

# The compelling psychopath: the charms of the anti-hero

In his new book, *Psychopath? Why we are Charmed by the Anti-hero*, **Dr Stephen McWilliams** explores how we are somehow seduced by fictional villains and antiheroes

**PSYCHOPATHS ARE ESSENTIAL** in fiction. They exist within the plot to present a challenge for the hero. Many fictional psychopaths are deliberately dislikeable; they are the villains in almost every novel, action film or television drama. Some are absurdly comical while others are simply repulsive without the humour. But often enough it is the protagonist himself (or, less often, herself) who is psychopathic. His nefarious deeds do little to dissuade us from cheering him on; indeed, we seem quite happy to shelve our own moral compasses as we root for him to prevail. Such an antihero needs charisma if we are to remain interested in his overcoming whatever challenge the plot throws at him.

There are countless literary and cinematic examples. We are seduced by the protagonists in Tarantino and Hitchcock films. We empathise with the talented Mr Ripley. We are so fascinated by Kevin Khatchadourian that we feel the relentless need to talk about him. We feel a thrill when Frank Underwood manipulates a naïve senator. And we positively tremble with glee at Hannibal Lecter's culinary assertion (with regard to a census-taker who once tried to test him) that he "ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti". He inhales sharply through his teeth and sends a shiver up the spine. And yet, deep within ourselves, we find him compelling.

So, what is a psychopath? Broadly speaking, we have a manipulative person who fundamentally lacks a conscience and has a lifelong history of engaging in a wide range of irresponsible, unethical or criminal activities for personal gain. He (for it is more often a he) lacks empathy or any sense of remorse and if confronted tends to blame others for his unscrupulous activities. He is often overtly likeable (at least, initially) because of the attention he pays to making a good impression upon those he thinks will be of use to him in his pursuits. This superficial charm may revert to glibness, but with narcissistic or even grandiose overtones. Promiscuous sexual behaviour, many short-term marriages or relationships, adultery and so forth are common. The psychopath lies pathologically to cover up his actions or more often for the sheer hell of it, even when lying is totally unnecessary. The psychopath gets bored easily, is impulsive and has a constant need for excitement. He lacks any realistic long-term goals.

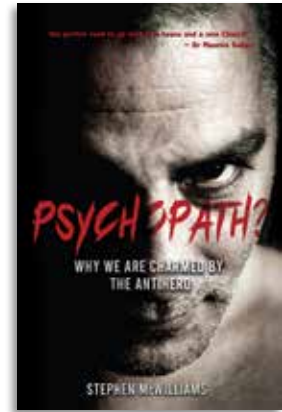
Not all psychopaths are serial killers. Indeed, not all are convicted criminals, even if this is a more likely outcome than for the average person. Conservative estimates suggest there are around 30 million psychopaths in the world – at least one in 200 of us, possibly more. Many

of these people function quite well in everyday life, even if some of the people around them soon learn to dislike them. Many psychopaths use their manipulative skills to carve out impressive careers as lawyers, police officers, politicians, advertising executives, estate agents, soldiers, surgeons and – yes – even the occasional psychiatrist.

Psychopaths in real life can initially appear likeable, especially if we have something they want, such as access to our money, power or influence. In such cases, the psychopath will go to considerable lengths to convince us that they are the type of person we should trust. Once they have exploited us and we cease to be of use to them, they will abandon us and we will be left wondering what on earth happened. In some instances, we may not even realise we have been conned, especially if nobody points it out to us. It may take the benefit of hindsight to work out their true character.

But how could a fictional psychopath possibly be likeable? Most importantly, the average reader and viewer will usually only finish a book or film if they have some affinity for (or at least fascination with) one of the main protagonists. Where the latter happens to be a psychopath, it is especially important to the author or director that we like the protagonist sufficiently to persist with the story. So, perhaps the most fundamental reason the fictional psychopath is likeable is that he simply must be so for his very survival as a fictional entity.

But the real question is how the author or director achieves the antihero's likeability notwithstanding their dirty deeds. Is it their calmness in face of danger? Is it a strange vulnerability they may possess? Do they appeal to our fascination with secrecy? Is it that they seem to take us into their confidence? Are we simply seduced by their charm? Do they appeal to a part deep within us that longs to be bad? Or do their less-likeable victims somehow make them look good? Whatever it is, something exists in the fictional psychopath that keeps us coming back for more. We just can't help ourselves.



**Dr Stephen McWilliams is a consultant psychiatrist and author. His latest book, *Psychopath? Why we are Charmed by the Anti-hero* is published by Mercier Press. ISBN:978-1-78117-590-3**