

I've always struggled to understand how serial killers have become iconic – perhaps even aspirational – figures in our culture.

It helps, of course, that these usually silent and uncommunicative murderers get locked up in maximum security prisons and, like Hollywood superstars ensconced in their Beverly Hills mansions, they therefore come to exist only in our imagination and by how they get described and portrayed by others. So, quite quickly, what the public believes to be true bleeds seamlessly into dramatic portrayals of real, or even fictional serial killers. I seem to have spent a career telling people “no, Hannibal Lecter did not exist; he’s a fictional character” but, for the record, I have never encountered a chess playing, Bach loving, cannibalistic psychiatrist who repeatedly murdered people.

Dennis Nilsen, a former soldier and Metropolitan Police Officer, was neither silent, nor uncommunicative but rather talked endlessly about what he had done, although not to any great purpose, or with any insight. Frankly, he was uninteresting in what he said and, as an individual, struck me as weedy and needy, banal and inconsequential. He was a Pound Shop Tom Ripley – perhaps the most accurate fictional serial killer ever created. However, Nilsen succeeded as a killer because he murdered young men who, by and large, would not be missed and, of course, he also benefitted from the pervasive homophobia that characterised the 1970s and 1980s – a reality that allowed him to escape detection for far too many years.

PS Lynch’s new, extraordinary collection of poems, *Cranley Gardens*, captures all of this with wit and pathos and expresses ideas, emotions and a sense of place and time that any number of dramas or documentaries about Nilsen and his appalling crimes have failed to understand. Lynch paints a picture of the seediness and overwhelming banality of what Nilsen did and where he did it, and so grasps how the killer’s sense of himself was at odds with the life that he lived and the crimes that he’d committed. I was struck in particular by *Des* in this thoughtful collection and, leave to one side how Nilsen would have loved the comparison, the reference to Gericault’s great painting *The Raft of the Medusa* and how 15 sailors survived the sinking of that French ship by resorting to cannibalism.

Of course, 15 is also the best guesstimate that we have of how many young men Nilsen actually murdered.

As far as I am aware, and with the notable exception of Sufjan Steven’s astonishing song about John Wayne Gacy Jnr, this is the first collection of poems about the activities of a serial killer and how we should try to make sense of who they were and what they did. These poems are uncompromising and insightful in equal measure and, in *Netflix*, Lynch even tries to explain our continuing fascination with “taciturn Dahmer”, “erudite Bundy” and other “rampant serial killers”. These poems express feelings and sensations and, in doing so, create a visceral connection to the horror of the murders sometimes by, for example, simply listing the collected accoutrements of Nilsen’s flat and how these failed to deliver for him the life that he believed he was entitled to have – a life, of course, that relied on taking the lives of others.

*Cranley Gardens* will take you to a place that is all too real and authentic and remind you that what you see on screen is often far removed from reality.

**Emeritus Professor David Wilson**