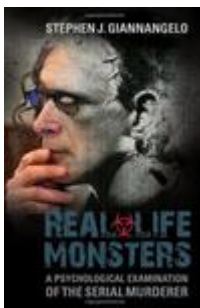# Only the Shadow Knows

A review of

Real Life Monsters: A Psychological Examination of the Serial Murderer

by Stephen J. Giannangelo

Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2012. 193 pp. ISBN 978-0-313-39784-4. $37.00

Reviewed by
[David M. Reiss](#)

Stephen J. Giannangelo prefaces his eminently readable book, *Real Life Monsters: A Psychological Examination of the Serial Murderer*, by recalling that as a child, "I never was all that affected by the horrors of the cinema," adding,

> For it's the people who walk among us that strike fear into our hearts. Not the seven-foot
> tall hulk with bolts in his neck . . . I believe this is what sparked my interest in human
> psychopathology and extreme abnormal psychology. I wanted to know what real monsters
> were capable of. (p. ix)

Giannangelo accomplishes exactly what he sets out to provide—a psychological examination of a horrible and frightening phenomenon, conducted through the study and intellectual analysis of eight case studies (one woman, seven men) and an extensive review

of the literature. The author effectively introduces his topics and theories and then provides the eight detailed case histories in which he applies the issues discussed, followed by his reflections on the case history material that pull everything together in a logical and organized manner. There are useful appendices of multiple additional very brief case histories, a glossary, and, of course, formal literature citations.

Real Life Monsters is not a densely clinical or academic research monograph; nor is it a dry or dogmatic attempt to persuade the reader to adopt a specific theory or line of reasoning. Giannangelo strikes out to review specific case histories and incorporate information from sociology, history, biology, and law enforcement in arriving at what are essentially case formulations that provide a partial understanding of contributory factors related to the cases presented.

Informed by that understanding, the author derives knowledgeable and erudite propositions that suggest common features and dynamics, clusters of risk factors, and an appreciation of the complexity of this difficult area of exploration. Giannangelo takes pains to insist that he has no intent to provide an overarching or all-encompassing theory regarding how "real life monsters"—specifically serial murders—come to exist. He readily acknowledges, "The theory proposed in this book is admittedly an intuitive assimilation, resulting from case studies and analysis of the literature" (p. 155).

Giannangelo's inclusion of references is extensive and comprehensive, with quotations and citations used liberally throughout the book in a manner that painlessly adds to the database and theoretical constructs, amplifying rather than detracting from the user-friendly flow of the text. The investigative research net is flung far and wide, including interviews with perpetrators, persons connected to victims, and law enforcement personnel as well as consideration of published clinical/academic data, both classical and contemporary and controversial. Giannangelo includes appropriate quotations from articles in the public media (e.g., news magazines) and refers to current publicized studies carrying newly emerging data on depression, violence, and impulsivity among military personnel and professional athletes related to exposure to head trauma (p. 37).

Giannangelo begins the book by effectively and appropriately narrowing his focus. He explains that not all mass murderers are serial murderers in that heinous acts, albeit in some ways similar, may involve very different motivations, concomitant psychopathology, underlying psychodynamics, and contributory influences.

Once he establishes the limitations of the subject of his contemplation, Giannangelo provides an impressive exploration of possible contributory and explanatory information. In detail, Giannangelo describes the juxtaposition of multiple different Axis I and Axis II psychological conditions/pathology with the history of the individuals in question; he delves into psychosocial influences ranging from family backgrounds to cultural influences, never neglecting the contributions of both constitutional and acquired neuropsychological factors (and the difficulties in creating a clear boundary between the two phenomena).

Additionally, without specifically defining it as such, Giannangelo touches on issues of the motivation of researchers (and readers) in this area—and, dare I say, countertransference—in a rather informal, at times irreverent but meaningful fashion. In discussing the connections between the diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder and serial murder, Giannangelo writes,

> It is not enough to simply describe the serial killer as an antisocial personality. The vast majority of the current prison population shares this diagnosis, as well as many average citizens (Politicians? Car salesmen?) who are not incarcerated. Actually, most of us at some time or another could look over the *DSM–IV–TR*'s criteria and recognize a few qualities close to home . . . The clustering of traits is helpful . . . but the criteria should not be overrated. (p. 14)

(Of course, in the current electoral season, in my opinion, the reference to politicians is uncomfortably meaningful, although I might argue that evaluating political theater involves a study of malignant narcissism more so than overt sociopathy; Reiss, 2009.)

Giannangelo's book should be understandable—and with all due caution, I might say uncomfortably enjoyable—to students of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and philosophy at all different levels, as well as to reasonably educated members of the lay populace. This is not to imply that Giannangelo's discussions are watered down. Giannangelo includes detailed clinical discussions of psychopathology, neurological pathology, and sociological issues, but they are accompanied by introductions and explanations of the technical terms and constructs used that the seasoned clinician does not need yet are very useful to the intellectually inquisitive but not necessarily technically sophisticated public. Categories of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* are effectively explained both by reference to quotations from the manual and by discussions devoid of unnecessary jargon. To his credit, Giannangelo transverses a wide range of psychological theory and conceptualization without resorting to psychobabble or demeaning the intellect of the reader.

Included in the book are sections that describe in detail the case histories upon which the work is based, again presented in a manner that integrates the best of reporting with appropriate psychosocial investigation. Giannangelo provides his opinions and conclusions in a manner that is informational and well organized without being dogmatic. He respects contributions from all fields, as this book is sincerely true to the idea that psychological and behavioral phenomena must be understood in the context of a comprehensive evaluation of the biopsychosocial—biological phenomena and pathology, psychological factors and dynamics, and social/cultural influences. As Giannangelo aptly summarizes, "With consideration of the potential of variables, the result appears to be an inclusive dynamic: multiple factors acting in concert . . . creating a feedback loop for the activity" (p. 63).

Regarding the latter issue of social/cultural issues, Giannangelo also investigates some of the legal quagmire: "What makes the insanity plea so difficult is it is inherently confusing,

'It's an attempt to explain rationally the irrational,' says [defense attorney] William Moffitt (Toufexis, 199, p. 17, 1992, February 3, *Time* "Do mad acts a madman make?")" (p. 29).

I believe that one will leave this book with a better understanding of and increased interest in gaining additional knowledge of the horrific topic of serial murderers—as well as some increased insight into one's own attraction to and repulsion from the frightening phenomenon. The book reads as a lively case discussion with an astute colleague rather than a text or a polemic providing data from an emotional distance.

Wisely, Giannangelo points out that his work proposes intellectual connections, clusters of risk factors, and a method for integrating information from diverse academic fields, while at the same time he acknowledgs that increased understanding through an appreciation of psychodynamics, neurology, psychosocial issues, and identifying contributory experiences does not provide sufficient data to predict the behavior of any specific individual. Giannangelo brings a refreshingly new—and unusually accurate—meaning to the descriptor "fair and balanced."

Perhaps "card-carrying" Jungians may be a bit disappointed that Giannangelo does not explore Jungian theories of the dark side of human nature. However, I sincerely believe that Giannangelo would take no offense, and would probably heartily agree, that although his work provides a wealth of information and a significant contribution to understanding the "monsters" under consideration, when it comes to definitively determining what leads one human being down the path to monstrosity whereas others with similar risk factors pass through their lives in very different (albeit not always benign) ways, perhaps, "only the Shadow knows."

Reference

Reiss, D. M. (2009). *The 2008 presidential election: Crossing the borderline. A developmental/characterological construct of psycho-social phenomena*. Retrieved from http://www.dmrdynamics.com/ 2008%20US%20Election%20--%20a%20developmental- characterological%20perspective.pdf