it is, I am eager to die. I chose the wrong path and am finished".

Knightley refers to *les intellectuels* from Dostoevsky to Wittgenstein before noting that "perhaps it will require another serial killer to recognise the paradoxical wisdom of these pages".

Each voice has its different focus and surface of meaning, but they converge on one point; that the existence of evil, the corruption of society, the apparent omnipresence of power relations that set the strong against the weak, create a situation so devoid of meaning that murder is justifiable. Criminality is excused on the grounds that society commits all kinds of crimes under a cloak of legality. It is worth enquiring into the psycho-spiritual quagmire that such a view implies. It takes a little empathy for fellow human beings to dissolve all of this into nonsense.

Brady commences his own "serious discourse on murder" with a broadside against capitalism. On the first page of chapter one he lists Auschwitz and the bombing of Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Vietnam on the way to condemning "the few, the fittest", "the powerful, wealthy and influential [who] stay on top like oil slicks, by hereditament (sic), and oligarchy, rather than merit". It is easy to dismiss this as an attempt to neutralise blame; but it is more than that. It is a first move in a series of non sequiturs that leads to an astonishing statement. Brady ends part one of the book by professing that if he were "constrained to classify the book's intent" he would be "forced to resort to sporting terms".

The book is, in his estimation, "a modest manual for helping to track and capture the greatest and most dangerous animal in existence: the human predator". What follows in part two of the book is quite detailed case studies of eleven notorious serial killers, including John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas, and Peter Sutcliffe. These emphasise factual accuracy in the creation of a pantheon of neo-Sadeans for Brady to coexist alongside.



Julie Grogan

There is not the space here to analyse these matters in detail, but a suggestive way to interpret them is in terms of gender stereotyping. It is possible to find in the pages of this book reference to a strict hierarchy of masculine and feminine role-types. On this view there are the “king rats”, who are: “those who dominate the dominators”, for example, Napoleon and Hitler, but there is also the more socially acceptable Beethoven and Wagner. Below these rare Nietzschean supermen are “the top five percent” and below this, presumably, are the mass of “ordinary men”. Women are also seen to fall into three “dominance groups” – high, medium and low. The high dominance women are seen to constitute five percent of female population, are sexually promiscuous and “inclined towards experimentation”. Medium dominance women, the largest group, are seen to be seeking a good husband, father and provider, and high dominance males scare them. Lastly, low dominance women are seen not to care for sex, prefer distant relationships with men and are terrified of high dominance males. All three female role-types ultimately are viewed as requiring a male somewhat more dominant than themselves. Brady’s own self-definition placed him near the top of the stakes. In another letter to Wilson he betrayed that he “always had the sense of seeing far and deep, and had contempt for those who couldn’t”. Of course, this is not a balanced world-view, and its details seem dated, but imagine for a moment the psychic pressure of trying to live up to it.

The long story of the Moors Murderers connects with social memory and imagination through its personification of culturally confining, controlling, and conflicting gender-role stereotypes. Gender and dominance; the conflicts thus established ramify out in all directions. Serial killing is a term that gains its resonance at least partly because of these ideas. Far from being symptomatic of a psycho-spiritual and philosophical quagmire,

Ian Brady’s and Myra Hindley’s life stories conform to a rigid, risible gender system, tragic in its consequences.

Here we come up against everyday violence, as commonplace as it is damaging. Perhaps when asked about serial killers who are sensationalised in popular culture, criminologists should lead the conversation to the prosaic reality which created these individuals. ■

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Other essays by the author on related topics include:

‘Review of Contemporary Perspectives on Serial Murder’ *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 39 No. 2, Spring 1999 pp. 322-328.

‘Reflections on the Transnationalisation of Policing; The Case of the RCMP and Serial Killers’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, March 1998, Vol 26, pp. 17-34.

‘Upholding the Boundaries of Order; The Mounties, Serial Sex Crime and the Transnational Pursuit of Serial Killers’, *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 12 No. 2, 1997, pp. 257-272.

‘Rapacious Bluebeards and Chivalrous Knights; a sociolinguistic view of policing woman battering’ *Edinburgh: New Waverley Papers*, Politics Series 95/3 June 1995, (ISBN 0902957 07 4) 25 pages.

‘Review of Serial Murder; An Elusive Phenomenon’, *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 33 No. 1 Winter 1993 pp. 103-108.