**WHO CARES WHODUNIT? OUR OBSESSION WITH MURDER**

Flick around channels of an evening, peruse the bestseller list, check out the podcast charts – whichever way you turn, it’s inescapable: we’re obsessed with murder.

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Crime is an ever-expanding genre. The possibilities are endless. There’s location, location, location: quaint English village, sure, but also remote Scottish island, or the grit of the inner city, a tropical paradise in the Caribbean, the Scandi-noir option, sunny Brisbane or gloomy wintry Tasmania. Murder mystery as travel brochure.

“It’s almost as if we all want to know the big question: who did it?” – Alison Milbank

But there’s time travel, too, and the literary tie-in. 1920s Melbourne (*Miss Fisher*), for example, or what if your favourite Jane Austen characters became embroiled in a nice juicy murder (*Death Comes to Pemberley*)?

Dół formularza

Which does make you wonder: what is wrong with us?

Whatever it is, it’s not new. George Orwell, in a 1946 essay delightfully titled “[Decline of the English Murder](https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/decline-of-the-english-murder/)”, set out to define what his contemporaries meant when, reading the Sunday papers, they’d complain that “you never seem to get a good murder nowadays”. Go back a bit further, and the Victorians (the 19th-century kind, not the kind currently back in lockdown) treated murder as public entertainment – following each sensational twist and turn in the daily press.

At least these days we’re a little bit circumspect about the real thing. Not that true crime is any less popular as a genre than the fictional kind, but at least in real time, we try not to gawk at what is an incredibly ugly and traumatic feature of human life. Give the family some space, let the police do their job. (Once it’s a cold case, though, all bets are off and we’re right back to ghoulish fascination.)

Still, there does seem to be something specific to our moment about the way murder increasingly monopolises our airwaves. The theologian and literary scholar Alison Milbank has thought about this a lot.

“It just seems like a real invitation for a theologian, really,” she says, “because when I was a child, not everything was a detective story, now it is, on television. It’s almost as if we all want to know the big question: who did it?”

Milbank thinks there are profound questions behind our obsession with crime (it’s not just that we’re morbid!) Here are three existential/theological itches that the good old murder mystery seems designed to scratch:

**1. Know thyself**

We gain a lot of knowledge about the normal working of things by looking at the points where they go very wrong. Brain injuries, for example, help neuroscientists to understand which parts of the brain are linked to which functions or elements of personality.

Part of the draw of crime fiction is seeing humans acting under extreme circumstances. When human relationships go as wrong as they can – when one person deliberately puts an end to the life of another – what does that tell us about what human nature is “really” like? What I’m really like?

There are two separate strands here. Let’s call one strand The Monster: this is the serial killer-type story, a vehicle for us to grapple with the darkest reaches of the human heart and the nature of evil. The reader/viewer does not, cannot, identify with the murderer – he or she (but almost always he) is separate from us, his humanity so distorted that he can only represent an enemy to be destroyed, never a fellow creature to be truly understood.

The other strand is the Everyman or Everywoman – the person who is driven by disturbingly recognisable impulses (greed, fear, self-protection, envy, revenge) to acts they would themselves, in other circumstances, consider unthinkable.

“You’ve got to figure out, how could that be? How could someone be both of these things?” – Jim Warner Wallace

Jim Warner Wallace, an American detective who has worked cold cases for decades and been called the “evidence whisperer”, makes this distinction between the two in real life:

“When you knock on the door of the neighbour of a serial killer, they’re likely to say, ‘Oh I’m so glad you’re taking that guy to jail, that guy is crazy – I mean it smells bad over there, there’s all kinds of weird noises, he’s always digging holes in his backyard’ … When you think of my kinds of cases, you knock on the neighbour’s door and tell them ‘I’m taking your neighbour to jail for this case from 30 years ago’, they’ll generally say, ‘No, I’ve known that guy for 30 years, he’s a great guy. No way could he have done that.’”

Detective fiction and crime shows offer a space to explore a side to human nature that secular humanism tends to deny or ignore, and that Christians have traditionally called sin. It squares up to the reality that there is something frighteningly corruptible in all of us.

Warner Wallace continues:

“He’s your banker, he’s your neighbour, he’s your teacher, he’s your professor, he’s your firefighter, he’s your police officer, he is a deacon in your church. And so whatever your worldview is that describes humans, you’ve got to make room in it for this. You’ve got to figure out, how could that be? How could someone be both of these things?”

“What you discover is that your view of human nature at some point has to accommodate this reality. And once it does – and not every worldview does a good job of that – but once it does, then you’ll see yourself differently too. You’ll have a little more grace for people because the truth of it is that, but for the grace of God, every single one of us is that same killer that just hasn’t been provoked to the point of actually committing the crime.”

Who better to secure a confession than a confessor?

I’m reminded of Agatha Christie’s beloved character Miss Marple, the constantly underestimated little old lady who alights correctly on whodunnit by virtue of her deep knowledge of human nature – acquired over the course of decades paying attention to the very quotidian goings-on in her village, St Mary Mead. Humans are the same everywhere; there is nothing new under the sun.

Maybe this is why the priest-detective works so well as a character (see: Grantchester; G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown stories). Let’s call it the Grantchesterton Principle: who better to secure a confession than a confessor?

Father Brown, a good-humoured and unobtrusive Catholic priest, solves mysteries by imagining his way into the mind of the murderer – understanding that he is not separate from this erring fellow human, but subject to the same temptations, capable of the same horrors.

Alison Milbank describes one account of the guilt/innocence dynamic at work in a lot of classic detective fiction:

“W. H. Auden wrote an essay called ‘[The Guilty Vicarage](https://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/)’ where he says that what happens, in that kind of 1930s-type story, is that a murder happens and everybody is potentially guilty. It uncovers this cosy world and shows that everybody is fallible in some ways and everybody might have done it. And then the detective comes along like a kind of priest, finds the guilty person, forgives, as it were, all the others, and restores order.”

Genre fiction such as crime novels are often seen as a guilty pleasure – not “serious” literature. But as a mirror held up to human nature, the best of them serve an important function, dragging into the light aspects of ourselves we don’t routinely acknowledge in the wider culture.

**2. Know the truth, and the truth will set you free**

It’s often been observed that the genre’s fanbase skews female. It’s theorised that, while most murder victims in real life are actually men, stories of murder appeal to women in particular, hoping to exorcise their fears in relation to violent crime. (Whether it works is another question.)

I don’t have hard data for you, but my instinct is the default TV victim is female and attractive. In one of the most popular true crime podcasts out there, My Favorite Murder, the two hosts are tapping into something when they sign off each episode by chirping, in unison, “Stay sexy and DON’T GET MURDERED!”

But that craving for reassurance runs deeper too. What is truly satisfying about watching an episode of *NCIS* or reading an Agatha Christie novel is the experience of having a mystery resolved and order restored. Crime is a highly conventional genre; there are rules, even formulae, with variations between specimens but high levels of internal consistency.

I have no idea how you solve a murder in real life, but I’m quite the expert at parsing a narrative to figure out who the murderer must be: this person is too obvious; that one is definitely due a happy ending; we wouldn’t have been introduced to this character if they weren’t going to be important. It’s a soothing mixture of shock twists and utter predictability.

“We think we’ve got enough evidence to convict this guy, but there’s lots of questions I can’t answer.” – Jim Warner Wallace

In a world where things so often seem chaotic and uncertain, this kind of story is deeply comforting. It’s a puzzle, which (almost) every time will be solved completely and with no awkward loose ends. Jim Warner Wallace explains that it doesn’t work this way in reality:

“Nothing is perfect. We make the most reasonable inference from evidence in these cases, even though we have large, glaring, unanswered questions. Every case I’ve ever worked, there are key questions the jury would love to have me answer that I will not be able to answer. And we select a jury and we ask those questions, ‘Hey, are you the kind of person who needs to have every question answered before you can make a decision? Because if you are, we’re not going to put you on the jury … We think we’ve got enough evidence to convict this guy, but there’s lots of questions I can’t answer.’ So I’ve gotten really comfortable with the idea that I’m going to make the most reasonable inference from evidence.”

The TV killer, by contrast, confesses every time, and at the end of the day will get extremely talkative about their motives and method.

George Orwell and W. H. Auden, Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, wrote their crime fiction – or their analyses of it – at a time when their officially Christian culture was somewhat coming apart at the seams. Where the final book of the Bible, Revelation (or the Apocalypse), promises that reality will ultimately be laid bare and justice done, our secular moment lacks assurance that life has narrative shape and purpose, or that truth is discoverable.

The detective story is a salve to our revelation-hungry souls.

**3. Being known**

A favourite comic of mine, drawn by artist Aude White, features a microphone on a table, a cloud hovering in the corner with a voice coming out of it. The caption reads: “‘I KNOW WHO DID IT’ – a true crime podcast hosted by God.”

Just as the puzzle-solving element of the crime genre reassures us that truth will out, the forensic element in particular offers a sense that our selves, experiences, actions leave an imprint on the world that will not be lost or forgotten.

It’s often been observed that the classic detective novel emerges at a time of transition from majority-rural to majority-urban living, and favours the village setting, where everyone knows everyone and secrets cannot (in theory) be maintained for long. The genre betrays an anxiety over the shift to life in big, anonymous cities where nobody knows you and where you could, perhaps, be – or do – anything.

Can scientific knowledge rescue us from being forgotten, obliterated?

Auden in ‘The Guilty Vicarage’ names this as one of requirements of a good detective story, that it take place in a “closed society” (guests at a country house; academics in an Oxford college; a group of apparent strangers stuck on a train who turn out to be connected in some way). It cannot be an outsider who committed the murder; it must be someone long known within the social microcosm but actually concealing their true self. The more incongruous the setting – the quaint village, the serene monastery – the better.

This preoccupation with knowing others and being truly known by them takes a particular turn in the current fascination with the character and work of the pathologist. We can trace back to Sherlock Holmes, at least, the idea that the physical world will yield up all kinds of information about what has taken place, if we only know how to look. These days we lean more heavily than ever on the power of forensics to take the marks we all leave on the world and interpret them in order to reconstruct the past, bring it back to life in a way.

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Of course, the TV version of forensics can strain credulity – how fortunate that the victim’s shoes retain traces of this rare plant that only grows in this one place! – but the desire to know that what we do, and what is done to us, truly matters is a deep human need. From a theological perspective, the terror and the triumph of human forensic power is a refraction of the claim that God sees all and forgets nothing – that he will call everything hidden into judgment.

That we care so much about cold cases (both in fiction and in reality) says something fundamental (and fundamentally Christian) about the value of human life. Even if this murder took place decades ago, even if nobody much cared about this person while they were alive, even if we don’t so much as know their name – still, we invest our time and our sympathies in discovering the truth. Everyone, and everything, matters.

“For me, as for many others,” wrote Auden, “the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol.”

Your favourite procedural, true crime podcast, or series of detective novels is likely tapping into psychological needs that our culture isn’t generally great at meeting: confronting the darkness of the human heart; reassuring us that life’s many questions do in fact have answers; that what we do, and what is done to us, does not go unnoticed or uncared for.

Which means that you can certainly make a case that that guilty holiday read/Netflix binge is in fact an important piece of existential analysis. Own it proudly.