

When X Marks Murder

By Ken MacQueen

After finishing *Hero Haters*, my debut thriller, I travelled to Wisconsin last June to attend the Writers Police Academy to continue my apprenticeship in fiction writing. It was an immersive experience into police procedure, criminology, courts—and murders. The latter was of particular interest since *Hero Haters* features two serial killers a century apart.

During this hands-on course I drove a police vehicle on a twisting course, attended lectures on the use, and abuse, of a multitude of firearms, and I was ambushed during a call-out to a gentlemen's club. Chaos ensued with bodies everywhere. After I yanked off my virtual-reality goggles, used in police training scenarios, I was a sweaty mess.

Why am I sharing this? Because recent headlines reveal one woman's inadvertent link between the recent murders of four University of Idaho students, and the serial murders of ten people decades ago.

One of the most fascinating—and chilling—police academy lectures was *Conversations with the B.T.K. Killer, Dennis Rader*. The lecture was given by Katherine Ramsland, a renowned professor of forensic psychology at DeSales University in Pennsylvania. She's written hundreds of articles and dozens of books, most exploring the criminal mind and the motivations of serial killers.

Her book, *Confession of a Serial Killer: The Untold Story of Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer*, is the product of hundreds of hours in conversation and correspondence with Rader. He was arrested in 2005 and is serving consecutive life sentences for 10 murders in Kansas between 1974 and 1991. Most murders followed his self-created sobriquet of Bind, Torture and Kill.

Ramsland, diminutive, soft-spoken and tough as nails, held court before a rapt group of authors in a lecture hall of Green Bay's Northeast Wisconsin Technical College. She described her investigation into Rader's "X-Factor," the thing that made a killer of an otherwise unremarkable family man, active in his Wichita church and in Boy Scouts. She displayed crime scene photos, apologizing if some were disturbing. They were. She said we were spared much worse.

She called Rader "an outlier." He was married, a father, had a college degree and was born into an intact family with no evidence of past abuse, thus shattering the loner stereotype of psychopathic killers. If there was an X-Factor, "something that drives a serial killer," she

concluded his was “straightforward.” He created opportunities to exploit his latent violent tendencies, and a sexual proclivity toward such things as bondage and cross-dressing. He wanted fame.

She would have shared those insights during her classes at DeSales University. In a stunning development, Bryan Kohberger, her former student, was arrested in December, six months after graduation, accused of the knife-murders of those four university students in Moscow, Idaho.

Kohberger graduated from DeSales with a Masters from their criminal justice program. He then moved to Washington State University, a 15-minute drive from the Idaho murder scene. He was a Ph.D. student and teaching assistant in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the time of his arrest. He has said through his lawyer he expects to be “exonerated.”

His former professor, the normally voluble Ramsland, told *Newsweek*, “I’m making no media statements at this time.”

But Kerry Rawson, the daughter of Rader, the BTK killer, has gone public with her shock. “Personally, my first reaction was just like my stomach turned,” she said in an interview with America’s *NewsNation* television network. “I literally physically got ill knowing there was now a connection to Ramsland, and she connects to my father.”

She tweeted her fear that Kohberger may have contacted or been inspired by her father, “knowing how common it is for criminology students, true crime fans and others to correspond with my father.” Rader, in a terse message from prison, denies any contact with Kohberger.

What insights did Kohberger draw from Ramsland’s study of extreme offenders? What drew him to her expertise? Certainly, there are parallels with Rader.

“My father graduated with a bachelors in Criminal Justice from Wichita State University,” the BTK killer’s daughter tweeted, “making a mockery of this important field, using his college courses to study his own ongoing murders and get access to [law enforcement] information.”

Whether Kohberger did likewise hinges on his guilt or innocence at trial.

“Was he studying my father outside of academics?” his daughter wrote. “Am I ever going to get answers to that?”

Ramsland must have similar questions about her former student. I think back to her lecture to a group of crime authors last June, the very month her student Kohberger graduated. Was there an X-factor she missed?