



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

By Jean Murley

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## The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture By Jean Murley

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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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Murley (Queensborough Community College), a fan of true crime, presents an engaging historical analysis of this popular genre, which has received little critical attention...This is a readable, entertaining book for those with a serious interest in true crime...Recommended. Lower- and upper-division undergraduates; general readers." - **Choice**

#### Review

"*The Rise of True Crime* is a magnificent achievement and deserves to become a standard work. Its unmatched range and clarity explain not only where true crime has been but also where it might go in the future. Essential reading for anyone interested in the genre." (David Schmid, Associate Professor of English at State University of New York, Buffalo, Author of *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*)

"Despite (or because of) its great popularity, true crime has always been scorned by serious critics. In this deeply informed and rewarding book, this centuries-old literary genre finally gets it due. Tracing the modern history of murder narratives from the pulp magazines of the 1920s to the true crime blogs of today, Murley, a deft and insightful analyst of these titillating texts, makes a powerful case for their cultural and sociological significance. One of those rare works of scholarship that manages to be both erudite and entertaining, *The Rise of True Crime* is a must-read, not only for fans of the genre but also for anyone seeking to better understand our dark fascination with stories of real-life murder and mayhem." (Harold Schechter, Professor of English at Queens College of the City University of New York, Author of several historical true-crime texts, including *Deviant, Deranged, and The Devil's Gentleman: Privilege, Poison, and the Trial that Ushered in the Twentieth Century.*)

#### About the Author

**Jean Murley** is Assistant Professor of English at Queensborough Community College, of the City University of New York (CUNY). She has published a review of "Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture" for the *Journal of Popular Culture*, and an essay entitled "Ordinary Sinners and Moral Aliens: The Murder Narratives of Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe" in *Understanding Evil: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (2003), an anthology on contemporary understandings of evil.

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