

Inside the Mind of a Killer: Researching your Antagonist

by **D.V. Berkom**

So there I was, minding my own business writing one of those truly twisted novels that grabs hold of you and *has* to come out when I came to the killer's debut. I'd never attempted to write a character quite so creepy and wasn't relishing that first passage. In fact, I continually wrote around him, putting off the scene until I felt I could do justice to him instead of creating a killer cliché. Yes, I could have abandoned the effort and gone on to something else, but a disturbing dream I'd had several months prior provided the inspiration for the story and I felt compelled to follow it through.

How do you write a fresh psychopath? Readers today have been clubbed over the head with serial killers (pardon the pun) to the point that it's become a joke in many literary agencies and publishing houses. The only way I could think to do it was to go to my default: research. I love learning new things. Researching has a way of surprising you with oddball connections, often to be used in ways you'd never expect. A reference here, a notation there, it's similar to a treasure hunt. Like I said, I love research.

Until I started to investigate killers.

Now, I haven't lived what anyone would call a sheltered life, but I'd so far avoided learning specific details about the habits of serial killers. The information I came across in my search made my skin crawl.

Reality is so much more frightening than fiction.

The information crept me out to the point I'd find myself vacuuming the living room, unsure how that Hoover ended up in my hand. One thing to understand about me: I don't like housework. I'll let dust and dirt accumulate until I can't find the couch or someone decides to visit. Apparently, I found something I like even less.

I followed this routine whenever I delved into the bizarre world of a psychopath, and though you could eat off my living room floor, my manuscript was going nowhere. No closer to fleshing out my killer, (I know- another pun. Sorry) he wouldn't budge from the twisted caricature of a human being I'd created and I was close to giving up. Sure, I could give him odd quirks and mannerisms, but it felt as if I was making him play dress up: all show, no substance.

That is, until I dug a little deeper and discovered the science behind the psychopath. A series of articles on NPR.org (<http://n.pr/vfWIF>) discussing the biological basis for psychopathic behavior led me ever deeper into the complexities of a killer's mind. Fascinated, I began to read white papers on personality disorder, multiple personalities, cannibalism and the like. Where once I'd been stymied by what motivated someone to kill, an ocean of ideas began to form around what my antagonist's early life was like, his taste in music, food, what made him tick.

Soon, I had seventeen pages of articles, notes and sketches, all revolving around my antagonist. I *knew* him, knew what made him get out of bed in the morning, why he chose the victims he did. Most importantly, I knew *how he justified killing*. That was my 'eureka' moment.

Understanding my antagonist helped me move past the visceral recoil from the heinous crimes I read (and wrote) about and gave a more human face to the killer. I learned there's an entire area of scientific inquiry emerging that uses genetic testing and MRIs to map the brains and biological processes of psychopaths, on occasion admitting the results of these tests as evidence in court trials.

Can the fact that a person has the genes and/or brain structure associated with violent behavior be enough to reduce a defendant's culpability in a trial? It's a new take on an age-old question.

Whatever the answer may be, for now I can't wait to write the killer's scenes and try to work in some small kernel of research to help the reader understand him better. Yeah, still pretty creepy, but it worked.

Now, where the heck is that couch?

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