



## Review of the Book “Monsters and Monarchs: Serial Killers in Classical Myths and History”

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**Irena V. Lebedeva**

Caspian Institute of Sea and River Transport. Astrakhan, Russia. Email: irenalebedeva[at]mail.ru

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### Abstract

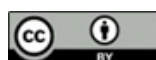
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Serial killers have been a popular topic in literature for centuries, appearing in works of fiction, non-fiction, and even poetry. In literature, serial killers often represent the dark side of human nature, and their stories often explore the depths of depravity and the psychological motivations behind their heinous acts. Examples of serial killers can be found throughout history and mythology. With all that the public's attention is usually focused on the serial murders of the latest decades, with the historical cases still generally remaining in the obscure. The reason for that lack of publicity is that serial killers in antiquity are difficult to identify, because the concept of serial killing is a relatively modern one. One of the pleasant exceptions is a book by Debbie Felton “Monsters and Monarchs: Serial Killers in Classical Myths and History” published by University of Texas Press, 2021, 235 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4773-2357-1 (paperback edition). This article reviews the book and comments on its contents and style.

### Keywords

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Serial Killers; Monarchs; Myths; Antiquity; Legends; Visual Representation



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## Рецензия на монографию «Монстры и монархи: серийные убийцы в истории и античной мифологии»

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**Лебедева Ирэна Валерьевна**

Каспийский институт морского и речного транспорта. Астрахань, Россия.

Email: [irenalebedeva\[at\]mail.ru](mailto:irenalebedeva@mail.ru)

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### Аннотация

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Серийные убийцы были популярной темой в литературе на протяжении столетий, появляясь в документальных хрониках, художественных и даже поэтических произведениях. В литературе серийные убийцы часто символизируют темную сторону человеческой натуры. Авторы подобной литературы часто исследуют глубины разврата и психологические мотивы чудовищных поступков серийников. Примеры серийных убийц можно найти во всей истории и мифологии. При всем этом внимание общественности обычно сосредоточено на серийных убийствах последних десятилетий, а исторические случаи, как правило, остаются в тени. Причина такой непубличности заключается в том, что серийных убийц в древности трудно идентифицировать, поскольку сама концепция серийных убийств является относительно современной. Одним из приятных исключений является книга Дебби Фелтон «Монстры и монархи. Серийные убийцы в классических мифах и истории», опубликованная издательством Техасского университета, 2021, 235 стр., ISBN: 978-1-4773-2357-1 (издание в мягкой обложке). В настоящей статье дается обзор книги и комментарии к ее содержанию и стилю.

### Ключевые слова

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серийные убийцы; монархи; мифы; античность; легенды; визуальное представление



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Serial killers have been a part of history for centuries, with some of the earliest known cases dating back to the 16th century. Throughout history, serial killers have been responsible for some of the most heinous and gruesome crimes ever committed. While the exact definition of a serial killer varies, it generally refers to someone who kills three or more people in a period of time, usually with a cooling off period between each murder. The most famous serial killer in history is probably Jack the Ripper, who terrorized London in 1888. He was never caught, and his identity remains a mystery to this day. Other famous serial killers include Ted Bundy, who killed dozens of women in the 1970s, and John Wayne Gacy, who killed 33 young men in the Chicago area in the 1970s. Serial killers are often characterized by their lack of remorse, their need for control, and their ability to manipulate their victims. They often have a distorted view of reality, and may suffer from mental illness or have a history of childhood trauma (Grande, 2021).

Serial killers have been a popular topic in literature for centuries, appearing in works of fiction, non-fiction, and even poetry. In literature, serial killers often represent the dark side of human nature, and their stories often explore the depths of depravity and the psychological motivations behind their heinous acts. One of the earliest examples of a serial killer in literature is the character of Bluebeard from the 17th century French folktale of the same name. In the story, Bluebeard is a wealthy nobleman who has murdered several of his previous wives, and his current wife must discover the truth about his past before it is too late. This story has been adapted and re-imagined in numerous works of literature, including the classic novel “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde.

Another classic example of a serial killer in literature is the character of Dr. Henry Jekyll from Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In the story, Dr. Jekyll is a respected scientist who creates a potion that unleashes his dark side, transforming him into the murderous Mr. Hyde. This story has been adapted and re-imagined in numerous works of literature, including the classic novel “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” by Robert Louis Stevenson. More recently, serial killers have been featured in a variety of works of literature, including the novel “American Psycho” by Bret Easton Ellis (Ellis, 1991), the novel “The Silence of the Lambs” by Thomas Harris (Harris, 2013), and the novel “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” by Stieg Larsson (Larsson, 2020). These works explore the psychological motivations behind serial killers and the dark side of human nature. In addition to novels, serial killers have also been featured in a variety of other works of literature.

In mass media serial killers have been a popular topic for decades, with films, television shows, books, and other forms of media exploring the psychology and motivations of these individuals. In cinematography serial killers have been portrayed in a variety of ways, from the sympathetic antihero to the depraved villain. Mass media often sensationalizes serial killers, focusing on their gruesome acts and creating a larger-than-life persona for them. Such are for instance,



Hannibal Lector from the 2013-2015 TV-series “Hannibal” portrayed by the charismatic Mads Mikkelsen, Joe Carroll from the 2013-2015 TV-series “Following” etc.

The media’s portrayal of serial killers has had a significant impact on public perception. It has created a distorted image of serial killers as being highly intelligent, calculating, and manipulative. This has led to a perception that serial killers are untouchable and that they are always one step ahead of law enforcement. This is far from the truth, as most serial killers are not particularly intelligent and are often caught due to their own mistakes or due to tips from the public. The media’s portrayal of serial killers has also had an effect on those who are interested. It has created a morbid fascination with the topic, which has led to a proliferation of books, movies, and television shows about serial killers. This has led to a distorted view of serial killers, as the media often portrays them as being more intelligent and calculating than they actually are. Overall, the media’s portrayal of serial killers has had a significant impact on public perception and has created a distorted view of these individuals. It is important to remember that the media’s portrayal of serial killers is often sensationalized and does not accurately reflect reality.

With all that the public’s attention is usually focused on the serial murders of the latest decades, with the historical cases still generally remaining in the obscure. The reason for that lack of publicity is that serial killers in antiquity are difficult to identify, because the concept of serial killing is a relatively modern one. However, there are some examples of individuals who may have exhibited behaviours that could be classified as serial killing. For example, in Ancient Rome, there was an innkeeper named Locusta who was known for poisoning her victims. She was hired by Emperor Nero to poison his enemies and was even given a state pension for her services. Serial killers even found their way into ancient mythology: in ancient Greek myths a man named Diomedes was known for eating the flesh of his victims. He was eventually killed by Hercules. In an ancient Egyptian legend a man named Khnumhotep who kills and mutilates women. He was eventually caught and executed. In the folklore of ancient China one Li Yu was known for killing and dismembering his victims. He was eventually caught and executed.

While the phenomenon of serial killing is often associated with modern times, it is important to note that examples of serial killers can be found throughout history and mythology. One of the most famous examples of a serial killer in classical mythology is the Minotaur. According to the myth, the Minotaur was a creature with the head of a bull and the body of a man, who lived in a labyrinth on the island of Crete. Every year, the people of Athens were forced to send seven young men and seven young women to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Theseus, a hero of Athens, eventually defeated the Minotaur and put an end to the sacrifices. While the Minotaur is not a human serial killer, the myth can be seen as a reflection of the fear and fascination that people have with serial killers. The idea of a monster lurking in a labyrinth, waiting to prey on innocent victims, is a powerful image that has been used in countless horror stories and films. In history, one of the most notorious examples of a serial killer is Gilles de Rais, a French nobleman who lived



in the 15th century. Gilles de Rais is believed to have murdered hundreds of children, often after subjecting them to horrific acts of torture and sexual abuse. He was eventually caught and executed for his crimes. The case of Gilles de Rais is significant because it is one of the earliest recorded examples of a serial killer in Western history. It also highlights the fact that serial killers are not just a modern phenomenon, but have existed throughout history.

Yet for a long period of human history serial killers remain in the shadows. They step out of the obscurity only in the Middle Ages, although the term itself was not coined until the late 19th century. The known serial killers in the Middle Ages were often members of the clergy or nobility, and their victims were often those of lower social classes. In the later times, serial killers were typically seen as individuals with a mental disorder or a psychological disorder, such as antisocial personality disorder. Serial killers in the modern era are often motivated by a desire for power, control, and revenge. They may also be motivated by a need for attention or a desire to satisfy a perverse sexual fantasy. Serial killers in the modern era are often highly organized and methodical in their approach to killing, and they often target specific victims.

Throughout history, there have been several monarchs who have been responsible for the deaths of countless individuals. These murderous monarchs often used their power and authority to their actions, leading to a legacy of violence and terror. One of the most well-known examples of a murderous monarch is King Henry VIII of England. During his reign, Henry VIII ordered the execution of several of his wives, as well as numerous political opponents. His reign was characterized by a brutal and authoritarian approach to governance, with many individuals living in fear of his wrath. Another example of a murderous monarch is Ivan IV of Russia, also known as Ivan the Terrible. Ivan IV was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, including his own son. He was known for his violent temper and erratic behaviour, which often led to brutal acts of violence and aggression. In addition to Henry VIII and Ivan IV, there are many other examples of murderous monarchs throughout history. From Caligula in ancient Rome to Vlad the Impaler in medieval Europe, these individuals represent a dark and disturbing chapter in history. Another notorious example is Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire. He was known for his ruthless tactics and his campaigns of conquest, which resulted in the deaths of millions of people. Other examples include Tamerlane, the founder of the Timurid Empire, who is believed to have killed up to 17 million people during his reign, and Ivan the Terrible, the first Tsar of Russia, who is believed to have killed hundreds of thousands of people during his reign. Or one can remember King Leopold II of Belgium, who is believed to have killed millions of people in the Congo Free State, and King Louis XIV of France, who is believed to have killed thousands of people during the French Revolution.

Despite the atrocities committed by these murderous monarchs, their legacies continue to fascinate and intrigue historians and scholars. By studying their lives



and actions, scholars seek to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and often violent nature of human society.

One illustrative example of such research is a recently published by by university of Texas Press monograph by Debbie Felton “Monsters and Monarchs: Serial Killers in Classical Myth and History” (Felton, 2021). By all accounts this is an engaging and informative book that explores the history and mythology of serial killers in the ancient world. The book delves into the lives and crimes of notorious figures such as Nero, Caligula, and Medea, examining the ways in which their monstrous deeds have been portrayed in myth and history. Felton examines the stories of some of the most notorious serial killers and provides a fascinating insight into the motivations and psychology of these individuals.

The book is divided into three sections, each focusing on a different type of serial killer. The first section, “Mythological Monsters”, looks at the myths and legends of monsters and monsters from the ancient world, such as the Minotaur, the Sphinx, the Hydra, Medea, Atreus, and Oedipus, examining the ways in which their crimes were depicted in ancient literature and what they reveal about the societies that produced them. Felton examines the stories behind these creatures and provides an interesting perspective on the motivations and psychology of these mythical creatures. The second section, “Historical Horrors”, focuses on real-life serial killers from throughout history, including Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth Bathory, and H.H. Holmes. Felton analyzes the cultural and societal factors that contributed to their crimes, as well as the ways in which their stories have been told and retold over time. Felton provides a comprehensive overview of the lives and crimes of some of the most notorious serial killers in history, such as Nero, Caligula, and Attila the Hun. Finally, the third section, “Cultural Consequences”, examines the lasting impact of these stories on popular culture and our understanding of crime and punishment. Felton considers how these tales have been adapted and re-imagined in everything from literature to film, and what this says about our ongoing fascination with violence and the macabre (Felton, 2021).

Felton also looks at the stories of some of the lesser-known serial killers, such as the infamous Roman Emperor Commodus. The author explores the motivations behind these killers and the ways in which they were able to evade justice. She also examines the impact that these serial killers had on their societies and the lasting effects that their crimes had on the people of the time. The reviewed monograph is a fascinating exploration of the dark side of classical literature and history. Felton's writing is engaging and accessible, making even the most complex historical and literary concepts easy to understand. Her analysis is thorough and thought-provoking, shedding new light on familiar stories and characters. The book is also well-researched, with a wealth of primary and secondary sources cited throughout. Overall, “Monsters and Monarchs” is a thought-provoking and engaging read for anyone interested in the intersection of true crime and classical literature.



Based on the review by Jane Draycott from the University of Glasgow, the book “Monsters and Monarchs: Serial Killers in Classical Myth and History” by Debbie Felton has however a few weak points:

- 1) Excessive justification: The author spends a significant amount of time justifying her choice of topic. This could potentially detract from the main arguments and discussions in the book.
- 2) Repetition of examples: There is a considerable repetition of examples, both ancient and modern, throughout the book. This could potentially lead to reader fatigue and dilute the impact of the examples.
- 3) Clarity of communication: Draycott suggests that the core argument of the book could have been communicated more clearly and cleanly. The excessive justification and repetition of examples may have muddied the waters and detracted from the author's impressive achievement in making her case in a thought-provoking fashion (Draycott, 2023).

However, it's important to note that these criticisms are subjective and other readers may have different opinions on the book

Debbie Felton is a prominent scholar of classical studies and a professor of classics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She received her Ph.D. in Classics from the University of California, Berkeley in 1993 and has since published extensively on classical mythology and literature.

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