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## A Page-Turner with a Social Conscience: Requiem for a Female Serial Killer by Phyllis Chesler

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### Acknowledgements

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**A PAGE-TURNER WITH A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE:  
REQUIEM FOR A FEMALE SERIAL KILLER  
(NEW ENGLISH REVIEW PRESS, 2020, 248 PAGES) BY PHYLLIS CHESLER**

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**KEYWORDS**

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WHEN DR. PHYLLIS CHESLER'S groundbreaking, courageous, profoundly insightful book, *Women and Madness* (1972), was published nearly 50 years ago, it changed the world for all of us who read it. It was a revelation about how women were treated in the mental health system, unjustifiably called "mad" for such things as refusing to do the housework, for loving women rather than men, for belonging to a racialized group. She had made it impossible for any reader to assume that therapists were scientists who made objective decisions about what "mental illness" was, who "had" mental illness, and what should be done to them—too often, what should be done *to* them, not *for* them. She had also raised other fundamental questions, such as who gets to define normality, who gets to decide who is and is not a "good woman," and how the so-called "mental health system" had acquired so much dangerous control over women. She yanked us away from assuming that women classified as psychiatrically disordered had individual, intrapsychic problems and left us considering how society's rigid prescriptions for women caused them to suffer, how that suffering was then treated as the women's problems rather than society's, and how the world needed to be changed for the better. The book established her as *the* pioneer feminist psychologist.

Since *Women and Madness*, Chesler has written many more books, each about a totally different subject. What all her books share is that *all* are groundbreaking, and *all* require the unique kind of mind and the courage either to tackle a subject no one has tackled before, such as her book about good mothers losing custody of their children in *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody* (1986; Second Edition, 2011), or a new take on a subject such as *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2002; Second Edition, 2009).

Furthermore, Chesler has never been an ivory tower academic. She walks the walk, with her generous spirit and seemingly boundless energy and brilliance leaping to the aid of the oppressed in a stunning variety of arenas. As just one example, when *Mothers on Trial* (1986/2011) was published, she did not produce the manuscript revealing the horrors of how and why good mothers were losing their children through decisions in family court—and the massive systemic faults sorely needing

correction—and then sit back and have a cup of tea. Instead, she organized speakouts in New York City and Toronto, where she brought noncustodial mothers from all walks of life to testify, to make their stories known and hopefully impel change in family courts. So many such mothers were currently living in fear of the men who had worn them down, overspent them into poverty, and terrorized them in various ways, that they were frightened to speak publicly, so Chesler herself was personally warm and supportive and found ways to protect them yet make their experiences public, such as having some mothers appear in disguise while someone else read their story.

The title of Dr. Chesler's newest book—*Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*—is a perfect reflection of what we read between its covers. This is because she has invented a new kind of book whose form is encapsulated in the clash between the word *requiem*—which connotes a form of worship, tribute, or at least appreciation of the dead, and the terrifying specter raised by *female serial killer*. The title suggests that the woman subject may have died and clearly *caused* many deaths, and because of the rarity with which “female” goes with “serial killer,” we immediately want to know why anyone would think that an eerily, unusually monstrous murderer deserves a requiem.

The subject of *Requiem* is Aileen Wuornos, who is probably most widely known because Charlize Theron won an Oscar and four other major acting awards for portraying her in Patty Jenkins' 2003 film *Monster*. Although Jenkins did a beautiful job of revealing a number of sides of Wuornos, Chesler's approach is more multi-faceted. The story is operatic in its drama, its violence, and the deep story of Wuornos' love for the woman she met a few years before she killed her first man. As an expert about opera and a person who has never shrunk from confronting life's harshest realities, Chesler is uniquely suited to tell the story; in fact, an opera called *Wuornos* was made about the story (“Serial killer Aileen Wuornos' life is subject of new opera,” 2005).

It is daunting to try to review *Requiem*, because it is hard to describe its combination of mystery-crime novel plus perceptive and compassionate feminist analysis of harsh (nay, horrific) realities of Wuornos' life as a childhood rape victim and victim of johns' humiliation and physical violence when she became a prostitute; the evocation of her toughness and hardness somehow alternates with her naïveté and sweetness, with portrayal of her views of others that are distorted sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Chesler helps us grasp *why* Wuornos made these distortions and how they made sense in terms of her experience as a repeated victim of abuse from childhood right through her encounter with her last murder victims. Beyond describing the facts of Wuornos' life, Chesler gives us information that puts that life in context: Wuornos has much in common with many other prostitutes, whom researchers have found often to be targets of emotional and physical violence by johns. She contrasts with most other serial killers, because nearly all are men, and nearly all male serial killers' victims are prostitutes.

Reading Chesler's description of Wuornos as a victim of violence is the one time I found it hard to keep reading; after the first several incidents, I wanted to cry out, “Please, no more!” but of course I read on, because the least I could do for Wuornos, who had lived through it, was respond to Chesler's wish to have me understand what had happened, to keep me from concluding: “Serial killer! Humph! No excuse for that! Clearly she was less than human!” It made me wonder what I would have done if I had been subjected to all that abuse and humiliation and, like Wuornos, had tried other ways to earn my living but encountered more humiliation and roadblocks, returning to prostitution where I encountered still more abuse and humiliation. Would I have

killed myself as Wuornos almost did? If not, would I have snapped at some point as she did? In the film, we see her meet her woman-lover, Tyria, look at her adoringly, feel what it is like to be loved and respected, then go out to earn the money they needed to live on, be demeaned and unusually (even for a violent john) physically tortured by a john, and kill him. In fact, she had been married to a man when very young and had many boyfriends earlier but at the time of the first killing had been with Tyria for four years. Did the contrast between at last feeling cared for and respected by Tyria over that time make her feel finally lovable enough that she did not have to take more abuse, leading to her first murder? Chesler tells us that Wuornos first said she killed that man and all her victims in self-defense but later said in fact she had killed out of “pure rage.” Although Chesler says the first murder was in self-defense, I would go further and suggest that surely the two are not mutually exclusive: When one’s very humanity is being destroyed, rage in response to that torment and invisibility is understandable and surely self-defense.

With *Requiem*, does Chesler leave us feeling that it was acceptable for Wuornos to kill those men? Not at all. What she does is leave us feeling that the whole world needs to know the full realities of all kinds of abuse of children, the way it often leads to prostitution, and the forms of abuse to which some johns subject the women they pay for sex. We need to be determined to make such abuse stop.

In a documentary film I am making about the execution of people with *intellectual disabilities*, attorney/activist Bryan Stevenson and author/activist Sister Helen Prejean say that executions would end if everyone had to visit death row, observe the condemned person’s walk to the electric chair, and watch the execution itself up close. Just describing how that looks up close, Sister Helen had me in tears, although I had been working on the film for nearly two decades (*Execution By the Numbers: A Social Justice Documentary*, n.d.). Chesler does something similar in *Requiem*, making it hard to deny the humanity of Wuornos and others who have been tortured by showing us what she makes clear is the very tip of the iceberg.

In her writing and her activism, Chesler has often taken personal risks, whether risks of physical harm or risks of verbal attacks by those who disagree with her or who fail to understand what she is doing. As a longtime feminist myself, I am familiar with those feminists and current and former prostitutes—some of whom identify as feminists—who describe prostitution as a choice that empowers the woman who opts to sell sex for money and claim that they have not been harmed. I do not have to challenge their statements to know that for many others that has not been the case, that for some, the other options are not available or for understandable reasons are unseen or not believed to be real. Working at the Toronto Family Court Clinic long ago, I listened to the stories of teenage girls with histories like that of Wuornos who ended up in the court system because they were prostitutes, and try though I might, I often found it extremely hard to help them to better lives.

*Requiem* includes descriptions of Chesler’s direct interactions with Wuornos, whether on the phone or through letters or finally, after Chesler recovered enough from serious physical illness to make the trip to the Florida prison, in person. These show how Wuornos sometimes expressed apparently sincere and well-placed gratitude to Chesler for trying hard to raise funds for her defense (until Chesler became very ill) and putting extensive time and trouble into bringing on board experts who could tell the court about Wuornos’ history and the similar experiences of other prostitutes in the hope that these would be considered mitigating factors that would save her from execution. They also show how Wuornos at other times turned on Chesler,

accusing her—as she accused nearly everyone at some point—of using her, whether of trying to make money from selling her story to media people (which Chesler never did but many others tried and succeeded in doing), or of trying to put her to use for feminist purposes through citing her as an example of how a misogynist and often abusive society tortured people like her (which Chesler told Wuornos from the beginning she wanted to do, in part for Wuornos' own sake). Wuornos' letters show that Chesler seems never to have taken offense but instead continued to make herself available if Wuornos and her various attorneys availed themselves of her help — which they never did—and supporting her in many ways from sending her postage stamps to providing other practical help and expressions of care and concern.

The state of Florida executed Wuornos in 2002, and Lisa Montgomery, a woman with a history eerily like that of Wuornos, is scheduled for federal execution January 12, 2021. As with Wuornos, the court never heard the staggering extent of the abuse to which Montgomery was subjected. In a recent essay, Chesler (2020, para. 4) decries Montgomery's treatment as she has that of Wuornos, writing:

Oh, what a clear and terrifying measure of how cheap women's lives are! Prostituted and sexually terrorized women are disposable throwaways who remain invisible to us both in life and in death...When finally apprehended (after many years), too many of their killers get to live out their natural lives.

She points out that between 1976 and 2016, 16 American women were executed, most often for killing one or two people, whereas during about the same time, 17 American male killers who killed between 14 and 100 women, mainly prostitutes, were given far less severe sentences, and only five were executed.

I wish that everyone would read *Requiem*, both because part of being human is to know as much as we can about the world, especially the lives of others who have been through hells to which we were not subjected, and because despite its tragic subject, Chesler's writing makes us reluctant to put the book down.

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**Paula J. Caplan**, Ph.D. is a clinical and research psychologist, expert witness, activist, advocate, award winning playwright and filmmaker, screenwriter, lyricist, actor, and director. She received her A.B. with honors from Radcliffe College of Harvard University and her Ph.D. in psychology from Duke University. She is currently Associate at the DuBois Institute, and she spent two years as a Fellow in the Women and Public Policy Program of Harvard Kennedy School, both at Harvard University. She has been a Lecturer at Harvard, teaching "Myths of Motherhood;" "Girls' and Women's Psychological Development over the Lifespan;" and "Psychology of Sex and Gender." She is former Full Professor of Applied Psychology and Head of the Centre for Women's Studies in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where she also headed the School Psychology and Community Psychology programs, and former Lecturer in Women's Studies and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. She is the author of 11 books, co-editor of one book, and author of dozens of book chapters and articles in scholarly journals, as well as of numerous articles and essays in popular publications. She has given hundreds of invited addresses and invited workshops and done more than 1,000 media interviews. She is producer of the social justice

documentary films, *Is Anybody Listening?* and *Isaac Pope: The Spirit of an American Century*, which have won festival awards and been widely broadcast on PBS. Her current film, *Execution by the Numbers*, ([executionbythenumbers.com](http://executionbythenumbers.com)), is in post-production. She received a Bronze Telly Award for her *Listen to a Veteran!* Public Service Announcement series.

Her most recent book, *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home*, won the Association of American Publishers' PROSE Award for best psychology book of 2011, Independent Publishers' Groundbreaking Book of the Month Award the month it was published, and Independent Publishers' Silver Medal in the psychology/mental health division for 2011.

Dr. Caplan received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Women in Psychology and the Lifetime Achievement in Interpersonal Violence Advocacy Award from the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma. She is included in *Feminists Who Changed America*, edited by Barbara Love.

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