

# Smooth Criminals: An Introduction to the Prevalence and Power of True Crime and Crime Fiction in Society

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Crime media has the capacity to highlight the reality of flaws and misconceptions in criminal justice. While these stories are intended to convey a realistic portrayal of the pervasiveness of crime, most only succeed in perpetuating stereotypes. Crime fiction has skyrocketed in popularity over the last couple of centuries as it has developed into a definitive, nuanced genre. This is for a multitude of reasons, the most obvious being that people are fascinated with crime, especially as a dramatized form of entertainment ([Lettieri](#)). Readers thrive on being able to follow the forensic clues and investigate a crime alongside the detective to try to figure out the criminal's motives and subsequently how to guard themselves against such horrendous crimes ([Donovan](#)). Crime fiction can also be a medium through which people can explore their fears and anxieties surrounding the possible repercussions of larger social or cultural problems. For instance, the Industrial Revolution took place when the genre began to define itself in the 19th century and the World Wars were in the background during the Golden Age of crime fiction which gave rise to authors like Agatha Christie and novels such as *The Maltese Falcon*.

Crime fiction has developed in many ways throughout history, leading us into more diverse territory. As the popularity of crime fiction continues to grow, audience and author demographics widen with it. We no longer exclusively see the restrictive storylines of locked rooms and police procedurals; the genre has evolved to provide contemporary authors with an outlet to discuss social issues involving race, gender, and class, such as those Ellen Bain examines in her essay "The Art of Persuasion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amy Dunne's Narration in *Gone Girl*." There are still many more advancements to be made concerning intersectional diversity within the genre,

such as those Riley Ellis calls attention to in her discussion about scapegoats in her essay “Money Moves: Class-Based Scapegoats and the Decolonization of Literary Crime Fictions,” but the increased representation of marginalized voices sets a more progressive tone for the future of crime fiction. As time has progressed, so has the genre. Society and culture have become increasingly complex and so have the crimes along with the criminals that commit them.

Much like crime fiction, true crime has garnered attention in recent years, becoming increasingly popular across all genres. The genre was originally full of works authored by those within the professions associated with crime–law enforcement, judicial participants, and reporters ([Roysdon](#)). While these figures are still heavily involved in works of true crime, production of the genre has expanded to more diverse fields. When true crime was first introduced in the 16th century, it was a way of communicating news and simply reporting a crime story. These pamphlets and short narratives gave literate audiences an inside look into criminal cases and legal proceedings ([Burger](#)).

As the genre grew and progressed, audiences began to gain more from the often graphic content. Around the 19th century, audiences began stepping into the detective role, gravitating toward true crime mysteries where they could put their wits to the test and attempt to solve the case. True crime also began to lean towards critiques of the criminal justice system and law enforcement, interacting with the ever-evolving culture that surrounds it. For some—particularly female audiences—true crime has become a tool for learning how to avoid crime, as Bella Hughes calls attention to in her essay “Murderinos: Examining the Female Audience of True Crime Podcasts with *My Favorite Murder*.” These audiences consume the content in order to learn from previous victims and avoid similar fates. That’s not to say that true crime is not simply entertainment for some.

It is because of the growing popularity and possibilities of the genre that *The Digital Literature Review* chose to explore the public perception of crime. In this 10th edition of the journal, the team wanted to analyze how certain tropes have shifted to fit a more progressive society. Crime media has become a more accepted form of literature because of its ability to validate fears of the uncertainty of violence. Our goal was to reach a broad audience of authors and readers from the already diverse world of crime narratives. As the purpose of crime literature has morphed to appeal to new generations of “crime junkies,” *The Digital Literature Review* wanted to examine these narratives in terms of their benefits—or lack there-of—to the understanding of crime and criminals in a society prone to upholding patriarchal and racial standards.

While crime fiction may be filled with outlandish mysteries and characters, it is important to acknowledge that these stories do not exist in a fully fictionalized bubble

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completely detached from real social impact, and thus they can become harmful narratives. Crime fiction gives us a clear look at many aspects of our culture, such as who is typically framed as a criminal, and what that can reveal about our preset biases. True crime narratives, too, can fall into these same biases when sensationalism is favored over accurate reporting, which Caleb Hardesty sheds light on in his essay “The White Lens of Crime Media: Examining Minority Underrepresentation in American Media and its Consequences.” When we begin to examine which people are assumed guilty in these narratives and, just as importantly, who is assumed innocent, we get a glimpse into the cultural scaffolding around criminality. For groups of people who are often cast as deviants in these narratives, such as foreigners or those suffering from mental disorders, the real-life implications make themselves known when they are labeled as dangerous or untrustworthy due to public perception being skewed from constantly being villainized by the media, as found in Makayla Edwards’s essay “Taking the ‘Psycho’ out of ‘Psycho-killer: The Impact of Criminal Portrayals of Psychiatric Disorders in Horror Films.”

Beginning with Hardesty’s “The White Lens of Crime Media,” we are shown how these damaging narratives are not a new phenomenon. Using Huey P. Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide*, Hardesty explores how racially biased media has damaged the reputation of American minority groups for decades, as well as how little has changed through contemporary comparisons. Issues like “Missing White Woman Syndrome” serve to illustrate how White upper-class Americans benefit from these biased narratives while paving the way for minority groups to be neglected by the justice system. In “The Art of Persuasion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amy Dunne’s Narration in *Gone Girl*,” Ellen Bain analyzes the role of narration in crime fiction. By examining the privileges of the character Amy Dunne, we are shown how demographics and logic can be used to skew public perception and shift the blame of criminality from one person to another. This essay highlights the power that societal expectations and prejudices hold over law enforcement. Continuing the theme of harmful misrepresentation, Makayla Edwards’s “Taking the ‘Psycho’ out of ‘Psycho-killer: The Impact of Criminal Portrayals of Psychiatric Disorders in Horror Films,” walks us through how damaging false narratives can be to those struggling with mental illness. The essay explores the inaccurate and criminalizing nature of mental illness representation through Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, which both perpetuate the stigma that those suffering from mental illness are violent and dangerous. The analysis also addresses the real-world implications of these portrayals and the negative effects they have on societal perceptions of various psychological disorders.

Recently, more authors have begun to recognize the harmful narratives taking

place and have taken to calling attention to their significant influence on society. When examining the social issues at play within true crime, some narratives choose to address the questions of who gets blamed, who gets away, and what role class, race, gender, and sexuality play in these types of stories. Instead of subverting the typical tropes that are played out in true crime, fiction that recognizes these narratives instead leans into the tropes, specifically in ways that reflect what society is already doing. The genre of true crime sheds light on societal and systemic issues, depicting them for what they are. Without attempting to fix the issues or find solutions, these stories simply but masterfully show the injustices of society, and leave it in the hands of the reader to understand the nuance behind the narrative and the commentary that they make about issues of injustice.

This discussion of recognizing the narrative begins with “Money Moves: Class-Based Scapegoats and the Decolonization of Literary Crime Fictions,” in which Riley Ellis tackles the role of the scapegoat in Tana French’s *The Secret Place* and Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. Through the context of literary crime fiction genre conventions, she explores topics such as gender, race, and class. Ellis uses Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as a framework to examine the significance of these intersectionalities and violence in the decolonization of literary crime fiction. In “Cogs in the Machine: An Analysis of *American Psycho*,” Rae Keeler connects the violence that is depicted in the novel with the inherent violence that is present in capitalism. She argues that Bateman’s victims, his style of killing, and the lack of justice brought upon him represent the criminal justice system and its effects on society. She breaks down parts of the serial killer that are depicted in Bateman and analyzes how they represent different aspects of the effects of trickle-down economics in America. Angelo Gonzalez examines the connection between setting, class, and the genre of crime fiction in “Mysterious Murderous Manors of Crime Fiction: An Examination of Setting in *Knives Out*.” Gonzalez argues that *Knives Out* is a nostalgia tribute to the genre but is also key to establishing themes and subverting typical tropes. Finally, in “New Law of the Land: The Monster in *No Country for Old Men*,” Will Callan examines the character Chigurh and applies monster theory to understand him in a new light. He argues that McCarthy creates Chigurh to be a monster in order to depict the violence of crime and the futility of attempting to stop it. He achieves this through the narration of Sheriff Bell and how that perspective translates into today’s society.

As creators of modern crime media begin to recognize the harmful narrative that has perpetuated prejudices and obstructed justice throughout generations, they work to break ground on a new narrative in which unjust societal and systemic structures are critiqued and the tropes and expectations that have made up the genre for so long are updated for a new generation of crime fans. Some of these unjust structures are

examined in “Realistic Villains’: Examining Social Commentary in Crime Films through *Knives Out* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*,” where Caitlin Davis uses the two titular films to highlight class divisions in the real world. With an examination of the symbolism involved in the deaths that occur in each movie, this essay adds to the discussion of what crime fiction can tell us about our own culture, as well as how to possibly move forward from unjust divisions that so often have a role in crime. Delving deeper into the possibilities of a younger demographic, Katelyn Mathew explores how young adult crime fiction has morphed to influence and reflect teenagers in today’s society in “How Young Adult Crime Fiction Influences and Reflects Modern Adolescents: An Examination of Karen M. McManus’s *One of Us Is Lying* and *One of Us Is Next*.” Mathew takes the reader through the popular young adult crime fiction duology and shows how McManus works to connect to modern adolescents through concepts such as technology and progressive values. With an understanding that contemporary audiences recognize and condemn societal faults that were once ignored or encouraged, novels like these attempt to normalize aspects of public relevance, which Mathew discusses regarding the development of social media as a weapon and the inclusion of primary non-heteronormative characters. It’s important to understand that these new narratives aren’t limited to only crime fiction, but can be woven into true crime as well. Audiences learn much about crime from engaging with the stories of victims and survivors. In “Murderinos: Examining the Female Audience of True Crime Podcasts with *My Favorite Murder*,” Bella Hughes investigates how women tend to gravitate toward true crime podcasts for their educational content. Through an analysis of the functions of both the medium and the genre, Hughes showcases the connection between those functions and audience reception of true crime podcasts with particular emphasis on women’s feelings of agency moving forward with access to this resource.

With the ever-growing popularity of the true crime and crime fiction genres, identifying, recognizing, and ultimately changing the harmful narratives that often lie within them is imperative. The cultural significance of these stories cannot be overstated, and leaving them without critique only creates more space for discriminatory and criminalizing portrayals. The lack of intersectionality in both crime fiction and true crime is a paradoxical issue, which can only be solved through accountability and intervention. While many authors have made strides to recognize and diversify tropes in the genre, it still remains largely catered to and biased toward the dominant population (whether it be class, race, gender, etc.). That is why our hope with this journal is to help readers explore and examine the tropes and inequities in crime media and literature as well as within real-life socio-economic contexts. Each essay provides a different perspective on various complex issues within the

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genre, offering a critical understanding of popular crime literature, film, and media. Throughout the journal, we encourage our readers to take an introspective approach to their own interactions with crime media and the significance of their personal consumption of it. And hopefully next time readers listen to an episode of their favorite crime podcast or try to solve a murder mystery, they will be able to understand it in a completely different light. Following the incredible work produced on a wide variety of subjects throughout 10 years of *DLR* issues, we are grateful for the opportunity to deliver research on such a prevalent topic in this 10th edition of the journal.

Thank you, and good luck, Detectives,

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