

VIEWPOINT


Pop Culture Is Full Of Sociopaths Right Now. I Should Know: I Was Diagnosed In College

In her new memoir, *Sociopath*, Patric Gagne writes about her lifelong quest to better understand and control her sociopathic tendencies. Here, in a personal essay for *Vogue*, she offers a new perspective on the much-maligned disorder.

BY PATRIC GAGNE

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 SAVE

I recognised the defiance immediately, the cunning, the head slightly cocked as she calculated the angles. She's a juvenile delinquent. A pathological liar. She demonstrates a lack of remorse and guilt, criminal versatility, impulsivity. She checks nearly every box on the checklist. Regardless of whatever preconceived notions you have of the mental disorder, Wednesday Addams is a budding sociopath.

As someone diagnosed with this disorder, I've spent most of my life under the malignant marquee reserved for this personality type. We are not the group anyone wants to root for. And yet, this is what everyone seems to be doing lately.

Chances are you've seen her, too. Her brooding visage graces book covers, movie posters, costume shops, and lunchboxes. Look closely, though, and you'll see there's more to this antisocial teenager than her goth archetype would suggest. She is kind. She is loyal. She is capable of close relationships. She cares deeply for her friends, is wounded by her enemies. She is smart. Disciplined. Fearless. Popular.

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BY MEGAN NOLAN



I see Wednesday everywhere: little girls (and some boys) wreaking havoc in her uniform. These children don't suffer niceties at birthday parties. They don't return my smile in the grocery store. Their long black braids frame angelic faces that hold my gaze with undisputed indifference, only to smirk in defiance. And it thrills me. I'm delighted that in a world full of chaos, violence, and division, so many kids see versions of themselves in this psychological heretic.

Contrary to popular belief, there's nothing inherently immoral about having a limited emotional range. The majority of those whose personalities fall on the sociopathic spectrum have the ability to lead perfectly happy, socially acceptable roles in loving family units. But you wouldn't know that from common discourse.



Television's talking heads, newspaper articles, and countless magazine headlines continue to disparage and vilify sociopaths, usually by erroneously conflating them with malignant narcissists or stereotyping us based on the worst examples of our personality type – serial killers and monsters. These extremes comprise only a fraction of the sociopathic picture, yet they've been misappropriated to define everyone with the disorder.

Ironically, fiction presents a more complete (if inconvenient) truth. Unconsciously it seems that a large segment of society identifies with (and sometimes even worships) those who have a harder time exhibiting and experiencing the higher social emotions. It's no coincidence that the resurgence in popularity of a character like Wednesday Addams follows so closely on the heels of another fictional outlier who took the world by storm, a snow queen named Elsa who equated solitude with freedom. It's likely the same driving force responsible for reimagining classic villains like Maleficent and the Wicked Witch as sympathetic characters, and the reason Swifties from every nation rejoice in their collective chorus, "It must be exhausting always rooting for the anti-hero."

Oh, yes, I know a thing or two about this. The red flags were there from the beginning. I always knew something about me was different. I started stealing in kindergarten and never felt remorse. In elementary school my behaviour worsened. I had urges of violence and struggled with impulse control. By junior high, I was routinely breaking into houses after school just to relax. And as my personality grew, so did my obsession with the word that described it: sociopath. Any Google search for the word will conjure a litany of serial killers and the decades-old checklist of psychopathic indicators. Early on I recognised myself in its description. But the sum of its parts never matched the solution of my equation.

As a child, I never *felt* like a bad person. I didn't *want* to be destructive. It was more of a compulsion, my brain's way of jolting itself out of apathy. My struggle with feeling was like an emotional learning disability, something I didn't understand. Granted, I

knew that I lacked empathy and wasn't emotionally complex like everyone else. But that was the point. I noticed these things. That meant I was not only capable of self-awareness but also of evolution, two emotional milestones that sociopaths are supposedly incapable of experiencing.

It didn't add up. From my perspective, the sociopath composite presented was only partially correct, with important nuances overlooked. And no place exemplified this lack of context more than the way the media so often portrayed them solely as murderers and soulless monsters.

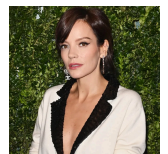
For a child who suspected she might be a sociopath, it was scary to think my fate was predetermined. I might not have felt like a bad person, but the lack of evidence beyond my own belief system made me feel uncertain. In the real world, sympathetic sociopaths were non-existent. So I took solace in make-believe.

While other little girls longed to be Cinderella, it was Maleficent with whom I identified. She was my hero, and I appreciated why she was anti-social. It had nothing to do with evil. Her darkness was not a by-product of her personality, but a misinterpretation of it. Characters like her serve as a glorious societal Rorschach, a magical wardrobe through which sociopathic kids can travel to see all the facets of their personalities. I could very much relate. I can still relate.

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BY NELL FRIZZELL



As a doctor of psychology, I've been consistently amazed by the dearth of resources dedicated to sociopathy. "Real life" models are roughly the same today as they were decades ago: insubstantial. Sensational. One-dimensional. Sociopaths as a cohort are erroneously defined by a small category of outliers. They're guilty by association. They're convicted without a trial. But paradoxically the prevalence of our fictional representatives tells a different story. From new Disney characters and Netflix heroines to Suicide Squads and comedic icons – I'm talking to you, Larry David – the

popularity of magnanimous malefactors has been steadily increasing since the turn of the century.

Could it be that more people relate to this disorder than are willing to admit it? Statistics indicate this is the case. Sociopathy is believed to affect nearly five per cent of the US population, roughly the same rate as bipolar and depressive disorders. But sociopathy has nowhere near the resources or treatment options. That needs to change. Like I said, we aren't the team anyone wants to root for. But there are far too many of us to simply ignore.

I wrote my memoir to show that not all sociopaths are evil. We're children seeking acceptance. We're parents hoping for validation. We're doctors looking for answers. We're human beings in need of compassion. If there's one thing I've learnt from decades of consuming pop culture, it's that representation matters. Representation can spark change. Society accepts Elsa, Maleficent, and Wednesday. Maybe it can accept the rest of us, too.

Sociopath: A Memoir is published by Bluebird and out now.

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