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Criminal psychologists are often the most important investigators in serial killings. And Jessica Woodhams is one of the best.
Jessica Woodhams grew up in the country. Her parents had a farm with animals. She wanted to be a veterinarian. Nothing came of it. Today, at just 39, she is one of the world’s most successful defenders of the law in the fight against crime.

While still in her mid-20s, Woodhams worked as a criminal psychologist for the London Metropolitan Police. Well before her thirtieth birthday, she taught students. At the age of 30 she was a senior lecturer at the University of Gloucester-shire. Since 2015, she has headed the Centre for Crime, Justice and Policing at the University of Birmingham, given lectures and advised the police on criminal cases around the world.

When they return, these thoughts, Jess-ica Woodhams looks quickly from one corner of the room to the other: left, right, left, right. This is how she cuts maneuvers her head, outwits her brain, pares away the memory of perpetrators and deeds. For the time being. She laughs as she explains her distraction technique, as though it were a good joke. However, the things that charac-terize her day-to-day life—which sneak back into her thoughts are far from funny. Jessica Woodhams routine-ly confronts evil and its earthly mani-festations. A delicate woman armed with a sharp mind. And strong nerves.

Anyone who, like the 39-year-old, has dealt with the psychology of crime for a third of their life picks up a lot of baggage along the way. It sounds so reassuring when Woodhams sits, coffee in hand, on the University of Birmingham campus and says that she no longer has that many nightmares.

For those who pursue the path of the psychologist, trouble nights come with the territory — not to mention the trips to the counselor. Woodhams actually wanted to become a veterinarian, then studied general psychology, but quickly landed in forensic psychology. For the Metropolitan Police in London she analyzed serial offenders. On television, they call such people profilers. They are the brains in the fight against crime, operating somewhat apart from the action and using a wide view to connect the various points that expose a perpetrator.

In front of Woodhams and her coffee, groups of students scurry across the campus from one session to the next, and her eyes move along with them. “I’m naturally always analyzing my sur-roundings,” she says. “That can make relaxation hard to come by.”

Seven years ago, Woodhams joined the University of Birmingham, which one year ago placed Woodhams together with an economist at the head of its new Centre for Crime, Justice and Policing. Along with several dozen experts from various disciplines, she has since been delving into the deep murk of capital crimes using computers, books and files. Her area of specialty is “crime linkage”, analyzing the behavior displayed at crime scenes to link to-gether the crimes of serial offenders.

It’s more important, says Woodhams, to look at when and where a crime took place. What was stolen or who was robbed and attacked plays a secondary role. “Perpetrators dominantly act where their routine activities take them,” she says. “And the time it hap-pens also says something to the victim, who is a victim of opportunity in most cases. Burglars usually don’t know what houses have within them that is worth taking until they have broken in.”

And what about murder? “With that, it’s mainly about how someone had the situation under control. How he planned the act and how cautiously he operated. And what the escape behavior was like.” In these areas, a serial killer will normally act in the same way — and at the same time distinguish himself from other perpetrators in these respects. That’s why consistency and distinctive-ness are core parameters for Woodhams’ work.

“If perpetrators were all to act in the same way, crime linkage would be impossible,” she says. “And, likewise, if serial offenders didn’t show similarity in their behavior across their crimes.” She talks about a case in which the serial killer targeted victims at their homes because he had easy access to murder weapons there. Another went to the scene of the crime multiple times before he struck in order to work out his escape plan precisely, including various escape routes. Outsiders know stories like this from television. And as a matter of fact, says Woodhams, popular TV shows like the American proce-dural drama “CSI” have been blamed for making investigative work more difficult. “The perpetrators now know what shouldn’t be left behind at the scene of the crime.” Usable clues are becoming increasingly rare.

She sits in her office, 33 square feet in size, filled with files and books, some of which she wrote herself. On the wall hang commendations, framed, but which she wrote herself. On the wall hang commendations, framed, but

Jessica Woodhams is a co-founder of C-LINK, which stands for Crime Linkage International Network.

She wants to develop it into a global crime-fighting net-work in which academics work together with police to make their work faster and more effective.

Analysts would no longer be subject to an unmanageable number of cases when searching for connections.

The project is still waiting for the final piece of financial support. But C-LINK, Jessica Woodhams and her colleagues at the Centre for Crime are ready to better endure the grime of humanity. “It’s not like my work makes my life rubbish,” she laughs again, as she of-ten does. She loves her work. She chose it herself.

Woodhams is wearing earbuds. High up on the roof her hair flies around her face. The image fits well with her fa-vorite band, Rage Against the Machine, crossover metal with more infective than any prison cell. She’s fallen head over heels for loud, booming music. “One thing she never does is to listen to songs she likes while analyzing cases.”

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