



The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture

Jean Murley

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During the 1950s and 1960s *True Detective* magazine developed a new way of narrating and understanding murder. It was more sensitive to context, gave more psychologically sophisticated accounts, and was more willing to make conjectures about the unknown thoughts and motivations of killers than others had been before. This turned out to be the start of a revolution, and, after a century of escalating accounts, we have now become a nation of experts, with many ordinary people able to speak intelligently about blood-spatter patterns and organized vs. disorganized serial killers. *The Rise of True Crime* examines the various genres of true crime using the most popular and well-known examples. And despite its examination of some of the potentially negative effects of the genre, it is written for people who read and enjoy true crime, and wish to learn more about it.

With skyrocketing crime rates and the appearance of a frightening trend toward social chaos in the 1970s, books, documentaries, and fiction films in the true crime genre tried to make sense of the Charles Manson crimes and the Gary Gilmore execution events. And in the 1980s and 1990s, true crime taught pop culture consumers about forensics, profiling, and highly technical aspects of criminology. We have thus now become a nation of experts, with many ordinary people able to speak intelligently about blood-spatter patterns and organized vs. disorganized serial killers.

Through the suggestion that certain kinds of killers are monstrous or outside the realm of human morality, and through the perpetuation of the stranger-danger idea, the true crime aesthetic has both responded to and fostered our culture's fears. True crime is also the site of a dramatic confrontation with the concept of evil, and one of the few places in American public discourse where moral terms are used without any irony, and notions and definitions of evil are presented without ambiguity. When seen within its historical context, true crime emerges as a vibrant and meaningful strand of popular culture, one that is unfortunately devalued as lurid and meaningless pulp.

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