Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies

TRUE CRIME IN AMERICAN MEDIA

Edited by
George S. Larke-Walsh

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True Crime in American Media

This book explores contemporary American true crime narratives across various media formats. It dissects the popularity of true crime and the effects, both positive and negative, this popularity has on perceptions of crime and the justice system in contemporary America.

As a collection of new scholarship on the development, scope, and character of true crime in twenty-first century American media, analyses stretch across film, streaming/broadcast TV, podcasts, and novels to explore the variety of ways true crime pervades modern culture. The reader is guided through a series of interconnected topics, starting with an examination of the contemporary success of true crime, the platforms involved, the narrative structures and engagement with audiences, moving on to debates on representation and the ethics involved in portraying both victims and perpetrators of crime within the genre.

This collection provides new critical work on American true crime media for all interested readers, and especially scholars and students in the humanities and social sciences. It offers a significant area of research in social sciences, criminology, media, and English Literature academic disciplines.

George S. Larke-Walsh is a Full-Time Lecturer at the University of Sunderland, UK.

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This book is dedicated with love to Jess, Bunny and Winnie

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Introduction

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Why is true crime so popular? This is an interesting question to which there is no easy or stable answer. Debate has been raised across the entire spectrum of media stakeholders – producers, audiences and critics – and has occured for many different reasons. Sometimes, it is attached to a celebration of the genre and its ability to reach such large audiences, but just as often it occurs in an attitude of despair at the seemingly endless productions dominating modern media, specifically popular streaming platforms. Questions on the genre's popularity have also given rise to serious, but essentially irresolvable debates within academic faculties (such as sociology, psychology, criminology, journalism and media studies), where scholars seek to explore the genre's structures and socio-historical purposes. The collection of work I have collated here has been developed as a response to such questions and debates. It examines the genre from a variety of academic perspectives and keeps an open mind about its qualities and its failings. It does not claim to provide a definitive answer to the genre's popularity, but it will provide insights into why the question is asked and how specific productions or patterns of production affect its image in public as well as academic spheres. True crime is an expansive non-fiction genre that, at its heart, examines actual events that occur, involving real people. Therefore, this collection suggests questions and debates about its popularity occur because true crime speaks to a wide variety of concerns affecting media and society.

As true crime is an act of storytelling, broadly speaking the topic has existed in one form or another since human social communities began. We make sense of ourselves and our relationships with others through the sharing of stories, and thus within that practice stories of misdeeds and violence are bound to hold significance. Evidence of printed versions of crime appear as early as the 17th century in religious pamphlets offering the final confessions of the condemned. These were mainly designed to promote salvation by suggesting even the worst sinners can be saved, and while the religious impulses for them can be linked to defining, or re-confirming spiritual or civic responsibilities, the testimonies also most likely hinted at gruesome or salacious details of the crimes. It is therefore also fair to suggest such practices invited responses that included both disgust and intrigue. As printed news

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developed, details of crime scenes, calls for witnesses and trial details also began to dominate the way cases were presented. Here, civic duty and compelling storytelling merged to create eye-catching headlines and intimate narratives in an effort to keep audiences both entertained and informed. In the 20th century, true crime books began to offer even more details of specific crimes through specific case studies. A pivotal example for American publishing is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966),[1] which focuses on the killings of four members of the clutter family in rural Kansas. Capote's detailed examination of the case includes psychological profiles of the two killers as well as offering social commentary on the surrounding rural community as well as the victims. Capote painstakingly describes the investigative processes, meanings, causes and effects of the crime and the book's popular and critical success confirms true crime as a most compelling form of mystery narrative and social commentary. In the 20th and 21st century, television series and feature documentaries have explored the psychological and/or sociological motivations behind criminal acts and provided insights into the judicial process. Recently, the focus has shifted to what Biressi (2004) has termed the "fallout" of crime through an emphasis on victims, bystanders and witnesses. She links this to "entertainment television's enthusiastic adoption of therapeutic discourses of revelation, truth-telling and self-exposure, and of popular notions of 'trauma' as the kernel of these revelations" (401). Hence, while the purpose and structure of true crime texts have developed over time, even this brief glimpse into the history of true crime suggests that it houses a wide variety of social and psychological impulses and reactions, and perhaps, this is why the genre endures.

It is also evident that much that is labelled true crime can also be labelled popular entertainment. Tanya Horeck argues that "many contemporary true crime texts are exercises in media manipulation" (2019: 10). They are packaged as "entertainment products" (11) whose main purpose is to titillate rather than engage in serious factual study. Similarly, Seltzer (2007) considers true crime as committed to its cliches (44) and Worden (2020) suggests its focus on storytelling means "in the true crime narrative, genre precedes reality" (68). Criticism of true crime is wide ranging, but I have often found the most intense criticism is levelled at texts involving unsolved or contested convictions.[2] This may partly stem from a tendency for audiences and critics to demand solutions or results in order to justify a text's worth. Such demand necessitates such things as the clear identification of a perpetrator, or the overturning of a conviction – basically a concrete solution to the mystery – as a justification for the text's existence. I would argue that these impulses are driven by the, sometimes unconscious, valuing of capitalist commercial criteria that demand quantifiable goals and results. For instance, the podcasts *Serial* (2014 –) and *Teacher's Pet* (2018 –) are two series whose critical reputations have been raised by the real-world legal events that have occurred since they were first aired.[3] In effect, their social purpose has been secured by affecting real world events in a perceptibly

positive manner. It could be argued that most true crime texts present themselves as having the potential for positive social impact, but the external demand for certainty means that until that impact can be convincingly identified the text remains on the fringes of critical acceptability. Two high-profile Netflix series, *Making a Murderer* (2015, 2018) and *Tiger King* (2020), are examples that have attracted intense criticism. While their devotion to audience engagement/entertainment is a valid focus of debate, it is important to note that it is not just the way in which crimes are presented, but also desires for truths to be proven that affect the social value of a true crime text.

True Crime, Documentary and Ethics

Documentaries are generally considered to offer factual reports on real events, but such a basic description cannot hope to encapsulate the immense scope and impact of the form. To quote Nichols (2010), "Documentaries stimulate epistephilia (a desire to know) in their audiences. At their best, they convey an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, and a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness" (40). Therefore, any exploration of the form must engage with the effects of documentary on its audience as much as on the techniques employed by the makers. Furthermore, while we tend to discuss documentary as primarily a visual form, this "desire to know" about real events has long been stimulated by both written and oral communication. While, the popularity of feature-length documentaries has increased since the emergence of streaming platforms, television documentary has held its position as a mainstay within most terrestrial and streaming offerings. 2021 Netflix viewing figures suggest documentary as their second most popular television format in the USA behind drama; in the UK and Ireland, it sits at number one. The styles and topics that appear to dominate the image of television documentary in 21st century are the various foci of reality television and true crime. Bruzzi (2016) has suggested a link between the two that stems from more general shifts in the ways audiences are encouraged to engage with contemporary media texts. She suggests audiences are captured through calls to participate and "to decide, vote, make up our minds" (274) about contestants, or subjects. While such connections to reality television might suggest a shared emphasis on constructed conflict, Bruzzi suggests such participation may work to legitimize the genre as a socially constructive form. This is echoed in Aguaya's (2013) article on participatory media culture. She argues the film *Paradise Lost* (1996) "transformed passive consumers of communication into deliberating agents" (240) and the community activism inspired by the film contributed in part to the eventual release of the three wrongly convicted young men.

Again, Bruzzi and Aguaya's works suggest a direct relationship between a true crime text and real-world solutions. This helps to establish the genre's

legitimacy and therefore it is not surprising that such debates appear throughout this collection. This includes the opening chapter by Lindsey Sherrill on the emergence of true crime podcasts. Participatory activism has increased in recent years through an exponential rise in the production of podcasts that encourage audiences to help decipher mysteries or engage with new information about old events. However, such an increase has brought new criticisms focused on the quality and constructiveness of such activities. The ethics and civic purpose of audience participation is an important area of debate in any aspect of mass media, but now that social media has joined the true crime sphere and opened-up spaces for instant, "real-time" discussions on events as they unfold, the ethics of such practices have changed shape yet again. Later in this collection, Bethan Jones's chapter on the Gabby Petito case focuses on the challenging ethics of social media activism or, as in the Petito case, real-time participation and speculation. When self-proclaimed amateur sleuths use social media platforms to investigate, or comment upon ongoing criminal investigations, it adds a whole new dimension to debates about the social value or ethics of the genre form.

In short, this collection explores many of these themes noted above that appear in contemporary American media. With chapters on feature films, streaming series, podcasts and novels, it examines the popularity and perceived social purposes of true crime. As editor, I included a range of topics to encourage readers to consider the ways true crime pervades modern culture, and to assess the demands it faces in how it is received and understood. To this end, rather than simply presenting a summary of the chapters, I will explain some of the reasons for their inclusion, suggest possible links and outline areas for further research.

How to Approach This Collection

Chapters include research from both American and European academics but focuses entirely on American media. The reason for this focus is threefold: first, America tends to produce most true crime media; second, its media reaches the widest possible audience; and third, a national focus provides more opportunities for connection between the topics and thus provides a sense of chapters as various parts of a conversation on true crime. You will find similar names and media texts appearing across chapters, but all presented from differing perspectives. Hence, this collection does not offer to "solve" the true crime genre, but I hope it has many of the same attractions the genre has offered to audiences elsewhere; the thrill of the search, hints at truths and a desire to inform and question. The collection does not adhere to any given approach or judgment of the genre. Sherill's chapter on the social value of some true crime podcasting contrasts with Hammonds' critique. Similarly, Gaynor's suggestion that light-hearted podcasting can be progressive is countered by Jones' caution against too

much laxity in tone and approach. In short, each chapter deals with different examples and therefore offers overlapping debate derived from differing perspectives and theoretical frameworks. I will provide a discursive map of some of the interconnecting themes and this will help illustrate how the collection works together to examine contemporary American true crime media.

The two opening chapters deal with the impact of the two most popular formats in contemporary American true crime media: podcasts and television streaming series. Caitlin Shaw's chapter on the Netflix series, *Making a Murderer* (2015–18), examines the Netflix programming model of binge-worthy, transnational quality narratives and how that affects the ways the series can be read. It is a lead chapter because it provides a detailed examination of some of the key debates surrounding contemporary true crime programming. It has been included to inspire readers to consider whether example texts are produced to help educate audiences about crimes and the criminal system, or are they a factual offshoot of mainstream fiction, merely exploiting tragedies for public entertainment? She notes how the model restricts narrative experimentation to the extent that the series is focused almost entirely on similar character engagement found in fictional drama. In this context, she suggests the series' factuality is a secondary element in terms of its structural appeal. The resulting cultural impact can therefore be viewed as serendipitous rather than planned and this explains why the series has been argued as profit-making entertainment as much as socially responsible sharing of information.

Each chapter in this collection is careful to consider the negative as well as the positive impacts. In this instance, Shaw's chapter provides the industry context for the structure and appeal of contemporary true crime streaming and it informs later topics such as Chaplin and Chaplin's discussion of the unsolved JonBenét Ramsey case, my own co-authored chapter on images of the mafia and Huelin's study of soundtracks. Furthermore, in opening debates on the motivations behind the production of true crime media, Shaw's work also helps to contextualize Buozis' study of Errol Morris' 2012 book *A Wilderness of Error* and Jiménez-Varea's examination of John Backderf's 2012 graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer*.

Two of the other early chapters focus on the development and impact of podcasts (Sherrill; Blom *et al.*). Lindsey Sherrill's chapter was chosen as the lead because of its focus on the development of the form. Later chapters in the collection also include podcasts as part of their discussion (Gaynor, Hammonds and Jones) but these are not solely focused on the platform or its possible social function. Regardless, there are some notable links and so I want to first point out Lyndsay Sherrill's role as the lead chapter. It is not surprising to see references to the release of *Serial* as a defining moment for the genre and many of the chapters make reference to it. Sherrill's chapter considers the "*Serial* effect" in terms of how its success has encouraged the growth in true crime podcasting. Using organizational ecology and social

movement theories as her foundation she addresses some of the criticisms levelled at true crime I detailed earlier by arguing how podcast creators have the ability to influence real-world social change. She states this is in part because the production context for *Serial* brought legitimacy, not only to podcasting, but also the true crime topic. Produced as an offshoot of the Public Radio series *This American Life* (1995 –, Chicago Public Media), the success of *Serial* influenced fan podcasts that discussed the show and the case, but its focus on a possible miscarriage of justice also encouraged others, including attorneys as well as journalists and fans to create their own podcasts, all linked to the justice reform movement.

Sherrill's chapter provides the structural reasons for the development of the true crime justice reform niche and encourages readers to consider the ability for podcasts to be socially responsible products. Hence, reading her chapter first helps to contextualize later chapters on more specific themes. For instance, Robin Blom, Gabriel Tait, Gwyn Hultquist, Ida S. Cage and Melodie Griffin provide a quantitative analysis of a small selection of wrongful conviction podcasts and examines their potential for offering more diverse and thus realistic representations of cases linked to justice reform movements. Their chapter is a logical companion to Sherrill's analysis because they offer a different viewpoint on the same niche format. Contextualized within an historical overview of racial bias in American crime news, the chapter asks whether podcasts are managing to offer more realistic and effective programming. They describe why there is limited statistical data available for comparison, due in part because the numbers of wrongly convicted currently in prison, or recently released remains unknown; the reasons for this include the difficulties of access to appeals as well as the common use of Alford pleas to solve wrongful imprisonment. In consequence, the chapter refers to the national register of exonerations as a limited, but verifiable list of solved cases. They compare its statistics against popular podcast series to analyse narratives preferences and to explore racial bias. The results show podcasts tend to favour certain narratives and cases, but their diversity is better than predicted. Blom *et al.* add data to Sherill's argument and thus further suggest the potential for podcasts to reflect the realities of the American justice system and thus offer socially responsible examples of true crime programming.

The next chapter addresses adaptations of the "Atlanta Monster" crimes. Kyle Hammonds' work was chosen because it blends aspects of both Sherrill and Shaw's approaches to explore the social influences that have affected interpretations of the crimes, from reportage to fictional recreations. He focuses on contemporary news reports, Payne Lindsay's (2019) podcast, *Atlanta Monster* and David Fincher's fictional adaptation of the case in *Mindhunter* (Season 2, 2019). He argues that each media example is its own "adaptation" of events because it is moulded by the value structures of the content creators. His analysis uses communications theories and includes a close textual analysis of Lindsay's podcast in which he identifies

the narrative and rhetorical strategies employed to convey a sense of objectivity to its audience. Rather than maintaining an open objectivity aimed at offering the story for further interpretation, Hammonds suggests this podcast enforces narrative closure by emphasizing the objectivity of material evidence and dispassionate investigative processes. The podcast constructs a "felt-belief" that Lindsay's approach to the events and evidence provides objective answers and thus closes the case. Such assertiveness, according to Hammonds, is at the core of many true crime adaptations that present themselves as objective analyses. Their refusal to acknowledge the complexities at the heart of a case such as the Atlanta Killings means their objectivity is a rationality constructed entirely by narrative strategies. Once these strategies are revealed, it is evident such adaptations can only ever offer subjective, socially defined interpretations.

In conclusion, he suggests Fincher's fictional interpretation of the strengths and weaknesses of the case surprisingly offers the most flexible and open narrative rationality. It allows for interpretations that acknowledge the social and institutional failings that surrounded the case and subsequent trial. Hence, in this instance, a fictional adaptation perhaps presents greater objectivity than its factual counterparts. Hammonds' chapter encourages readers to assess the narrative rationalities of other news reporting, or podcasts and may also change perceptions of fictional adaptations. Objectivity is often revered in factual media but blind faith in its abilities tends to also suggest a definable, knowable truth is always available in every case; Hammonds' work asks us to question such faith.

My summary of Hammonds' work might suggest the collection sees distinct differences between factual and fictional adaptations of true crime events, but of course there is a great deal of overlapping aesthetics and structures. Chaplin and Chaplin's chapter on *The Case of JonBenét Ramsey* is included for the ways it expands on debates from Shaw's opening chapter and asks similar questions as Hammonds about the veracity of documentary narratives focused on an unsolved case. Employing close textual analysis within a media studies framework they examine the ways factual narratives use strategies of fiction to suggest solutions to the crime. Focusing first on the CBS two-part series, *The Case of: JonBenét Ramsey* (2016), Chaplin and Chaplin argue the extensive use of re-enactments helps to construct a compelling case against the Ramsey family. The desire for narrative closure influences the ways in which the case is presented and doggedly insists on identifying a culprit. In the context of my earlier arguments about the social value of influencing real world actions, it is easy to see how such a documentary is appealing to desires to know "for sure" what happened. Chaplin and Chaplin note however, in this case the desire to construct a trial through media is shown to be a risky decision when the chosen culprit successfully sues CBS for their portrayal of him. The blurring of fact and fiction in the pursuit of truth is suggested as ethically dubious in this case. Turning attention to *The Casting of JonBenét* (2019) Chaplin and

Chaplin examine how this documentary also functions as a reconstruction of events, but its determinedly open-ended examination of the case is careful to not offer specific accusations. However, it does focus on the family members as performative characters, thus implicitly suggesting their involvement in events as at least questionable or open to debate. Chaplin and Chaplin note how these documentaries show that, in the end, the tragedy of JonBenét's death can often be obscured by the generic desire for narrative closure and for justice to be seen to prevail. This chapter builds on Shaw and Hammonds to encourage readers to consider the structural biases of narratives about unsolved crimes. While suspicion lingers on still living families, does the narrative constraints and/or desires for closure inherent to mainstream media help or hinder the presentation of unsolved cases?

My own chapter, co-authored with Blake Wahlert, explores documentaries about the mafia. It is not focused on unsolved cases, but it does discuss how narrative formats help bolster commonly accepted truths or create mythologies about a subject. The Mafia is a popular topic in true crime, but it has received minimal critical attention. Our chapter focuses on how images of violence contribute to mythologies of mafia strength and infamy even in carefully considered anti-mafia narratives. Images are housed within intensely emotional narrative structures that suggest events as tragic but somehow inevitable. These structures reduce complex and contradictory realities of events into more accessible stories of morality and fate, which paradoxically elevates their narrative significance to the stature of classical tragedy. We understand and explain how the enormity of the violence enacted during the mafia wars in Sicily of the 1980s and 1990s is a difficult topic for documentaries to condense in such a way as to convey the human cost without simplifying the causes, effects and continued threats involved in organized crime. Hence, our chapter focuses on the narrative context for images of death and in so doing, reminds readers of the responsibilities involved in viewing tragedy particularly from afar. While addressing documentary through a similar theoretical framework as Chaplin and Chaplin, our chapter asks readers to also consider the proximity of events in their assessment of a documentary's structural tone or value.

Toby Huelin's chapter examines another aesthetic element in true crime media that has so far lacked critical attention. He examines the ethical responsibilities involved in producing and employing soundtracks for true crime media. In similar ways to the surrounding chapters, Huelin analyses the impact of aesthetic choices. He does this by focusing in on two areas: audience emotional responses and narrative authenticity. He identifies the sources for various popular soundtracks to specific commercial music libraries that produce and house soundtracks for sale, and through analysing their content and labelling practices he traces the context of their use and the possible emotional impacts on audiences. He identifies the ways a soundtrack may obscure the distinctions between real and constructed events, and the ways re-using specific music undermines its authenticity – especially in eliciting

emotional responses. Huelin's scholarship encourages readers to consider the way narrative consistencies dominate productions and how this impacts emotional responses. Viewed as a group, all of these chapters, from Hammonds to Huelin, have used narrative structure and aesthetic choices to question assertions of social value in the genre, but within that they have suggested fictional structures certainly have the ability to be critical (Hammonds) and to revisit evidence through re-enactment and performance (Chaplin and Chaplin). However, historical distance audience and a focus on heroism can reduce images of violence to spectacle (Larke-Walsh and Wahlert) and can also simplify context and affect audience responses (Huelin). In short, readers are being asked to consider whether the simplification of cause and effect in many true crime narratives, while making them popular, comforting and/or enjoyable, lie at the heart of the genre's problems of credibility?

An answer to the problems of objective truth and language is found away from visual media in Michael Buozis' chapter on the book, *A Wilderness of Error* (Errol Morris, 2012) for it discusses the difficulties of separating language from structures of power and thus also grapples with notions of factual objectivity. For Buozis, Morris' book engages with the ungraspable nature of truth. He proceeds to examine its structure and intentions through Roland Barthes concept of "neutral language" encapsulated within his "Grand Project" as described in *The Preparation of the Novel* (2011). Buozis links Barthes' literary concepts to the broader topic of true crime through their shared capacity to interrogate presentations of knowledge. He explains how Morris' novel, through its refusal to offer answers, or avoid multiple contradictions and examples of conflicting evidence, works to show how reality remains unresolved and thus the only way to share a case is to lay out all the pieces for a reader/viewer to access while all the while undermining or critiquing any attempts to have the layout reduced to a singular coherence.

Buozis suggests a refusal to offer certainty is the most practical response to a post-truth world. Unlike conspiracy theorists who use doubt and critique to steer others towards re-positioned, illogical truths, the ability to doubt and critique without demanding alternative truths can be embraced as a discourse of reality; a reality that is in perpetual flux but does not need to be re-positioned or explained as a certainty. The true crime genre is a perfect arena to showcase this aspect of a post-truth world, especially examples that deal with unsolved, or contested events and so, if we view Buozis' chapter as a response to the previous ones on narrative tendencies, we have a better view of the practical problems and ideals within the debate. When narratives embrace the inconclusive nature of reality then, regardless of the legal status of a case, an ability to critique and accept facts as discursive and unstable is the clearest example of how the true crime genre can operate as a socially responsible product.

Jesús Jiménez-Varea's chapter is an appropriate companion to Buozis' study because it focuses on the development processes involved in the

production of a true crime text. It is an examination of truths derived from socially responsible true crime media and autobiographical authorship. It traces the development of John Backderf's graphic novel *My Friend Dahmer* (2012) through its many iterations and influences in order to suggest Backderf's development as an artist and storyteller helped to turn an autobiographical account of childhood into a pertinent discussion of speculative psychology. Jiménez-Varea suggests Backderf's work considers the lessons that can be learned from revisiting Dahmer's early years and the role social isolation may have had on later events. He also suggests the novel highlights the ripple effect of guilt that even brief associations with a killer may have on the lives of those affected. This chapter was chosen to encourage readers to consider the social relevance of witness testimony, described earlier through Bruzzi's description of "the fallout" of crime. While Jiménez-Varea notes the reputation of some graphic novel production to glorify crime, he suggests it also has strong roots in expressing autobiographical experience. This chapter asks readers to consider the less common forms of true crime media and what they bring to broader discussions on the sociological effects of crime.

It could be argued that Backderf's fascination with Dahmer is a way of understanding his own past, or a desire to offer a key to the killer's personality that may help explain why certain events happened the way they did. While Backderf adapted his story carefully to avoid associations with an exploitation of events it is evident that desires to explain or solve crimes are evident in contemporary American media. To this end, Bethan Jones' chapter analyses the increasing use of social media to comment on or help solve crime in "real time". Focusing on the Gabby Petito case from 2021, Jones' chapter links the social media behaviours of people hoping to help solve her disappearance with Jason Mittel's (2012) description of forensic fandom. She notes how the ways fans interrogate fictional texts, such as *Lost* or *Star Trek* as puzzles to be solved can also be linked to the ways people on social media approached the real case of a missing woman, Gabby Petito. Jones argues that while many of the contributors expressed their desire to help the investigation, much of the vocabulary used echoes the excitement found in engaging with fictional mysteries. She argues the realities of the case, such as respect for the victims or families involved, became lost in the excitement of analysing evidence. This edged the behaviours away from socially responsible concern for a missing woman and towards obsessive fandom over a source of entertainment. Viewed together, Jiménez-Varea and Jones' chapters highlight the ever-present desire people have to find personal connections to real-world events. These chapters encourage readers to consider the authors of true crime media and to ask questions about motivation, as well as the impact their content has on the interpretation of real crimes and the people involved.

Stella Gaynor ends the collection with a return to podcasts, television documentary, and the inclusion of more social media in a chapter aptly

titled "What else can I add?". Rather than debating truths, her chapter embraces female subjectivity and engages with various alternative tones of delivery found in true crime media. She explores a podcast, an Amazon television documentary series and a YouTuber's episode all focused on the serial killer, Ted Bundy. Her chapter asks whether these specifically female-centred offerings add anything to the topic, and again explores their social function in encouraging constructive responses. Initially focusing on a comedy podcast, Gaynor explores the extent to which its mocking description of Bundy undermines some of the mythology surrounding his criminal prowess. She notes fans of the podcast (*My Favorite Murder*) call themselves "Murderinos" and have formed a supportive online community, thus suggesting comedy has a role in creating positive social responses to crime. The chapter goes on to explore two other very different female-centred responses to the events: a documentary that gives voice to the women involved in Bundy's life and crimes through interviews, photographs and other intimacies, and a YouTube influencer that approaches the crime in a dispassionate manner, refusing to name any of the women in order to avoid labelling them as victims.

These productions provide constructive responses to the crime and the criminal all from very different female perspectives. They suggest women-centred responses can add something to well-known events be it through comedic, emotionally intimate or dispassionate retellings that place the women involved at the centre of events and responses. Gaynor's analysis asks readers to reconsider how true crime is packaged and whose perspective is prioritized. It also encourages a reassessment of why certain styles are dismissed as entertainment, or exploitative if they offer challenging or alternative responses.

Summary

My thematic map of the collection has highlighted the key areas of debate and explains why chapters have been chosen and their place in the book's structure. This is not a chronological study of the genre, instead the reader is guided through the true crime media landscape in a series of interconnected topics. The first chapters explore the impetuses of its current popularity through the podcast *Serial*, the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* and the adaptations of the Atlanta Monster. All three of these chapters explore production choices, platforms and audience engagement. They introduce the primary media formats associated with contemporary true crime and to interrogate their impact on popular perceptions of the justice system. These three chapters all consider the development of the notion of audiences as active participants in investigations of the crimes involved.

The collection continues in its dissection of various popular approaches to true crime by expanding the focus, discussing the importance of representation in true crime by considering the political, racial and gender stereotypes

employed in narratives on criminal events from the past, as well as examples of contemporary injustice. It explores the unsolved mystery, mafia narratives and the tendency to operate within simplistic cause-effect visions of criminal events and finally a study of musical soundtracks revisits all of the previous themes by exploring the ethics of its production and inclusion in texts.

The final chapters are crucial studies of lesser-considered aspects of contemporary true crime. Jimenez-Varea's consideration of the graphic novel leads on from Michael Buozis' study of Morris' literary study and again considers the search for truth by studying the role of peripheral figures in the hunt for motivation or causes of criminal behaviour. Bethan Jones' chapter considers the influence of forensic fandom on the true crime genre, as well as on criminal investigations discussed in "real-time". Lastly, Stella Gaynor's chapter asks "what more can be added" to the story of Ted Bundy through analysis of female-centred texts. These chapters have been placed at the end of the collection in order to encourage readers to consider new avenues of study and to consider the impact of true crime from a transmedial point of view.

It is evident the true crime genre entertains and informs, sometimes in equal measure. We aim to dissect the effects, both positive and negative, of its popularity on wider perceptions of crime and the justice system within contemporary America. As stated at the beginning of this introduction, true crime *is* popular and therefore speaks to a wide array of audiences and for many different reasons. The collection has been designed with this understanding in mind and to open further debate. It asks readers to consider the roles true crime plays in the dissemination of information about contemporary American culture, the legal system and civic responsibility. It engages with some of the ethics involved in the production and consumption of the genre, such as the social values assumed in narrative closure and links to real world actions. It examines whether audience engagement and activism help or hinder the efficacy, or understandings, of the judicial system. This collection encourages readers to engage with the genre as a complex and wide-ranging form. It suggests readers proceed with an open mind and consider the multiple ways the genre speaks to society and what it encourages in response.

Notes

1 *In Cold Blood* was originally published in 1965 as a four-part serial in the *New Yorker* magazine. The full version was published as a book in 1966.
2 See for instance, Seltzer (2007) on Bruce Sinofsky and Joe Berlinger's *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996), *Paradise Lost II: Revelations* (2000), and *Paradise Lost III: Purgatory* (2011), or Horeck (2019) on Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos' *Making a Murderer* (2015, 2018).
3 Adnan Syed's conviction was overturned in September 2022 (*Serial*) and Chris Dawson was convicted of killing his wife in August 2022 (*Teacher's Pet*). In both cases, the podcasts were referenced by media as having a direct impact on the legal process.

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