



THE RISE OF
True Crime

**20TH-CENTURY
MURDER AND
AMERICAN
POPULAR CULTURE**

JEAN MURLEY



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**TWENTIETH CENTURY MURDER AND
AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE**

Jean Murley

PRAEGER

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For Joel

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INTRODUCTION

Rosenberg's First Law of Reading: Never apologize for your reading tastes.

—*Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction*

This book began with a question, or rather, a series of questions, which I've been trying to answer since I picked up my first true-crime book as a teenager: "What *are* these books? Why are they so popular?" And, perhaps most important, "Why can't I stop reading this horrifying story?" That book was Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), a pillar of true crime for many reasons: its subject matter (the infamous serial killer Ted Bundy), Rule's personalized perspective on the events, and her expert use of the conventions of the true-crime genre. In the 1980s and 1990s, true-crime texts were hugely popular, and like many readers, I consumed the volumes like candy: *In Cold Blood*, *Helter Skelter*, *Zodiac*, *Fatal Vision*—I couldn't get enough. True crime was more than just another formula, another genre, another story—it was about real things that had happened to real people, and the stories of murder were both terrifying and oddly reassuring. No matter how dreadful and devious, the killers were always caught and punished. The genre spoke in a visceral and graphic way about acts of human evil, and the writers never minced their terms: the killers, predators, and sexual psychopaths of true crime were called monsters, madmen, beasts, and sadists, murderers without conscience or even recognizable humanity. Their existence, and their stories, insisted that in the American middle-class 1980s and 1990s, a world where nearly everything had been made safe and comfortable, a gnawing undercurrent of unmitigated evil was still present.

Reading and shamelessly enjoying true crime over the past twenty-five years, and getting a Ph.D. in English along the way, I've come to realize the interconnectedness of my original questions by studying the circumstances of the genre, reading scores of the books, and talking to many true crime

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fans. My questions have been slowly sketched in while becoming slightly more nuanced: what is the appeal of this genre at this particular point in time? Why is this type of murder narrative so fascinating and flexible, while also being rigid, formulaic, predictable, and almost boring? When—and why, and how—did true crime become the market force that it is now? How have true-crime texts informed other popular culture representations of murder? What kind of cultural work do these murder narratives, in various media forms, do? *The Rise of True Crime* contains my answers to these questions, and it describes and explores the origins, growth, and cultural impact of true crime in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American popular culture. This book maps out the rhetorical, technical, and cultural dimensions of true-crime magazines, books, television programs, films, and Internet material.

Although murder narratives and nonfiction crime writing have a history that spans centuries, modern true crime made its earliest appearance in the pages of *True Detective Magazine* during the 1940s and 1950s, as a new way of narrating and understanding murder—one more sensitive to context, more psychologically sophisticated, more willing to make conjectures about the unknown thoughts and motivations of killers—emerged. More than a single popular literary genre or even a set of technical narrative conventions, true crime has become a multifaceted, multigenre aesthetic formulation, a poetics of murder narration. True crime is a way of making sense of the senseless, but it has also become a worldview, an outlook, and a perspective on contemporary American life, one that is suspicious and cynical, narrowly focused on the worst kinds of crimes, and preoccupied with safety, order, and justice. True crime has brought a tabloid sensibility into high culture, and has illuminated the sordid with beams of truth: in its best exemplars, true crime questions its own motivations and reason for being. The cultural work of true crime, in its various pop culture manifestations, is important, compelling, and often misunderstood or ignored entirely.

But true crime in its current iteration also raises a host of difficult moral, ethical, and cultural questions, questions that are largely ignored by its mainstream producers and consumers: Why is there such an easy acceptance of murder as entertainment? Why are we so preoccupied with sexual violence against women, and what is the appeal of the genre for women, who make up the majority of its audience? Why do the vast majority of true-crime depictions deal with white, middle-class killers and victims, thereby ignoring the real dimensions of homicide in America, which is statistically more prevalent in urban communities of color? Since the 1960s, the genre and its practitioners have withstood accusations of misogyny, racism, and moral bankruptcy, with some choosing to tackle the tough issues, others deciding to duck for cover. An analysis of the “rise” of true crime—its enormous popularity and appearance in multiple media forms—reveals a populist

grassroots perspective on the formidable issues that have emerged since the 1960s in American society. Atavistic in its intensely gendered appeal and misogynist subject matter and avoidance of race and multiculturalism, true crime can be read as a countercurrent to the social progress and cultural changes—feminism, multiculturalism, political correctness—that have transformed American life in the past four decades.

True-crime depictions appeal to many different people, for reasons ranging from vicarious and perhaps prurient interests in the untimely demise of “innocents” to the genuine desire to understand a mysterious and sometimes tragic death (or, more commonly, a *series* of deaths). We read true-crime books and blogs and watch the television shows and films because they promise to furnish answers to serious questions about human behavior, because they’re formulaic and therefore as addictive and soothing as old-fashioned mystery novels, because of our insatiable human curiosity about the macabre and forbidden, and because of our late twentieth-century hunger for nonfiction, part of the gluttony for information that Americans have indulged since the 1970s. True-crime depictions have formed a momentous cultural response to a frightening rise in violent, seemingly random crime in our society between the 1960s and the present. Part of that response has been to reinvigorate and reinvent the language of evil and monstrosity, and in the late twentieth century, true crime was one of the only sites in American culture—barring evangelical Christianity—where the rhetoric of evil was used without ambiguity, irony, or postmodern questioning of absolute moral categories.

During the 1970s, with skyrocketing American crime rates and the appearance of a frightening trend toward social chaos, the true-crime worldview made sense of such phenomena as the Charles Manson crimes and the widening threat presented by psychopaths in books, films, and television programs. In the 1980s and 1990s, true crime both created and assuaged fears about serial killers, and it educated consumers of pop culture about forensics, profiling, and highly technical aspects of criminology. We have become a nation of violent crime pseudoexperts, with many ordinary people able to speak intelligently about blood-spatter patterns and “organized” versus “disorganized” serial killers. The true-crime worldview and narrative poetics confirms the reading public’s shifting and often paranoid fears about violence in America, bringing the reader or viewer into closer relationship with real killers by drawing us “into the minds” of such people, while simultaneously distancing us from the possibility of random violence and death. In true crime, the killers are usually incarcerated or executed at the end of the story, reassuring us with a good old-fashioned reordering of the chaos wrought by crime. Through representational strategies which posit certain kinds of killers as “monstrous” or outside the realm of normative human morality, the emergence of the figure of the sociopath/psychopath, the

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creation of a textual and visual landscape of paranoia and fear of “stranger-danger,” and by portraying these conditions as reflective of ordinary American reality, the true-crime aesthetic both managed and helped create fears of crime and violence. True crime is also the site of a dramatic renegotiation and revaluation of the rhetoric of evil, and is one of the sites in American public discourse where that rhetoric is used without irony, and where notions and definitions of evil are presented without ambiguity. When seen within its proper historical context, true crime emerges as a vibrant and meaningful strand of popular culture, little understood and often devalued as lurid and meaningless “pulp” reading and viewing.

In the 1970s and 1980s the true-crime literary genre rose to prominence and became the dominant form of nonfiction murder narration in America. In the 1980s, true crime became a consumer-driven publishing industry category, garnering huge profits for mass-market paperback publishing houses that have continued to grow. In the decade of the 1960s, there were approximately thirty-seven texts that treated single cases of contemporary murder and/or the activities of single murderers. In the 1970s, there were seventy-eight examples of the same; in the 1980s, there were 145, and in the 1990s, the number rose to 165.¹ Entire careers—that of Ann Rule, for example, whose work regularly appears on bestseller lists—have been spawned and nurtured by true crime, and large booksellers such as Barnes and Noble devote entire shelves to the genre. Since Capote, textual true crime has acquired a specific set of generic conventions, narrative techniques, and assumptions about audience, which its writers have adhered to, creating a coherent body of texts that narrate real murder and posit a consistent way of understanding it. Those same techniques are used in visual representations as well, with the addition of new trends and amplification of others, such as the dramatic reenactment and the creation of a noir-inflected visual landscape.

True crime has created and brought to life an important pop culture icon, the socio-psychopath. Although psychopaths and sociopaths differ significantly to mental health professionals, in popular media representations the two categories are often blurred together. The sociopath is popularly understood as a person who has no conscience but can function in society, while the psychopath is conscienceless, prone to violence, and has paranoid, grandiose, or schizoid delusions, making it hard for him to function ‘normally’ in relationships, in employment, and in general society. Not all psycho- or sociopaths are killers, but throughout this book, I will use the terms to signify the murderers whose stories are told in true crime, and whose actions have become landmarks in the American popular imagination. People like Ed Gein, Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Aileen Wuornos—these are primal socio-psychopathic American icons, whose stories have granted them the kind of

cultural capital usually given only to celebrities. (For more on this phenomenon, see David Schmid's *Natural Born Celebrities: The Serial Killer in American Culture*, 2005.) True crime was instrumental in securing for such people a place in an American celebrity culture of infamy, which, while not explicitly glorifying serial murder itself, fetishizes, romanticizes, and traffics in the "careers" of such killers. The serial killer has become the container and symbol for a contemporary understanding of evil in popular culture, one that posits evil as hidden, persistent, and spectacularly gruesome.

Literary forms, or genres, both reflect and contain a perspective on their cultural moment; just as the eighteenth century "rise" or creation and popularity of the novel corresponded to the realities of emerging market capitalism and social and political changes in England and the emergence of a consciousness of the self, true crime as a genre rose in America during a period of drastic and rapid social upheaval, the advent of New Journalism, and a dramatic and frightening upsurge in violent crime. In this book, I reveal and articulate the strategies true crime uses to make meaning out of violent and irrational acts in contemporary American society, and I show that true crime responds to murder with both irrational fear and compelling fascination. True crime, although laying strong claims to factuality, truthfulness, and realistic representation of actual events, is driven by and preoccupied with themes of an updated, contemporary gothic horror, and it is marked by a carefully constructed rhetorical style that inspires horror. This horror is personified by the presence of the psychopath, paranoia, and hidden threats lurking in a seemingly innocuous environment, domestic and romantic betrayals and reversals, and extreme, graphic, sexualized violence against women. Within a social and cultural context of rising murder rates, increasing sexual freedom for men and women, and greater social freedoms and significant economic advances for women, true crime responded with an intense, gruesome, and paranoid counterstory, repeated endlessly—serially—through its narrative framework and strict conventions.

Such conventions include the depiction of one murder event, a narrative focus on the killer through exploring his or her history, motivations, and unique psychological makeup, some degree of fictionalizing or speculating about events, and a great deal of tension between emotional identification with and distancing from the killer. In true crime, repulsion vies with attraction, murder is rife with suspense and mystery, and the graphic destruction of bodies is commonplace. True crime is obsessed with full-on visual body horror: autopsy footage, close-ups of ligature marks and gunshot wounds on bodies, bruises or lividity on flesh, and blood pools, stains and spatters in the physical spaces where murder has occurred are all depicted in the genre, with varying visual intensity, causing some critics to refer to true crime as "crime porn." The overwhelming majority of true-crime stories portray white killers and victims, with a heavy emphasis on both serial killing and

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murder in the domestic sphere, and the “missing white woman of the week” is vastly overrepresented in major media forms like cable television news and their Internet affiliates.

Contemporary murder narration in the form of true crime did not spring fully formed into existence, and modern true crime shares some important characteristics with its predecessors. The true-crime narrative poetics are surprisingly similar to nineteenth-century depictions, relying largely on horror and a rhetorical distancing of the killer through the language of monstrosity. Popular early twentieth-century murder narratives in the work of Edmund Pearson show a Modernist sensibility, with a self-mocking ironic tone and a witty, almost sarcastic narrative style. The hard-boiled style used in crime fiction found its way into murder narratives in the 1930s and 1940s, and in the 1950s, after two world wars and in reaction to the “teenaged threat” of that era, murder narratives began a significant change that culminated in the formation of true crime. Before delving into the annals of contemporary true crime, the following paragraphs sketch out the historical trajectory of murder narration in America and offer a condensed overview of the cultural work that murder narratives have effected in American life.

TRUE CRIME AS MURDER NARRATIVE

Very simply, a murder narrative is a story—the story of real events, shaped by the teller and imbued with his or her values and beliefs about such events. Narratives can be textual, visual, aural, or a mixture of the three. In addition, murder narratives are also shaped by the means of their production—under deadline for a newspaper story, with great attention to research and accuracy for a high quality book, or brought to life by actors in a televised dramatization or film. The ways that real murder is narrated, and therefore understood by any given culture, change through time and with differing historical circumstances. Different stories, interpretations, emphases, and perspectives on any single case of murder abound. An 1892 account of the Lizzie Borden murder events reads differently, employs a different rhetoric, examines and emphasizes different elements of the actors and actions than a modern retelling of the same set of events. In her book *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, cultural historian Karen Halttunen writes that “Any story of murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to serious transgression in its midst.”² Because murder narratives are constructed and are always somewhat fictive, no matter the reality of the event being discussed, they reveal the underlying preoccupations and perspectives on “serious transgression” in ways that other texts—stories about sports, say, or dance—do not. The trajectory of American nonfiction murder narration both responds to and

reflects its context and historical circumstance, showing changes and shifts in widespread religious beliefs, philosophical understandings about crime, definitions of insanity, and shifting perspectives on the meaning and mystery of radical evil.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the story of murder was told very differently than it is told now, and was circulated in society mainly through broadsheets, pamphlets, and execution sermons. Early American murder narratives, primarily execution sermons, focused on the spiritual condition of the murderer. Typically, a minister would spend weeks or months with the convicted killer, conversing, eliciting the confession, acting as spiritual advisor, and writing the sermon, which would then be read to the entire community either on the Sunday before the killer's execution or at the actual event. Rather than relating the shock and horror of murder and details about the crime, execution sermons related the spiritual transgression that led to murder, and (hopefully) described how the murderer's soul was then saved by his or her minister before execution. These narratives also posited a view that violent transgression, although shocking, was not entirely beyond comprehension because of widespread acceptance of the Christian doctrine of innate depravity and fallen human nature.

From the Calvinist and Puritan perspective, everybody was subject to various forms of sinning, whether it was lying, drunkenness, adultery, infanticide, or homicide. Lesser forms of sin were understood to lead into greater transgressions, and one important function of the execution sermon was to relate the progression from relatively minor spiritual difficulties, which resulted in such small sins as lying or laziness, to more serious breaches, which, if left unchecked, could culminate in murder. The sermon had two specific and highly focused goals: to bring the murderer back into the human community in a metaphorical sense, and to ask the community "to look sin in the face—the face of the convicted criminal before them—and see in that face a mirror image of themselves, with their rages and lusts, wayward impulses and vicious inclinations, small sins and great."³ In the Puritan context, the murderer was spiritually redeemable, not beyond the pale and certainly not expelled from the moral structures of the larger society. Rather, he or she was seen as a common sinner, spiritually wayward but not monstrous, inhuman, or beyond redemption. The sinner was given the ultimate punishment, but physical death did not negate the spiritual progress that the killer had hopefully made during the period of confinement.

During the turn from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, execution sermons, with their focus on the spiritual condition of the killer and the absence of graphic descriptions of the crime, began to change slightly to include more biographical details about the killer. Gradually, an interest in who the killer was—his personality, experiences, motivations,

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and behavior—emerged within the most popular forms of murder narrative. This preoccupation with biographical details of killers and the newly emerging and fast-growing forms of crime narratives in printed material would lead to the formation of a new genre, the sensational account. Writing about this much earlier shift, Halttunen finds that “the new murder accounts evinced a great interest in the narrative act of defining the individual person by his or her distinguishing characteristics and tracing personal development over time.”⁴ Changing narrative forms such as newspaper accounts, books, trial transcripts, and killer’s biographies, would eventually replace the execution sermon, as they more capably handled a new and growing fascination with and interest in the figure of the killer. Simultaneously, killers began to be portrayed with a set of “Gothic horror” conventions, including a preoccupation with domestic crimes, an increasing emphasis on gore and more graphic violence, and a depiction of murder as mystery. The language of murder narration changed tone and register dramatically during this period, as the more rhetorically ornate and abstract language of the execution sermon dropped out of the accounts, and a more physical, embodied, and horror-inflected rhetoric took over.

In the early nineteenth century this change in the ways that murder was narrated reveals a cultural and ideological shift into viewing murderers as “moral aliens,” and as entirely beyond the boundaries of human experience and understanding. The increasing popularity and dominance of Enlightenment ideas about the supremacy of rational thought and behavior helped to shift the focus of the murder narrative onto the utter irrationality and horror of interpersonal violence. In the sensational accounts, differences between the killer and the reader were emphasized with a rhetoric which stressed moral monstrosity, “barbarity, unknown among savages or beasts,” in the words of one account from 1804.⁵ Enlightenment ideas stressed the basic goodness and rationality of human nature, ideas that were necessary for the growth and maintenance of a healthy new democratic society. The necessity for having faith in one’s fellow man in order to create a stable and viable society left no room for the bizarre, the irrational, or the unjustified in human behavior. Fears about hidden moral corruption and ideological rot were expressed through murder narratives, for the murderer embodied individual instances of the irrational and senseless. Murderers were now depicted as hideously outside the moral boundaries of humanity, not, as in the execution sermons, as having fallen into sin and the free expression of impulses which lurked within us all. They had to be seen so, for to admit otherwise would mean that democracy could not, would not, flourish, and “mobocracy” or anarchy would overcome young and vulnerable American government institutions.

The melodramatic generic conventions of the sensational account—killers as monstrous moral aliens, an exaggerated sense of horror and moral

outrage, murder as titillating gothic mystery—dominated nonfiction murder narratives throughout the nineteenth century. Different representational vogues came and went, each expressing passing social concerns or anxieties, adding complexity and nuance to the narratives: the murder of prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836 prompted an outpouring of support for the killer, a young man who was depicted as naïve and duped by an experienced and sexually dangerous woman, and a large number of murder narratives reflected the various perspectives on the gender and social class issues contained within this crime. The antebellum “penny press”—most notably New York’s *Sun*, *Herald*, *Tribune*, and *Transcript*—made crime reporting a staple of working class news, the more sensational the better. With the aplomb and finesse of a first-rate nineteenth-century confidence man, these papers expertly negotiated the tension between exploitation and truth-telling, titillation and responsible journalism, while adding an element of political rivalry and class-consciousness, which appealed to the increasingly literate journeymen, mechanics, and laborers of the larger cities. Scholar David Ray Papke writes that between 1830 and 1900, “an immense variety of crime-related products traveled every avenue into the cultural marketplace. Journalists published thousands of broadsheets, pamphlets, articles and columns concerning crime. Writers of fiction created crime novels, detective stories, and serial crime thrillers. Police chiefs, detectives and criminals composed memoirs, confessions and crime-stopping kits.”⁶ In most of these accounts and however varied the media, melodrama was the prevailing narrative mode, served with a heaping appeal to the reader’s sense of disgust, pity, and sympathy.

Apart from the penny press news dailies, one nineteenth-century publication stands apart as offering coverage of crime and criminals exclusively: the *National Police Gazette*. This weekly publication had its origins in two British publications: the *Newgate Calendar*, a regularly published collection of criminal biographies, confessions, and accounts of crimes, investigations and executions, and the *London Police Gazette*, which furnished descriptions of fugitives mostly for local police forces. Beginning publication in 1845, the American *National Police Gazette* filled the growing demand for a codified selection of crime reporting and narration in tabloid form, and during the period from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, it traces the arc of popular murder narration from gothic horror to scientific, ironic detachment. Its early incarnation relied on sensationalism and headlines shouting about “horror” and “fiends,” and the *Gazette*’s writers employed the standard conventions of melodrama and sensation to narrate murder. But as the century progressed, advances in science and forensic techniques fostered a new depiction of homicide as a scientific and sociological problem. During the turn of the century, killers begin to be of much greater interest to science.