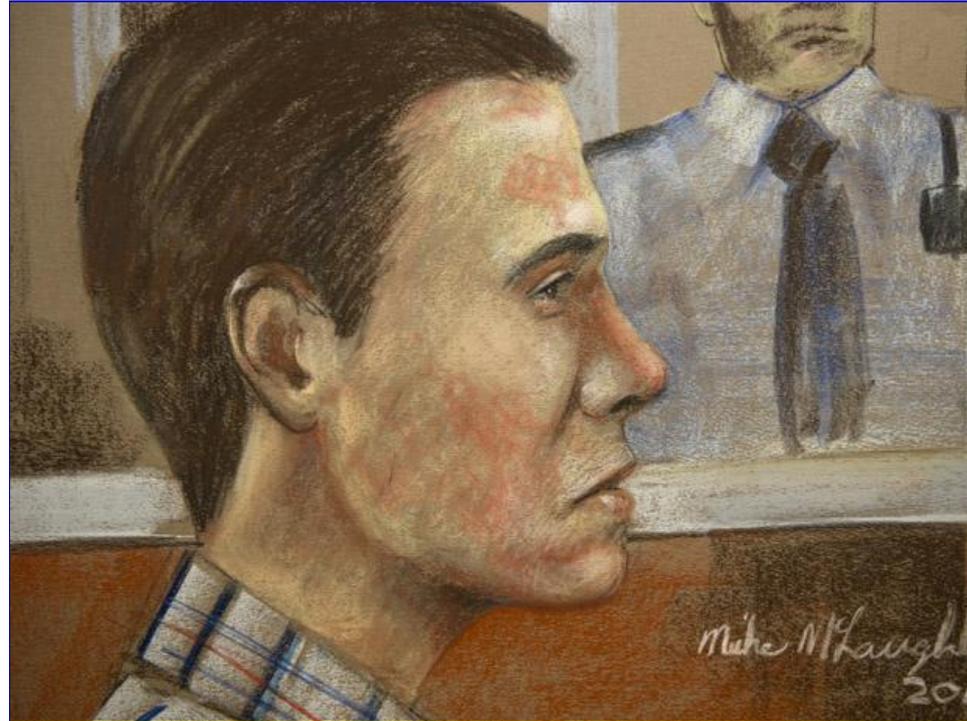


Barbara Kay: Psychopaths — and the women (and men) who love them

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Mike McLaughlin/ THE CANADIAN PRESS

Luka Magnotta, the Montreal suspect in a gruesome dismemberment- murder of Lin Jun, is seen in court in an artist drawing Thursday, June 21, 2012 in Montreal.

The head of Jun Lin, the dismembered and defiled victim of alleged killer Luka Magnotta, was discovered a few days ago in a Montreal park.

This exceptional case — it is unusual for killers to advertise their murders in a YouTube video — has naturally sparked keen interest in those who study psychopathy, a phenomenon that does more damage than all other psychiatric disorders put together.

What causes psychopathy: nature or nurture? Experts are divided. Just- deceased UN welfare officer Gitta Serenyi, who worked with child prisoners at Dachau, devoted herself to the study of evil, leaning toward the nurture perspective. She wrote books based on extensive interviews with notorious murderers Mary Bell, an 11- year- old girl who strangled two children, and empathy- void Franz Stangl, a concentration- camp commander who oversaw the gassing of Jews, speaking of them as “cargo.” Bell had suffered appalling abuse from her mother, and Stangl was the product of a violent father and the sadistic culture of the Austrian police force.

By contrast, a recent, quite chilling article in The New York Times — “Can you call a nine- year old a psychopath?” — leans toward nature as the culprit. The article explores the nascent field of treatment for children (of otherwise ordinary, non- abusing families with normal siblings) who exhibit psychopathic tendencies, such as constant shameless lying, manipulativeness and a callous, unemotional affect.

These “bad seeds,” as they were called in my day — unloving, unlovable, dangerous — are a nightmare for parents. One child under review had pushed another child into a pool and calmly watched her drowning out of detached interest. Another cut off the family cat’s tail piece by piece over a period of weeks, proudly claiming he was laying the groundwork for a career in science. So far behaviour modification treatment has had only limited success with such children.

In a riveting new novel, *Defending Jacob*, about a teen with a history of psychopathy- related traits, who may or may not have murdered a school peer, the author, former district attorney William Landay, uses fact- based dialogues with a consulting forensic psychiatrist — featuring locutions such as “Reactive Detachment Disorder,” “alleles” and the “serotonin transporter gene located on chromosome 17” — to build the case for a “murder gene.”

Psychopaths are estimated to make up about 1% of the population. Many end up in prison (15%-25% of the prison population) for all manner of crimes, including murder, but few are true monsters of legendary evil like Hannibal Lechter.

Because I can’t fathom what goes on in the heads of psychopaths — they’re so abnormal they’re like another species to me — I am in a way much more troubled by people who seem normal in most respects, but find themselves sympathetically, even erotically drawn to psychopaths.

There are websites in support of Magnotta, for example, like a Facebook group with almost 1,400 members. In another group, members seek information on how to write or visit Magnotta in his Quebec detention centre. Saskatoon resident Destiny St. Denis, 21, the “Support Luka Magnotta” page administrator, claims to have watched Magnotta’s “1 Lunatic, 1 Ice Pick” video over 20 times: “I liked it. He is inspirational because he is not afraid to be himself.”

Inspirational? What fresh social hell is this? Well, not so fresh really, as it was ever thus. Jack the Ripper would have a Facebook fan page today. Serial killers always attract a coterie of women who find their hideous exploits arousing and who send flowers and write or visit them in prison. There’s even a name for their bizarre obsession: *hybristophilia*.

But the syndrome isn’t restricted to women. Some men are equally drawn to twisted minds and the heinous crimes they produce. The infamous Karla Homolka had her admirers. One married her. Truman Capote, author of *In Cold Blood*, the documentary novel of a cold- blooded Nebraska family killing, was erotically attracted to one of the killers he wrote about. Ian Barnard, who teaches Queer Studies at California State University (Northridge), confessed in an essay on cannibal- killer Jeffrey Dahmer: “I feel sorry for him. He played the clarinet. So do I. I am attracted to him, his voice, his glasses at his sentencing.”

Psychopathic killers are incarcerated, studied and treated. But what are we to make of these otherwise harmless, but creepy, fellow travelers who vaunt their attraction to psychopathic violence, who are titillated by their superficial likeness to perpetrators of stomach- turning violence and defilement? Are they too “disordered”? Are, if you dig deep enough, we all?

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