

In the Eye of the Beholder

Martha Shelley reviews [Ebisu Publications](#):



In the case of Aileen Wuornos, the basic facts aren't disputed. The question is one of interpretation. In her latest—and very provocative—book, *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*, Phyllis Chesler presents a complex picture of this complex woman.

Born in 1956, Wuornos was abandoned by her parents, beaten viciously by her adoptive grandfather, and raped repeatedly in childhood by multiple family members. [By age 11, she was being sexually abused by boys and men in the neighborhood](#) in return for cigarettes, food, and drugs. She came to adulthood with no marketable skills except one: selling pussy. But unlike the myriads of nameless, forgotten women with similar biographies, Wuornos will always be remembered for killing seven johns along the highways of Florida.

The killings took place in 1989-1990. She was apprehended in 1991 and, after a brief trial, sentenced to death. The state killed her in 2002.

Chesler contacted Wuornos after her capture, corresponded extensively with her, and attempted to assist in her defense. In her book, she portrays a severely damaged human being, drinking heavily to drown her pain, in love with a woman who betrays her, spinning lies and delusions and genuine insights—yet finding the courage to fight much larger men. Wuornos confessed to the killings, but said that each of the johns she shot had raped or were attempting to rape her, and she was afraid they would murder her.

Was it self defense? Women like her are raped and murdered all the time. As Chesler writes, “The same police who had no trouble arresting prostitutes for selling had a much harder time finding or arresting the johns who murdered prostitutes.” The author gives numerous examples, and then says, “Street prostitutes are not even considered human, but were treated as disposable filth, garbage.” So if a john rapes and beats a prostitute and cheats her out of her earnings, whom should she call?

A neighbor of mine, a graduate student and single mother, once called the police to report a prowler. When the cop arrived, he raped my neighbor and then calmly took a shower in her apartment. Whom should she have called then?

Wuornos’s trial lasted 13 days. The jury took less than two hours to convict her and less than two hours to sentence her to death. Unlike Ted Bundy, who was given the option of a life sentence after murdering at least 30 women, Wuornos was female and—even worse—her main relationship was a lesbian one. Worst of all, one of the johns she shot was a former police chief and another was in the police reserves. Cops get away with killing civilians (especially Black ones) all the time. Nobody gets away with killing a cop.

Chesler’s book has met with mixed reviews. Twelve that I read were raves. M.H. Hoffman wrote, “this book will not let go of you.” I certainly agree! Novelist Talia Carner suggests the

book is actually a requiem for social justice, commenting that “The story of this desperate woman told from Prof. Chesler’s experiences, interviews and the many letters exchanged between her and the doomed prostitute is a lesson that should be taken seriously as our society only now begins to distinguish between victim and victimizer. It is also a condemnation of Florida’s justice system’s bias against women, of the backward, macho social norms that are lenient toward male serial killers because, after all, a man’s life is worth more than that of a woman’s, including one who defends herself.” Again, I agree wholeheartedly.

Two reviews, however, were dismissive. One argued that Wuornos could not be called a serial killer but only killed in self-defense. The other said she was simply a murderer.

Julie Bindel is an English radical feminist. From her perspective, Wuornos was a damaged person but her behavior was not irrational. Bindel objects that the book portrays Wuornos as deranged and doesn’t “challenge the label of ‘serial killer.’” (Chesler in fact acknowledges that she was “defending a serial killer.”) To support her thesis, Bindel quotes documentary filmmaker Nicholas Broomfield: “[Wuornos] was...not a serial killer. Aileen neither planned her crimes, stalked her victims, or took any pleasure from what she did.”

Additionally, she quotes psychologist Melissa Farley: “She killed those men because they raped her and threatened her life, which is common in the type of prostitution Wuornos was involved in.” Finally, Bindel stays, “I believe that Wuornos was so brutalised by men during her life that her actions – however extreme, however hard to condone – were committed in self-defence. They could, therefore, be described as understandable.”

Bindel grew up in poverty. [When she was a child, her family moved from a home without an indoor toilet to council housing](#)—the English version of a housing project. In 1980 she

was stalked by the Yorkshire Ripper, who murdered at least 13 women, but got away. She has organized on behalf of women who were prosecuted for killing violent male partners.

Charlotte Allen, the other negative reviewer, is an American conservative Catholic. Like Bindel, she sees Wuornos as not irrational—she insists that the killings were premeditated murder. She objects to Chesler's proposed defense, the "'battered women's syndrome' theory that allows women routinely beaten by their husbands or intimate partners to claim self-defense if they kill their abusers... [and] to extend this concept still further to include prostitutes, on the theory that, like battered wives, they experience near-daily violence from their male customers."

Allen continues: "There is no doubt that prostitution is a dangerous occupation—which is why there are pimps, or at the high-priced escort end, layers of protection in the form of screening, drivers, and bodyguards...prostitution is simply a career choice that pays better than administrative work... Selling your body does in fact pay better: Even a lowly streetwalker can earn as much in 20 minutes as a McDonald's cashier standing behind a counter makes in an entire morning. Prostitution is thus a vice-magnet for the unfortunate and desperate, but also for the lazy, the short-horized, the drug-addicted, and those, like Aileen Wuornos, who spend the greater part of their day chugging Budweisers. To believe otherwise is to deny women moral agency."

Pimps are there to protect prostitutes? Rather than take their money and beat them when they try to hold some back? I confess that Allen's statement astonishes me. But it shouldn't. Allen is the daughter of an attorney and wife of another, and [has degrees from Stanford, Harvard, USC, and the Catholic University of America.](#) A right wing Republican, she has compared Planned Parenthood to Murder, Inc.

So was it self defense, or murder? Or, as Chesler's book

suggests, something in between, shaped by a life of abuse, alcoholism, and mental illness? I find Chesler's portrait more compelling than either of the interpretations of these two negative reviewers.

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What are serial killers, anyway? Are they all predators who stalk their victims and enjoy killing them, like Ted Bundy, the Yorkshire Ripper? Do we count Dorothea Puente, who murdered elderly and disabled men for their Social Security checks, rather than for the pleasure of killing? Puente, like Wuornos, was also [horribly abused as a child](#). Is a Mafia don a serial killer when he orders his subordinates to kill multiple rivals but doesn't get his own hands bloody?

If so, then dare we add a handful of men who will never face prosecution? Those who have ordered thousands of subordinates to attack people in other countries, resulting in the deaths of millions? Should we call them psychopaths and serial killers—or just presidents, prime ministers, or kings?