



**hoopla digital:** What gave you the idea to write about a college program that recruits and studies psychopaths?

**Vera Kurian:** Because I have a background in psychology, I was aware that psychopathy is something that has always been difficult to treat. I was listening to a podcast one day and heard about a residential treatment facility for young boys, juvenile delinquents in which they were more or less taught to have a “cognitive conscience” of sorts. So while you can reason with a child who has empathy by saying, “don’t hit that boy, it hurts him,” you cannot do this with a psychopath because they wouldn’t care. Instead, everything was put in terms of things that the boys wanted—you can watch TV if you don’t hit that boy, or you get ten more minutes of play time if you do this chore. Everything is framed around their self-interest—the rewards rather than the punishment, which works out better because psychopaths respond to rewards and are often too impulsive to think ahead about potential punishments for their actions. I thought, what if there was an entire school like this program? Then I thought that would be too much, and necked it down to a small program.

**hd:** Why choose a psychopath as the protagonist?

**VK:** Why not? Psychopaths are often picked to be the villains rather than the main characters. I really wanted to highlight what it would be like to be inside their heads, and to do this realistically by doing research to see what they are really like, rather than what people assume they are like. This book also focuses on morally gray issues and people: Chloe is, on paper, “bad” because she wants to kill someone. But when you find out why, is she really? Some people have complicated feelings about that particular question because they want morality to be black and white, and for the characters in novels to be good people they would want to be friends with—that’s not me. The worst sin of writing is to be boring. There are people in the book who aren’t diagnosed psychopaths, but who do really bad things. And there are psychopaths who are harmless. I also wanted to highlight a little-known fact: that many people have these traits but are never diagnosed, never treated, and might even be successful individuals. They walk among us—we just don’t know.

**hd:** *Never Saw Me Coming* is narrated from multiple points of view. Why structure the book this way? Did you find that some character perspectives were easier to write than others? Did you have a favorite?

**VK:** I did this for a few reasons. One, I wanted the shifts in POV to build dramatic irony, which I think is an old-fashioned way of creating tension. The reader knows things that characters don’t. We see Chloe scheming in the first few chapters and know she is dangerous, but then we see her through Dr. Wyman’s POV where we can see her tricking him into thinking she’s an innocent girl. I also did it because shifts in narration are a way of playing with time and information without cheating, in my opinion. I really dislike when central mysteries are formed by narrating characters withholding crucial information from the reader. One way of



avoiding this is by different characters knowing different information, but they don't necessarily share it. Chloe was the most fun POV to write, mainly because she is so funny and has a unique way of seeing the world, and even a unique diction. Andre was the hardest. Both because I was writing outside my race and because Andre carries a heavy weight in the book: he is the only one of the three main characters who actually feels fear. One of the difficulties of writing this book—a thriller—is that a standard emotion that most people feel, fear, is absent in two of the main characters.

- hd:** You have a PhD in social psychology. What knowledge did you already have before writing? What additional research did you do in preparation for this book?
- VK:** My background in psychology is on methodology and political science, not abnormal psychology at all. But working in a psych department for six years of course exposed me to many things, and half my close friends were clinicians. I did know some information about psychopathy because I'm a true crime nut, but I did do some additional research. I read some articles and got a hefty book entitled *The Handbook of Psychopathy*, which has the latest research from experts in the field. It isn't very accessible, but my background helped me be able to understand the studies in it.
- hd:** John Adams University felt fully realized, despite being fictional. How did you flesh out the campus?
- VK:** "John Adams University" is definitely a play on the George Washington University in DC, my alma mater. I could have set the book there, but I really wanted to create my own setting whole cloth. GWU is a great campus because it feels like a campus and community despite being nested within a larger city—I wanted Adams to have that feeling. I always want my settings to feel three dimensional, like an extra character in the book that is just as important. For all my books, I draw out the layout of where things are, and have strong visuals my head so it feels real to the reader.
- hd:** Is Gregory Ripley (the Rock Creek Killer) based on any particular serial killer(s)? Dennis Rader (BTK) sprung to my mind while reading.
- VK:** You hit the nail on the head. I was definitely thinking of the BTK, and also Ted Bundy. "Ripley" is a nod to Patricia Highsmith, and Rock Creek Park is a location which, while it's a nice place to hike, a number of attacks and body burials have taken place there.
- hd:** You have some really unique methods of murder in this novel. How did you come up with those?
- VK:** You must be referring to the MRI murder? I probably stole that from one of the X-Men movies, where Magneto pulls the iron out of somebody's flesh to kill them. I have had to have MRIs before, and always found them quite scary because it's such a small, enclosed space and it is emitting very loud noises. I've often had panicky thoughts about, what if there is metal in my body and I forgot about it and it's about to get ripped out? I conferred with a couple friends of mine who do cognitive neuroscience who said the particular scenario described in the book isn't outside the realm of possibility.



**hd:** How much did you know about your characters and their paths before you started writing? Did you know the murderer’s identity from the outset?

**VK:** I knew a great deal about the characters, and knew the murderer(s) before I even put pen to paper. I usually get a flash of an idea that includes both the premise and the character at the same time. The first thing I saw was the geode scene: a scene where someone catches someone doing something bad, but doesn’t respond in the “right” way. From there, I filled out those two characters, and refined as I went along. I normally don’t know everything about them at first, but will then consider different aspects as feeling “right” when I try them on. For example, when I started the book, I didn’t necessarily intend for there to be much humor in the book, but Chloe is so judgmental and snarky that her voice came out pretty funny. She isn’t trying to be funny, but she is, so I ran with it. And yes, I am a believer of working backwards when you do a mystery. It saves a lot of agony with the rewrites.

**hd:** How does your short story writing compare to novel writing? Is your process the same? Or do you approach the process differently?

**VK:** Short stories are a lot easier for so many reasons. For one, it’s easier because of the length—you can hold the entirety of a short story in your head a lot easier. Also you can break basic rules of writing in short stories in ways that you can’t for novels. In a story, you can have something nonsensical happen and the nonsensicality is sort of the point, or have a really obnoxious narrator—and those are things you can’t get away with in novels. The audience is different—more readers come to novels for an old-fashioned story, but the short story audience is often more tolerant of things that are really out there that can only be done in the short form. Stories are also way easier to publish, and unlike novels, at least those published by Big 5 publishers, you’re not worried about marketability or being accessible. My process, though, is more or less the same. I normally have worked a short story out almost in its entirety in my head before I start writing it. I probably will spend more time formally plotting out things for a novel, and typically my plots are more complicated.

**hd:** Can you tell us about your road to publication?

**VK:** It was a really long one. For many years I was exclusively a short story writer, and I was successful at getting them placed. Around 2013, I wrote one that someone said would make a good novel, so I wrote that novel and queried it (querying is the process of cold-calling to get an agent.) I was unsuccessful there, though people said they liked my writing, so I wrote a science fiction space opera next, which I also queried. I got a few “revise and resubmit” requests from agents on that, but found that I couldn’t solve a major plot problem. Instead, I abruptly got the idea for *Never Saw Me Coming* and wrote it in something of a frenzy. I got an agent in November of 2019 and we were working on revisions into the new year. When I finished the revisions and we were ready to go on submission, it was the first week of March 2020. My agent and I talked about this newfangled coronavirus thing, and if life as we knew it was coming to an end, and if it even made sense to go on submission. She had the good sense to want to wait until editors were actually biting, so we didn’t submit until the end of May. That first year of the pandemic was one of the worst years of my life, and when I got the call that we were going to auction, I had been isolating alone in my apartment for weeks.



Then I was being hit by one piece of good news followed by the next: selling to Vintage in the UK, a film/TV option, other foreign rights being sold at auction. It was the best of times and it was the worst of times. Some of my friends told me that the only good thing going on that year was my book deal. It certainly gave me a light on the horizon to look forward to.

**hd:** Congratulations on selling the TV rights for this book! Who is your dream cast?

**VK:** Ha, I am too old to know actors that are the right age right now. Maybe Amanda Seyfried when she was 18 for Chloe, Bill Skarsgard when he was 20 for Charles, Alfred Enoch when he was 16 for Andre (he's got the dimples for it!). I always pictured Dr. Wyman as actor Richard Mulligan (RIP).

**hd:** What's next for you? Any sequel plans?

**VK:** I am currently working on a standalone mystery that may or may not have some supernatural elements. If you like to know all the ins and outs of a small town, and an ensemble cast, and the Scooby gang element of *Never Saw Me Coming*, I think you'll like this next book. It isn't as fast-paced, so I have a bit more space to spread my writerly wings. I definitely set up the ending of *Never Saw Me Coming* to welcome the potential for a sequel—I don't know yet if that's what the future holds, but at least in my head I can still see all the characters running around Adams University.

**Vera Kurian** is a writer and scientist. Her short fiction has been published in magazines such as *Glimmer Train*, *Day One*, and *The Pinch*. She's lived in DC for most of her adult life and has a PhD in social psychology. *Never Saw Me Coming* is her first novel.



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