

Three Reasons Why People Are Fascinated by Serial Killers

I binge watch crime shows. My roommate is responsible. She got me to watch three episodes of CBS' "Criminal Minds," and I was hooked.

Recently, I saw Netflix's "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile," a portrayal of Ted Bundy's life through his girlfriend's eyes. I also watched Netflix's "Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes," which was released on January 24, 2019, the 30th anniversary of Bundy's execution.

Ever since I started my crime binge, I constantly ask myself why I watch these shows.

Why would a young, 20-something year old woman want to give herself nightmares about unimaginably heinous things that happen to people exactly like her? What good is there in watching these brutal crimes played out in real time – for the sake of enjoyment? And why are people so interested in serial killers particularly?

As I attempted to answer this question, I found what I consider to be the three main reasons.

1. To Understand What They Cannot Comprehend

Scott Bonn, Ph.D., a criminologist and author of [Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers](#), suggests several reasons.

In a *Psychology Today* [article](#), he emphasizes that the crimes of serial killers are random and unmotivated, which not only makes them interesting but forces us to "question our safety

and security.” Because the crimes are random, a serial killer “makes anyone a potential victim.” And because they don’t have motive, people “cannot understand [them] and feel compelled to.”

2. To Prepare for the Worst

The executive producer of “Criminal Minds,” Erica Messner, [said in an interview](#) that she has “received a number of letters from fans who’ve said they knew what to do in a dangerous situation because they watch the show.”

Even though the chance of coming into contact with a serial killer or being in a situation akin to a scene on “Criminal Minds” is slim, the crimes they portray are so horrific that they are impossible to forget.

Thus, it makes sense that people would, as Dr. Bonn says, feel compelled to understand them. The old adage, “Better the devil you know than the devil you don’t,” is a reasonable truth. The less foreign these killers become, the less scary they seem. Though the shows stir up fear in the viewers, they simultaneously quell it.

3. To Know that Evil Does Not Triumph in the End

Though not a contemporary of Bonn and Messner, G.K. Chesterton provides further insight into the fascination surrounding serial killers today. In “The Red Angel” in his book [Tremendous Trifles](#), Chesterton too writes about quelling fear and the importance of fiction:

“Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear... fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. ... What fairy tales give the child

is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."

These shows with serial killer antagonists have the characteristics of a fairy tale, even if children aren't the ones watching them. And Chesterton is right – no one hears about serial killers by watching the shows. They're a well-known phenomenon in our society. The shows signal to the viewers that this type of "extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile" crime is indeed real, but not unstoppable.

So, why are people like my roommate and I so easily hooked on serial killer dramas?

A small part of it is sheer curiosity, and an even smaller part is that we hope to gain more knowledge to keep ourselves safe. But the biggest part – the part that keeps us clicking the "Are you still watching?" button on Netflix after 2 A.M. – is that we, like everyone else in America right now, need a reminder that there is still a St. George to kill even the worst dragons.

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