

## Only Some Are Serial Killers by Tucker Lieberman

A psychopath, also known as a sociopath, will take your money if it makes their day easier, malign your reputation if they find it amusing, or put a bullet in your head if you stand in their way. They lack the emotionally-laden, innate moral brakes on their behavior that we think of as “conscience.” Some are content to exist as neighborhood busybodies spooking cats out of their yards, but those with intelligence and ambition can be quite dangerous.

The unsettling behavior, believed to be mostly genetically determined, starts in early childhood. Psychopaths are the kids who seek cruel thrills like torturing animals or pimping out their siblings. Easily bored, they aren’t likely to form relationships, stick with school, or hold jobs. Even heroic parenting and positive cultural influence may only dampen these instincts. Psychiatric pills and electroshock therapy will not help, since there is nothing specifically wrong with psychopaths’ brains. (By definition, they are not psychotic; that is, their evil acts are not driven by delusions, but are acts of logic and free will.) Talk therapy will not work either, because they don’t believe they are sick, and they do not wish to change their behavior. They don’t want to “feel” or “connect”; they want to manipulate and win.

Surprisingly, only a few will go on to be serial killers. Martha Stout in *The Sociopath Next Door* (2005) suggests that the “noncorrectable disfigurement of character” called psychopathy afflicts as many as 4 percent of all Americans. This implies that millions of Americans lack basic moral emotions and must fake their way through social interactions that assume the involvement of such emotions. Yet Robert Hare, in his book *Without Conscience* (1993), pointed out that there are “probably fewer than one hundred” serial killers in North America. One must conclude that most psychopaths are motivated by things other than torture and killing for their own sake—things like sex, money, or power—although they might not hesitate to kill to achieve those other goals.

To some extent, the psychopathic character is uncomfortably recognizable and needs no introduction. Many have interacted at some point with a compulsive liar or manipulator; others have grappled with similar tendencies within themselves. (The paradox of the latter is that, if you fear you are a full-fledged psychopath, you ought to fear it not: real psychopaths don’t lose sleep contemplating the ethical implications of their nature.) Despite the prevalence of these traits, there is a deep reluctance, and in some cases perhaps a taboo, to acknowledge them for what they are. Few people will rush to brand someone else as irredeemably corrupt. Instead, the default is to rationalize their behavior as if they must have a conscience that is only temporarily suppressed, for example by speculating that “he must be under a lot of stress to have publicly insulted his wife,” “she must not have carefully weighed the ramifications of submitting someone else’s term paper,” or “that guy accidentally stepped on my foot.” The plainer fact is that some people cheat, lie, steal and betray quite on purpose.

Formal diagnoses are made with the standard questionnaire known as the “Psychopath Checklist” developed by Hare in the early 1990s. In a recent episode of

the radio show "This American Life," Hare described himself as "ambivalent" about how the checklist is sometimes used today by the corrections system to keep psychopaths in jail longer. On the one hand, psychopathic individuals are more likely to reoffend. It serves a social good to identify them so that their damage can be contained; that's why Hare developed the checklist. (When he worked as a prison psychologist, an inmate working in the auto shop cut the brakes on his car.) On the other hand, the test is imperfect and subjectively applied, and no test can predict a single individual's future with certainty. Presumptively, psychopaths, too, have the right to be judged based on what they've actually done, not on what others fear they might do.

Hare and Stout's books have similar aims: to educate normal people how to avoid those without conscience. Break their "tetanizing," predatory gaze; don't pity their "crocodile tears"; don't let them "gaslight" you into believing you're crazy, as Stout phrases it. This is pragmatic survival information.

It's always more pleasant to encounter a psychopath in fiction, where they are infinitely safer and especially familiar. Memorable child psychopaths include an eight-year-old girl in William March's *The Bad Seed* (1954) and young adolescents in Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* (2003), Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006), and William Landay's *Defending Jacob* (2012). Satanic worship produces psychopathic behavior in adults in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). Similar demonic influences plague many of Stephen King's characters, beginning with his first novel, *Carrie* (1974). The classic "deal with the devil" usually implies a willingness to use other people for selfish ends, buoyed by a misguided sense that, in doing so, one is "winning" the game of life. The characters of robots and zombies, too, are often based upon human psychopaths: self-interested logic without empathy.

Finally, real-life psychopaths are interesting on an abstract level, insofar as the examination of disordered behavior provokes attention and insight into everyday behavior that we might otherwise take for granted. Everyday life, for most people, involves a thousand tiny acts of altruism and honesty—generally on autopilot. Why do "conscience-bound" people express no desire to be freed from our consciences, Stout asks; why don't we envy psychopaths? Because, she writes, "conscience grants little bits of meaning to our normal and spontaneous day-to-day interactions with everyone and everything around us." In the end, those social bonds confer not only meaning, but material strength, which is why evolution seems to have favored the conscience-bound, not the psychopaths among us.