

Aileen Wuornos was no monster

Why do we continue to sensationalise this tormented
woman's desperate life?

Julie Bindel

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Aileen Wuornos's life was hell from the day she was born.

When I hear that Peter Sutcliffe, the serial killer known as the Yorkshire Ripper, is expected to die any moment, I think about monsters like him, and how his murderous reign of terror left its stamp not just on the victims and their loved ones, but on women everywhere.

There are monsters, though, and there are misrepresentations. Can we even begin to compare a man who rapes, murders and defiles the bodies of his female victims to Aileen Wuornos, a woman who perfectly fit the profile of a victim of a serial killer such as Sutcliffe — but who, instead, has been represented as his female counterpart? They even made a film about her: *Monster*.

The story of Aileen Wuornos, branded America's first female serial killer, sits on that blurry edge between fact and fiction. Her life reads like the bleakest of horror stories in which there is no reprieve or redemption, but instead a trail of death and destruction culminating in her execution by lethal injection.

At the age of 46, the former prostitute was put to death in Florida, in 2002, having killed seven men — in self defence, she always claimed.

Wuornos's life was hell from the day she was born. Her mother was barely 14 when she married 16-year-old Leo Dale Pittman. He was already a serial sex offender and,

at the time Wuornos was born, in 1956, he was in prison for the rape of a child. He later hanged himself while still inside.

When she was four, Wuornos and her brother were abandoned by their mother and sent to live with their alcoholic and abusive grandparents. The young girl was repeatedly raped by multiple family members, and by the time she was 11, was being sexually abused by boys and men in the neighbourhood in return for cigarettes, booze and what she understood as ‘affection’.

After another rape, Wuornos became pregnant aged 14 and her baby was given up for adoption. She ran away to live in the nearby woods, selling sex to survive. After a miserable lifetime of selling sex to men she found repulsive, being raped and abused and treated like dirt, Wuornos’s tenuous coping strategies wore down to zero. She could no longer cope with the daily hell her life had become.

“Aileen was terrorised by violent johns, and eventually lashed out in crazed defence, just like men do in wars when they are also afraid of getting killed or tortured,” says psychologist Melissa Farley, who was involved in the case.

The news coverage of the Wuornos trial — which can be seen in the documentaries Nick Broomfield made about her — completely omitted any mention of her tormented mental state, though. She was depicted as an avaricious sexual deviant, seducing men and then gleefully murdering them before running off with their money and her lesbian lover. Wuornos, though, had been damaged and traumatised beyond measure by a lifetime of sexual violence. She didn’t have a rational understanding of her rights when she was arrested, and her inconsistent confessions were all the prosecution needed to bring a 12:0 verdict. Three detectives on the case, meanwhile, as well Wournos’s girlfriend, Tyria Moore, sold their story to the media.

A voyeuristic body of work has grown up around her tragic tale. Wournos’s story has been used in a dozen documentaries and films, the most famous of which is 2003’s *Monster*, starring Charlize Theron. There are books, academic studies, umpteen podcasts, 10 songs and even an opera about Wuornos’s life and crimes. In fact, Broomfield’s first documentary about her, *The Selling of a Serial Killer* highlights the exploitation of Wuornos by those around her.

The latest addition to this sorry library is a book by US feminist academic and psychologist Phyllis Chesler entitled *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*. Chesler was interested in Wuornos right from the get go: after hearing that Wuornos was planning on pleading self-defence, she called her up, thinking she could help.

As Chesler puts it: “I wanted a jury to hear the truth about how dangerous the ‘working life’ really is; how prostitutes are routinely infected with diseases, gang-raped, tortured, and murdered; and that Wuornos had been raped and beaten so many times that, by now, if she was at all human, she’d have to be permanently drunk and out of her mind.”

Chesler describes her book as being: “...about a female serial killer and about the way in which her badass deeds pried the world’s imagination wide open. Here was a ‘nobody’ who became a ‘somebody’, a throwaway child who became the whore who

shot down johns. Someone anonymous who became famous, a kickass folk hero like Jesse James or Bonnie and Clyde.”

Requiem is fascinating, flawed and exploitative. Written in a true crime/potboiler style, it is full of vivid descriptions of Wuornos’s crimes and imagined conversations and is dripping with misrepresentation. Chesler breathlessly describes Wuornos early on as: “the hitchhiking lesbian prostitute [who] was no longer prey; she had become a predator”. And she believed Wuornos had “the forbidden feminist longing” to become a “predator”, based on no real evidence whatsoever.

Wuornos’s lawyer, on the other hand, described her as the “most disturbed individual”, and Nick Broomfield, after interviewing her for the final time said: “My conclusion from the interview is today we are executing someone who is mad.”

There are, though, some invaluable insights from Wuornos in *Requiem*, such as this extract from a letter she wrote to Chesler in February 1992 from her prison cell, following her conviction:

“I am a female who has been raped and the male dominant world is laughing. They’ve succeeded to putting me in the chair to prove that men can and will do as they want to us women of America.”

All Wuornos’s victims were ‘johns’ who crawled the highways looking for women. Wuornos left their bodies in wooded areas off Highway I-75, Florida, over a 12-month period. All had been shot with the same pistol between two and nine times. All were white men between the ages of 40 and 65.

Richard Mallory, 51, was the first victim, shot dead on 30 November 1989. Wuornos claimed the convicted rapist had sodomised, brutally beaten and tortured her. David Spears, Charles Carskaddon, Peter Siems, Troy Burrell, Charles Humphreys and Walter Antonio would meet the same fate.

There was nothing extraordinary about any of these men, except Humphreys. He was a retired US Air Force Major, former State Child Abuse Investigator and former Chief of Police. Perhaps that’s why he was the only man Wuornos shot in the head, execution style.

As Chesler recounts from Wuornos’ statement: “Humphreys took his badge out and he said I’m gonna have you arrested for prostitution. I said: Bullshit you are. So he grabbed my hand... my arm, and he said, no, better yet, how would you like to suck my dick and I won’t do anything, but you’re not gettin’ any money for it. If you suck my dick I won’t arrest you and you can go scott free.”

Throughout her book, though, Chesler supports and perpetuates the lazy description of this woman as a ‘monster’; nowhere does she challenge the label of ‘serial killer’. I called Nick Broomfield who is, in my view, the only person who has told Wuornos’s story in an honest and non-exploitative way. Broomfield tells me he is “haunted” by the case.

“People painted Aileen as a monster,” he says, “which she was not. She was also not a serial killer. Aileen neither planned her crimes, stalked her victims, or took any pleasure from what she did.”

Melissa Farley agrees. “Aileen was exploited and used all her life by men doing monstrous things to her, and I know she hated that being applied to her. This book does nothing to disabuse the reader of the mythology that has been created about Aileen.

“Wuornos was defending herself, not seeking to become the ‘whore who shot down johns’ or some sort of folk hero,” Farley continues. “She killed those men because they raped her and threatened her life, which is common in the type of prostitution Wuornos was involved in.”

The dialogue is at its most jarring when Chesler “gets inside [Wuornos’s] mind” and imagines what she was thinking about her victims: “But he promised! But he owed her! But she’d worked for it! She’d fucked for it. Fucked for it? Tough shit lady. The state doesn’t enforce verbal contracts between whores and johns.”

The book veers between potboiler and parody, littered with stereotypes and clichés: “Wuornos only wants a ‘piece of the pie’, she surrendered long ago, the way all ‘good girls’ are supposed to. Just let the woman have her Bud, her Marlboros, her girlfriend, her motel room, and when she’s goddam ready to spread ‘em and sell, don’t mess with her. Pay her, fuck her, and be on your way.”

In another section, Chesler writes: “All her life, she’d welcomed men who ‘wanted one thing only’, and if they cursed at her, well, let them, they were paying; it didn’t bother her anyway.”

These are not the sentiments of any of the hundreds of women in prostitution I have met. 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.

Wuornos, it seems, wised up to Chesler, telling her in no uncertain terms to leave her alone, “that [i]t is quite obvious that your interest in my behalfs, are not in the right places. I can diffentately sense a swindle in you. . . So, this will be the final reply back.”

Chesler inevitably, wasn’t having any of it: “So: I had Wuornos’ permission to write about the Case, but not about her life. Does she think that her life or what she’s done ‘belongs’ to her and not to the universe-at-large? Does Wuornos think she can sell pieces of her story, or the same piece, over and over again? Does she think being on trial for murder is an asset she can merchandise?”

Wuornos, though, wasn’t selling herself any more. She knew that there were countless women like her, being raped and beaten and offered no protection or justice by the police. In a letter to her childhood friend Dawn in 1995, she wrote that there should be a “nationwide self-defence law for women”.

These are not the words of an insane person or a sexually fetishistic serial killer; these are the words of someone desperately wanting to protect herself — and others like her. Regardless, Chesler strips her of dignity and turns her into tabloid fodder.

There are books that can help the reader understand human cruelty and how people can turn into real sexual predators, such as Jonathan Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam*

or Kate Millett's *The Basement. Requiem*, though, is a travesty. It fails to explain Wuornos and fails to help the reader understand the cumulative effects of male violence and cruelty on women.

I followed the case avidly at the time and, as Nick Bloomfield also admits, I find that the life and death of this tortured and abused woman still preys on my mind. I desperately wanted *Requiem* to lay to rest some of the lies about Aileen Wuornos. I wanted it to name her as a victim of both men's violence and of the man-made law. But *Requiem*, just like every other attempt at telling this terrible story, has failed.

There are countless other Aileen Wuornos's, tortured, neglected children that grow into the type of woman that sadistic men prey upon. They are seen as disposable, as scum, and when they die we barely notice. Wuornos flipped the script. She blew wide open the reality of women's lives in the face of the worst of male violence. But, still, so unjustly, she remains the monster.

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