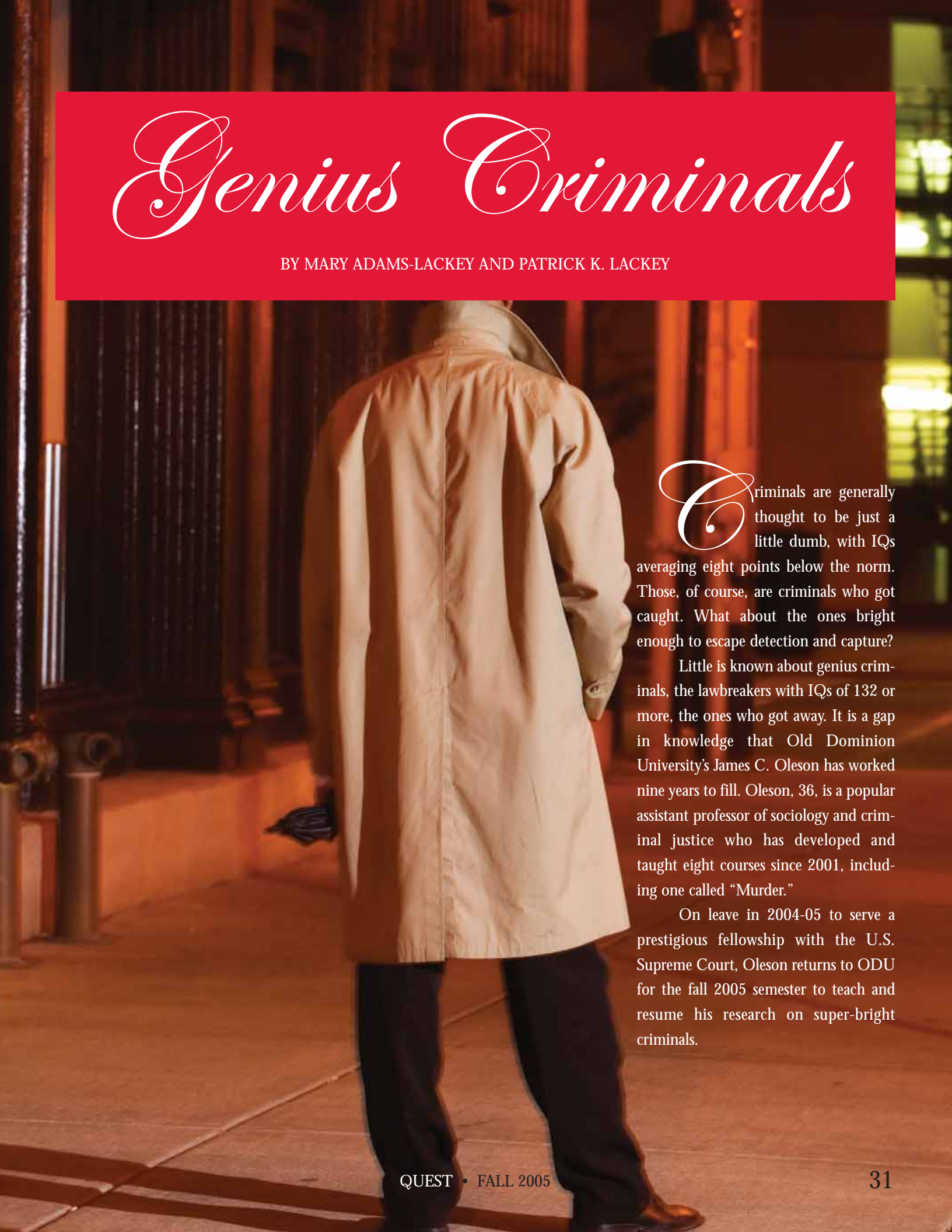


Genius Criminals

BY MARY ADAMS-LACKEY AND PATRICK K. LACKEY



Criminals are generally thought to be just a little dumb, with IQs averaging eight points below the norm. Those, of course, are criminals who got caught. What about the ones bright enough to escape detection and capture?

Little is known about genius criminals, the lawbreakers with IQs of 132 or more, the ones who got away. It is a gap in knowledge that Old Dominion University's James C. Oleson has worked nine years to fill. Oleson, 36, is a popular assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice who has developed and taught eight courses since 2001, including one called "Murder."

On leave in 2004-05 to serve a prestigious fellowship with the U.S. Supreme Court, Oleson returns to ODU for the fall 2005 semester to teach and resume his research on super-bright criminals.

Mr. X

To say the least, Oleson's research subjects are elusive, and at least one could prove dangerous. That person, whom Oleson calls Mr. X, claims to have killed 15 people, at first in self-defense or to protect others, but later to preserve his reputation as a killer. "You know," Oleson said, "if you crossed him, you will be punished."

The man has never been arrested and indicated that he has put crime behind him. The possibility exists, however, that Mr. X could at some point regret spilling his guts to Oleson and decide that the professor should be eliminated. While Oleson has no way of contacting Mr. X, the killer could easily find him.

A second concern is that Oleson's research materials could be subpoenaed by authorities seeking information about offenders who are still at large. While that's unlikely, as the statute of limitations has run out for most of the offenses studied, even one subpoena for his records would put him in a bind, because he has promised hundreds of subjects confidentiality: they wouldn't have talked to him any other way. "The only way I was able to do this work," Oleson says, "was to resolve, in advance, that I would go to jail if that was required."

As a safeguard, he keeps some materials out of the country.

Dangers and Obstacles

Besides the inherent dangers in conducting his research, there were obstacles. To gain the cooperation of an organization of geniuses, the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry, Oleson was required to join it. The minimum IQ score allowed is 150, which excludes 99.9 percent of the adult population. Oleson took the application test - one page on both sides - and passed. He has both a doctorate and a law degree but says, "It's probably the most difficult test I've ever taken in my life. It was tougher than anything I did for my Ph.D. It was tougher than any test I took in law school." He is a genius studying geniuses.

Oleson believes studying high-IQ offenders is worth certain risks and difficulties for at least three reasons.

For one, he says "They are able to commit their offenses with the same acumen and intellect that they bring to bear in other areas of their lives, which makes them very dangerous." At white-collar crime, they tend to obtain more money than less-intelligent criminals can. At violent crimes, their ability to elude apprehension enables them to inflict harm or even death over long periods. Infamous Unabomber Ted Kaczynski might still be concocting letter bombs if his brother had not directed authorities to him. If caught, genius criminals tend to have the resources or connections to keep them out of the justice system, Oleson said.

Secondly, academicians always try to fill in knowledge gaps. Never before had anyone studied genius criminals as broadly or deeply as Oleson.

A third reason is to challenge the assumption that criminals are stupid.

And besides, Oleson simply is intrigued by high-IQ offenders.

A Fascination With "The Idea of Evil"

It could have been his family's story about serial killer Harvey Glatman pistol-whipping Oleson's grandmother when she was young that piqued Oleson's interest in crime, but he says it wasn't.

Neither was it an early absorption with crime stories, although he says he did go through a Sherlock Holmes phase as a lad. In college he developed a "real soft spot for classic literature," which is evident in quotes and excerpts he liberally sprinkles throughout his research papers.

"My dad," he says, "is a huge mysteries fan, favoring the espionage thriller genre." His mother reads a lot of Stephen King and John Grisham; his sister likes true crime books.

But it was his early fascination with "the idea of evil" and reading about the Nazis, the Holocaust and medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners that led him into a life of crime study.

"I was really astonished," he says, "by how sadistic and callous people could be, and how someone could take affirmative pleasure in hurting someone else."

After a stint as a naval nuclear propulsion operator, Oleson landed at St. Mary's College of California, where he earned his bachelor's degree in psychology and anthropology.

He was a dormitory resident adviser. From this campus vantage point he became aware of unlawful activity that the university handled privately. The bright sons and daughters of middle-class and privileged America were spared the consequences of their bad behavior - some of it criminal. Their offenses left no paper trail.

Not only did he want to know "whodunit," but why. And why they weren't caught.

Consequently, high-IQ offenders, the ones who get away with activities for which those of lower IQ are apprehended, became the focus of his doctoral study at Cambridge University in London.

For his study, he found 424 high-IQ offenders from a number of countries

who would complete a questionnaire regarding 72 offenses ranging in seriousness from abuse of work privileges to homicide. In total, the respondents reported 33,500 offenses in the previous year and nearly 326,000 offenses over their lifetimes. The large majority were minor infractions.

But Oleson concluded that his investigation suggests that, among intellectually superior adults, offending — even crime of a serious nature — is a surprisingly commonplace phenomenon.

It was, he said, the first “systemic investigation of the offending behavior of genius-level adults.”

The offenders came from three groups: members of the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry, students at prestigious American and foreign universities, and American and British correctional facilities inmates who scored high on IQ tests.

He found that about 6 percent of his subjects committed half of the offenses. Other studies have shown the same results for criminals of ordinary intelligence.

He conducted phone or e-mail conversations with many of the subjects as he sought to understand why geniuses commit crimes.

Generally, Oleson says, bright criminals focus on nonviolent crime such as fraud or tax evasion, with many using illegal drugs or even dealing drugs. “Especially for the consensual crime, there was the sense of being above what the law required. And a lot of them said very bluntly that they were glad the laws were there because most people needed that kind of coerced influence to regulate their behavior but that they didn’t and that they could make conscientious choices of their own. There really is a kind of intellectual arrogance or superiority about their viewpoint.”

Violent offenders had the same intellectual arrogance. “Another motive that seemed to emerge repeatedly,” Oleson says, “was a revenge motive, that they had been snubbed and slighted and picked on all their lives. They had been ostracized as brains or nerds.”

Meeting Mr. X

Of all of the subjects Oleson has studied, the one he calls Mr. X is by far the most unsettling. Not only was Mr. X a shadowy figure, he could have been Oleson’s doppelgänger, the Mr. Hyde to Oleson’s Dr. Jekyll.

Of all of the subjects Oleson has studied, the one he calls Mr. X is by far the most unsettling. Not only was Mr. X a shadowy figure, he could have been Oleson’s doppelgänger, the Mr. Hyde to Oleson’s Dr. Jekyll.

“A lot of criminologists talk about ‘There but for the grace of God go I,’” says Oleson. “And, man, I had that in a big way.”

Roughly the same age, Mr. X and Oleson had similar educational backgrounds, including participation in programs for gifted students. Their family backgrounds are similar. Both came from homes with a highly moral environment. Both had involved parents. Both had younger sisters. Their IQs are nearly identical - around 160. This all led to an easy rapport between the two men, although the night before their first meeting, in a sports bar, Oleson said, he “was just terrified” and “nervous as cats.”

His research methods were spun 180 degrees. Instead of leaving no stone unturned, Oleson developed selective vision while walking through Mr. X’s violent past. He taped no conversations and took only the briefest of notes when the two met. He intentionally never learned Mr. X’s name, where he lived or even what he did for a living. Oleson figured that he could not be legally coerced into revealing information he did not have.

In their formative years, Oleson moved several times and Mr. X at least once. They both felt different from their peers. Oleson used his frequent changes of environment to make new friends and adapt quickly. Though he was considered odd because of his quiet bookishness, he did not feel ostracized.

“I was embraced for my weirdness,” he said.

Mr. X’s experience was different. He was labeled early as gifted, but was stigmatized and alienated because of his precocity.

Though a good student, at age 17 he was academically unchallenged and socially insecure. Ripe for the picking, he virtually fell into the hands of a flashy hoodlum, whom Oleson calls Vincent in his published account of his research. Vincent quickly became Mr. X’s mentor in underworld activities, including drug dealing and homicide.

Mr. X graduated from high school and enrolled in college, all the while becoming more and more immersed in Vincent’s violent and intriguing world. Between ages 17 and 20, he killed 15 people, becoming, by law enforcement’s definition, a serial killer. Yet his double life remained unknown to his parents, he said.

“Aging Out” of a Villainous Past

Near the end of Mr. X’s freshman year in college, Vincent died in an ambush in Italy. Mr. X found himself in charge of what had been Vincent’s province. He felt alone. And vulnerable.

Soon, his own world was shot to shreds when he was ambushed in Brazil with his girlfriend and two of his associates. Mr. X, the only survivor, bribed his way out of the country and back to the states. He continued his university

life, reportedly putting his shadowy past behind him. He graduated in 1988.

In talks with Oleson, Mr. X was hardly consumed with regrets and guilt. He rationalized that he never killed an innocent individual and that the killings were part of doing business in the underground world. "This rationalization," states Oleson, "allowed him to commit villainous acts without conceiving of himself as a villain."

Oleson said it is his understanding that Mr. X is now living a quiet life and engaged in a legitimate occupation. He reported that Mr. X talked of "going to grad school, either law school or a master's program of some kind." Criminal research shows, Oleson said, that young men tend to commit a disproportionate amount of their crimes as teenagers, then "age out" of the behavior as they grow older.

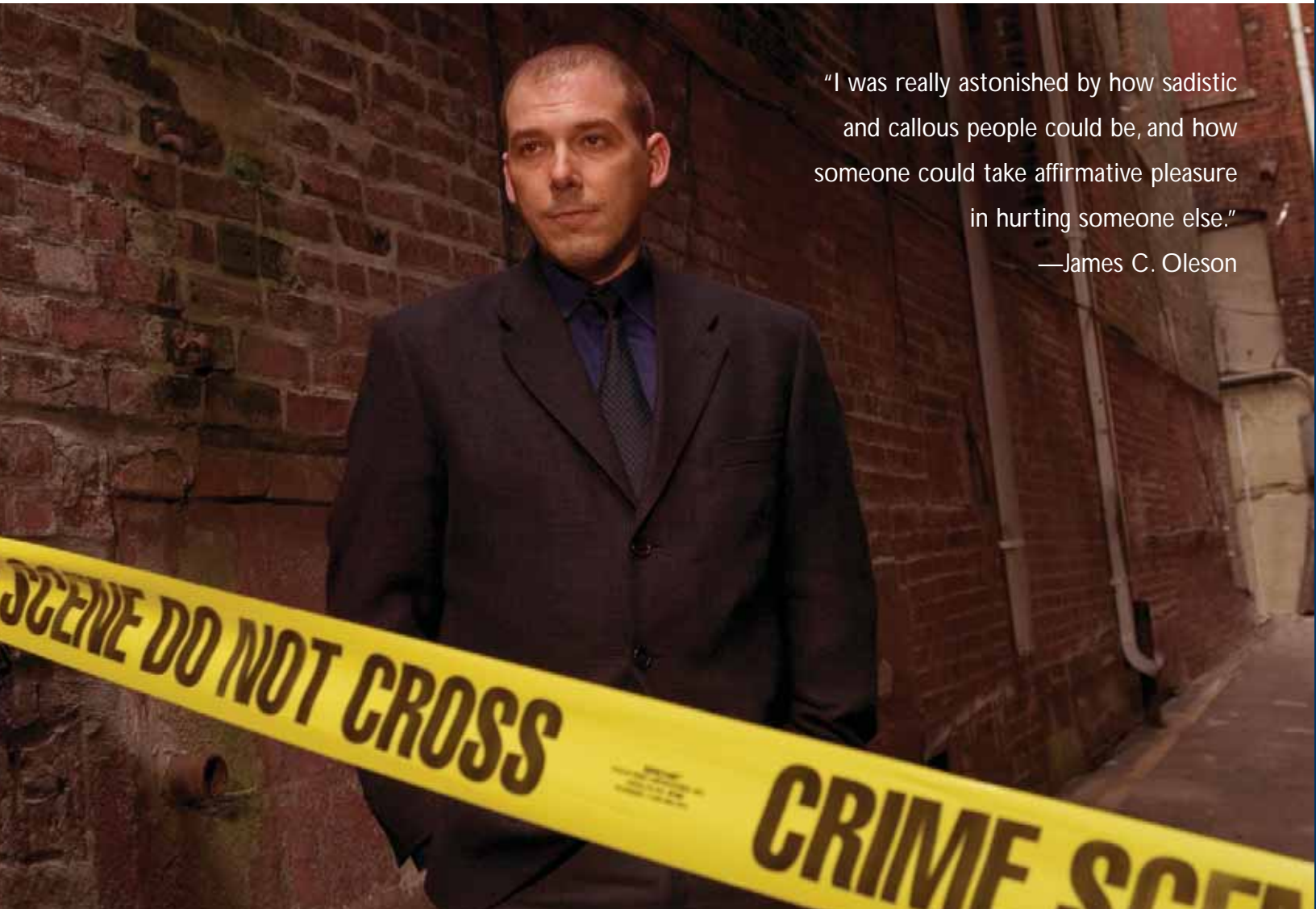
Since it is impossible to check Mr. X's accounts of drug trafficking, killing and other underworld activities, Oleson can't swear to their veracity.

Whatever the case, he said, the facts remain that serial killers are not always lust killers, are not always addicted to killing, do not always have abusive and troubled childhoods, and are not always of low IQ. The evolution of the criminal is influenced by many factors.

According to Oleson, Mr. X's story highlights the workings of the genius criminal's mind and in that way contributes to the small but growing body of knowledge about high-IQ offenders.

But all that was on hold the past year while Oleson researched different crime issues as a U.S. Supreme Court Fellow. He served on a committee investigating the ramifications of *Blakely v. Washington*. Oleson says that, according to Ohio State University law professor Douglas Berman, it is "probably the single biggest criminal procedure case to emerge in the history of the Supreme Court." Berman, an expert on criminal law and sentencing, runs a Web site where he posts current information about the *Blakely* case. That state case eventually led to the Supreme Court's rejection of mandatory sentence guidelines for federal judges that had been in place for two decades.

Now that his fellowship has ended, Oleson will resume his teaching and research at Old Dominion. He's looked at the brightest; next he'll compare them with the rest — offenders whose IQs fall below the genius range. He'll present his observations in a book he is writing about genius wrongdoers. He plans to call it "Masterminds."



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