

# *Killing Eve*: A television series about a soulless psychopath and her pursuer

By David Walsh  
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*Killing Eve* is a British-made television series broadcast on BBC America, based on the *Codename Villanelle* novella series by Luke Jennings. The first season had eight episodes. The series has been renewed for a second season.

Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh) is a bureaucrat working for MI5, the UK's domestic intelligence agency. She becomes convinced the recent murder of a "sex-trafficking Russian politician" is the work of a female assassin, contrary to the views of her superiors. On her own time, Polastri has been attempting to connect a number of killings. After she disobeys her boss, Polastri—along with two colleagues—is fired.

However, Carolyn Martens (Fiona Shaw), the head of the Russian section of MI6, the British foreign intelligence service, recruits Polastri and the other two for an "off-the-books" operation to track down the killer.

Meanwhile, the assassin herself, "Villanelle," real name Oksana Astankova (Jodie Comer), is informed by her handler, Konstantin (Kim Bodnia), a veteran Russian intelligence operative, of MI6's interest in her. She immediately becomes obsessed with her pursuer, Polastri.

The series consists essentially of Polastri and team's pursuit of Villanelle as she carries out her killing spree in various European countries (France, Germany, Bulgaria, Italy, England and perhaps more) and inside a Russian prison, a chase complicated by the fact that the prey on several occasions becomes the hunter.

The underlying motives behind the murders, of a politician, a gangster, a businesswoman, etc., are unclear (perhaps mere political destabilization and "chaos"), but a "shadowy organization," The Twelve, seems to be ordering them. Villanelle herself, in response to a question from one of her victims, "Why

are you doing this?," tells him, "I have absolutely no idea." She takes considerable pleasure in causing pain, mutilating and killing.

Eve becomes obsessed with Villanelle too, describing herself at one point as "a fan." Even after the assassin kills her colleague, Bill (David Haig), in a Berlin disco, Polastri—along with everyone else—remains intrigued and slightly awe-struck.

Eve's marriage suffers from the strains of her new and dangerous work. On several occasions she fights with her long-suffering husband, Niko (Owen McDonnell). She seems more interested in Villanelle than anything or anyone else.

Nearly everyone comes under suspicion. Carolyn has had some sort of personal relationship with Konstantin in the past, and may have a current agenda that is hidden from the others, including her son, Kenny (Sean Delaney), a hacker and a member of the secret team. On the other side, it is not clear to whom or what Konstantin is loyal.

While it does not appear that Russian intelligence is directing Villanelle's homicidal campaign, a distinctly anti-Russian mood and ambiance pervades the series. It is simply one of the givens of this television program and many other programs and films at present, as it is for a particular international social layer, that Moscow is the source of a much of what is perverse, corrupt and evil in the world. One does not have to provide one's criminals, torturers and assorted violent maniacs with an emotional or social background, it is enough to give them a Russian name and accent.

We have returned to the days of the Cold War, or, in many ways, something considerably more primitive. After all, the writings of John le Carré (*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, etc.) and others helped undermine the propaganda of the

“free world” to the effect that it was defending freedom and democracy. Grubbiness and cynical *realpolitik* were shown to prevail.

*Killing Eve* serves up a ridiculously Manichean view of the world. Everything Russian is sinister, cruel and bleak. All things British, even when treachery is afoot, are bright, chummy and amusing.

There is very little social or psychological realism or plausibility here. One doesn't have the impression that the author of the novellas, Luke Jennings, or the creator of the series, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, have thought seriously about the geopolitical, social or emotional implications of any of the characters' actions.

We are meant to accept on faith that Eve and Villanelle, involved in a “deadly cat-and-mouse game,” fascinate one another from the first moment each is aware of the other. But it's never clear why that should be the case. The self-consciously “disturbing” effort to establish some sort of psycho-sexual bond between Eve and Villanelle (“You'd find we work for the same people”, “You like me too much ...”, “I think about you all the time ....” “I think about you too ...,” etc.) simply falls flat. The series *asserts* such a “dark” and intense bond, but never *proves* it dramatically or psychically.

Oh is pleasant enough, but her Polastri is hardly the stuff of obsession. She is rather ordinary and plodding.

As for Villanelle-Oksana, *Killing Eve* indulges in the unpleasant romanticization and glamorization of “hitmen” (and women) and other murderers that seems to have come into particular vogue within the American and European upper middle class in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In other words, the interest in depicting and even idealizing killers emerged about the same time as the Great Powers, including the UK, launched the drive to recolonize major parts of the globe, expressed in such efforts as the US-led 1990-91 Gulf War. The infamous motto of the *Wall Street Journal* after that murderous, one-sided assault on Iraq, “Force works,” became that of a section of the movie- and television-making community.

There is no reason to believe that hired killers, belonging among the most odious human types, are anything like Villanelle in *Killing Eve*. In any case, the producers and writers don't have any idea what such people are like. They simply create a protagonist who corresponds to the empty-headed petty bourgeois

delusion that “freedom” consists in being permitted to do anything, including murdering without a conscience. Comer is a talented performer, but nothing she does can bring to life what is a full-fledged fantasy.

Numerous reviewers express delight in the Villanelle/Oksana figure, who is, after all, a sadistic killer. Hannah Giorgis in the *Atlantic* first notes that after Villanelle murders, “she luxuriates in her Paris flat, collecting ornate trophies from her kills and draping herself in the finest fabrics. She is cocky, playful, and ostentatious. She stabs one elder statesman through the eye with her hairpin; she triggers a fatal asthma attack in one ‘breathy’ female target using poisoned perfume”—before adding, “yet she is nearly impossible to not root for.”

“*Killing Eve* is a funny, witty, bright show about a hilarious, soulless maniac who waxes people to pop music,” asserts Willa Paskin in *Slate*. Villanelle, she continues, is “twisted and conscienceless, but she is also irrepressible. She's a proper psychopath; a little bloodshed isn't gonna get her down! As written and performed, Villanelle is unsinkable, undeniable, drawing people in, even when they should be running away.”

Giorgis and Paskin should perhaps speak for themselves.

Inevitably, given the gender of the series' two leading characters, *Killing Eve* has been labeled a “feminist thriller,” a “perfect show for the #MeToo era,” in the words of *Salon*'s Melanie McFarland. “What's been fascinating,” McFarland writes, “is to witness the ways that it explores the kind of trickiness involved in navigating the world as a woman, in ways that the #MeToo and Time's Up movements are only starting to reckon with.” Etc., etc.

All in all, despite the presence of some talented performers, *Killing Eve* is a poor artistic effort, superficial, unconvincing and unenlightening.

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