THE WISDOM OF PSYCHOPATHS

LESSONS IN LIFE FROM SAINTS, SPIES AND SERIAL KILLERS

KEVIN DUTTON

Author of *FLIPNOSIS*

Contents

About the Book

Psychopath. No sooner is the word said than images of murderers, rapists, suicide bombers and gangsters flash across our minds.

But unlike their box-office counterparts, not all psychopaths are violent, or even criminal. Far from it. In fact, they have a lot of good things going for them. Psychopaths are fearless, confident, charismatic, ruthless and focused – qualities tailor-made for success in twenty-first century society.

In this groundbreaking adventure into the world of psychopaths, renowned psychologist Kevin Dutton reveals that there is a ‘scale of madness’ along which we all sit. Incorporating the latest advances in brain scanning and neuroscience, he shows that there is a fine line separating a brilliant surgeon and a serial killer, illustrating the spectrum of psychopathy with some insightful and startling case studies.

The Wisdom of Psychopaths is an intellectual rollercoaster ride that combines original scientific research with bold on-the-ground reporting from secret monasteries, Special Forces training camps and rarefied psychopath wings of maximum-security hospitals. Provocative, engaging and surprising at every turn, *The Wisdom of Psychopaths* reveals a shocking truth: beneath the hype and the popular characterisation, psychopaths have something to teach us.

About the Author

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Also by Kevin Dutton

Flipnosis

The Wisdom of Psychopaths

Lessons in Life from Saints, Spies and Serial Killers

Kevin Dutton

WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.

– John Milton, Paradise Lost (1667), Book 1, lines 254–5

Preface

My old man was a psychopath. It seems a bit odd saying that now, looking back. But he was. No question. He was charming, fearless, ruthless (but never violent). And had about as much going on in the conscience department as a Jeffrey Dahmer coolbox. He didn't kill anyone. But he certainly made a few killings.

It's a good thing genes aren't everything, right?

My father also had an uncanny knack for getting exactly what he wanted. Often with just a casual throwaway line. Or a single telling gesture. People even used to say that he *looked* like Del Boy. Which he did. Not just acted like him, which he also did (he, too, was a market trader).

Only Fools and Horses was like a Dutton family video.

I once remember helping Dad flog a load of diaries at Petticoat Lane market, in London's East End. I was ten at the time, and it was a school day. The diaries in question were a collector's item. They only had eleven months.

'You can't sell these,' I protested. 'There's no January!'

'I know,' he said. 'That's why I forgot your birthday.'

'Unique opportunity to get your hands on an eleven-month diary, folks . . . sign up for a special two-for-one offer and get an extra month thrown in next year for free . . .'

We shifted the bloody lot.

I've always maintained that Dad was in possession of pretty much the ideal personality for modern living. I never once saw him panic. Never once saw him lose his cool. Never once saw him get hot under the collar about anything. And believe me, there were plenty of times when he might have.

‘They say that humans developed fear as a survival mechanism[1] to protect against predators,’ he once told me. ‘But you don’t see too many sabre-toothed tigers prowling round Elephant and Castle, now do you, boy?’

He was right. I certainly hadn’t seen any. There were a few snakes, maybe. But everyone knew who *they* were.

For a long time, growing up, I used to think of Dad’s bon mot as just another of his market-stall one-liners. Here today, gone tomorrow. A bit like a lot of the crap he used to flog, funnily enough. But now, years later, I realise that there was actually a deep biological truth to what the crafty old bugger was saying. In fact, he anticipated the position taken by modern evolutionary psychologists with uncanny, sublime precision. We humans, it appears, did indeed develop our fear response as a survival mechanism to protect against predators. Monkeys with lesions of the amygdala[2], for instance – the brain’s emotional sorting office – do very stupid things. Like trying to pick up cobras.

But millions of years on, in a world where wild animals aren’t lurking around every street corner, this fear system can be over-sensitive – like a nervous driver with their foot hovering constantly over the brake pedal – reacting to dangers that don’t actually exist, and pushing us into making illogical, irrational decisions.

‘There was no such thing as stock in the Pleistocene era[3],’ George Loewenstein, professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon, points out. ‘But human beings are pathologically risk averse. A lot of the mechanisms that drive our emotions aren’t really that well adapted to modern life.’

I prefer my dad’s version.

The observation that modern-day humans are pathologically risk averse does not, needless to say, mean that this has always been the case. In fact, it might even be argued that those of us today who are clinically risk averse – those of us, for instance, who suffer from chronic anxiety –

simply have too much of a good thing. During the time of our ancestors the existence of individuals who were hypervigilant to threat may well, evolutionary biologists suggest, have been decisive in the fight against predators – and from this point of view, anxiety would undoubtedly have served as a considerable adaptive advantage. The more sensitive you were to rustlings in the undergrowth the more likely you'd have been to have kept yourself, your family and your extended group members alive. Even today, anxious individuals are better than the rest of us[4] at detecting the presence of threat: slip an angry face in among a display of happy or neutral faces on a computer screen, and anxious people are far faster at picking it out than those who are non-anxious – not a bad ability to fall back on should you happen to find yourself alone at night and wandering around an unfamiliar neighbourhood. Being anxious can sometimes be useful.

The notion that mental disorder can occasionally come in handy, can sometimes confer extraordinary, outlandish advantages, as well as inordinate distress on its sufferers, is hardly new, of course. As the philosopher Aristotle observed more than 2,400 years ago, 'There was never a genius without a tincture of madness.' In most people's minds, this link between 'genius' and 'madness' is probably most apparent, thanks to the box-office success of the films *Rain Man* and *A Beautiful Mind*, when it comes to autism and schizophrenia. In his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*[5], the neurologist and psychiatrist Oliver Sacks reports a famous encounter with 'the twins'. Profoundly autistic, John and Michael, then twenty-six, were living in an institution. When a box of matches spilled onto the floor, both of them, simultaneously, called out '111'. As Sacks gathered up the matches, he started counting . . .

On a similar note, the well-worn stereotype of the brilliant but 'tortured artist' is also not without foundation. The painter Vincent van Gogh, the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and

the father of ‘game theory’ (of which more later) John Nash were all psychotic. Coincidence? Not according to Szabolcs Kéri, a researcher at Semmelweis University in Budapest, who appears to have uncovered a genetic polymorphism associated with both schizophrenia and creativity. Kéri has found that people with two copies of a particular single-letter DNA variation[6] in a gene called *neuregulin* 1, a variation which has been previously linked to psychosis – as well as poor memory and sensitivity to criticism – tend to score significantly higher on measures of creativity compared with individuals who have one or no copy of the variation. Those with one copy also tend to be more creative, on average, than those without.

Even depression has its advantages. Recent research suggests that despondency helps us think better – and contributes to increased attentiveness and enhanced problem-solving ability. In an ingenious experiment Joe Forgas,[7] professor of psychology at the University of New South Wales, placed a variety of trinkets, such as toy soldiers, plastic animals and miniature cars, near the checkout counter of a small stationery store in Sydney. As shoppers made their way out, Forgas tested their memory, asking them to list as many of the items as possible. But there was a catch. On some days the weather was rainy, and Forgas piped Verdi’s ‘Requiem’ through the store. On other days it was sunny, and shoppers were treated to a blast of Gilbert and Sullivan.

The results couldn’t have been clearer. Shoppers in the ‘low mood’ condition remembered nearly four times as many of the knick-knacks. The rain made them sad, and their sadness made them pay more attention.

Moral of the story? When the weather’s nice, be sure to check your change.

When you go down the road of disorders conferring advantages, of clouds, silver linings and psychological consolation prizes, it’s difficult to conceive of a condition

that *doesn't* pay off – at least in some from or another. Obsessive-compulsive? You're never going to leave the gas on. Paranoid? You'll never fall foul of the small print. In fact, fear and sadness – anxiety and depression – constitute two of the five basic emotions[fn1] that have evolved universally across cultures and that, as such, virtually all of us experience at some point in our lives. But there's one group of people who are the exception to the rule, who don't experience either – even under the most difficult and trying of circumstances. Psychopaths. A psychopath wouldn't worry even if he *had* left the gas on[8].[fn2] Any silver linings there?

Put this question to a psychopath and, more often than not, he'll look at you as if you're the one who's crazy. To a psychopath, you see, there are no such things as clouds. There are only silver linings. The fiendish observation that a year consists of twelve months, not eleven, might well, you would've thought, have put one hell of a kibosh on flogging those diaries. But not to my dad, it didn't. Quite the reverse, in fact. He saw it as a selling point.

He's certainly not alone. Nor, some might argue, too far off the mark. During the course of my research I've met a great many psychopaths from all walks of life – and not, for the record, just within my own family. Sure, behind closed doors I've encountered my fair share of Hannibal Lecters and Ted Bundys: remorseless, unconscionable A-listers who could dine at any psychopath table you care to mention without even picking up the phone – by just showing up. But I've also met psychopaths who, far from devouring society from within, serve, through nerveless poise and hard-as-nails decision-making, to protect and enrich it instead: surgeons, soldiers, spies, entrepreneurs – dare I say, even lawyers.

'Don't get too cocky. No matter how good you are. Don't let them see you coming,' counselled Al Pacino as the head attorney of a top law firm in the film *The Devil's Advocate*.

‘That’s the gaff, my friend – make yourself small. Be the hick. The cripple. The nerd. The leper. The freak. Look at me – I’ve been underestimated from day one.’ Pacino was playing the Devil. And, not surprisingly perhaps, hit the nail right on the head. If there’s one thing that psychopaths have in common, it’s the consummate ability to pass themselves off as normal everyday folk, while behind the façade – the brutal, brilliant disguise – beats the refrigerated heart of a ruthless, glacial predator.

As one hugely successful young attorney told me on the balcony of his penthouse apartment overlooking the Thames: ‘Deep inside me there’s a serial killer lurking somewhere. But I keep him amused with cocaine, Formula One, booty calls and coruscating cross-examination.’

Ever so slowly, I moved away from the edge.

This aerial encounter with the young lawyer (he later ran me back to my hotel down river in his speedboat) goes some way towards illustrating a theory I have about psychopaths: that one of the reasons we’re so fascinated by them is because we’re fascinated by illusions, by things that appear, on the surface, to be normal, yet that on closer examination turn out to be anything but. *Amyciaea lineatipes* is a species of arachnid that mimics the physical appearance of the ants on which it preys. Only when it is too late are its victims finally disabused of the notion that they’re good judges of character. Many people I’ve interviewed know exactly how that feels. And they, believe me, are the lucky ones.

Take a look at the picture below. How many footballs can you see? Six? Take another look. Still six? Turn to here and you’ll find the answer at the bottom.

This is what psychopaths are like. Outwardly personable, their charm, charisma and seamless psychological camouflage distract us from their ‘true colours’: the latent anomaly right in front of our eyes. Their intoxicating, hypnotic presence draws us inexorably in.

Yet psychopathy, as the Devil and his flamboyant London protégé just hinted, can also be good for us. At least in moderation. Like anxiety, depression and quite a few other psychological disorders, it can, at times, be adaptive. Psychopaths, as we shall discover, have a variety of attributes – personal magnetism and a genius for disguise being just the starter pack – which, once you know how to harness them and keep them in check, often confer considerable advantages not just in the workplace, but in everyday life in general. Psychopathy is like sunlight. Over-exposure can hasten one’s demise in grotesque, carcinogenic fashion. But regulated exposure at controlled and optimal levels can have a significant positive impact on well-being and quality of life.

In the pages that follow we’ll examine these attributes in detail. And learn how incorporating them into our own psychological skillset can dramatically transform our lives. Of course, it’s in no way my intention to glamorise the actions of psychopaths – certainly not the actions of dysfunctional psychopaths anyway. That would be like glamorising a cognitive melanoma: the malignant

machinations of cancer of the personality. But there's evidence to suggest that psychopathy, in small doses at least, is personality with a tan. And that it can have surprising benefits.

I've witnessed a few first-hand. As the years rolled by, and he retired from the markets, the gods didn't look too favourably on Dad. (Though it wasn't as if he was picky: figurines of Buddhas, Muhammads, Sacred Hearts, Virgin Marys . . . they'd all done their time in the back of his three-wheeler van.) He got Parkinson's – and went, in a frighteningly short space of time, from someone who could pack up a suitcase in ten seconds flat (an ability which had come in handy surprisingly often), to someone who couldn't even stand without an aide on either arm ('In the old days, they used to be coppers,' he would say).

But his finest moment undoubtedly occurred posthumously. At least, it was after he died that it came to my attention. One evening, not long after the funeral, I was going through his things when I chanced upon a volume of handwritten notes in a drawer. The notes had been penned by a succession of the various carers who'd looked after Dad over the previous few months (he'd managed, against the advice of pretty much everyone, to stick it out at home), and amounted, I suppose, to a kind of care 'diary'.

The first thing I remember that struck me about the diary was how neat and painstakingly detailed the entries were. Unmistakably female, the handwriting catwalked voluptuously across the page, modestly attired in blue or black Bic, with barely a serif or ligature out of place. But the more I read, the more it began to dawn on me just how little variety there had been in Dad's last few months on earth; how monotonous, repetitive and unremittingly bleak that final pitch, that final stand on the market stall of life must've been. Not that he'd ever given me that impression when I'd dropped in to visit him, of course. The Parkinson's may well

have been kicking the shit out of his arms and legs. But it was no match for his spirit.

Yet the reality of the situation was clear:

'Got Mr Dutton out of bed at 7.30.'

'Gave Mr Dutton a shave.'

'Made Mr Dutton a cucumber sandwich.'

'Brought Mr Dutton a cup of tea.'

And so on. And so forth. Ad infinitum.

Pretty soon, I started to get bored. And, as one does, began randomly fanning through the pages. Then something caught my eye. In tremulous, spidery writing, scrawled in large, pointillistic block capitals across the middle of one of the pages, was the following: 'MR DUTTON DID CARTWHEELS DOWN THE HALL.' Followed, a couple of pages later, by: 'MR DUTTON PERFORMED A STRIP SHOW ON THE BALCONY.'

Something told me he might be making it up. But hey, this was Dad we were talking about here. Why mess about with the habit of a lifetime?

Besides, the rules of the game had changed. Behind the cut-price bullshit lurked a higher, greater truth: the story of a man whose soul was under fire, whose circuits and synapses were hopelessly and mercilessly outgunned. But who, when the chips were down and the game was all but up, was going down fighting in a hail of irrepressible irreverence.

Cartwheels and strip shows beat shaves and cucumber sandwiches any day of the week.

Who cared if it was crap?[fn3]

[fn1] The other three basic emotions are anger, happiness and disgust. There is some dispute about the inclusion of a sixth, surprise, in the list.

[fn2] Most of the time, it *is* a 'he'. For the possible reasons why, see the Notes section at the end of the book.

[fn3] OK, you're right, it *is* six. But now take a closer look at the man's hands. Notice anything unusual?

1

Scorpio Rising

Great and Good are seldom the same man.

– Winston Churchill

A scorpion and a frog are sitting on the bank of a river and both need to get to the other side.

‘Hello, Mr Frog!’ calls the scorpion through the reeds. ‘Would you be so kind as to give me a ride on your back across the water? I have important business to conduct on the other side. And I cannot swim in such a strong current.’

The frog immediately becomes suspicious.

‘Well, Mr Scorpion,’ he replies, ‘I appreciate the fact that you have important business to conduct on the other side of the river. But just take a moment to consider your request. You are a scorpion. You have a large stinger at the end of your tail. As soon as I let you onto my back, it is entirely within your nature to sting me.’

The scorpion, who has anticipated the frog’s objections, counters thus:

‘My dear Mr Frog, your reservations are perfectly reasonable. But it is clearly not in my interest to sting you. I really do need to get to the other side of the river. And I give you my word that no harm will come to you.’

Reluctantly the frog agrees that the scorpion has a point. So he allows the fast-talking arthropod to scramble atop his back. And hops, without any further ado, into the water.

At first, all is well. Everything goes exactly according to plan. But halfway across, the frog suddenly feels a sharp pain in his back – and sees, out of the corner of his eye, the scorpion withdraw his stinger from his hide. A deadening numbness begins to creep into his limbs.

‘You fool!’ croaks the frog. ‘You said you needed to get to the other side to conduct your business. Now we are both going to die!’

The scorpion shrugs. And does a little jig on the drowning frog’s back.

‘Mr Frog,’ he replies casually, ‘you said it yourself. I am a scorpion. It is in my nature to sting you.’

With that, the scorpion and the frog both disappear beneath the murky, muddy waters of the swiftly flowing current.

And neither of them is seen again.

Bottom Line

DURING HIS TRIAL in 1980, John Wayne Gacy declared with a sigh that all he was really guilty of was ‘running a cemetery without a license’.

It was quite a cemetery. Between 1972 and 1978, Gacy had raped and murdered at least thirty-three young men and boys (with an average age of about eighteen), before stuffing them into a crawlspace beneath his house. One of his victims, Robert Donnelly, survived Gacy’s attentions, but was tortured so mercilessly by his captor that, at several points during his ordeal, he begged Gacy to ‘get it over with’ and kill him.

Gacy was bemused. ‘I’m getting round to it,’ he replied.

I have cradled John Wayne Gacy’s brain in my hands. Following his execution in 1994 by lethal injection, Dr Helen Morrison – a witness for the defence at his trial and one of the world’s leading experts on serial killers – had assisted in his autopsy in a Chicago hospital, and then driven back home with his brain jiggling around in a little glass jar on the passenger seat of her Buick. She’d wanted to find out whether there was anything about it – lesions, tumours, disease – that made it different from the brains of normal people.

Tests revealed nothing unusual.

Several years later, over coffee in her office in Chicago, I got to chatting with Dr Morrison about the significance of her findings. Of the significance of finding . . . nothing.

‘Does this mean,’ I asked her, ‘that we’re basically all psychopaths deep down? That each of us harbours the propensity to rape, kill and torture? If there’s no difference between my brain and the brain of John Wayne Gacy, then where, precisely, does the difference lie?’

Morrison hesitated, before flagging up one of the most fundamental truths in neuroscience.

‘A dead brain is very different from a living one,’ she said. ‘Outwardly, one brain may look very similar to another, but function completely differently. It’s what happens when the lights are on, not off, that tips the balance. Gacy was such an extreme case that I wondered whether there might be something else contributing to his actions – some injury or damage to his brain, or some anatomical anomaly. But there wasn’t. It was normal. Which just goes to show how complex and impenetrable the brain can sometimes be, how reluctant it is to give up its secrets. How differences in upbringing, say, or other random experiences can cause subtle changes in internal wiring and chemistry which then later account for tectonic shifts in behaviour.’

Morrison’s talk of lights that day, and tectonic shifts in behaviour, reminded me of a rumour I once heard about Robert Hare, professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, and one of the world’s leading authorities on psychopaths. Back in the 1990s, Hare submitted a research paper to an academic journal[1] which included the EEG responses of both psychopaths and non-psychopaths as they performed what’s known as a lexical decision task. Hare and his team of co-authors showed volunteers a series of letter strings, and then got them to decide, as quickly as possible, whether or not those strings comprised a word.

What they found was astonishing. Whereas normal participants identified emotionally charged words like ‘c-a-n-c-e-r’ or ‘r-a-p-e’ more quickly than neutral words like ‘t-r-e-e’ or ‘p-l-a-t-e’, this wasn’t the case with psychopaths. To the psychopaths, emotion was irrelevant.

The journal rejected the paper. Not, it turned out, for its conclusions. But for something even more extraordinary. Some of the EEG patterns, reviewers alleged, were so abnormal they couldn’t possibly have come from real people. But, of course, they had.

Intrigued by my talk with Morrison in Chicago about the mysteries and enigmas of the psychopathic mind – indeed,

about neural recalcitrance in general – I visited Hare in Vancouver. Was the rumour true? I asked him. Had the paper really been rejected? If so, what was going on?

Quite a lot, it emerged.

‘There are four different kinds of brain waves,’ he told me, ‘ranging from beta waves during periods of high alertness, through alpha and theta waves, to delta waves which accompany deep sleep. These waves reflect the fluctuating levels of electrical activity in the brain at various times. In normal members of the population, theta waves are associated with drowsy, meditative or sleeping states. Yet in psychopaths they occur during normal waking states – even, sometimes, during states of increased arousal . . .

‘Language, for psychopaths, is only word deep. There’s no emotional contouring behind it. A psychopath may say something like “I love you”, but in reality it means about as much to him as if he said “I’ll have a cup of coffee” . . . This is one of the reasons why psychopaths remain so cool, calm and collected under conditions of extreme danger, and why they are so reward-driven and take risks. Their brains, quite literally, are less “switched on” than the rest of ours.’

I thought back to Gacy and what I’d learned from Dr Morrison.

Normal on the outside (Gacy was a pillar of his local community, and on one occasion was even photographed with First Lady Rosalynn Carter), he camouflaged his inner scorpion with an endearing cloak of charm.

But it was entirely in his nature to sting you – even as he was about to go under.

‘Kiss my ass,’ he’d said as he entered the death chamber.

Talking the Walk

Fabrizio Rossi is thirty-five years old, and used to be a window cleaner. But his predilection for murder eventually

got the better of him. And now, would you believe, he does it for a living.

As we stand next to each other on a balmy spring morning, poking uneasily around John Wayne Gacy's bedroom, I ask him what the deal is. What is it about psychopaths that we find so irresistible? Why do they fascinate us so much?

It's definitely not the first time he's been asked.

'I think the main thing about psychopaths,' says Rossi, 'is the fact that on the one hand they're so normal, so much like the rest of us – but on the other, so different. I mean, Gacy even used to dress up as a clown and perform at children's parties . . . That's the thing about psychopaths. On the outside they seem so ordinary. Yet scratch beneath the surface, peek inside the crawlspace, as it were, and you never know what you might find.'

We are not, of course, in Gacy's actual bedroom. But rather, in a mocked-up version of it that forms an exhibit in what must surely be a candidate for the grisliest museum in the world: the Museum of Serial Killers, in Florence. The museum is located on Via Cavour, a well-heeled side-street within screaming distance of the Duomo.

And Fabrizio Rossi curates it.

The museum is doing well. And why wouldn't it? They're all there, if you're into that kind of thing. Everyone from Jack the Ripper to Jeffrey Dahmer. From Charles Manson to Ted Bundy.

Bundy's an interesting case, I tell Rossi. An eerie portent of the psychopath's hidden powers. A tantalising pointer to the possibility that, there might if you look hard enough, be more in the crawlspace than just dark secrets.

He's surprised, to say the least.

'But Bundy is one of the most notorious serial killers in history,' he says. 'He's one of the museum's biggest attractions. Can there really be anything else except dark secrets?'

There can. In 2009, twenty years after his execution at Florida State Prison (at the precise time that Bundy was being led to the electric chair, local radio stations urged listeners to turn off household appliances to maximise the power supply), psychologist Angela Book and her colleagues at Brock University in Canada decided to take the icy American serial killer at his word. During interview, Bundy, who staved in the skulls of thirty-five women during a four-year period in the mid-1970s, had claimed, with that boyish, all-American smile of his, that he could tell a 'good' victim simply from the way she walked.

'I'm the coldest son-of-a-bitch you'll ever meet,' Bundy enunciated. And no one can fault him there. But might he, Book wondered, also have been one of the shrewdest?

To find out, she set up a simple experiment[2]. First, she handed out the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale[3] – a questionnaire specifically designed to assess psychopathic traits within the general population, as opposed to within a prison or a hospital setting – to forty-seven male undergraduate students. Then, based on the results, she divided them up into high and low scorers. Next, she videotaped the gait of twelve new participants as they walked down a corridor from one room to another, where they completed a standard demographics questionnaire. The questionnaire included two items: (1) Have you ever been victimised in the past (yes or no)? (2) If yes, how many times has such victimisation occurred?

Finally, Book presented the twelve videotaped segments to the original forty-seven participants, and issued them a challenge: rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, how vulnerable to being mugged each of the targets was.

The rationale was simple. If Bundy's assertion held water, and he really had been able to sniff out weakness from the way his victims walked, then, Book surmised, those who scored high on the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale should be better at judging vulnerability than the low scorers.

That, it turned out, was exactly what she found. Moreover, when Book repeated the procedure with clinically diagnosed psychopaths[4] from a maximum-security prison, she found something else. The high-scoring ‘psychopathic’ undergraduates in the first study might’ve been good at identifying weakness. But the clinical psychopaths went one better. They explicitly stated it was because of the way people walked. They, like Bundy, knew precisely what they were looking for.

The Men Who Stare at Coats

Angela Book’s findings are no flash in the pan. Hers is one of a growing number of studies that have, in recent years, begun to show the psychopath in a new, more complex light: a light somewhat different from the lurid shadows cast by newspaper headlines and Hollywood scriptwriters. The news is difficult to swallow. And it goes down the same way here, in this murderous little corner of Florence, as it does nearly everywhere else: with a healthy dose of scepticism.

‘Do you mean,’ asks Rossi, incredulous, ‘that there are times when it isn’t necessarily a bad thing to be a psychopath?’

‘Not only that,’ I nod, ‘but there are times when it’s actually a good thing – when, by being a psychopath, you in fact have an advantage over other people.’

The former window cleaner seems far from convinced. And looking around, it’s easy to understand why. Bundy and Gacy aren’t exactly the best crowd to fall in with. And, let’s face it, when you’ve got several dozen others knocking about in the wings, it’s difficult to see the positives. But the Museum of Serial Killers doesn’t tell the full story. In fact, it’s not the half of it. As Helen Morrison eloquently elucidated, the fate of a psychopath depends on a whole range of factors, including genes, family background, education, intelligence and opportunity. And on how they interact.

Jim Kouri, vice president of the US National Association of Chiefs of Police, makes a similar point. Traits that are common among psychopathic serial killers, Kouri observes – a grandiose sense of self-worth, persuasiveness, superficial charm, ruthlessness, lack of remorse, and the manipulation of others – are also shared by politicians and world leaders.

Individuals, in other words, running not from the police. But for office. Such a profile, notes Kouri, allows those who present with it to do *what* they like *when* they like, completely unfazed by the social, moral or legal consequences of their actions.

If you are born under the right star, for example, and have power over the human mind as the moon over the sea, you might order the genocide of 100,000 Kurds and shuffle to the gallows with such arcane recalcitrance as to elicit, from even your harshest detractors, perverse, unspoken deference.

‘Do not be afraid, doctor,’ rapped Saddam Hussein on the scaffold, moments before his execution. ‘This is for men.’

If you are violent and cunning, like real-life ‘Hannibal Lecter’ Robert Maudsley, you might lure a fellow inmate to your cell, smash in his skull with a clawhammer and sample his brains with a spoon: as nonchalantly as if you were downing a soft-boiled egg. (Maudsley, by the way, has been cooped up in solitary confinement for the past thirty years, in a bulletproof cage in the basement of Wakefield Prison in England.)

Or if you are a brilliant neurosurgeon, ruthlessly cool and focused under pressure, you might, like James Geraghty, try your luck on a completely different playing field: at the remote outposts of twenty-first-century medicine, where risk blows in on hundred-mile-an-hour winds, and the oxygen of deliberation is thin:

‘I have no compassion for those whom I operate on,’ he told me. ‘That is a luxury I simply cannot afford. In the theatre I am reborn: as a cold, heartless machine, totally at

one with scalpel, drill and saw. When you're cutting loose and cheating death high above the snowline of the brain, feelings aren't fit for purpose. Emotion is entropy, and seriously bad for business. I've hunted it down to extinction over the years.'

Geraghty is one of the UK's top neurosurgeons – and though, on one level, his words send a chill down the spine, on another they make perfect sense. Deep in the ghettoes of some of the brain's most dangerous neighbourhoods, the psychopath is glimpsed as a lone and ruthless predator, a solitary species of transient, deadly allure. No sooner is the word out than images of serial killers, rapists and mad, reclusive bombers come slinking along the stairwells of our minds.

But what if I were to paint you a different picture? What if I were to tell you that the arsonist who burns your house down might also, in a parallel universe, be the hero most likely to brave the flaming timbers of a crumbling, blazing building to seek out, and drag out, your loved ones? Or that the kid with a knife in the shadows at the back of the movie theatre might well, in years to come, be wielding a rather different kind of knife at the back of a rather different kind of theatre?

Claims like these are admittedly hard to believe. But they're true. Psychopaths are fearless, confident, charismatic, ruthless and focused. Yet, contrary to popular belief, not necessarily violent. And if that sounds good, well, it is. Or rather, it can be. It depends, as we've just seen, on what else you've got lurking on the shelves of your personality cupboard. Far from its being an open and shut case – you're either a psychopath or you're not – there are, instead, inner and outer zones of the disorder: a bit like the fare zones on an Underground map. There is, as we shall see in Chapter 2, a spectrum of psychopathy along which each of us has our place, with only a small minority of A-listers resident in the 'inner city'.

One individual, for example, may be ice-cool under pressure, and display about as much empathy as an avalanche (we'll be meeting some like this on the trading floor later), and yet at the same time act neither violently, nor antisocially, nor without conscience. Scoring high on two psychopathic attributes, such an individual may rightly be considered further along the psychopathic spectrum than someone scoring lower on that dyad of traits, yet still not be anywhere near the Chianti-swilling danger zone of a person scoring high on all of them.

Just as there's no official dividing line between someone who plays recreational golf on the weekends and, say, a Tiger Woods for instance, so the boundary between a world-class, 'hole-in-one' superpsychopath and one who merely 'psychopathises' is similarly blurred. Think of psychopathic traits as the dials and sliders on a studio mixing desk. Shunt all of them to max, and you'll have a soundtrack that's no use to anyone. But if the soundtrack is graded, and some are up higher than others – such as fearlessness, focus, lack of empathy, and mental toughness, for example – you may well have a surgeon who's a cut above the rest.

Of course, surgery is just one instance where psychopathic 'talent' may prove advantageous. There are others. Take law enforcement, for example. In 2009, shortly after Angela Book published the results of her study, I decided to perform my own take on it[5]. If, as she'd found, psychopaths really *were* better at decoding vulnerability, then there had to be applications. There had to be ways in which, rather than being a drain on society, this talent conferred some advantage. Enlightenment dawned when I met a friend at the airport. We all get a bit paranoid going through customs, I mused. Even when we're perfectly innocent. But imagine what it would feel like if we *did* have something to hide.

Thirty undergraduate students took part in my experiment: half of whom had scored high on the Self-

Report Psychopathy Scale, the other half low. There were also five ‘associates’. The students’ job was easy. They had to sit in a classroom and observe the associates’ movements as they entered through one door and exited through another, traversing, en route, a small, elevated stage. But there was a catch. The students also had to deduce who was ‘guilty’: which of the five was concealing a scarlet handkerchief.

To raise the stakes and give them something to ‘go on’, the ‘guilty’ associate was handed £100. If the jury correctly identified the guilty party – if, when the votes were counted, the person with the handkerchief came out on top – then they had to give the money back. If, on the other hand, they got away with it, and the finger of suspicion fell more heavily on one of the others, then the ‘guilty associate’ would stand to be rewarded. They would, instead, get to keep the £100.

The nerves were certainly jangling when the associates made their entrance. But which of the students would make the better ‘customs officers’? Would the psychopaths’ predatory instincts prove reliable? Or would their nose for vulnerability let them down?

The results were extraordinary. Over 70 per cent of those who scored high on the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale correctly picked out the handkerchief-smuggling associate, compared to just 30 per cent of the low scorers.

Zeroing in on weakness may well be part of a serial killer’s toolkit. But it may also come in handy at the airport.

Psychopath Radar

In 2003, Reid Meloy, professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, conducted an experiment[6] which looked at the flipside of the scarlet-handkerchief equation. Sure, traditional ‘hole-in-one’ psychopaths may well have a reputation for sniffing out

vulnerability. But they're also known for giving us the creeps. Tales from clinical practice and reports from everyday life are replete with utterances from those who've encountered these ruthless social predators: mysterious, visceral aphorisms, such as, 'the hair stood up on the back of my neck' or 'he made my skin crawl'. But is there really anything in it? Do our instincts stand up to scrutiny? Are we as good at picking up on psychopaths as psychopaths are at picking up on *us*?

To find out, Meloy asked 450 criminal justice and mental health professionals whether they'd ever experienced such odd physical reactions when interviewing a psychopathic subject: violent criminals with all of the dials on the mixing desk cranked right the way up to max.

The results left nothing to the imagination. Over three-quarters of them said that they had, with female respondents reporting a higher incidence of the phenomenon than males (84 per cent compared to 71 per cent), and masters/bachelor-level clinicians reporting a higher incidence than either those at doctoral level, or, on the other side of the professional divide, law enforcement agents (84 per cent, 78 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively). Examples included 'felt like I might be lunch', 'disgust . . . repulsion . . . fascination' and 'an evil essence passed through me'.

But what are we picking up *on*, exactly?

To answer this question, Meloy goes back in time: to prehistory, and the shadowy, spectral dictates of human evolution. There are a number of theories about how psychopathy might first have developed, and we'll be looking at those a little bit later on. But an overarching question in the grand etiological scheme of things is from which ontological perspective the condition should actually be viewed: from a clinical standpoint, as a disorder of personality? Or from a game theory standpoint, as a legitimate biological gambit – a life history strategy

conferring significant reproductive advantages in the primeval, ancestral environment?

Kent Bailey, emeritus professor in clinical psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, argues in favour of the latter[7], and advances the theory that violent competition within and between proximal ancestral groups was the primary evolutionary precursor of psychopathy (or, as he puts it, the 'warrior hawk').

'Some degree of predatory violence,' proposes Bailey, 'was required in the seek and kill aspects of hunting large game animals' – and an elite contingent of ruthless 'warrior hawks' would presumably have come in handy not only as a means of tracking and killing prey, but as a ready-made defence force to repel unwanted overtures by similar contingents from other, neighbouring groups.

The problem, of course, was what the hell you did with them in peacetime. Robin Dunbar, professor of psychology and evolutionary anthropology at Oxford University, lends support to Bailey's claims[8]. Going back to the time of the Norsemen, between the ninth and eleventh centuries, Dunbar cites the 'berserkers' as a case in point: the feted Viking warriors who, as the sagas and poems and historical records attest, appear to have fought in a brutal, trance-like fury. But dig a little deeper into the literature, and a more sinister picture emerges: of a dangerous elite who could turn against members of the community they were charged to protect, committing savage acts of violence against their countrymen.

Here, proposes Meloy, lies the solution to the mystery: to the prickle at the back of the neck and the long-range evolutionary thinking behind our indwelling 'psychopath radar'. For if, as Kent Bailey argues, such predatory, ancestral individuals were indeed psychopathic, it would follow, from what we know of natural selection, that it wouldn't be a one-way street. More peaceable members of both the immediate, and wider, communities, would, in all

probability, themselves evolve a mechanism, the covert neural surveillance technology, to flag up and signify danger when entering their cognitive airspace – a clandestine early warning system that would enable them to beat a retreat.

In the light of Angela Book's work with attack victims, and my own investigations into scarlet-handkerchief smuggling, such a mechanism could quite plausibly explain both the gender and status differences thrown up by Meloy's experiment. Given the psychopath's enhanced reputation as diabolical emotional sommelier, their specialised nose for the inscrutable bass notes of weakness, it isn't beyond the bounds of possibility that women, by way of a sneaky Darwinian recompense for greater physical vulnerability, may well exhibit more intense and more frequent reactions in their presence – as, for exactly the same reason, did the lower-status mental health professionals.

It's certainly a working hypothesis. The more you feel threatened, the more at risk you are for a break-in, the more important it is to tighten up on security.

Of course, that there existed, in the penumbral days of our ancestors, ruthless, remorseless hunters brutally accomplished in the dark arts of predation, is beyond doubt. But that such hunters, with their capacity to second-guess nature, were psychopaths as we know them today is a little more open to question. The stumbling block diagnostically, is empathy.

In ancestral times, the most prolific and accomplished hunters were not, as one might expect, the most bloodthirsty and indefatigable. They were, in contrast, the most cool and empathetic. They were the ones who were able to assimilate their quarry's mindset – to 'step out of their own shoes' and into those of their prey, and thus reliably predict its deft, innate trajectories of evasion: its routes and machinations of escape.

To understand why, one need only observe a toddler learning to walk. The gradual development of upright