Murderinos: Examining the Female Audience of True Crime Podcasts with *My Favorite Murder*

Bella Hughes, *Ball State University*

• • •

Consumption of true crime podcasts has shot up in recent years, with a majority of listeners being female. There are many things which might draw women to these pieces of media. Women who previously reported elevated levels of fear of violent crime have taken to viewing true crime as a safety measure, wanting to become educated on the stories of others in an effort to not become victims themselves. Many women report feeling more confident that they would know how to avoid or get out of a dangerous situation after learning the details of previous crimes. Production and consumption of true crime media can also lead to increased feelings of justice and a desire to speak out about personal experience or societal and systemic issues. Studies have also been done on the effect of hearing women's voices on true crime podcasts and its relation to the visualization of mutilation in true crime stories. While earlier studies have argued that audiences of true crime media have more anxiety and trepidation around violent crime, I argue that true crime podcasts have many psychological benefits, specifically for women. In their podcast, *My Favorite Murder*, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark tell murder stories with comedic commentary, including advice about how to avoid meeting the same fate as the victims they speak of. Following the success of the podcast, the hosts published *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide*, condensing their tips into book form and sharing their own experiences with true crime. Using select episodes from the podcast as well as the book, I will prove that participating in these audio spaces improves feelings that women have agency over their lives, giving them an awareness of what's happening around them that makes them savvier, helps them notice patterns, and allows them to break out of the dangerous mold society has placed them in.

Of the top twenty subscriber podcast shows of 2022, eleven are of the true crime genre. True crime has become one of the top entertainment genres in the modern world, with new multimodal content being released every year. Audiences flock to these projects, dying for a glimpse into the gruesome crimes committed by seemingly ordinary people. While there are plenty of reasons that people are drawn to this genre, what is often overlooked is the demographics of these audiences. More than ever before, women are the key consumers of this media, making up large portions of true crime fanbases. Specifically, women have been drawn to true crime podcasts, with 61% of the genre's most popular podcasts' audiences identifying as female (Parisyan). The popularity of true crime among women has been noticed and publicly mocked, most notably by *Saturday Night Live* in their skit entitled "Murder Show." Through a catchy melody, various women sing about how they watch shows about true crime as a form of relaxation and listen to true crime podcasts as they fall deeper into "the rabbit hole" about the gruesome events. This sort of mockery tries to dismiss the power of the podcast medium, but it succeeds only in inspiring laughter as most consumers of true crime podcasts believe in the effectiveness of this auditory pastime as an accessible educational tool.

True crime podcasts have many psychological benefits, specifically for women. Participating in these audio spaces improves feelings that women have agency over their lives, giving them an awareness of what's happening around them. This makes them savvier, helps them notice patterns, and allows them to break out of the mold of deference that society has placed them in by encouraging them to act against men who might harm them. This argument will follow the idea that "[t]he exercise of human agency therefore requires a 'change in the rules of the game', i.e. the formal and informal institutions that condition the effectiveness of human agency" (Ibrahim & Alkire 385). In regards to this paper, the "rules of the game" are the informal mold society has placed women in—to be polite, well-mannered, and helpful, always showing deference to men. By examining one of the most popular true crime podcasts, *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*), one can reach an understanding of why this genre is so appealing to a female demographic. Amidst femicide and violence against women, *MFM* provides a unique experience that we must analyze in order to be able to properly prepare women to defend themselves in an increasingly hostile society. The knowledge gained from this medium can increase awareness of threats and encourage women to break free of expectations that have led to their victimization for far too long.

My Favorite Murder is a true crime comedy podcast hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. Each episode covers at least one true crime story, incorporating

victims—and criminals—of various races, genders, and classes and discussing the role these demographics played in the treatment of each party within the crime as well as the investigation. Multiple episodes comment on the seemingly lenient sentences for perpetrators of specific assaults and murders, offering criticism of the reliability and functionality of the justice system. The hosts, both middle-class white women, acknowledge their privilege within society and take care to preface their comments on these issues with statements on how they can't understand what victims of other demographics go through due to their race or class. The podcast first aired in 2016 and immediately amassed a large fanbase. Since its launch, the podcast has expanded to include live shows and a published book of tips and tricks from the hosts titled *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide*. The show has popularized phrases such as "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered," "Call your Dad, you're in a Cult," "Fuck Politeness," and "Stay out of the Forest." Humorous phrases such as these draw people in with the promise of a light take on a dark subject, but many listeners get hooked on the way the hosts deliver instructive content in a comedic way. The show's popularity has led to merchandise, memes, fan art, Facebook groups, and Reddit discussions where listeners can share their stories or insights in a community setting. Partially owing to its majority female fanbase, "*MFM* also stands out…in part because it continues to focus on true crime as it relates to women but also because this focus has developed into a feminist critique of the gendered nature of crime" (Rodgers 3). This aspect of *MFM* is what makes it an ideal podcast to examine in relation to women escaping the expectations society has placed on them.

Before considering the effects of consuming true crime podcasts, it's important to understand why people—specifically women—are drawn to the genre. While more than half of general podcast listeners are men, listeners of true crime podcasts are more likely to be women, as in the case of *MFM*, whose fanbase is 80% female (McDonald et al. 2086). Ultimately, many women come to this genre out of fear. They consume true crime media as a survival measure, learning defense tactics and methods of escape while also uncovering the mysteries behind why someone might commit violent crimes. Furthermore, listeners are aware that most victims discussed in true crime media are women, so they have more to gain from engaging with this genre. One of the hosts of *MFM*, Georgia Hardstark, writes in their book *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide*:

> I had picked up tons of questionable survival techniques from watching overly dramatized reenactments on America's Most Wanted and terrible Lifetime movies where stalkers had to be fought off in life-or-death battles and abusive husbands always got their comeuppance. I fortified those shows with real-life accounts of survival in books from our true-crime lord and savior, Ann Rule. (39)

While the media Hardstark cites are not podcasts specifically, her experiences of using true crime as a self-defense tool are common among women who acknowledge their fear of the world that seems aimed to harm them. Though women feel more fear of crime happening to them, men are more likely to be victims of crime (McDonald et al. 2086). In their article "True Crime Consumption as Defensive Vigilance: Psychological Mechanisms of a Rape Avoidance System" published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, McDonald et al. discuss this phenomenon, which "is referred to as the 'fear-victimization paradox'…[and] rests on the tendency for women to perceive that crimes committed against them, such as burglary and assault, will co-occur with rape" (2086). With this knowledge, it becomes clear that "women's fear of crime is in fact, a fear of men that reflects women's social location in a gendered world and an 'anxiety about their vulnerability to men's violence'" (Rodgers 8). This circles back to the idea that women live in a society where deference to "the man" has become a dangerous expectation.

After establishing what draws women to general true crime, one can begin examining the appeal of the podcast medium. A 2022 study of Australian podcasts found that "the potential for 'justice' outcomes draws listeners towards specific [true crime podcasts]…participants also recognized that podcasts and the act of listening could be a way of providing justice to victims by memorializing and sharing testimony" (Vitis 10). In terms of seeking justice, podcasts are unique in that they provide more opportunities for audiences to get involved. As Kathleen Rodgers calls attention to in her study entitled "'F*cking politeness' and 'staying sexy' while doing it: intimacy, interactivity and the feminist politics of true crime podcasts," podcasts like *MFM* allow listeners to passively consume but actively provide feedback and ask questions on certain platforms. In *MFM*, hosts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark ask audience members to send them their "hometown murder stories" so that they can share them on the podcast. This brings more awareness to lesser-known victims and allows for those victims' stories to be heard on a large platform.

Bringing listeners into the personal accounts of others lends to the "hyper-intimacy" of podcasts, allowing listeners to feel like part of a community where their fears are heard and shared. That "hyper-intimacy" extends to the speakers as well, "wherein listeners feel as though they develop 'parasocial' relationships with the hosts" (Rodgers 4). In parasocial relationships, one party "extends emotional energy, interest and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other's existence" ("Parasocial Relationships: The Nature of Celebrity Fascinations"). Part of the development of these relationships is the feeling that podcasts are centers of gossip or storytelling, which often happens among friends. This is another aspect

of true crime podcasts that draws women to the genre, as "evolutionary perspectives on gossip and story-telling suggest that they may be psychological adaptations that enable individuals to discuss group norms and values, to police or deter the deviant behavior of others, and to learn from others' experiences" (McDonald et al. 2089). The story-telling nature of true crime podcasts and their online communities is one of the reasons women see the genre as beneficial to their survival. They believe that by hearing about other victims' "mistakes," they can better defend themselves and recognize the behaviors of others that indicate they are in danger. These parasocial relationships can also add to diminishing feelings of loneliness among listeners and those who feel as though they are alone in their fear of crime. Even though the hosts aren't aware of each individual listener, there is comfort found in hearing someone considered a friend describe a situation that is relatable. That comfort leads to a realization that others have survived these events as well and can aid in recognizing patterns or informing about concerning details in an environment that might not have aroused suspicion before. Awareness of those extra details or patterns can prevent women from becoming victims, thus becoming a benefit of these parasocial relationships.

The relationship between host and listener is not the only component setting the medium apart from others. Podcasts hosted by women also have a uniqueness in their sound. Amanda Greer discusses the idea of the *acousmêtre* in her article "Murder, she spoke: the female voice's ethics of evocation and spatialization in the true crime podcast." Greer introduces how "in cinema, the *acousmêtre* as a disembodied voice both frustrates and titillates the viewer…the act of de-acousmatisation, wherein the acousmatic voice is attached to a body, neutralizes these powers" (152-153). Podcasts allow for the female *acousmêtre* to retain its disembodied power. This is demonstrated in *MFM* as the female hosts rely on a purely auditory recounting of the crimes rather than graphic images like those used in visual media. The hosts and the victims they speak of then become "spectres," leading listeners to use their imaginations to visualize the scenes of violence in their heads.

Greer asserts that "the true crime podcast is one potential site of doubled resistance against the de-acousmatisation of female voices and the visualization of mutilated female bodies…[which] allows an affective and affectionate relationship to establish itself between listener and victim" (153). Greer offers an example of this in the context of *MFM* on pages 156-158, describing how the back-and-forth conversation style of the podcast demonstrates the idea of the *acousmêtre* and evocation in the context of true crime podcasts. The impact of women's voices communicating through this medium lies in the power that they bring to the victims. Hearing the stories of female victimization told in a man's voice or through his perspective would run the

risk of taking away from the life and respect for the victims. When a woman brings the story to this medium, it is typically clear that they are doing so to inform and educate on something that is prevalent in their own life, whereas a man would not necessarily be able to understand the everyday fear or experience of women. Women are usually trusted to communicate the details accurately and in a way that would resonate with audience members. Not only is this an important factor in understanding the benefits of this medium, but it is also a reminder that there is a level of awareness for all involved in the production and consumption of true crime podcasts. The stories told must be dealt with delicately while the hosts try to communicate lessons such as "fuck politeness."

For those who struggle to understand the concept of "fuck politeness," the hosts explain the idea more in-depth in their dual memoir. Under the chapter titled "Fuck Politeness: Final Thoughts," the hosts discuss why they think their listeners gravitate toward the concept and how to implement it in your life. Kilgariff claims that their audience is drawn to the phrase because "it's what everyone wants to do but has been led to believe they're not allowed to do. We're giving you the permission to act in your own best interests before considering anyone else's" (61). Many women find this difficult as society has made them feel like acting in their best interests makes them "bad people." In reality, the reason this tactic must be used is because a bad person— or someone you can't be sure has good intentions—has made you feel the need to forgo the usual politeness you'd use around others, particularly men. This is explained further by Kilgariff when asked how to get past the awkwardness and do what needs to be done for your safety:

> Let's be clear: the idea of fucking politeness isn't about standing on a corner shouting, "Fuck you!" to anyone passing by. It's a strategy for when someone tries to invade your space somehow. They started it. They're the dick here. You're just fighting fire with fire. You can't care what a dick thinks about you. They rely on that fear of judgment to keep you in their control. (61)

In this piece of advice, Kilgariff brings up what has led to the creation of "fuck politeness," which is the assumption and expectation that women should show deference to men, even those who are strangers. This expectation can lead to women putting aside their instincts and giving a stranger a ride or being unable to say no, which is oftentimes how women find themselves to be victims. The "fear of judgment" that Kilgariff refers to is the idea that women will remain quiet in the face of a threat rather than potentially offend by calling attention to the concerning actions of another person. As one listener explained, "there is no obligation for you to cater to being a

woman who is pleasing and not making a scene" (Rodgers 11). More than anything, the mantra reminds women that they can choose to go against what's expected, as the phrase "encourages women to express agency, uniquely instructing women that they can also protect themselves by engaging in behaviors that run counter to cultural expectations of deference" (Rodgers 11). "Fuck politeness" is, in essence, the call to break free of society's expectation that keeps women from putting their needs first.

When encouraging women to "fuck politeness," one must keep in mind how the concept could be misconstrued. Some might say that this phrase places blame on the previous victims for not trusting their instincts in the first place. While victim blaming is a common issue in some areas of true crime, the *MFM* podcast takes great care in respecting the victims and their stories. They recognize the extreme circumstances of the scenes they describe, often calling attention to how people never know how they'll truly react when they're put in a dangerous situation. While some true crime narratives suggest that women invite violence unto themselves, the stories on *MFM* are "discussed within an anti-victim-blaming framework…and instead explain women's experiences in the context of social structural conditions that foster victimization" (Rodgers 11). While this mantra directly targets the culture of gender-based violence, another popular phrase tackles victim-blaming at its heart. The popular slogan "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" (SSDGM) has been viewed by some as sexualizing murder. In actuality, the phrase is permitting women to embrace their femininity without being blamed for being victimized. Often used as a tag in stories where women have survived or escaped being the victim, SSDGM allows women to maintain their confidence in their feminine or "sexy" appearance while also encouraging them to be cautious and conscious of their surroundings as best they can.

The backlash against this podcast is not confined to concerns about catchy quips. After each episode, there are bound to be people who noticed a particular phrasing or word choice used and will call attention to it in the *MFM* Facebook group. However, the podcast medium allows for both the hosts and the listeners to learn in real-time. When it is brought to the hosts' attention that something they said was wrong, politically incorrect, or insensitive, they are sure to take responsibility for that mistake in the following episode in what they call "Corrections Corner." Before they begin talking about their new favorite murders for the week, the hosts take a moment to respond to audience feedback. For example, in the early episode "10 - Murderous TENdencies," one of the hosts used the word "prostitute" to describe a victim in a story and listeners were quick to inform the hosts that the correct term is "sex worker." In the following episode, they apologized for their mistake and committed to using more respectful language when referring to sex workers. Encouraging their audience to call

them out on incorrect language has continued to be a vital part of the podcast and it is what has contributed to an evolution of thinking for all parties involved. Not only does audience participation like this improve the overall respect attributed to *MFM*, but it also invites members of the audience working in certain specialties to offer up their own knowledge and experience. Many doctors, scientists, and forensic specialists have commented on cases where an incorrect claim was made during the storytelling or where they think their insight on a topic might bring something new to light.

It is these aspects of the podcast medium that make it such an ideal place for true crime, as well as an ideal place for women. These spaces have become a haven for women searching for vindication and community. When Hardstark first got into true crime, she expressed the relief she felt at knowing she wasn't crazy for having anxiety about navigating the world as a woman, writing, "There was something so satisfying about getting confirmation that the world wasn't as great as *Happy Days*…made it out to be. It didn't take the anxiety away, but it still felt like a fucking triumph…I didn't just want to feel the thrill of fear or the satisfaction of validation, my survival *depended* on my knowing about crime" (*Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered* 131). She's not alone in this feeling, as others have also shared their relief upon finding a community to navigate true crime with. One listener explains how they benefit from listening and participating in the *MFM* community, saying "I guess I feel reassured because I know that the anxiety that I feel walking out of the house at night, that is normal, that is what everybody feels, that is because of these vulnerabilities for the situation I am in" (Rodgers 9). This perspective, as well as countless others, brings attention to the normalcy of crime in the lives of women. One reason true crime podcasts are a huge step for these women is that "few opportunities previously existed for women to share or document the everydayness of their fear" (Rodgers 9). Participating in online spaces, in-person meet-ups, and live shows regarding true crime feels like an assurance to these women that they aren't alone in a world that seems to thrive on violence against them.

MFM has offered women a place to share their stories of how they've escaped dangerous situations or how listening to the podcast has made them more aware of their surroundings. For example, in the episode "54 – Valet Area," the hosts open with a story submitted by a listener that describes the moment a fellow "Murderino"—the term coined for listeners of the *MFM* podcast—helped her get out of a situation where she could have become a victim. As the listener was leaving a restaurant, a woman came up to her and started talking to her like she knew her. After the listener voiced her confusion, the woman lowered her voice and informed her that a man was hiding behind her car. The listener let the woman walk her to her car, during which time she explained that she noticed him "lurking…got a bad feeling" and decided to wait

for the listener before she left. When they approached the vehicle, a hooded man stood up and walked into an alley nearby. The listener says that their savior turned to them before they left and said "stay sexy and don't get murdered." She goes on to say, "A fellow Murderino probably saved me from being robbed, assaulted, kidnapped, murdered, god knows what and I'm so thankful for her." There were other stories like this shared on the podcast as well and the hosts had their own reactions to the stories:

> *Kilgariff:* That idea right there of somebody noticing something that might be bad and taking the time to look out for another person and the idea that the reason they might do that is because they were emboldened by the shit that you and I say on this…

> *Hardstark:* …I'm so proud of us! I left therapy the other day and just texted you "I'm really proud of us." …That's so wonderful and I'm proud of us.

> *Kilgariff:* Good job, everybody.

> *Hardstark:* Good job, you guys. We fuckin did it. We're staying sexy, we're not getting murdered, we're making friends.

> *Kilgariff:* Extending yourself to people who might be in a bad place, that's kinda like, that's what we're looking for these days.

> *Hardstark:* Yeah, and we're putting those fuckin dumpster alley lurkers in their place, of like "no, you can't fuckin, you can't do this, dude."

> *Kilgariff:* No. Or, you know, maybe that guy was peeing, either way that girl got in her car and got home safe, the end. ("54 – Valet Area")

Stories of listeners being saved either by other Murderinos or by what they've learned from the podcast make up much of discussion boards on Facebook and Reddit. The examples shared on the show demonstrate the importance of the podcast in the lives of women. It's clear from the reactions of the hosts that this is the type of impact that they want to come from their discussions of true crime.

Another story came up in the episode "60 – Jazz It" when a situation was mentioned where a victim fought off a perpetrator, and the hosts debated when fighting back was a viable option. One of the hosts says, "You don't want to say how badass she is because that's sending the message that you should always fight. It's just such a situational thing…you don't want to be like 'beat the shit out of the person who's attacking you' because that could be the absolute wrong thing to do." As the

hosts explain, the response depends on the situation. In this case, the woman knew she was in a place where there was no way the situation could be turned around on her and she had taken self-defense classes. However, in another situation, a victim might be better off trying to scream and get the attention of others or observe their surroundings in case they have a chance to communicate their location or the suspect's appearance to someone. The hosts go on to discuss how this victim went about defending herself:

> *Hardstark:* The thing I really did like about it, and that I took away from it, is that she was fighting him and at one point she thought in her mind "this doesn't have to be a fair fight," and so it wasn't like wrestling. Then she said "I started clawing at his face" and that kind of hit me because it was like, this doesn't have to be civil, this can be fucking out of control.
>
> *Kigariff:* Yes! If there is someone in the bathroom, that came into the bathroom to harm you or touch you in any way that you don't want to happen, you go, the knee goes to the nuts, the fingers go to the eyes, and you fucking go for it Animal Style like they serve at In-N-Out. ("60 – Jazz It")

In this instance, the hosts remind women that they have the ability to judge how to respond to their situation by observing their surroundings and determining how they can best survive. Hardstark brings attention to the fact that people who would try to harm someone don't deserve a fair fight and asserts that victims have every right to do whatever is necessary to escape, pushing the idea of "fuck politeness." The advice given in response to audience testimonies and during the stories of the hosts' favorite murders is one of the things that draws listeners back to the podcast every week. As one listener wrote at the end of their hometown murder story, "Thanks for the humor, the strange and enjoyable hobby that is true crime and for being some kick-ass ladies. I honestly believe that fucking politeness and all your other wise words are helping empower women and other humans to truly stay sexy and not get murdered" (*MFM* Minisode 23). This is the general consensus of the *MFM* fanbase, which shows the importance of the true crime podcast in the lives of these women.

  While men are certainly welcome to join the communities that surround true crime podcasts, more often than not, the typical true crime podcast fan will be female. This will continue to be true as long as gender-based violence continues to flourish in a society that persists in trying to own or control women's bodies. As violence against women continues unchecked, women will search for anything that might help them feel in control of what happens to them, as well as anything that makes them feel like there's someone at their back who knows what they're dealing with daily and

can share in their struggle. These things can be found in true crime podcasts like *My Favorite Murder* and so many others. What makes true crime podcasts mockable by outside spectators are the very things that make them so valuable to women. The gory detail and a seemingly endless list of stories to learn from make these audio spaces central for female self-preservation and self-defense education. Though many of the victims whose stories are told did not survive their encounters, their actions and their memory can be the catalyst for the survival of future women. It is the voice in the dark that shouts the reminder "fuck politeness" when a situation could take a turn for the worse.

Works Cited

Browder, Laura. "Dystopian romance: True crime and the female reader." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39.6 (2006): 928-953. proxy.bsu.edu/login?url=https://search. ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=22978260&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Greer, Amanda. "Murder, she spoke: The female voice's ethics of evocation and spatialisation in the true crime podcast." *Sound Studies* 3.2 (2017): 152-164. proxy.bsu.edu/ login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=13099 4359&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Hardstark, Georgia, and Karen Kilgariff. *My Favorite Murder*. Feral Audio and Midroll Media. 2016.

—. *Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide*. New York, Forge, May 2019.

Ibrahim, Solava, and Sabina Alkire. "Agency and empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators." *Oxford development studies* 35.4 (2007): 379-403. proxy.bsu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true& db=a9h&AN=27665396&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

McDonald, Melissa M., Rachel M. James, and Domenic P. Roberto. "True crime consumption as defensive vigilance: psychological mechanisms of a rape avoidance system." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 50.5 (2021): 2085-2108. proxy.bsu.edu/login?url=https:// search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=151386584&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Monroe, Rachel. *Savage Appetites: True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession*. Scribner, 2020.

"Parasocial Relationships: The Nature of Celebrity Fascinations." *Findapsychologist.org*, 2015, www.findapsychologist.org/parasocial-relationships-the-nature-of-celebrity-fascinations/.

Rodgers, Kathleen. "'F*cking politeness' and 'staying sexy' while doing it: Intimacy, Interactivity and the Feminist Politics of True Crime Podcasts." *Feminist Media Studies* (2022): 1-16. proxy.bsu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct =true&db=a9h&AN=158568691&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Vitis, Laura. "'My Favorite Genre Is Missing People': Exploring How Listeners Experience True Crime Podcasts in Australia." *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* (2022).