

**Movie:** *Badlands* (1973)

## **Synopsis**

*Badlands* is an American crime drama that depicts Kit Carruthers, a character loosely based on Charles Starkweather, and his 14-year-old girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate, who killed 11 people during their month-long murder spree in Nebraska (1958). The movie received critical acclaim, building on Starkweather's place in history as captured in Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire*:

Little Rock, Pasternak, Mickey Mantle, Kerouac  
Sputnik, Chou En-Lai, Bridge On The River Kwai  
Lebanon, Charles de Gaulle, California baseball  
Starkweather, Homicide, Children of Thalidomide...

Unlike *Badlands*, *The Frighteners* (1996) focuses on the supernatural in featuring a Starkweather-inspired killer who goes on a similar spree with a kidnapped female accomplice. In this way, *The Frighteners* is similar to *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), and the movie we'll watch on June 5, *The Ring* (2002), as all are inspired by real life (serial and spree) killers.

## **How it relates to the field of psychiatry**

Movies such as *Badlands* serve to review salient features of antisocial personality and related disorders. Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) is defined by a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of others' rights in a person 18 years of age or older. APD is the only personality disorder with an age requirement and underscores a critical aspect of the film; as Kit is 25 and 10 years older than Holly. When Holly's father disapproves of Kit being around his daughter, Kit commits the most egregious violation of another's right and shoots him.

## **Sociopathy versus Psychopathy**

Two terms often used interchangeably with APD are *sociopathy* and *psychopathy*. While sociopathy and psychopathy appear to result from the same biopsychosocial determinants that cause APD, efforts to define and differentiate these conditions have been inconsistent. At this time, it is arbitrarily agreed upon that both are aggressive forms of APD. Sociopathy is hallmarked by an element of sadistic pleasure, while psychopathy describes conscienceless killers who appear to show no human feeling for their victims. Kit appears to be a psychopath, demonstrating signs beyond what we would expect from APD (i.e. not DSM-5 criteria) including manipulateness (Kit never signs his name the same way twice), episodic relationships (Kit tells Holly's father he's never really had a girlfriend), emotional shallowness (Kit calls Holly 'stupid' right after she loses her virginity to him), and glibness (Holly follows Kit on his murder spree after Kit kills her father).

**Key Words:** Badlands, Charles Starkweather, Caril Ann Fugate, Billy Joel, We Didn't Start the Fire, The Frighteners, Saw, Hostel, The Ring, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Sociopathy, Psychopathy, spree, mass murder

A “murder spree” is defined when someone (or a couple) kills a number of people “in spurts” over a relatively short period of time. The term “mass murder” is used when 4 or more people are killed at one time. These scenarios remind us of the complexity of human behavior in general, and of antisocial behavior in particular. For example, most spree killers and mass murderers die by suicide; either by their own hand or that of law enforcement (“death by cop”). SPOILER ALERT: Kit’s murder spree ends with his deciding to forgo escape and give himself up. He shoots his front tire and awaits the police to arrive, and doesn’t put up any resistance despite knowing he’ll be executed.

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