

122 of 124 people found the following review helpful:

5.0 out of 5 stars **This book is your "vaccination" or "insurance policy" against sociopaths - a must read!**, December 16, 2005

I've written many five-star reviews, but never have I been so motivated to try to convince everyone to read the book. Here's why: one in twenty-five Americans is a sociopath, a figure psychologist Martha Stout obtained from three journal articles and a U.S. government source. Assuming this premise of *The Sociopath Next Door* is correct, or even if the figure is say one in 50, odds are you know at least one sociopath. He or she could be an abusive partner, the person in the next cubicle at work, your landlord, or the person your teenager is dating. Even if you can't think of sociopath you know, you have high odds of encountering one. Given the havoc even one sociopath can wreak in one's life, this book provides a sort of insurance that you'll be able to identify him or her and deal with that person so they don't harm you emotionally, financially, or in any other way. This is a well-written and well-researched book that I think will benefit the 96% of you who are not sociopaths.

To gain the benefits of "sociopath insurance" there are three portions of the book I believe are crucial for you to read: (1) the discussion of what is a sociopath along with her stories illustrating the different types of sociopaths, (BTW, those stories would make fine literary short stories with Stout's descriptive language and suspense building.) (2) Stout's "Thirteen Rules For Dealing With Sociopaths in Everyday Life", and (3) the discussion of how good people with consciences end up allowing sociopathic leaders to rise to power and do horrific acts. If you read just these sections and skip all the philosophical discussions about sociopaths, you will still gain a lot from this book.

One of the first topics covered is what a sociopath is. Stout gives us both the official diagnostic version from the American Psychiatric Association's DSM IV (their diagnostic manual) as well as a sort of "street guide" of what to look for. Essentially, a sociopath will glibly lie, charm and use others, without a moment's remorse over hurting anyone. They're often, but not always, more charismatic, charming and sexy than the average person. Take murderer Scott Peterson for example (although Stout didn't mention him): Women found him quite attractive and charming, and were quick to believe his lies. Most sociopaths are not murderers, (solely because they don't want to get caught and go to prison) but will still wreak havoc lying, stealing, and manipulating people.

After learning how to identify sociopaths, Stout's "Thirteen Rules for Dealing With Sociopaths in Everyday Life" (p.156 - 162) are a MUST-READ and worth the price of the book. All the rules are important. To paraphrase several: Rule 2 - If your gut tells you a person is untrustworthy, even if it's in contrast with their high standing in society such as a doctor or community leader, go with your gut feeling. Rule 3 is the "Rule of Threes." If a person breaks one promise, it may be a misunderstanding. If they break two, there may be a serious mistake. But if they break three promises, you're dealing with a liar. Strike three they're out-count your losses and leave ASAP. Stout advises "do not give your money, your work, your secrets, or your affection to a three-

timer." Rule 8 states, "The best way to protect yourself from a sociopath is to avoid him, to refuse any kind of contact or communication." Remember that sociopaths, like leopards, don't change their spots.

One other MUST-READ section of the book is the discussion on how good people allow sociopaths to rise to positions of authority and to do bad things. To understand this, Stout explains the Milgram experiment which began in 1961 - 62. I won't describe the experiment here, but if you're not familiar with it, I strongly encourage you to google "Milgram experiment" and read about it. As a psychology major in the 1980s, I watched footage of this experiment, which was so powerful, I remember it like it was yesterday. Stout's discussion of the Milgram experiment will show you how the public can all too easily be swayed by people in authority such as charismatic leaders and demagogues. Reading this discussion will help you understand why Rule #4, "Question Authority" is not just an old hippy slogan, but crucial.

Much of the rest of the book contains all sorts of interesting, well-reasoned discussions on many facets of sociopathy: Do sociopaths know they're sociopaths? Is sociopathy caused by heredity, environment or both, and if both, to what extent each? What are the theories of sociopathy from clinical psychology, evolutionary psychology and theology? Given sociopaths never feel guilty, do they have happier lives than the rest of us? (Stout's answer is a resounding "no!") Why do some cultures have (or appear to have) more sociopaths than others? One great thing about these discussions is that Stout doesn't immediately come out and tell the reader what she thinks. Instead, she firsts asks probing thought questions as if you were a student in one of her classes, encouraging you to reason these issues out for yourself. She always gives her opinion by the end, however. These discussions answered most of my questions about sociopaths (and created some new ones!), but was not the most valuable part of the book for me.

Bottom Line: I wish everyone would read this book, particularly people in the dating world meeting strangers. If you always remember on the front burner of your brain that about 4% of people are sociopaths and follow the 13 rules, you're far less likely to be hurt by them.

28 of 32 people found the following review helpful:

The Sociopath Next Door is the first popular book I have seen on the psychiatric condition known as antisocial personality disorder (more commonly known as sociopathy). The author describes a variety of composite case studies, all of which center around the fact that the individuals described seem to lack a conscience. The damage that this causes to the people around them, who treat them as if they were normal conscience-bound members of society, is described in detail. I personally enjoyed this book a great deal, largely because I have encountered similar individuals in my own life (fortunately, not many of them, but they leave an unmistakable impression). I know firsthand the trail of scandal and human wreckage these people

leave, along with the gradual realization by the sociopath's acquaintances of what they are really dealing with. The worst situation is when one is in a relationship with one of these people, because it's hard to get over the shock you feel when you realize that the other person simply has a dramatically different value system than you do, and that lying, manipulating, emotional bullying etc. are not something the other person considers to be wrong, but rather something they take pride in. It would appear that the author has been through similar experiences, and she writes about them compellingly.

The main reason I rate this book so highly is that very few people really understand the incredibly negative effect sociopaths have on our lives. This is most apparent in the world of politics, which attracts sociopaths like feces attracts flies. Much of the history of mankind revolves around a sociopath becoming a leader of a country and leading it to ruin (World War 2 being an obvious example). The current administration in Washington has perhaps the largest density of sociopaths I have ever witnessed in American politics (with obvious cases like Tom Delay and Karl Rove, but with lots of other examples as well). By the way, I know right wingers are going to rate this review negatively because of that last statement -- bring it on, guys! Have fun!

That said, this book is not for everyone and it has some flaws. The book is not written in a scholarly manner at all; instead, it's written in a deeply personal manner which is very involving and moving, but if you are looking for a reference on the subject, you should look elsewhere. Also, it's annoying that the author gets one of her most basic facts wrong: the assertion that one out of 25 persons is a sociopath. According to the DSM-IV, the main reference for psychiatric conditions, roughly 3% of males and 1% of females have this condition. That averages out to 2% (assuming equal numbers of males and females), which is one person out of 50, not one out of 25. I'll assume that Dr. Stout made an honest mistake, but I hope she corrects it in subsequent printings. For me, a more serious flaw is that the author treats sociopathy as an all-or-nothing phenomenon -- you either are a sociopath or you aren't. The reality is much more complex than that. As I mentioned above, I have known a few individuals who behaved in a sociopathic manner, but even they didn't resemble the full-on sociopaths the author describes. Instead, they would sometimes behave in a normal manner, and only under specific circumstances would the sociopathic behaviors come out. I suspect these "partial sociopaths" are much more prevalent than the full-blown sociopaths Dr. Stout describes. Also, the nature/nurture issue is given comparatively little attention. I think it's vitally important to understand if a sociopath is the way he/she is because of an alteration in brain function (due to genetics or a developmental defect) or due to e.g. early childhood abuse or neglect. Probably both are involved, and different people will have different causes for their conditions, but this isn't covered much in this book.

Despite these flaws, I recommend this book highly and wish that everyone would read it so that you understand what you're up against when you encounter one of these people, or when you see one on TV running for a major public office.