

True Crime: Inside the Mind of Mayhem

Karl Menninger once wrote, “Crime is everybody’s temptation,” and forensic psychiatrist Robert I. Simon coined the phrase, “Bad men do what good men dream.” While some would agree that the seeds of criminal impulse reside in everyone—a view reflected in Dostoyevski’s *Crime and Punishment* and in Leopold and Loeb’s desire to commit the perfect crime—the opposing view holds that the violent criminal is truly a breed apart, an evil monster, a sociopath who can only pretend to be normal. In the latter category, we might identify men like Harold Shipman, who perpetrated an unprecedented spree of murders under the fiendish guise of a trusted physician. With this set of references, moderator **Spencer Eth**, Professor and Vice-Chairman in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at New York Medical College, evoked contrasting interpretations of human criminality to introduce the November 1 roundtable, *True Crime: Inside the Mind of Mayhem*. Turning to his fellow panelists, he asked, “Are they a different breed, or are they just like us but have lost their ability to control their impulses?”

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Shoba Sreenivasan, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine, noted that while Cicero described the “bright line between good and evil,” Machiavelli saw a far hazier border, holding that one can be good if there are compelling reasons, and evil when it’s expedient. Sreenivasan, who conducts sexually violent predator evaluations for the states of California and Washington, went on to present the views of psychiatrist Harvey Kleckley, who believed that evil had to do with certain personality characteristics, in particular the inability to connect emotionally. She then screened excerpts from televised specials about three noted serial killers: Richard Kuklinski, a contract killer described as having “a mind made for murder;” Kenneth Bianchi, one of the Hillside Stranglers, whose all-American good looks masked his disturbing sadism; and Gary Ridgeway, who had sex with his victims after murdering them. In response to this gruesome litany, Eth concluded, “These three exemplify a class of people who are not like the rest of us, even if they could pass themselves off as normal.”

Joe Loya, author of *The Man Who Outgrew His Prison Cell: Confessions of a Bank Robber*, offered the contrasting perspective of a former criminal, noting, “I don’t believe there are monsters. I believe there are people who do monstrous things because they are dislocated from their conscience.” Loya, who recounted that his best friend in prison killed his cellmate, expressed his belief that criminals are not born, rather they become what they are through the violence and sadism inflicted on them as children. Loya reported that inmates form communities and strong bonds not only as a technique for survival, but out of a paradoxical sentimentality, a possible compensation for deep-seated emotional numbness. But ultimately, the inmates that Loya knew were chiefly committed to subduing their enemies. “They want to dominate another person ... and reduce them, and cut them down ... it’s all about dominion.”

John Coston, author of *To Kill and Kill Again* and *Sleep, My Child, Forever*, described the two types of criminals he encountered in researching his books. The first was a “very sympathetic” woman who was abused as a child and abandoned by her father and her husband.



Joe Loya

After filing for bankruptcy and seeing no alternative for her financial woes, she decided to take out insurance policies on her children, kill them, and then collect the money. (These final details elicited an audible gasp from the audience.) The second criminal was a young man, also abused as a child, who began killing at 18, when he murdered his friend’s mother. He was intelligent, highly organized, and able to escape detection, killing simply for the thrill. But in order to experience a greater thrill, his crimes became more and more risky, and he was eventually caught. While each of these killers ended up becoming a monster, especially in the case of the infanticide, Coston felt that they straddled the line between inherent, inhuman evil and a relatable human weakness molded by terrible circumstances.

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Qiu Xiaolong, author of the award-winning Inspector Chen series of crime novels, said that he is more inclined toward the model wherein the criminal represents a kind of everyman. Addressing the ways in which a society and a culture can shape notions of evil, he explained that when he was growing up in China, there was no study of criminal psychology. Rather, criminality was described in strictly political terms as counterrevolutionary. In one of his novels, Xiaolong observed, the criminal is shaped by what happened to him during the Cultural Revolution.

Regardless of how criminal behavior is formed, Professor Sreenivasan professed the belief that criminals, even murderers, can be rehabilitated. Loya, who spent seven years in prison for bank robbery, spoke about how long stretches in solitary confinement, during which he would hallucinate and hear voices, broke him down and pushed him to the level of self-awareness necessary for his reformation. But, he acknowledged, his epiphany was due in part to his education and his command of language, tools that were out of reach to many other inmates. In response to an audience question about the criminal’s tendency to dissociate, Loya added a note of humor to the discussion, recounting that he used to have a soundtrack that played in his head when he committed crimes. “At first it was ‘Smooth Criminal’ by Michael Jackson, and then I realized, ‘Oh, that’s not me,’ so I went deeper and got ‘Comfortably Numb’ by Pink Floyd. I was trying to organize my life in a cinematic way.” *A.L.*