

Serial Violence

Analysis of Modus Operandi and Signature Characteristics of Killers

Robert D. Keppel, Ph.D.
William J. Birnes, J.D., Ph.D.



Practical Aspects of Criminal and Forensic Investigations Series



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Series Editor's Note

This book is part of a series entitled *Practical Aspects of Criminal and Forensic Investigation*. This series was created by Vernon J. Geberth, New York City Police Department Lieutenant Commander (Retired), who is an author, educator, and consultant on homicide and forensic investigations. This series, written by authors who are nationally recognized experts in their respective fields, has been designed to provide contemporary, comprehensive, and pragmatic information to the practitioner involved in criminal and forensic investigations.

Introduction

“The signature aspect of a violent criminal offender,” wrote Vernon Geberth in his book *Practical Homicide Investigation*, “is a unique and integral part of the offender’s behavior. This signature component refers to the psychodynamics, which are the mental and emotional processes underlying human behavior and its motivations. Likewise, from an investigative perspective, it is important to note that an offender’s M.O. or ‘method of doing things’ is a learned behavior and tends to remain constant.”

Because *Serial Killers: The Practical Analyses of Signature and Modus Operandi* is a textbook about linking murder cases together, it contains next to nothing about criminal profiling. There is little written about the actual steps and procedures of linking cases by the presence of modus operandi (M.O.) and signature characteristics. A number of profilers, from John Douglas to David Canter, have written or co-written books or memoirs highlighting their profiling careers, which have included efforts at linking cases. The initial book undertaken was Robert Ressler’s *Whoever Fights Monsters* (1992), followed by David Canter’s *Criminal Shadows* (1994). Not long after, John Douglas’ *Mindhunter* (1995), Robert Keppel’s *The Riverman* (1995), Russell Vorpegal’s *Profiles in Murder* (1998), Roy Hazelwood’s *The Evil That Men Do* (1998), and Gregg McCrary’s *The Unknown Darkness* (2003) arrived, which mentioned information about linking cases, not from a scientific or instructional viewpoint toward performing linkage analysis but more resembling works for true crime-genre enthusiasts.

Although the function of linking cases and subsequent testimony in criminal prosecutions has typically been performed by FBI criminal profilers or by professional police investigators they have trained, this textbook is not an explanation of how to perform the task of developing offender characteristics from crime scene behaviors, the normal criminal profilers’ purview. Taken alone, linking cases involves a specific methodology beyond profiling and has been thoroughly scrutinized by supreme courts, but never comprehensively covered in any book or journal article. That is the effort of this text: to fully explain the process of linking one violent crime to another for the purpose of pursuing the same offender or for trial purposes. The definitive text on criminal profiling can wait.

These pages tell, instead, the story of the procedures that have been employed to functionally link violent crimes to anyone who is seriously

concerned about the course of criminal investigations. This is a work about what experts have been able to perform in previous cases; it explains how their opinions and work have survived appropriate appellate review.

The first chapter offers an account of how information about M.O. and signature analysis became known historically. The emphasis here is on the short history of the beginnings of using M.O. during the early 1890s in the United States in civil suits involving the law of patents, and in the late 1890s in England tracking criminals. In this chapter, the working definitions of the terms *modus operandi*, ritual behaviors, non-ritual behaviors, and signature crimes are established and examples of all four crime scene behaviors are provided. Within this particular framework, the known publications, testimonies, and M.O. information systems are discussed and evaluated.

The heart of this book examines the work of signature analysts in detail, and explains the process outside the critical stereotypes in mystery books, movies, and documentaries that has grown up in the last 20 years. Each chapter covers a specific signature killer and provides details of ritualistic and non-ritualistic linking characteristics that were established. The chapters reveal, upon close analysis, the various cases that have used signature testimony to link cases for courtroom purposes. In addition, the scientific structure of the signature of each particular violent criminal offender is explained.

Chapter 2 covers the discovery of murderous ritualistic behaviors in the notable cases of William Heirens (1945) in Chicago, Harvey Glatman (1958) in California, and Morris Frampton (1977) in Seattle, which occurred prior to known testimony on linking cases in court. These cases, among others, began the interest in understanding the importance of the M.O. and ritualistic characteristics of killers to the investigative process. Although actual M.O. and signature analyses were not performed as we know them today, understanding of the elements of the ritualistic behaviors helped solve these investigations in these regionally famous cases. For example, the crimes of Morris Frampton highlighted the communication level of linkage analysis, informing detectives that they could be searching for the same offender in two murders. The linkage of these murders was the major reason the crimes were solved. The linkage of these murders committed two weeks apart united detectives from the King County Sheriff's Office and the Seattle Police Department. A parallel and team-oriented investigation was undertaken, thereby enabling the killer to be quickly apprehended.

Chapter 3 covers an article in its entirety written by Robert Keppel, Joseph Weis, Kathrine Brown, and Kristen Welch for the *Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling* in 2005. It reveals the signature aspects of the infamous Jack-the-Ripper murders in 1888 to 1891 in central London. A number of women, commonly recognized as 11 victims, were murdered in separate events in the Whitechapel area of London. An evaluation of the murders using M.O. and signature analytic procedures revealed that six of

those murders were linked by a number of distinct personal signature characteristics, including picquerism, overkill, incapacitation, domination and control, open and displayed unusual body position, sexual degradation, mutilation, organ harvesting, specific areas of attack, preplanning and organization, and a combination of signature features that are also covered in the chapters that follow as part of the various components of additional serial killers' signatures.

Chapter 4 examines the essence of torture by describing and documenting the attempted and actual murders by Richard Cottingham in New York and New Jersey. Torture has been identified as a recognizable crime scene behavior of serial killers and rapists. The implements used by Cottingham to torture his victims differentiated his types of torture and individualized his behavior from other sexually sadistic offenders.

Chapter 5 covers the burglary murders of Timothy Spencer in the Richmond, Virginia area. The wrong man, David Vasquez, was initially arrested and convicted of a murder that was later connected to a series of murders committed by another man. That man was Timothy Spencer. Spencer's crimes were rape-murders of female victims, who were found in their own residences. Spencer proved he was a crafty cat-burglar, which reflected one element of his anger-retaliatory signature.

Chapter 6 identifies a picquerism signature that helped in the convictions of the cases of the Clairmont killer, Cleophus Prince. The signature testimony was crucial in connecting the murders of athletic women at trial. The multiple stabbings victims in certain areas of concentration and using primary sexual mechanisms as crime scene behaviors were major components of this killer's signature. The crimes of the Clairmont killer held the entire city of San Diego at bay in the early months of 1990.

Chapter 7 examines a serial killer's signature that is missing the primary sexual mechanisms of penile penetration and ejaculation. The details that led to the connection of the US Route 40 murders and to the arrest of Steven Pennell in Delaware are covered. The trial of Steven Pennell and the testimony of FBI Agent John Douglas highlighted the first use of M.O. and signature testimony by anyone at a trial.

Chapter 8 covers an anger-excitation signature that uses the symbolic intent of posing victims to accomplish sexual degradation. Through the grotesque placement of his victims, George Russell left victims in positions that would shock and repulse the finder and the police. Within 67 days and 5 miles of each of three murders, the city of Bellevue, Washington experienced atypical murders, unlike any experienced in previous years in its history. It was the signature testimony that linked the cases through the major signature elements of posing, open and display, and sexual insertion of a foreign object that enabled prosecutors to convict George Russell of three murders.

Chapter 9 examines the absence of beating, strangling, and physical elements of torture in the 1984 Cranbrook murders in British Columbia. This chapter highlights the importance of examining what is there, and, of equal importance is to examine what is not there. When a serial killer uses a .410 shotgun to murder his victims, it is truly a rare event. After the defendant won his appeal on one murder count, the Crown Counsel used M.O. and signature analysis for the first time in a Canadian murder series to connect cases and, ultimately, to convict the killer of two women.

Chapter 10 examines the two murders of Wayne Dumond in Kansas City, Missouri in 1995. When authorities charged Dumond with one murder, they felt he had committed others, but he remained silent about any others. A search for similar murders in the Kansas City area uncovered another victim. M.O. and signature analyses were performed, connecting Dumond to that second murder. Dumond could not be tried for the second murder because he committed suicide in jail.

Chapter 11 covers the signature killer, Robert Parker, the Shoreline Killer in King County, Washington. He murdered two women, 30 days apart, who lived in the same apartment complex in the Ballinger Terrace area. Unique features of Parker's signature were that he entered occupied apartments, and, eventually, after his anger-retaliatory behaviors occurred, he set fires, one of which was located between the legs of both victims in both apartments.

Chapter 12 covers five rapes and one murder committed by Wesley Miller from Ft. Worth, Texas. Miller had a distinctive approach to his victims in that all were cheerleaders from the same high school. Finally, after the rape of five victims, he murdered the sixth. All of these cases were connected through M.O. and signature analysis for the purposes of his civil commitment procedures in Texas.

Best practices in M.O. and signature analyses are found in Chapter 13. It is the defining chapter in that it explains the differences between signature analysis and criminal profiling. Signature analysis is not meant to resemble criminal profiling. It was built upon a concept quite different from that of profiling. Signature analysis occupies a different position within crime assessment. This book was not meant to highlight the demographic and behavioral characteristics of the unknown offender from crime scene characteristics, but to highlight what M.O. and ritualistic behaviors link cases to the same offender. At the present time, it is impossible to describe the process of M.O. and signature analyses without considering expert testimony and appellate decisions influencing future signature testimonies. This text highlights recommended qualifications of the signature analyst. It is about the special—and multiple—talents of the signature analyst.

About the Authors

Robert D. Keppel, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the Henry C. Lee School of Criminal Justice and Forensic Science at the University of New Haven. For 2 years, he was a visiting associate professor of Criminal Justice at Seattle University. He spent 2 years as an associate professor at Sam Houston State University. He retired after 17 years as the Chief Criminal Investigator with the Washington State Attorney General's Office. He has more than 29 years of homicide investigation experience.

Among his many homicide investigation experiences, he has been a consultant to the Atlanta Police on the Missing and Murdered Children's Cases, a member of the national planning committee for the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), and a consultant to the Green River Murders Task Force, Seattle, Washington. He also served as a consultant to the El Paso Police Department in the Desert Area Serial Murders in Texas, the Austin Police Department in the Yogurt Shop Murders, the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Department in the New Orleans area prostitute murders, the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office in the Nightstalker murder cases in California, and to the Oregon State Police in the Randy Kraft Murders in Oregon.

Dr. Keppel is the founder of the Washington State Homicide Investigation and Tracking System (HITS), which set the benchmark for how police handle information in support of homicide investigations. He was the project director for a federal grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) entitled, "Managing Investigative Technologies," which was completed in 2002. He was the project director for an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) grant entitled, "Investigative Case Management for Missing Children Homicides," which was completed in 1997. He was the project director for a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Grant entitled, "Improving the Investigation of Homicide and the Apprehension Rate of Murderers," which was completed in 1989. He was the primary investigator for the King County Sheriff's Department in the Ted Bundy murder cases in the Pacific Northwest and was present for Bundy's final confessions before his Florida execution. He has personally investigated, reviewed, or consulted in more than 2000 murder cases. He has lectured extensively to police officers at national seminars on homicide investigation. He has testified in trial as an expert on the method of operation of serial killers, the "signature aspects" of murder investigations, and police investigations.

He is the author of several articles and books: *The Psychology of Serial Killer Investigations*, published in 2003 by Academic Press, *The Riverman: Ted Bundy and I Hunt the Green River Killer*, published in 1995 by Pocket Books; *Signature Killers*, published in 1997 by Pocket Books; *Murder: A Multidisciplinary Anthology of Readings*, published in 1999 by Harcourt Brace; and *Serial Murder: Future Implications for Police Investigations*, published in 2000 by Authorlink.com.

Dr. Keppel received his Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the University of Washington in 1992. He graduated from Washington State University with a B.Sc. in Police Science and Administration in 1966 and an M.A. in Police Science and Administration in 1967. In addition, he received an M.E. degree from Seattle University in 1979.

William J. Birnes, J.D., Ph.D., *New York Times* bestselling author is chairman of the Board of Sunrise Community Mental Health Center in Los Angeles. He is an author in the fields of mental health, true crime, human behavior, law and journalism, and science and technology, as well as an editor and book publisher. His first true crime title, *Serial Killers*, is in its 19th printing at Random House. Birnes' book about the O.J. Simpson case in 1994 was made required reading for all first-year law students at Harvard Law School.

Birnes is the editorial director of his own literary imprint at Tor/Forge Books Macmillan Publishing in New York and is the president of the book production company, Shadow Lawn Press. He is also the publisher and president of Filament Books in New York and Los Angeles. A co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller, his *The Day After Roswell* in 1997 is a documentary on the History Channel (May, 2005). Birnes' previous cable feature "The Riverman" that was based on his book, *The Riverman*, which he co-authored with detective Dr. Robert Keppel about how serial killer Ted Bundy helped police track Green River Killer Gary Ridgway, was broadcast on A&E in September 2004.

Birnes is a frequent radio and television talk-show guest, having appeared on *Good Morning America*, *Dateline*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *Coast to Coast AM*. He currently produces and hosts his own documentary series on *The History Channel*, appeared in the feature film *Occam's Razor* in 1999, and was featured in a Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary on the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1995.

A National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, grants judge for the National Endowment for the Arts, and law school graduate, William Birnes received his Ph.D. from New York University in 1974 while he was an Instructor of English at Trenton State College. He completed his post-doctoral work under a Lily Foundation Fellowship at the University of

Pennsylvania. Birnes has also worked as a member of a grants recipient team from the Bureau of Justice Administration and the United States Department of Justice. In 2007, Dr. Birnes was made the chairman of the board of directors of Sunrise Community Counseling Center in Los Angeles.

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