Gender, True Crime and Criminology

Offenders, Victims and Ethics

Louise Wattis

EMERALD STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Gender, True Crime and Criminology

True crime can be understood as popular cultural output, consisting of a long-form narrative that tells the story of actual criminal events, most frequently focussing on murder narratives. What Murley refers to as 'nonfiction murder narration' (Murley, 2008, p. 6). However, writers in the field point out that true crime may tell stories based on actual events, but the genre has an uneasy position when it comes to truth and fact, playing around with the truth of events, characters and other details in its retellings (Jenkins, 1994; Murley, 2008; Seltzer, 2008). Murley (2008) sums this up in the following way:

> True crime is a genre that claims a strict and tidy relationship with "reality" or "truth", and many of its creators and consumers believe it to depict "just the facts." The genre does present factual material about crimes that have actually occurred, and some of its creators and consumers believe true crime is uniformly honest and truthful. But true crime always fictionalises, emphasises, exaggerates, interprets, constructs and creates truth, and any relationship to the facts is mediated and compromised. (Murley, 2008, p. 13)

Drawing on true crime author Gary Provost, Biressi (2001) notes people read true crime to engage with the 'real': 'Actuality is most obviously a prerequisite . . . Real names and real places are badges of authenticity; powerful signifiers that help to differentiate true crime from "novelised" stories of crime' (Biressi, 2001, p. 23). Other writers argue that true crime offers audiences and readers reassurance by restoring order and endorsing the legitimacy of criminal justice institutions (Murley, 2019; Yardley et al., 2019). True crime also reassures us by providing a recognisable criminal Other (Linnemann, 2015). Furthermore, the preoccupation with women as the primary consumers of true crime has inspired a collection of gender-specific motivations relating to feminine focal concerns.

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The history of true crime has its origins in English 18th-century criminal biographies and the Newgate Accounts – the biographies of criminals executed at Tyburn (Rawlings, 1998). The murder of five women in London's Whitechapel in 1888 by a still unidentified killer is a further key moment in true crime's history. The case spawned the ripper myth and set in motion cultural fascination with sexually motivated murder (Downing, 2013; Linnemann, 2015). The Victorian press pored over the details of the murders and fuelled the public appetite for graphic murder narratives (Curtis, 2002). More recently, writing about the growth of true crime in the US, Murley (2008) notes that the pulp magazines of the mid-20th century, populated with assorted violent narratives and sexualised images of female victims, further established the conventions for the modern true crime genre. By the 1970s, driven by high-profile serial murder cases, the demand for true crime had grown and evolved to books and documentaries (see Biressi, 2001 for a similar overview of the UK). At this point, the genre was considered low-brow, mainly telling prurient stories about serial killing in pulp novels and poorly produced documentaries.

More recently, streaming platforms, podcasts and a new genre of true crime, which does not rely on reconstructing previously solved cases but address questions about truth, guilt and justice, have reset the genre and led to a renewed buzz about it (Hess, 2018; Oliver Conroy, 2019; Tuttle, 2019). Newer documentaries and podcasts such as *The Staircase* (2008), *Se*rial (2014) and *Making a Murderer* (2015–2018) differ from lower-brow televisual predecessors in terms of their narrative structure, production values and claims to a higher purpose. Indeed, the emergence of streaming platforms and the popularity of podcasts has driven true crime's popularity in the digital era, increasing the volume and accessibility of content and transforming modes of consumption (Horeck, 2019; Klinger, 2018). Horeck (2019) notes that true crime is a good fit with digital culture as it 'provides endless material for the streaming era and lends itself to participatory media culture through the solicitation of viewer involvement in crime solving' (p. 9). Indeed, Boling and Hull (2018) argue that the first series of *Serial* marked the point at which 'podcast media' met true crime and became a definitive platform for this content.

Academic Criminology and Popular Criminology

Criminologists interested in crime and popular culture often use the term popular criminology to describe a range of genres and formats, such as feature films, television dramas, crime fiction, true crime books, podcasts and documentaries that tell stories about crime, justice, offenders and perpetrators. Academic criminology's interest in what popular cultural representations of crime can tell us about crime, justice and the social predates the naming of crime and popular culture as popular criminology (see, for instance, Brown, 2003; Sparks, 1992; Young, 1998). However, with some notable exceptions, it is fair to say that criminology's engagement with the representations of crime has historically centred on crime news and its distortion of crime, victims and offenders (Yardley et al., 2019). Rawlings (1998) referred to

'popular criminology' in a paper critiquing how academic criminology has dismissed and overlooked popular historical true crime while historians have long recognised them as a valuable resource. Indeed, Rawlings points out that academic criminology needs to acknowledge crime and popular culture, given these texts are the main way that people experience and make sense of crime and justice.

Following Rawlings, Nicole Rafter's (2007) analysis of 'sex crime' films introduced the idea of *popular criminology* to academic audiences, making explicit its value as a resource for criminology. Rafter argues that both discourses demonstrate differing limitations and get at crime truths in different ways, but she notes how they might complement one another to advance criminological knowledge. Indeed, using popular culture enables criminology to go beyond academic explanations and can reveal how audiences and different publics might respond to crime in different ways. Popular criminology can also offer creative solutions to crime problems beyond the academic and policy imagination (Wakeman, 2013). For instance, films, documentaries, crime fiction and true crime might inspire us to think and feel differently about crime, violence and its subjects, which prompts different political, ethical and philosophical questions (Rafter, 2007). This could be something as straightforward as a film that offers the means to grasp a criminological theory or concept (Rafter & Brown, 2012) to approaching a text as a socio-historical document or research data (Wattis, 2018, 2023).

All of the above might equally apply to true crime. Texts can be analysed for their progressive and political value; equally, the ethical and representational problems presented by true crime pose important criminological questions. This is even more pronounced given how the genre is evolving beyond murder narratives and its now pivotal relationship to contemporary digital culture. The following volume aims to tap into the current significance of true crime, exploring and disrupting its gendered dimensions, as well as returning to recurrent ethical issues relating to representation and visibility in the context of digital media culture.

Men, Women and True Crime

Defining true crime within the narrow parameters of the 'murder event' (Murley, 2008) has provoked the preoccupation with women as the main consumers of 'real-life' crime events (Hess, 2018; Oliver Conroy, 2019; Tuttle, 2019). This has led to a flurry of media commentaries and some academic work attempting to get to the bottom of true crime's popularity amongst women. Debates have intensified with the emergence of female-led podcasts and the ascendance of the true-crime podcast format more generally (BBC, n.d.; Hess, 2018). A range of explanations have been offered for women's enjoyment of true crime, ranging from wanting to pick up survival tactics, experiencing risk and fear vicariously to reading true crime as a form of therapy and identification with victims (Hess, 2018; Oliver Conroy, 2019; Tuttle, 2019). However, these debates only apply to true crime as a 'murder event' featuring a specific type of socio/psychopathic perpetrator. If we expand the definition and include subgenres to include the

'hardman' narratives, men as consumers come into view, and true crime presents as less of a feminine pursuit.

The narrow focus on a particular type of murder narrative involving stock perpetrators and victims belies the varied nature of the true crime genre. Indeed, so many more texts across a variety of formats count as true crime. For instance, prison memoirs, rape memoirs, stories of war, espionage, state crime and genocide. Going beyond the accepted genre boundaries of true crime and seeing its variety, my own work in this area has explored the violent male subject often connected to organised crime, who are admired as 'hardmen' with violent reputations (Wattis, 2021, 2023). Mayr (2012) refers to individuals who feature in these texts as 'unrepentant hard men' and borrows Penfold-Mounce's (2009) term 'underworld exhibitionist' to describe criminal subjects who go on to write their life stories in this manner. Indeed, once the hardman becomes discernible, so too does the profligate cultural production that surrounds them. Hardman stories feature in books (memoirs, biographies and auto-biographies), documentaries, feature films, television drama and podcasts, crossing both fact and fiction, elevating criminal protagonists to a 'dubious infamy' (Schmid, 2008), with some of the most well-known figures self-consciously pursuing celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2009) becoming household names embedded in the collective memory. In the British context, the clearest example of celebrity 'gangster' is the Kray twins' legend. Their crossover into legitimate celebrity and positioning within 1960s iconography (Cummins et al., 2018) typifies how these criminal figures occupy a place within the dominant culture beyond censure.

Gender and True Crime

The gendered features of true crime are clear. True crime centres male perpetrators and either leaves women out of the story or sexualises them (Murley, 2019). As such, true crime reinforces the association between violence and masculinity and society's acceptance of men's offending, up to a point (Byrne & Trew, 2008; Downing, 2013). As Lisa Downing (2013) argues, society is fascinated by murder and the figure of the murderer, who is invariably male. For Downing, this is symptomatic of a misogynist culture where the male murderer is venerated and mythologised and female victims are often collateral damage in serving the masculine murder narrative. This relates to a specific type of male killer bound up with the norms of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. As Fathallah (2023) points to 'the primacy of straight men as the most "impressive" killers, as opposed to the pathetic abjection of the monstrous queer' (p. 175).

As feminist work highlights, the template for the male killer and the female victim was set by the Whitechapel murders and the Ripper myth (Cameron & Frazer, 1987; Caputi, 1987; Downing, 2013; Smith, 2013; Warkentin, 2010). The case involved the murder of five women in the east end of London in 1888, by a still unidentified killer. The case and, more importantly, the way it was reported by news media and entered the public imagination elevated the unknown male killer to mythical status while female victims were blamed and vilified as

prostitutes, while the press and public pored over the graphic details of women's murdered and mutilated bodies (Curtis, 2002). Fascination with the case persists, notably in the pseudo-criminology of Ripperology, which remains fixated on the killer's identity and victims' connections to prostitution. Jane Caputi (1987) identifies how during 20th century, media and popular culture have seized on similar cases involving male killers and female victims, often sex workers, in what she refers to as 'ripper repetitions' which reinforce specific gender roles around gender, violence and victimhood.

Social status and ideologies of feminine respectability linked to female sexuality often determine if and how media include certain victims and how they portray them. Taking the example of sex workers, double standards relating to gender and sexuality have marginalised sex workers throughout history and subjected them to legal repression (O'Neill, 2010; Warkentin, 2010; Wattis, 2021). The portrayal of sex workers, often viewed as the endpoint in female morality, illustrates this point. News media either ignore female victims linked to prostitution, treat them with indifference or blame and objectify them (Garcia-Del Moral, 2011; Strega et al., 2014; Wattis, 2022a). In contrast, media and culture construct the ideal female victim as White, attractive, respectable and middle-class (Wykes & Welsh, 2008). 'Ideal' female victims 'top' victim hierarchies (C. Greer, 2017) and attract more news coverage, with the tone of coverage differing in comparison to poor and non-White victims (Wykes & Welsh, 2008). Likewise, White, 'respectable' female victims have dominated traditional true crime narratives and continue to do so in the podcast era of true crime (Slakoff & Duran, 2023). Indeed, Murley (2008) draws attention to true crime's depiction of an all-White universe where Black people do not exist as either victims or perpetrators. In the case of Black men, this stands in stark contrast to their racialisation and criminalisation in news media and the wider public discourse.

The privileging of White female victimhood, reflected in disproportionate news coverage, is captured by the concept of missing White woman syndrome (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019; Stillman, 2007). Relevant work highlights how the lack of media reporting on cases involving victims of colour reflects and conveys their lack of social value and determines how criminal justice actors respond differently based on race and class (Neely, 2015; Posey, 2023). However, fixating on White victims and, in some cases, inviting the public to engage in collective grief for certain victims, the media risks fetishisng dead women and prompting acceptance of violence against women and femicide via mediation processes (Dillman, 2014; Jermyn, 2017). Arguably, this results in murdered women becoming a taken-for-granted part of popular culture. The new era of true crime does better in this respect, diversifying its focus beyond murder narratives and exploring truth and guilt in relation to potential miscarriages of justice. That said, a quick look at current visual and podcast content indicates murder narratives continue to dominate true crime content.

An Overview of Chapters

The following two chapters deal with gendered audiences, exploring how both men and women engage with true crime. Chapter 1 revisits women and true crime, conceding that if we stick within assumed genre boundaries, women dominate as consumers of 'murder narratives'. The discussion identifies how current debates focussing on true crime echo earlier academic work that explored women's enjoyment of post-war cinema, soap operas and romance novels. The chapter explores the popularity of true crime aimed at women in the digital era and also considers whether feminist criminology focussing on gender and crime, which explores gendered lives and women's relationship to offending, might advance understandings of how women relate to crime, violence and popular culture.

Chapter 3 focusses on men and true crime, looking at the types of true crime and violent subjects that men are interested in. In doing so, it considers the appeal of true crime for the male true crime audience. Expanding on earlier work (Wattis, 2021, 2023) which identified the considerable cultural output centring the hardman renowned for the 'profession of violence' (Pearson, 2015), I explore how men's true crime has evolved in digital culture. With this in mind, I consider the presence of 'hardman' subjects in online spaces, exploring true crime podcasts that appeal to men where the format consists of guest interviews with men often connected to organised crime and violence. The chapter assesses this podcast genre against the dominance of the podcast format in the digital era, reflecting on its criminological value as a popular criminological text and the different cultural work it performs in comparison with other podcasts.

I draw further attention to true crime's diversity in Chapters 4 and 5, focussing on recent true crime docuseries that examine sexual violence and abuse and expose the failure of the justice system to act on behalf of victims. These documentaries share common features relating to the subject matter, narrative structure and assemblage of constituent parts to produce a recognisable genre (Horeck, 2024). The two chapters assess the political value of this form of visual media in terms of raising awareness, advocating for victims and revealing injustice and the harms of sexual violence. Chapter 4 focusses on *Football's Darkest Secret* (Gordon, 2021), which examined the institutional sexual abuse of boys in the English youth football system. The documentary does important work by challenging the dominant ways we view male victims of sexual abuse and inviting the viewer to rethink masculinity, vulnerability and victimisation. Similarly, Chapter 5 explores how the documentaries *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* and *Surviving R. Kelly* also perform a public interest function in exposing the failure of formal justice in respect of these cases and revealing how the dynamics of class, race, power and injustice shaped both cases. The chapters also consider the ethical difficulties connected to the genre. This relates to how the documentaries may commodify survivors and sexual violence, foster carceral logics, bolster criminal justice responses and create a recognisable genre characterised by a consistent set of tropes that diminishes the harms of sexual violence and fosters expectations about the victim experience and first-person testimony.

Chapter 6 revisits how media and culture fixate on the figure of the murdered woman, specifically the murdered White woman. It draws on the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021 to consider what the reactions to this relatively recent case tell us about current attitudes towards violence against women, identity and femicide. I identify how the case clearly resonates with Missing White woman syndrome, given the extensive news coverage of Sarah Everard's murder in comparison to the lesser coverage of the murders of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry in June 2020 and Sabina Nessa in September 2021. I acknowledge the consequences of the media privileging certain victims and erasing others in terms of the impact on victims' families, the reproduction of inequality and discrimination, and the failure to commemorate murder victims. However, the chapter discusses the dangers of fixating on certain victims and encouraging the collective mourning for dead White women across media cultures and the knock-on effect this has in terms of how we regard violence against women and femicide. This raises important questions about the ethics of representation and visibility in terms of how we recognise victims without exploiting them as commodified objects in both media and academic discourse. The volume concludes by reflecting on the issues raised, assessing what the good true crime can do, especially for those crimes and victims who are often overlooked in mainstream discourses, but stresses that we need to stay focussed on the ways in which 'real' suffering is portrayed and consumed and how audiences engage with content which for all intents and purposes, has been produce for entertainment in a commercial media market.

Chapter 2

Gender and True Crime: Women, Murder, Feminism and Therapy

Introduction

The current true crime cultural moment (Hess, 2018; Horeck, 2019) has been accompanied by assumptions and questions about true crime's popularity amongst female audiences. The rise of the female-led podcast, produced and presented by women, with its feminine sensibilities/conventions has further fuelled the association of true crime with female audiences, listeners and consumers. As I argue in the introduction, once the variety of true crime has been noted, male audiences come into view. They are simply interested in different sorts of violent subjects and narratives (Wattis, 2021). That said, true crime as murder narrative (Murley, 2008) is more popular with women. Aggregated statistics for different formats and genres identify women as between 60–70% of consumers of true crime (Umstead, 2017) while Vicary and Fraley's analysis of Amazon reviews of Ann Rule's *Every Breath You Take*, identified 86% of reviews as written by women. Likewise, women make up around 85% of recent true crime podcast audiences (CBS, 2018; Joyce, 2018; Pavelko & Gall Myrick, 2020). For instance, 98% of the 541 participants in Pavelko and Gall Myrick's (2020) survey of listeners to the *My Favourite Murder (MFM)* podcast were women.

The preoccupation with true crime and female audiences has prompted a raft of articles from journalists ruminating on just why is it that women love true crime, accompanied by a requisite degree of hyperbole (Hess, 2018; Oliver Conroy, 2019; Tuttle, 2019). Alice Robb writing in *New Statesman* in 2019 refers to the women 'transfixed with violent crime'. Likewise, Oliver Conroy (2019) is concerned with women's true crime 'obsession'. As the examples illustrate, the tone of many of these think pieces implies a pathological element to women enjoying true crime. Explanations offered by media and academics on the women and true crime question put it down to women's relationship to fear, risk and violence in the context of patriarchal culture which amplifies and fetishises a certain type of female victim (Wykes & Welsh, 2008). In addition, cultural and academic commentators refer to feminine 'focal concerns' (Steffensmeier et al.,

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