

# REAL CRIME

MARCH 03, 2020

## 'Daddy Did It': Why Some People Believe They Have a Serial Killer in the Family

MELINDA BECK



San Francisco police circulated this composite of the Bay Area's "Zodiac" killer. At left is a drawing from witnesses to a murder of a cab driver in San Francisco. The amended drawing on the right was based on further questioning of the witnesses. The suspect is also linked with other murders. Photo: Getty Images

Maybe they were abandoned or abused as children and spin a dark fantasy to explain their lives. Or they see a vague resemblance in a composite sketch and hope to ride a sensational case to 15 minutes of fame.

In very rare instances, people who suspect their fathers, brothers or other family members are long-sought serial killers are dead right and help authorities solve a notorious cold case. But far more often, they pester police with circumstantial evidence backing up wild theories—and then accuse the cops of cover-ups when their suspicions are dismissed.

"I've dealt with it most of my career," sighs Jeffrey L. Rinek, a retired FBI Special Agent and author of *In the Name of the Children: An FBI Agent's Relentless Pursuit of the Nation's Worst Predators*. "People call in and say, 'I have some information and I'm a little afraid to tell you, but I think it needs to be told.' Then what they say doesn't fit the location of the crime or the time or other details. So you start asking questions and their tone changes. They say

location of the crime or the time or other details. So you start asking questions and their tone changes. They say, 'But I know this—you have to believe me!'"

### More Than a Thousand Zodiac Killer 'Leads'

The Zodiac killer, who murdered at least five people and possibly dozens more in California in the late 1960s, has attracted an outsized number of "Daddy-Did-It" claims. More than 1,200 people have told police they know the identity of the killer who also taunted police with letters and coded messages—including six who are convinced that a family member did it.



Watch: Naomi Ekperigin talks about the Zodiac killer and the many theories surrounding his real identity.

"Most of them have little more evidence than 'My dad looked like the composite sketch, he lived in California at the time and he was breathing,'" Michael Butterfield, a writer and researcher who runs the website [Zodiackillerfacts.com](http://Zodiackillerfacts.com) and hosts the podcast *Zodiac A to Z*, tells *A&E Real Crime*. "This case is a sea of stupidity, crackpots and falsehoods."

Gary Stewart, for one, believed his biological father, Earl Van Best Jr. was the Zodiac killer. He wrote about how he came to this conclusion in his 2014 bestseller, *The Most Dangerous Animal of All*.

Like Stewart, **Dennis Kaufman** and **Deborah Perez** also saw a composite sketch of the Zodiac—showing close-cropped hair and glasses—on TV crime shows years after the killings and were stunned by the resemblance to the men who raised them.

William Beeman wrote a two-part book, *Jack the Zodiac*, suspecting that his **brother was the killer**—in part because they wore the same shoe size. William Collins told an interviewer on *ABC's Primetime Live* that his father could be the Zodiac because his **handwriting looked similar**.

Steve Hodel, a retired Los Angeles Police Department detective, wrote a best-selling book, *Black Dahlia Avenger*, claiming that his estranged father, Dr. George Hodel, murdered and mutilated actress Elizabeth Short in Los Angeles in the sensational 1947 case. In a second book, *Most Evil*, he went on to posit that his father was also the Zodiac killer, Chicago's "Lipstick" killer and Manila's "Jigsaw" murderer—based largely on his father's travels.

The FBI, local police and amateur Zodiac sleuths have poked holes in all these allegations, but they live forever in books, movies, TV documentaries, websites and message boards debating different theories of the case.

"Every time that 2007 movie, *Zodiac*, airs on TV, it inspires even more kooks to come out of the woodwork and claim they've solved the case," says Butterfield.

Beyond the Zodiac, people have attracted media attention recently claiming to be Ted Bundy's granddaughter, Jack the Ripper's great-great grandson (via the HISTORY channel series, "American Ripper,") and the brother of the "real" killer of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police are investigating a Utah man's claim, posted on Facebook in January 2020, that his father was a serial killer and may have murdered a young mother who disappeared in Edmonton 10 years ago.

The man said he recognized his father's voice on a brief recording made when the woman got into an unknown man's car. An RCMP spokeswoman said previous assertions by the source against his father turned out to be false and cautioned that "erroneous information can have negative effects on the investigation and the family involved."

### **Why People Point the Finger at Their Family Members**

What motivates someone to suspect a family member is a heinous killer and then spend years collecting circumstantial evidence?

Sandra L. Brown, a trauma therapist and CEO of the Institute for Relational Harm Reduction & Public Pathology Education, says there could be several, overlapping reasons. "As much as we could like to have a simple answer, there never is one," she tells *A&E Real Crime*.

While some may be seeking publicity, others might be suffering from mental health issues, delusions or personality disorders such as narcissism which creates a sense of grandiosity, Browns says. "And let's not rule out people who have the kind of psychopathy that gives them a desire to jerk people around."

She also notes that people who are adopted in childhood often invent stories about their real parents as a defense mechanism that helps them cope. And people who experience trauma in childhood—particularly chronic, ongoing abuse—and don't resolve it in therapy often seek out explanations of their own, and the line between fantasy and reality can become blurred. Hearing a story about what a serial killer or rapist did might trigger a "re-experiencing" of the trauma, and the flashback may be distorted.

"It's taken us a long time to understand that trauma plays with memory and what comes back isn't always accurate, frame by frame, although it's representative of something similar," Brown says. "I could see that happening in some of these cases."

Several of those who claim their fathers were responsible for the Zodiac killings did have traumatic childhoods.

In *The Most Dangerous Animal of All*, Stewart writes that his father married his mother when she was 14 years old

and so hated the baby they had together that he often put him in a closed trunk to muffle his cries. He then abandoned him in a stairwell when he was two months old. Although Stewart was adopted and raised in a loving home, he writes that he lived in fear he would be rejected at any moment because he wasn't worth keeping around.

Kaufman's siblings described their stepfather, Jack Tarrance, as violent and abusive. Kaufman claimed he found a bloody knife, a crude mask and some rolls of grainy film among Tarrance's possessions after he died and police initially believed him. But Tarrance had a thick Southern accent, which witnesses who heard the real Zodiac never described.

Perez said her father, Guy Ward Henrickson, never abused her, but did tell her he had killed "many, many people." She told reporters that she wrote one of the Zodiac letters for him when she was just 7 years old and waited in the car during two of the killings. Reports later surfaced that Perez had also claimed to be JFK's illegitimate daughter.

Steve Hodel was 9 years old when his father abandoned the family. Dr. Hodel was a plausible suspect in the Black Dahlia murder in 1947; he was also charged with molesting his own 14-year old daughter. But he would have been decades older than witnesses described the Zodiac in the late 1960s. Hodel's second book describes his father as "one of the most prolific serial killers in history," but Zodiac sleuths say it is full of inconsistencies and errors.

In the rare cases where a family member's suspicions prove correct and help police catch a notorious criminal, the accusers generally behave differently, wrestling with deeply mixed feelings and avoiding the spotlight.

When David Kaczynski recognized his older brother Ted's writing style in the rambling manifesto issued by the Unabomber in 1993, he tried to stay anonymous and hired a lawyer to bring his suspicions to the FBI. David also made sure Ted was apprehended safely, and later became an activist against the death penalty, which his brother narrowly escaped when he was sentenced to eight consecutive life sentences in prison with no possibility of parole.

#### **Related Features:**

[Interview with Kerri Rawson, Daughter of Serial Killer BTK](#)

[5 Serial Killers Who Haven't Been Caught Yet](#)

[The Zodiac Killer and Other Horrifying Murderers Who Wore Masks and Costumes](#)

[When Ted Bundy Was a Babysitter](#)

[A Surprising New Theory About Jack the Ripper's Victims](#)

 **Can't Get Enough Of The Real Crime Blog?**

Never miss a story by signing up for the newsletter now.

Email Address

**Get Updates**

By submitting your information, you agree to receive emails from A&E and A+E Networks. You can opt out at any time.

**More details:** [Privacy Notice](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Contact Us](#)