SMOOTH CRIMINALS

Ball State University | The Digital Literature Review | Issue 10, 2023

The Digital Literature Review

The Digital Literature Review is a journal showcasing undergraduate student work in literature and cultural studies. The journal is produced by undergraduate students at Ball State University who are involved in *The Digital Literature Review* immersive learning project. Our goal is to provide a forum where undergraduate students can showcase their research projects and disseminate their valuable contributions to ongoing academic conversations.

The Digital Literature Review is published annually in the spring. The deadline for submissions is in early January. We welcome original articles relating to each year's theme. Articles should range from 2500-5000 words; every article is reviewed by undergraduate students on the journal's editorial team. Notification of initial decision is in February. All authors receive constructive feedback concerning submissions.

Further information regarding *The Digital Literature Review* is available at bsudlr.wordpress.com or openjournals.bsu.edu/dlr.

 The Digital Literature Review gratefully acknowledges Ball State University's support for the publication of this journal.

COVER ART BY Kallie Hunchman, Ball State University.

DLR Staff

Editorial

Bella Hughes, *Lead Editor*
Makayla Edwards
Caleb Hardesty
Rae Keeler
Hannah Holmberg

Publicity

Wren Mills, *Team Leader*
Caitlin Davis
Angelo Gonzalez

Design

Katelyn Mathew, *Team Leader*
Thaddeus Lee, *Blog Editor*
Will Callan
Ellen Bain

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Molly Ferguson

Teaching Assistant

Riley Ellis

Smooth Criminals

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

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

Makayla Edwards, Caleb Hardesty, Hannah Holmberg, Bella Hughes, Rae Keeler, *The Digital Literature Review Editorial Team*

• • •

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

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 how 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 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,

Makayla Edwards, Caleb Hardesty, Hannah Holmberg, Bella Hughes, and Rae Keeler

Editorial Team of the 2022-2023 *DLR*

Works Cited

Burger, Pamela. "The Bloody History of the True Crime Genre | JSTOR Daily." *JSTOR Daily,* 24 Aug. 2016, daily.jstor.org/bloody-history-of-true-crime-genre/.

Donovan, Trisha. "Forensics in Fiction." *Mystery and Suspense Magazine*, 17 Mar. 2021, www.mysteryandsuspense.com/forensics-in-fiction/.

Lettieri, Richard. "Why Are We so Interested in Crime Stories?" *Psychology Today,* 24 Sept. 2021, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/decoding-madness/202109/why-are-we-so-interested-in-crime-stories#:~:text=Some%20researchers%20concluded%20that%20the.

Roysdon, Keith. "A Brief History of the Rise—and Evolution—of True Crime Books." *CrimeReads*, 14 June 2021, crimereads.com/a-brief-history-of-the-rise-and-evolution-of-true-crime-books/.

The White Lens Of Crime Media: Examining Minority Underrepresentation in American Media and its Consequences

Caleb Hardesty, *Ball State University*

• • •

True crime's popularity has never been higher. However, true crime media largely ignores offenses by authority figures, and creators use their outreach to monetize viewership with cold cases rather than making critiques of the societal structures in the United States. Most true crime media also perpetuates "missing white woman syndrome" and ignores the plights of marginalized communities, including Black and Native American. This bias makes it harder for the stories of minority groups to be heard and can be damaging to their communities in the long run. Following this, my argument will use Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* as a historical representation and firsthand account of the ways in which the judicial system is inherently biased towards minority groups and how their representation in the media makes them more likely to be targeted by police, as well as a contemporary comparison and analysis of these issues. The media around Newton's case, although he was later acquitted of all charges, painted Newton as a deviant simply because he was in a Black organization. Applying the lens of Critical Race Theory, as explained by Bryan Warde and Edward Taylor, to these events, we can begin to see the racist groundwork on which many of our institutions of law are built upon and how media's favoring of sensationalism over accurate representation is hurtful to already vulnerable members of the American public.

Introduction

Nearly every facet of media in the United States is tainted by the racist precedent set by reporters over the course of the last two hundred years. This inherent racism not only demonizes members of minority groups daily but also completely erases their voice in the purposeful omission of their struggles. If more mass media outlets and popular influencers were willing to highlight the day-to-day injustices faced by the underprivileged members of our country, we could potentially see real social change and the regression of racist legislature as the public becomes more aware of the oppressive scaffolding holding the judicial system together, instead of continuing to cast minority groups as inherently deviant and making it harder for them to prove their innocence or receive help from government bodies.

To lay out the historical groundwork of these issues, this essay will draw heavily from Huey P. Newton's experience in the 1960s using his autobiography R*evolutionary Suicide* (1973), as well as the works of several critical race theorists including Bryan Warde, Angela Davis, and Edward Taylor. Newton's own experience with racism in the judicial system and how he was portrayed in public media provides a well-documented firsthand account of the inherent racial bias in both of these institutions, as well as fighting back against the pre-established narrative of Black Americans. While Newton's story did unfold in the 1960s, its relevance can still be directly applied to the current climate of The United States. While many like to pretend that institutionalized racism is a thing of the past, modern media and judicial issues prove otherwise.

These contemporary issues linked with a historical precedent provide a clear outline of the real-life damage that negative media representation inflicts upon the marginalized communities of our country. Were these communities to have a larger say in their own stories, or at the very least get to have their stories properly told through other outlets, they could potentially benefit in three major ways: these groups could remove the mark of demonization that has plagued them throughout American history, they could have a greater chance of combatting racist legislature and demanding structural change, and they could finally receive proper help from government bureaucrats (such as the police) rather than having their struggles be ignored or punished.

Historical Precedent

A brief overview of the origins of the police force in the United States is helpful to understand the argument being presented before moving on. The first equivalent of

the police force can be traced back directly to Carolina slave patrols in the 1700s. While these groups would continue to grow and develop throughout America's early history, they flourished after the abolishment of slavery in 1865. Wealthy white communities, afraid of retribution from the now-freed Black population, needed a vanguard to protect them from perceived harm and continue the subservient role of the previous slaves. This job, which would lead directly into the modern police force, was given to former slave hunters (Spruill 43). From their very inception, the police have served white elites by purposefully combatting underprivileged communities, and their brutality has been overlooked by state governments in favor of pleasing the upper class. This was later followed by Jim Crow policies and mass segregation (enforced by the police and upheld by legislative and judicial bodies), the effects of which still permeate throughout American institutions (Warde 468).

In 1967, Newton, a co-founder of the Black Panthers, was charged with the murder of police officer John Frey. His trial began in 1968, and he was later acquitted of all charges after it was discovered that Frey was accidentally killed by his own partner in a panicked shooting. This case, as well as Newton's experiences leading up to it, will be used to demonstrate Newton's demonization by the media and how the opinions of him that were publicly broadcasted through various outlets allowed law enforcement officials to harass him, and further, to pass legislation to directly suppress the rights of Black Americans.

The media's negative representation of minority groups was not a new concept during Huey P. Newton's trial. On the contrary, it was a leading force that made Newton question the unfair treatment of him, his family, and his community at a very young age. On his entrance into the local school system, Newton reported, "I knew only that I constantly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of being Black. … It was a result of the implicit understanding in the system that Whites were 'smart' and Blacks were 'stupid'" (17). This statement shows the permeating effect of negative minority representation in America, where a child inherently feels othered from their fellow children simply because of their skin color. Despite not having yet faced direct racism in his life, Newton had already been forced to internalize the racist status quo because of what public opinion had taught him about race relations.

As Newton grew older, he watched as both he and his community were routinely harassed and assaulted by police officials. At this time, these events did not gather any media attention. Whereas today, thankfully, bystanders can easily document instances of police misconduct, this was occurring at a time in which the marginalized communities being harassed had almost no outlet for help. When they did reach out, it boiled down to their word against the word of the white police officers.
This is a nearly impossible battle for members of minority groups to win, as the societal

narrative broadcasted through all forms of media forces disenfranchised groups to have to prove that they are morally sound, whereas white people are naturally assumed by the public eye to be just (Patton & Ward 335). This is further reinforced by critical race theorist Angela Davis who describes a system through which an ever-perpetuating cycle forces Black Americans to be arrested after being assumed guilty, sent to jail in much greater quantities than whites because of racial bias, and then seen as criminals because of the large number of Black people in prison, creating a perceived "Black monopoly on criminality" (265).

Reflecting on this idea, Newton became aware of how severely minority groups were being deprived of their own voice. This concept would inspire a large portion of *Revolutionary Suicide* in which Newton emphasizes the importance of Black people being in charge of their own representation. He highlights this scarcity and the flaws with what little representation there is when reflecting on his first experiences with African American activists. Newton claims Donald Warden "is the only Black man I know with two weekly radio programs and one on television. The mass media, the oppressors, give him public exposure for only one reason: he will lead the people away from the truth of their situation" (66). As a way to combat this problem, Newton was driven to write this book without the influence of "the oppressors" to inspire others to resist these narratives upheld by the establishment.

After this, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale started The Black Panthers. The first course of action they took was to combat the harassment of innocent minorities by police officers. The Black Panthers started "police patrols" in which volunteers would gather in small groups with visible firearms and follow the police officers through Black communities in Oakland. During the process, they would also give legal advice near people who were being detained, often providing the victim with the knowledge they were being arrested under false pretenses and allowing them to go back home to their families while also forcing the police officer to admit their illegal actions (Newton 127-128).

These officers would not face charges, however, as there were no outlets for these groups to report officer misconduct and no popular media outlets broadcasted the struggles of inner-city communities. The complete omission of the Black narrative allowed the white power structure to publish false claims about The Panthers with no repercussions. White-owned newspapers began to print stories told by the police that The Panthers were a violent mob disrupting the peace, which allowed law enforcement to crack down on the group without public outcry (Figure 1).


Panthers Indoctrinate The Young

Figure 1. "Panthers Indoctrinate the Young." Aug. 18, 1969, Fascination and Fear: Covering the Black Panthers - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

Consider here Bryan Warde's ideas on critical race theory in which he states:

> This racial privilege comes by way of white people having unequal access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society by virtue of being a member of the dominant group. Because of this unequal access, white people as a group not only have and maintain an ongoing competitive edge over minority groups, such as black people, but they are also able to sustain this dominance in all areas of society through the shaping of law and practices that protect the status-quo. (463).

Warde's definition helps to underline the relationship between resource access and the subsequent ability to suppress minority groups. It is important to note that while the resources mentioned certainly apply to physical things like money and property, public resources also include more conceptual aspects such as time and executive representation. From this, we can begin to see that this symbiosis between white media and white lawmakers is not an accidental occurrence, but rather a product of the purposeful exclusion of Black voices which allows the powers that be to reap the social rewards, in this case being able to control social perceptions in a way that places them on top of the social hierarchy.

This unity of police and media narratives paved the way for racist public officials to change the law to directly combat their unease at the thought of organized Black people following the aforementioned police patrols carried out by The Black Panthers. Look no further for proof of how improper media representation can allow lawmakers to suppress minority groups than the following quote by Huey P. Newton. These are his own words on Donald Mulford, a republican state assemblyman, calling into a radio

show interview with Newton:

> He told us that he planned to introduce a bill into the state legislature to make it illegal for us to patrol with our weapons. It was a bill, he said, that would "get" the Black Panthers. Mulford's call was a logical response of the system. We know how the system operated. If we used the laws in our own interest and against theirs, then the power structure would simply change the laws… A few days later, the paper carried a story about Mulford's "panther bill." In its particulars it was what we had expected- a bill intended to suppress the people's constitutional right to bear arms. Until then, White men had owned and carried weapons with impunity… Mulford had been asked by the Oakland police to introduce this bill because some "young Black toughs," as they called us, were walking around with guns. The bill was further evidence of this country's double standard against Blacks. (Newton 154)

This is a very potent historical event for several reasons once we begin to roll back the layers. Firstly, and perhaps most glaringly, Newton points out that white people (including the violent Ku Klux Klan at the time) had publicly brandished weapons in public protests throughout the country without ever being charged as criminals and without any intervention by lawmakers. Once minority groups in underprivileged communities began to practice this same right, laws were implemented in direct response to strip these communities of their power and uphold the status quo. This was made possible because of the media's use of fear mongering, in which news outlets spread disinformation to paint the Panthers as a force of evil acting against the interest of American citizens. Fear goes hand in hand with racism, and this is a purposeful strategy utilized by oppressors because if citizens are afraid of a group of people and what they might do, they are more likely to overlook when they are brutalized under the guise of public safety (Davis 269).

Furthermore, we can see that this blatantly racist bill was able to be passed because of the media's support and presentation of Mulford's ideas, as well as the newspapers' repeated characterization of Black Panthers as a militant force taking the streets by storm. By controlling the narrative through news media, Mulford was able to propose racist legislature in the public eye and simultaneously be seen as a protector of the community due to the papers' inherent bias against minority groups. Below is an example and analysis of the impact of these press releases.


THE SACRAMENTO BEE

CAPITOL IS INVADED

Press Corps Draws Ire Of Legislator

State Police Halt Armed Negro Band

11 MIGs Are Destroyed By US Jets

Governor Urges

Figure 2. "The Sacramento Bee's front page story the day after the Panthers protest of the Mulford Act." May 2nd 1967, The Panthers and the Press – Fourteen East (fourteeneastmag.com).

This article (Figure 2) was released in the Sacramento Bee after a protest at the Sacramento capitol building regarding the aforementioned "Panther bill." The images and opinions expressed in this article were not a new stance by the media, but they do highlight the lengths that the press was willing to go to uphold the narrative that most benefited the power structure. Simply put, the capitol was not invaded. The Panthers arrived at the capitol brandishing firearms (as was still legal at that time) and read a speech highlighting the importance of combatting racist lawmaking as well as simply walking around the building (Newton 156-158). However, the headline of this paper and the accompanying image instill a fear of an organized and hostile mob looking to overthrow the government. Within the article, there are also lies about how many Panthers there were, what they had been doing, and what they had said, as well as the use of negative vocabulary to describe normal legal actions. This was done to imply that the Panthers were criminals and deviants rather than the protesting civilians that they were (Pederson).

These Panthers would be arrested after their legal demonstration, which may not have happened had the public been more aware of what was actually happening. The media's portrayal of the Black Panthers prior to the incident made it simple for police

to round up the protestors without gaining public ire, whereas if the average citizen had been more aware of the true situation taking place, they may have been outraged to see innocent people being battered and arrested by the police.

This is a situation we still see all too often, in which the oppressed are robbed of their voices and are denied the opportunity to speak out in defense of themselves. Throughout the entirety of Huey P. Newton's lifespan, he was denied chances to speak on mass public broadcasts because of the representation that preceded him as a Black activist, something he attempted to counter with his autobiography. Without the ability to present their own narratives, minority groups are forced to endure whatever the established powers wish the public to believe, which is almost always a narrative that upholds the status quo and keeps those that benefit from the oppression of minority groups in control.

Contemporary Application

While some may insist that these historical precedents are outdated and deny that there is any such thing as systemic racism, there is an alarming parallel connecting these past issues to the contemporary United States. I also argue that racism is just as pervasive in these institutions as ever, it has simply changed its form. In this section, each of the historical issues covered will be directly tied to recent events in this country that show little progress has been made regarding minority group representation and struggles within the judicial system.

First, representation of minority groups in media has only minutely changed in news media and true crime narratives. A glaring issue with both of these mediums is the erasure of minority stories. Several factors lead to this issue. Just as in the 1960s, minority groups are still assumed to be naturally at fault when presented in news stories, even when they themselves are the victims. Patton & Ward contend that "proving the worthiness of missing Black women is difficult when media narratives attempt to link these women to crime, mental illness, and other issues to suggest that they are somehow responsible for their predicament" (334). It has been so ingrained in the mass-scale culture industry of The United States that Black people are deviants that simply making their presence known in crime media will, by default, suggest guilt on their behalf.

With the lack of public outlets available to them, as mentioned by Bryan Warde, there is little hope for these oppressed groups to counter these narratives or begin the process of reversing their assumed guilt by white audiences, meaning that the audience is not only made unaware of the struggles of these communities but also becomes unsympathetic towards their struggles. Because of this, the stories of

minority groups are often simply left out of the media circuit. White people can be related to as a stand-in for the audience whereas a member of a minority group would ostracize the potential viewership (Patton & Ward 333). Just as the Panthers could not speak for themselves against allegations by the police, modern disenfranchised communities are still at the mercy of white media.

This erasure that strips minority groups of their voices is a symptom of a phenomenon known as "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (MWWS). MWWS is best described as "the information communicated to general audiences [is] influential and situate[s] 'certain subgroups of women-often white, wealthy, and conventionally attractive—as deserving of our collective resources, while making the marginalization and victimization of other groups of women, such as low-income women of colour, seem natural" (Patton & Ward 334-335). MWWS arises from the media's reliance on sensationalism and viewership monetization rather than reporting on the most pressing stories. This has life-altering consequences for those who are denied media representation and is widespread in both news and crime media.

Take for instance the recent true crime craze over Gabby Petito, a young white blogger who went missing in 2021. The events following the search and rescue efforts carried out by law enforcement highlight the sad reality of the underprivileged experience in our country. During the search for Petito, at least nine other dead bodies were found in the wild. These bodies would turn out to belong largely to minority groups, including Black, Native, and Hispanic women. Their stories were almost completely ignored, as they did not fit the public narrative of an innocent pure woman (Montell & Medina). Law enforcement agencies did not look for their killers, and their families were left without peace, which is another example of media representation directly affecting the course of policing. Without public outcry and interest, true crime media's hyper-fixation on MWWS allowed the police to sideline the deaths of the underprivileged.

This is not a unique standalone occurrence. Whereas a young white woman's story draws the national eye seemingly overnight, minority groups must fight to get even a passing glance from both media and law enforcement. Take for instance serial killer Jeremy Skibicki, who was charged with the murder of three Indigenous women in 2022. Normally, it would be assumed that a modern serial killer would attract true crime influencers like moths to a flame, but the deaths of Indigenous women don't fit into the sensationalism addiction caused by MWWS, even though police believe that the bodies of two or more women may still be buried in the landfill where Skibicki dumped his victims. Even worse, the police refuse to search for these bodies despite pleas from the families of the victims (Morin). Being denied any semblance of justice is a reality minority groups face on a daily basis. If these police were held accountable

in news media, the pressure for the case to be solved would push law enforcement to assist its community. As it stands, the lack of public outcry allows law enforcement to avoid consequences for ignoring the needs of underprivileged Americans.

While MWWS is not immediately evident and media outlets may deny that they are favoring white people over minority groups, that only further aligns with the thoughts of Critical Race Theorist Edward Taylor, who states in a 1998 article, "[b]y relying on merit criteria or standards, the dominant group can justify its exclusion of blacks to positions of power, believing in its own neutrality" (123). Neutrality may at first sound positive regarding race relations. However, when it comes to oppression, neutrality naturally benefits the oppressor while further harming the efforts of the oppressed.

Neutrality leads to an issue sometimes conveyed as "colorblindness" towards race and is presented as a positive. "Colorblindness" often fails to see the white power structure oppressing minority groups or implies that underprivileged communities are already entirely equal with the white upper class, which is not true (Taylor 123). This pseudo-willful ignorance does more damage than good and only ensures that those without the ability to speak for themselves will remain suppressed and controlled by the established racist narrative. Instead, media owners should acknowledge the discrepancy present in their narratives and allow diverse journalists to highlight the problems in their communities.

Another direct correlation between the 1960s and today's narrative structure arises whenever any member of a minority group stages a public protest. As seen during the Sacramento protest in 1967, the established media will skew the narrative whenever possible to mislead their audience into believing that peaceful protesters are organizing into violent mobs.

In this image (Figure 3), taken during a 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest following the death of George Floyd, protestors can be seen standing in front of a flaming trash can on a public street. The headline speaks for itself. When comparing this reporting to that of the 1960s, there are many parallels with damaging implications. First, this report immediately relies on fear mongering. Tucker Carlson, pictured on the left, has often been accused of being a fear monger himself, and the headline along with the photo of fire is meant to instill a sense of panic in viewers. If the camera were to pan around this city, however, it would be evident that the city is not on fire and this was a contained incident, which can be proved by the documentation of these protests posted to social media. Although these more aggressive actions were largely isolated incidents, media outlets, such as Fox News, instead skew the facts in order to uphold the racist narrative that serves them best and allows for further discrimination against minority groups by fostering fear in their audience that these protestors are an active threat to their cities and their safety.

Figure 3. "Our Leaders Peddle Lies as Our Cities Burn." 2020, Foxnews.com

Consider also the combative attitude of "Our Leaders Peddle Lies" and the function that this part of the report serves for the narrative. The "Lies" mentioned here are the charges against the officer who murdered Floyd, as Fox News took the stance that the officer was within his legal right. By trying to undercut opposing views, this outlet is attempting to instill distrust in BLM spokespeople and any public officials who are sympathetic to them. This angle was also used to say that Floyd was deserving of his punishment by implying that he was a criminal and the officer was simply detaining a dangerous man, which was the same strategy used to justify the arrest of the Sacramento Panthers. Yet again, we see the symbiotic relationship between media fear mongering and presumed criminality used as a tool to pave the way for abuses by government bodies.

Finally, there is the issue of how separate events are reported and how the vocabulary and presentation of these issues serve to uphold the status quo. Take for instance January 6th. During the reporting of that event, Fox News took a sympathetic tone and praised the protestors for upholding civic duty and fighting for what they believed was right. They were painted as family-oriented patriots, and it's no coincidence that a majority of these protestors shown were white. When compared

to the reporting of BLM protests, we see a harsh contrast that bolsters Newton's exact critique in the 1960s in which violent white protesters were excused while Black activists were immediately reprimanded. Despite a vast majority of BLM protesters being nonviolent, Carlson described them as "crazed ideologues, grifters, criminals, antisocial thugs with no stake in society and nothing better to do than hurt people and destroy things."

However, unlike the Sacramento protest, there is a spark of light in the reporting of this event. It comes from the independent posters on social media that relayed the true motives and goals of these protesters, as well as clarifying that they did not participate in any violent or aggressive action. Because of the ease of internet access and widespread social media in this country, it is somewhat more possible for underprivileged communities to share their stories. We see a direct effect in this story, wherein the protestors were prevented from being entirely demonized because of the large public interest in the protests that encouraged interpersonal discussion and inspired content creators to report on the situation. Looking back at the events of Sacramento and even the foundation of the Black Panthers, you'll recall that there was no outlet for the group to clarify its own story en masse. They were entirely at the mercy of biased white media and therefore made deviant. Had they had this ability to present their narrative, the Mulford bill may not have been passed, and members of the Panthers may not have been unlawfully beaten and arrested.

This shows us the direct positive influence that proper media representation can have. Despite the longstanding racist narrative, the historic abuses by the police, and the racist legislature across the country, this group was protected and valued because they were given the chance to speak for themselves. They were not erased in favor of a trite and dated true crime story or demonized on the public news. Were more of these massively popular independent content creators driven to pick up on the stories of the underprivileged, we could see real public perception of these groups change entirely.

Conclusion

It is a simple fact that institutionalized systemic racism permeates throughout many largely influential bodies throughout the United States. These issues have existed since the country's inception and have affected all levels of government. While these problems do not rest solely on the shoulders of the media, the assistance that the media has given (and continues to give) to uphold the power vacuum preventing minority groups from protecting themselves cannot be understated. Angela Davis argues, "What we have come to recognize as an open, explicit racism has in many ways begun to be replaced by a secluded, camouflaged kind of racism, whose influence on people's daily lives is as pervasive and systematic as the explicit forms of racism

associated with the era of the struggle for civil rights" (270-271).

As citizens, we have historically had little in the way of outlets for demanding social reform. However, with the rise of easy-access media, we have seen cases in which minor pushback has been inflicted on the power structure. If more media creators, specifically independent true crime influencers and news media reporters unbound by the limitations of broadcast networks, were to continue presenting the stories of the voiceless, these communities would gain an invaluable quantity of support. From finding missing persons to combatting the racist foundations of law enforcement bureaucrats, proper media attention could revolutionize how we communicate with our government.

In the words of Huey P. Newton, "There were enough laws on the books to permit Black people to deal with all their problems, but the laws were not enforced" (110). The pieces to social reform do exist in this country, but they will not be put into the proper place by those currently in charge, as that would upset the power vacuum that keeps them in charge. Through the mass social education available through independent media available to the public, we, as a united people, could hold the institutions around us responsible for their actions and demand an end to the injustices inflicted upon our marginalized countrymen by the judicial system.

Works Cited

Lubiano, Wahneema, and Angela Davis. "Race and Criminality - Black Americans and the Punishment Industry." *The House That Race Built,* Random House, 1999, pp. 264–279.

Montell, Amanda and Isa Medina, hosts. *Sounds Like a Cult*. Apple Podcasts, 2023, Sounds Like A Cult: The Cult of True Crime on Apple Podcasts.

Morin, Brandi. "Daughters of Murdered Indigenous Woman Push Canada For Action." *Indigenous Rights News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 9 Dec. 2022, www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/9/daughters-of-murdered-indigenous-woman-push-canada-for-action.

Newton, Huey P., and J. Herman Blake. *Revolutionary Suicide.* Penguin Books, 2009.

Patton, Lori D., and LaWanda W. Ward. "Missing Black Undergraduate Women and the Politics of Disposability: A Critical Race Feminist Perspective." *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2016, pp. 330–349., doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0330.

Pederson, Brendan. "The Panthers and the Press." *14 East,* 21 Oct. 1970, fourteeneastmag.com/index.php/2016/10/21/the-panthers-and-the-press/.

Spruill, Larry H. "Slave Patrols, 'Packs of Negro Dogs' and and Policing Black Communities." *Phylon (1960-)*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 42–66. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/phylon1960.53.1.42.

Taylor, Edward. "A Primer on Critical Race Theory." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 19, 1998, pp. 122–24. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2998940.

Tucker Carlson Tonight. Fox News Channel. 2020.

Warde, Bryan. "Black Male Disproportionality in the Criminal Justice Systems of the USA, Canada, and England: A Comparative Analysis of Incarceration." *Journal of African American Studies,* vol. 17, no. 4, 2013, pp. 461–79. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43525522.

Photo by: Jaxson Kidd

Original art modified to black and white with permission from artist

The Art of Persuasion: A Rhetorical Analysis of Amy Dunne's Narration in *Gone Girl*

Ellen Bain, *Ball State University*

• • •

Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, as well as the 2014 movie adaptation, portrays the story of a wife, Amy, whose suppressed resentment in a dysfunctional marriage that caused her to frame her husband, Nick, for her murder. The story takes the audience through the plot of the disappearance and investigation through the alternating perspectives of the two spouses. Amy's accounts of their relationship initially paints Nick as guilty, but it later reveals that the entire disappearance was a ploy, meant to convince the public of his faults while uplifting Amy's character. This essay seeks to use rhetorical criticism to analyze the persuasive devices of emotional appeal, credible identity, and logical reasoning utilized by Amy Dunne's character to manipulate other characters and media into believing that her husband killed her. It will also analyze how she uses those same rhetorical devices to attempt to convince the readers that her actions in framing her husband for her murder were justified. This analysis won't solely focus on how she goes about persuading the characters, media, and the audience; It will also analyze why it was so easy for her to do so. As a result, this essay will use sociological criticism to reveal the power that mass media and public perception hold in regard to criminal justice cases, and how this pressure from the media corresponds with a present-day bias favoring privileged white women in America's criminal justice system.

The crime fiction genre is an overarching space of literature that tends to focus on the art of careful investigation and problem-solving in relation to a crime, highlighting the good of society versus the darker, more sinister side. In many cases, these pieces of fiction tend to reflect aspects of our real lives, using written pieces of fiction to reveal the unspoken truths of society. This is emphasized in the theoretical framework of the sociological criticism of literature, which considers modern societal issues and their influence on a written piece (Blanchard). This framework, along with rhetorical criticism—which interprets the persuasive arts used in a communicative act —serves as the foundation of this essay's examination of the 2012 novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn as well as its 2014 movie adaptation (Leeman). Throughout the novel, Amy's narration utilizes rhetorical elements of emotional appeal (pathos), credibility as a victim (ethos), and logic (logos) to effectively manipulate the media and characters in the novel to believe that her husband committed the murder. Furthermore, she uses these same rhetorical devices to justify her actions to the reader in the second half of the novel. The overall ease and effectiveness of Amy's ability to skew the criminal investigation through the manipulation of mass media reveals the influence that media pressure has over criminal justice cases. Furthermore, it reveals a larger issue of the impact of public perception in the legal system, which very often lends itself to a societal bias towards privileged white women in America.

The plot of *Gone Girl* revolves around the mysterious disappearance of antagonist Amy Elliot-Dunne, who is suspected of being killed by her husband, Nick Dunne. With alternating first-person perspectives between Amy and Nick, the audience is taken through the criminal investigation regarding Amy Dunne's disappearance during the past and present days of the relationship, initially painting Nick as the prime suspect. The novel is set up to follow the traditional form of a "whodunit," which is the mystery subgenre that takes the audience through the puzzle of discovering the truth behind the crime by planting clues throughout the piece. As the novel reaches the halfway point, the story breaks the traditional form of a whodunit when the narrator reveals that the disappearance was a ploy set up by Amy to get back at her husband for being unfaithful. Ultimately, she returns home after fabricating yet another story of false kidnapping by an ex-boyfriend, whom she ends up murdering to keep up the appearance of her elaborate story. Although she admits her crimes to Nick, the truth of Amy's actions is never revealed to the public, nor is she ever formally penalized for murder, fraud, and defamation of her husband. The story ends with the couple spiraling into an even more toxic relationship, in which Amy manipulates Nick into continuing their marriage by revealing that she is pregnant with his child, which she announces in a tense scene in front of a talk show host.

One of the most imperative factors in Amy Dunne's ability to persuade others to believe her story is her manipulation of the media. As Ahmed Hussein states, "Amy displays an obsession with making the people she abhors constantly suffer the 'wrath of public opinion'" (146). In other words, Amy uses the media and the public's negative opinions to punish those that have wronged her, especially her husband Nick. To do so, she places her own public identity at odds with Nick's, creating a situation in which the press must choose one side or the other. Out of all the rhetorical appeals that she uses, establishing credibility (ethos) is perhaps the easiest for her to accomplish, but is also one of the most important as it serves as the driving force behind the investigation and overall public outlook on the case. As Phillip and Steidly state in their article, "the likelihood that a defendant accused of a death-eligible murder will be sentenced to death is three times greater if the case involves a white female victim." This statistic is especially important in Amy's case because she utilizes this knowledge to sway the case in her favor. By framing her husband as the murderer, she is stripping him of all his credibility in depicting him as a criminal.

Opposedly, Amy is a well-educated, wealthy white woman who is well known by many in the story due to her being the inspiration for the popular children's book Amazing Amy. As her character mentions in the novel, the book character "Amy is the Elliot bread and butter, and she's served us well…" (Flynn, 26). So well, in fact, that Amy mentions her trust fund of nearly $800,000 provided by her parents to "make me feel secure enough so I didn't need to make choices based on money—in schooling, in career" (Flynn 86). These lines point to the lifestyle that she was raised in, confirming the notion that she has been positioned very highly in society in terms of class and race. Furthermore, the character of Amazing Amy serves as a mirror to reflect good traits onto Amy's character in the eye of the public. Amy herself describes Amazing Amy as "my literary alter ego, my paper-bound better half, the me I was supposed to be" (Flynn 26), proving that the character in the novel is meant to be a more idealized and loved version of herself. This then allows Amy to take on the fictitious persona of Amazing Amy in the eyes of the public, "adopting the heroine's traits of perfection and female virtue [to] establish her appeal to an audience" (Vouza 40). As such, there is an inclination by society to automatically believe her side of the story without question because of the reputation that has been constructed through the media, which greatly impacts the way that her "murder" case is perceived by the nation.

An additional layer of an appeal to ethos that Amy Dunne uses is directed towards both the characters of the story and the readers themselves. The narration of *Gone Girl* shifts perspectives, going back and forth from Nick's view to Amy's view. While Nick's narration is through a first-person depiction of his inner thoughts, Amy uses a reflective, diary entry to depict her life leading up to and after her

disappearance. The form of epistolary, or diary, writing is an especially effective tool for persuasive storytelling because it is "particularly effective at producing reactions of sympathy, since [it] encourages extradiegetic readers to respond to intradiegetic writing" (Snyder IV). In other words, writing in this way prompts the audience that exists outside the fictional world to critically and emotionally interpret events that happen within the fictional realm, causing them to accept it as truth. Upon reading Amy's diary, the audience is under the impression that they are gaining insight on the innermost personal thoughts of the victim leading up to the crime.

However, we later discover that the narration the audience sees through the diary entries is meticulously set up to uplift Amy while incriminating Nick Dunne. By carefully injecting false scenarios and fears in her diary entries, it's extremely convincing to the readers that he committed the crime, as they initially read the diary entries with no other context than Amy's recollections. As Amy reveals in the novel, "I wrote her carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released" (Flynn 238). This line reveals the intricate ways in which Amy purposely manipulates her identity, fragmenting "Diary Amy" as an entirely separate entity from her actual self. According to Isavella Vouza, Amy uses the diary to demonstrate her belief that "selfhood is not something that one is but something that one does" (39). Rather than completely transforming herself into the likable persona that the public wants, she puts on a performance of sorts to create a different persona compiled of traits that she knows will appeal to both the reader and the characters in the novel.

In her explanations of staging her husband's crime, it is apparent that Amy is acutely aware that to have any credibility in framing her husband, she needs to make herself a sympathetic victim beyond the scope of reasonable doubt. During the criminal investigation, Amy knows that she must make both the detectives and the public relate to her through the struggles she endures at the hands of her husband. As a result, Amy's use of logical appeal to the detectives is crucial to establish herself as a victim in their eyes. One of the main ways in which she establishes a logical appeal to the detectives is by manipulating a staged crime scene. According to Bitton and Dayan, "the most common victim–offender relationship involving HSS [homicide scene staging] is an intimate partner relationship, and most staged homicidal scenes involve the killing of an intimate partner" (1056). In other words, most cases in which the crime scene is altered relate to the murder of intimate domestic partners, such as a husband or boyfriend. This is something that Amy's character capitalizes on and uses for the basis of staging the home crime scene; she creates a scene that is believable at first glance but has deeply obvious flaws which signal to law enforcement that her husband, Nick, is a strong suspect in her disappearance.

Amy manipulates this statistical evidence of crime scene staging by pointedly setting up her home in such a way that leaves a breadcrumb trail for investigators, prompting them to look deeper into the crime. She expresses this notion in the movie adaptation through a voiceover by emphasizing the importance of "Meticulously [staging] your crime scene with just enough mistakes to raise the specter of doubt." (*Gone Girl* 1:08:38-1:08:41). Along with selectively destroyed furniture that presented indications of struggle, Amy further increases her appeal to the investigators' sense of logic by using unmitigable DNA evidence to stage the scene. According to Steven Lee, DNA is often referred to as the "silent witness," as it is the only concrete way to place or connect someone with a crime (2). As such, Amy is intentional in using her own blood on the floor of the kitchen to frame her husband. She expresses in Flynn's novel that after cutting herself, she "cleaned it up as poorly as Nick would have done after he bashed my head in" (220). This was done because Amy knew that the forensics team would come to the logical conclusion that her husband was trying to cover up the murder once they discovered the cleaned-up blood via blue light and luminol—an organic compound commonly used by forensic teams to discover blood and other human fluids on crime scenes. These two factors that contributed to a staged scene in the home are very effective in their appeals to the detectives' deductive reasoning by manipulating the crime scene in a way that would make sense in a typical domestic disappearance investigation.

A staged crime scene was only one part of what Amy Dunne altered to what was deemed as common sense to the detectives; another approach she took in appealing to the detectives' common sense was by creating false incentives for her husband to kill her. To give more validity and probable cause to her husband killing her, she had to make the marriage appear troubled. Amy had extremely effective ways of going about this. In building up to her big reveal, Amy constructed a marriage riddled with money problems. She explains in the first half of the novel how they are first burdened with "his-and-her-layoffs" as well as Nick's spending of her trust fund money to fund their sudden move to Missouri and to purchase a bar (Flynn 85). Furthermore, as the investigation into her disappearance continues, she makes countless purchases that would put their credit cards into massive debt. As she expresses in the film through flashbacks of the initial stages of her plan, she must keep up appearances and "Secretly create some money troubles: credit cards, perhaps online gambling" (*Gone Girl* 1:07:13-1:07:17). She takes it a step further in making it seem that her husband signed off on raising her life insurance a few months prior to going missing: "With the help of the unwitting, bump up your life insurance" (*Gone Girl* 1:07:20-1:07:24). By doing this, Amy was able to sway the characters and the audience in her favor because there are tangible documents that can be used as proof of incentive for the husband

committing the crime. In hindsight, audiences see a husband who made their money troubles worse by spending thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of purchases and signing off on life insurance right before the disappearance of his wife. This would lead any rational person, including the audience, to believe he is guilty.

The same can be said about her appeal to the detectives, by creating numerous means of evidence that would force them to make the most logical conclusion in the investigation. Amy continues this notion with the reader, as she goes on to explain that what she is doing to her husband is justified. A famous line from the film adaptation explains her reasoning as such: "Nick Dunne took my pride and my dignity and my hope and my money. He took and took from me until I no longer existed. That's murder. Let the punishment fit the crime" (*Gone Girl* 1:06:36-1:06:48). It is evident from the text that Amy Dunne elicits the audience's emotions by depicting how Nick Dunne went about ruining her life, financially and emotionally. Even with the given knowledge that she is actively trying to incriminate her husband, she is appealing to the reader's empathy by explaining that she is essentially getting back at him because of what he did to her. In her mind, Nick's infidelity with another woman after all that they invested into their marriage is the same as ending her life. She's using this reasoning to explain that potentially sentencing him to the same fate is within the lines of just punishment.

This analysis of Amy's ease in her ability to use rhetorical devices to persuade the literary audience reflects some of the larger societal issues that come into play regarding privilege in criminal justice cases. The investigation and media coverage of Amy's case in *Gone Girl* is a clear example of the sense of urgency and importance that white female victims receive in criminal cases in comparison to other citizens of the country. A study done by professors at the University of Denver in the department of Sociology and Criminology supports this notion, stating that "white females were victims in 36% of the approximately 1,000 cases in which capital defendants were sentenced to death." The same study also found that "an execution was 2.8 times more likely in cases with a white female victim than one would expect in a system that is blind to race and gender" (Phillips et al.). These statistics regarding the execution of perpetrators committing crimes against white women suggest that there are harsher repercussions in our justice system when the victim of the crime is a white woman. Furthermore, in violent crimes like this where the victim is a white woman, media outlets exert more outrage and pressure than they would with victims of other demographics.

The bias found in the justice system can be attributed to the combination of two things: the white privilege that makes their life more of a concern to the public, and the media's desire to deliver an entertaining story. Beale explains this phenomenon,

stating:

> The news media are not mirrors, simply reflecting events in society. Rather, media content is shaped by economic and marketing considerations that override traditional journalistic criteria for newsworthiness. In the case of network news, this strategy results in much greater coverage of crime, especially murder, with a heavy emphasis on long-running, tabloid style treatment of selected cases. (401)

This idea of network news focusing on 'long-running, tabloid style treatment of selected cases' works perfectly for the media because newscasts can make their own perceptions of criminal cases. If it's within reasonable rationale with the evidence provided, newscasts have freedom in how they convey cases, regardless of the objective truth of the matter.

The manipulation of media based on societal biases was the driving force behind Amy's plot in *Gone Girl*. News stations were able to create a seemingly clear-cut story of a husband who killed his pregnant wife, despite the manipulation that was at play behind the scenes of this crime. Because of the utilization of her privilege as a white female "victim," it was easy for Amy to convince everyone in the novel, including the readers, to go along with her side of the story. Additionally, the shock factor of the story allowed it to garner enough attention from the nation to also be pressured by the opinions of common people, despite the investigation still being ongoing. In this way, the power of the media was able to correspond with Amy Dunne's status as a privileged white woman, effectively influencing the detectives, the consumers, and the criminal case itself. This ease in her execution of the revenge plot proves that, in our society, the media has too much influence over criminal cases and investigations. Too often, it alters the sense of unbiased reasoning in criminal cases by creating incriminating narratives in advance based on preconceived notions of who the victims are.

Works Cited

Beale, Sara. "The News Media's Influence on Criminal Justice Policy: How Market-Driven News Promotes Punitiveness." *William & Mary Law Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2006, scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1103&context=wmlr.

Blanchard, Robert. "Social Criticism and Their Types." *International Scholars Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1 Mar. 2022, www.internationalscholarsjournals.com/articles/social-criticism-and-their-types-86417.html.

Fincher, David, director. *Gone Girl*. Twentieth Century Fox, 2014.

Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl: A Novel*. First edition. New York, Crown, 2012.

Hussein, Ahmed. "Patriarchal Potency in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*." *Adalya Journal*, vol. 9, no. 6, June 2020, doi.org/10.37896/aj9.6/016.

Lee, Steven B. *Collecting DNA Evidence at Property Crime Scenes.* San Jose University, 17 Mar. 2009, www.sjsu.edu/people/steven.lee/.

Leeman, Richard W. "Rhetorical Criticism." *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 2017, pp. 1–11., doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0219.

Phillips, Scott, and Trent Steidly. "Study Finds Defendants Accused of Killing White Women Are 3 Times More Likely to Be Sentenced to Death in Texas." *Death Penalty Information Center*, Columbia Human Rights Law Review, 6 Sept. 2020, deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/study-finds-defendants-accused-of-killing-white-women-are-3-times-more-likely-to-be-sentenced-to-death-in-texas.

Snyder, Emery. *Persuasion and Tutelage in some European Epistolary Novels of the Eighteenth Century*. 1992. Harvard University, PhD thesis, www.proquest.com/openview/98ca33b034668e7ba9e5b684322fe0c6/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.

Vouza, Isavella. *"Setting the Stage": Theatricality in* Gone Girl *(2012) and 10:04 (2014)*. 2018. McGill University, Master of Arts. eScholarship@McGill, escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/s1784p00h.

Yifat Bitton, Hava Dayan, "'The Perfect Murder': An Exploratory Study of Staged Murder Scenes and Concealed Femicide," *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 59, Issue 5, September 2019, Pages 1054–1075, doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz015.

Photo by: Jaxson Kidd

Original art modified to black and white with permission from artist

Taking the "Psycho" out of "Psycho-killer": The Impact of Criminal Portrayals of Psychiatric Disorders in Horror Films

Makayla Edwards, *Ball State University*

• • •

"Psycho", "maniac", and "madman" are all words that are found to be synonymous with serial killers and criminal activity. For decades, the media has perpetuated an extremely harmful image that those suffering from mental illness are violent and dangerous. These portrayals can be found across mediums from fictional books and movies to docuseries and podcasts. In the realm of fiction, specifically, some of the most harmful depictions can be found in horror films. These films tend to paint their villains to be caricatures of various psychiatric disorders including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder), and narcissistic personality disorder. These misrepresentations are not only grossly exaggerated but also highly inaccurate. In this piece, I will explore and expose the negative distortions of mental illness in various horror films. The scope will focus on two of the most influential psychological thrillers in the industry: *Psycho* and *The Shining*. These films each depict an antagonist who displays exaggerated traits indicative of mental illness. By deconstructing and comparing these traits with modern research on the mental illnesses they are meant to represent, I will expose the inaccuracies of these portrayals. Furthermore, I will outline the lasting impacts of these inaccuracies on both the public perceptions of mental illness, as well as help-seeking among individuals suffering from psychological disorders. Even if the characters in these popular films are fictional, the stigma they direct toward mental illness is very real and must be addressed.

Introduction

"He has done horrible things to people, and he will do horrible things to you," (*Split* 2:23). These are the final words of the trailer for the 2017 horror film *Split*, wherein the primary antagonist speaks about himself in the third person, saying he is about to harm the girls he has abducted. The movie centers around a man named Kevin, whose dissociative identity disorder (DID) supposedly leads him to kidnap and torture people. Throughout the film, Kevin takes on multiple personalities, ranging from peaceful to violent, all of which participate in the abduction of the girls. His disorder plays a principal role in his crimes and violence in the film.

Figure 1. Film capture of Hedwig, a 9-year-old with a lisp and one of the many personalities of Kevin (James McAvoy). 27 July 2016, Split *Official Trailer 1 (2017) - YouTube.com.)*

Upon initial release, the film immediately sparked controversy due to its negative depictions of DID and its villainization of mental illness. Many found the film to be not only offensive but also extremely harmful to the public perception of the disorder. With various scenes cutting between peaceful and violent personalities, an extremely dangerous picture is painted: any individual suffering from the disorder may simply switch at any given moment and start attacking people. However, many studies, which will be discussed in detail later in this essay, have found that individuals suffering

from psychological disorders are statistically no more violent than their neurotypical counterparts.

Furthermore, a very important aspect of this characterization is often glossed over: *Split* is far from the first horror film to exploit and criminalize mental illness. Rather, much of the genre is built on it. Dating back to the 1960 release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, various psychological disorders, both named and unnamed, have been used as grounds for a character to be violent and homicidal. *Psycho*'s antagonist is a young man, Norman Bates, who suffers from an unnamed mental illness that causes him to take on the persona of his abusive mother. When taking on this persona, he murders various people, including a young woman staying at his motel. The mental illness being negatively portrayed would now be referred to as DID, but was not called such in the actual film. This film laid the framework for the "psycho-killer" and many others followed suit. Suddenly, horror antagonists didn't have to be fantastical creatures like Dracula or Frankenstein's Monster, they could be human beings.

In the two decades following *Psycho*'s release, the industry became flooded with the new brand of "homicidal maniac". From *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to *Halloween* (1978) to *Friday the 13th* (1995), villains characterized by various symptoms of mental illness filled the theaters. Audiences loved the concept of a "real" killer and Hollywood knew it. While these films may not have given as much focus to the actual mentality and inner struggles of the antagonist as *Psycho* did, it was still clear that the reasoning behind their violent tendencies was assumed to be mental illness. It wasn't until the movie adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980) that filmmakers circled back to a more antagonist-led plot structure. Much like *Psycho*, *The Shining* centers around one man, Jack Torrance, and his descent into "madness." Similarly to Norman, Jack has a troubled past as well as delusions that both play a role in his unraveling. Although we are once again not given an actual diagnosis for the character, many analysts believe that Jack suffers from schizophrenia.

While *Split* has been heavily targeted in the media for its controversy and inaccuracies, both *The Shining* and *Psycho* remain revered as some of the best horror films to date. Though they are well-constructed films in many ways, this is cause for concern. These portrayals were cornerstones in shaping modern horror; they have even spurred off a subgenre now known as the psychological thriller. They are commonplace in present-day media, which means that even those who haven't seen the films are likely familiar with them in one way or another. What a majority of the population is less familiar with, though, is what people with psychological disorders are actually like. These films build such a stigma around mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder, that many people fear even being in the general vicinity of individuals suffering from them. They produce shame, and even

go so far as to deter those suffering from mental illness from seeking care for fear of being labeled as dangerous. Psychological disorders in film, particularly within the horror genre, can be extremely damaging to individuals who want to seek help but are afraid of negative societal perceptions of mental health. After all, films are not just moving pictures; they are active catalysts for real-world perceptions.

Dissociative Identity Disorder in *Psycho*

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* follows Norman Bates, a homicidal motel owner who murders the primary female protagonist and motel guest, Marion Crane. As people begin to investigate the woman's death, Bates goes on to commit another murder and two additional attempts. The key thing to note here, though, is that the audience does not find out Norman is guilty until the end. Throughout the film, it is suggested that his sickly mother is committing the crimes and that Norman is simply another victim of her manipulation. And while the latter half is true, it is revealed that Norman's mother has been dead for a substantial amount of time and that he has been taking on her persona during the murders. While her death was initially ruled as a murder-suicide by her lover, Norman had actually killed them in a fit of rage. It is suggested that Norman's present mental state was a result of childhood abuse combined with unmanageable guilt from killing his mother.

This representation is problematic on a handful of fronts. Firstly, dubbing Bates as simply a "madman" without any particular diagnosis creates a blurred image of mental illnesses, grouping them all together as one generalized concept of "madness". This is damaging because it further alienates individuals suffering from any variant of mental illness by collectively categorizing them as dangerous. In the case of Norman Bates, the modern equivalent of the psychiatric condition he displays would be dissociative identity disorder. However, due to the lack of information about the disorder available following the film's release, many viewers miscategorized the character as suffering from schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Misguided assumptions such as these can be detrimental and lead to widespread misinformation concerning the symptoms of various disorders. In her article entitled "We all go a little mad sometimes," Sonya Lipczynska contends:

> The antagonists in these kinds of films usually display the kind of behaviours, which mainstream media generally considers as indicative of psychopathy. Rarely are these characters diagnosed with any particular disorder (the psychiatrist character at the end of Psycho does have a go), but instead, they present with specific symptoms to indicate a general "madness". These include split personality behaviour, talking to imaginary people, violent urges, sadism, manipulation, obsessive behaviours,

> remorselessness, and general acts of depravity. Crucially, all these particular antagonists are human beings, made villainous by their mental illness. (61)

Figure 2. Film capture of Norman Bates approaching Marion. 1960, Psycho*.*

General "madness," as Lipczynska describes, is extremely prevalent in *Psycho*. There are many scenes throughout the film that portray the violent behavior that Lipczynska is referring to, most notably being the infamous shower scene. The scene shows Marion getting into the shower, followed by Norman sneaking into the bathroom and pulling back the shower curtain to stab her multiple times. The scene is filmed to not directly show Norman, which functions not only as a plot device to maintain the mystery of the killer but also as a way to dehumanize him. The camera is maneuvered in alternating shots that specifically show only Marion or a backlit silhouette of the killer. The act of dehumanization is further shown through the use of dramatic music during the murder followed by the juxtaposed calm demeanor of Bates as he cleans up the aftermath, insinuating a lack of empathy and psychopathy. Even though the audience is led to believe at this point that the murderer is Bates's mother, Bates's eerie composure remains unsettling, to say the least.

The violent actions of Norman combined with the psychiatrist's "psychoanalysis"

(which is being used very liberally as it is not a real informed medical opinion), creates a taboo around matters pertaining to mental health. The film is framing the scenario as "Norman's mental illness makes him kill people," which is a misinformed perspective that ultimately leads to negative perceptions. Dissociative identity disorder is not inherently linked to or considered a cause of criminal activity, including homicide (Weberman & Brand). However, characters such as Norman Bates encourage stigma suggestive of villainous intent among those suffering from mental health conditions.

Figure 3. Film capture of Norman smiling sinisterly at the camera. 1960, Psycho.

In one of the final scenes of the film, the audience sees Norman sitting alone in a cell after being caught. While Norman does not appear to be speaking, his mother voices over the scene, implying the killer's inner thoughts. Mother speaks to the audience, telling them that she always knew Norman was "bad" and that he "intended to tell [the police] that [she] killed those girls and that man" (*Psycho* 1:48:01). The voice of Norman's mother had been present throughout the whole film, but it is only at this point that she speaks directly to the audience. Ominous music underlays as the camera zooms in on Norman who seems to be in a trance. The audience is intended to be horrified by this, inching closer to Norman's face as his smile becomes more sinister. This, the only point in which the audience experiences Norman's psychological condition directly, is explicitly made to be one of the most frightening scenes in the entire film, which further encourages the idea that those suffering from mental disorders are to be feared, even in a calm and resting state.

Schizophrenia in *The Shining*

Jack Torrance, from Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*, is another example of violent misrepresentations of mental illness. Note that this is specifically referring to the film, not Stephen King's novel which the film is based on. This difference is critical because while the book focuses much more on supernatural elements, the film takes an approach far more indicative of mental illness. Though the film does incorporate the presence of spiritual entities as a reason behind Jack's homicidal behavior, a majority of audiences still perceived him to be "crazy" or "psychotic" (Mancine 17). This is because many of the behaviors exhibited by Jack in the film are gross exaggerations of symptoms associated with schizophrenia, including delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized behavior (Yusfa 50). This is then coupled with violent outbursts that imply a connection between schizophrenia and violence.

Figure 4. Film capture of Jack's face in the hole of the door he chopped through. 1980, The Shining.

One example of such behavior is the notorious "Here's Johnny!" scene, wherein Jack chases his wife Wendy into the bathroom and chops through the locked door with an axe. This scene, much like the one in *Psycho*, is accompanied by dramatic music as well as screams of terror from Wendy as Jack tries to harm her. He hacks away at the bathroom door as Wendy begs him to stop and even tries to defend herself with a knife. At this point, though, Jack has become so engrossed in his delusions that he no longer cares for her well-being and wishes to cause her harm. This outburst is caused by Jack's belief that Wendy is trying to get him to abandon his responsibilities because

chases her, trying to stop her from leaving the property. In reality, their son had been injured, and Wendy wants to take him to get help. Paranoid delusions such as these are a common symptoms of schizophrenia (Yusfa 49); however, the violent reaction that Jack had is not.

Another instance of delusion-induced violence is when Jack chases Danny through the hedge maze. This happens after the encounter with Wendy, and it is clear that Jack is exhausted, as well as suffering the effects of the head injury he received in an earlier scene. He eerily stumbles through the maze yelling out for his son, whom he intends to harm. It is the middle of the night, and the maze is hazy and snowy. Intense music once again plays to create an anticipatory effect for the viewer. The scene is extremely dark and intense because it is one of the moments in which the audience is meant to be the most scared of Jack. The concept that Jack is trying to find his son Danny in the middle of the night in a foggy maze and harm him is not only terrifying but unrealistic. This is a man suffering from multiple injuries and paranoid delusions. In a real episode such as this, it is much more likely that an individual suffering from schizophrenia would not be violent, but would rather be terrified themselves. Paranoid delusions more often cause severe and debilitating anxiety and stress, not violence ("Paranoia"). The individual would be much more likely to go into a more catatonic state or sent into an anxiety attack than to chase down and attack their family. Framing the condition as scary and threatening encourages a negative perception of psychosis that can create harmful backlash for individuals suffering from paranoid schizophrenia.

Figure 5. Film capture of Jack walking through the maze. 1980, The Shining.

Violent behavior, such as that exhibited by Jack Torrance, is not considered to be directly caused by psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia (Stuart 122), but this does not stop the film industry from perpetuating this stigma. In a study of films portraying schizophrenia conducted by Patricia Owen, thirty-five out of the forty-one films reviewed depicted characters suffering from schizophrenia as dangerous and violent, and thirteen of them exhibited homicidal behavior (657). This behavior is also often coupled with various other horror tropes such as paranormal activity or cults (657). These portrayals may seem like mere works of fiction, scary movies to enjoy with a bag of popcorn, but unfortunately, the reality is far more detrimental.

Real World Impacts

Whether one claims that the portrayal of psychiatric disorders in the horror genre is merely fiction or a "warning" to the public, the result remains the same. It perpetuates societal bias against those with mental illness. In regards to simply categorizing it as fiction, it is ignorant to assume that means that cinematic depictions don't influence public perception. Hollywood and the advertising industry have vicious holds on society's collective subconscious and grossly impact the way that people understand the world around them (Hyler 1047). For instance, an individual who has never encountered somebody suffering from schizophrenia has no other reference than what has been shown to them. Whatever the media puts in front of them, they are inclined to believe. If the film industry is presenting violent images of people with schizophrenia or DID, then audiences have no explicit reason to believe otherwise. The viewer could theoretically seek out resources to help them understand the disorders, but that is assuming they are even aware of their existing bias, which is unlikely.

This stigma is rooted deeply in societal perceptions even though they are not based on fact. This is where the argument that cinematic portrayals are a sort of "warning" comes into play. These warnings and cautionary tales are not scientifically sound, however, and their impacts are staggering. In a study conducted by Bruce Link, a sociologist employed by Columbia University, and his colleagues, it was found that sixty-one percent of participants believed that individuals with schizophrenia were prone to violence (1331). Furthermore, sixty-three percent of participants claimed that they would prefer to social distance from an individual described as suffering from schizophrenia (1332). Another more recent study found that after viewing the film *Split*, participants were twenty percent less likely to be willing to be in contact with a person suffering from DID, and the number of participants who reported a negative impression of the disorder rose from zero to forty percent (Chen 545). The same study

found that after viewing *Shutter Island*, another film that inaccurately portrays DID (although less explicitly than *Split*), participants were fifty percent less willing to get in touch with an individual suffering from DID (545). This is proof that even if a negative portrayal may not be perceived as entirely accurate, that does not negate the overall stigma that is being encouraged by the film. The viewpoints that end up developing as a result of these films are unfortunately very real.

In contrast to this perception, it has been found that the prevalence of violence among those with a major mental disorder was virtually no different from those not suffering from one, assuming that neither party is abusing illegal drugs (Stuart 122). Furthermore, out of those studied, individuals suffering from schizophrenia were statistically least likely to commit an act of violence. More impactful determinants of violent behavior were actually socio-economic and socio-demographic factors, like being a working-class young male (123). A similar study of individuals suffering from dissociative disorders, including DID, found that symptoms of the disorder (emotional dysregulation, dissociation, etc.) were not indicative of criminal activity (Weberman & Brand 9), which greatly contrasts the cinematic portrayals of these disorders in both *Psycho* and *Split*.

Regardless of this research, the public perceptions of these specific disorders, along with public perceptions of mental illness as a whole, remain predominantly negative. This is a very harmful truth, not only because it creates a societal bias against those with psychological disorders, but also because it may deter said individuals from seeking help at all. A review of various studies at Cambridge University concluded in qualitative research that "anticipated and experienced stigma based on stereotypes deters help-seeking directly and through non-disclosure" (Clement 22). This compounded with inaccessible and underfunded mental healthcare puts individuals suffering from mental health conditions at a loss for support and treatment.

Conclusion

As Sonya Lipczynska explains in her article, the primary purpose of any horror movie is to scare its audience. By using mental illness as a motivator for murder, the stigma will only inevitably increase (62). Fueling public fear of those suffering from psychological disorders with villainous caricatures cannot be construed as anything but harmful. Even though the inaccuracy of these portrayals has been proven through empirical research, it doesn't seem to prevent Hollywood from continuously exploiting psychological disorders. Instead, as we see in the recent release of M. Night Shyamalan's *Split*, filmmakers continue to ostracize those with mental illness through depictions of violence and criminal activity.

abandoned hotels. A vast majority of them are compassionate people with good hearts that happen to face more complex mental and emotional struggles than the average person. The film industry paints them as "madmen" and "psychos" when in reality they are simply trying to live their lives, the same as anybody else. Individuals exhibiting signs of mental illness or psychosis should be able to seek help without feeling threatened by what social repercussions a diagnosis might bring, and, unfortunately, that will not be the case as long as they are continuously depicted as "psycho killers."

Works Cited

Chen, Suqi. "Analysis of Dissociative Identity Disorder Presented in Popular Movies and the Possible Impacts on Public Stereotypes." *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Atlantis Press, 2022, https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220105.100.

Clement, S., et al. "What Is the Impact of Mental Health-related Stigma on Help-seeking? A Systematic Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies." *Psychological Medicine*, vol. 45, no. 1, Cambridge UP (CUP), Feb. 2014, pp. 11–27. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291714000129.

Hitchcock, Alfred, director. *Psycho*. Paramount, 1960.

Hyler, Steven E., et al. "Homicidal Maniacs and Narcissisfic Parasites: Stigmatization of Mentally Ill Persons in the Movies." *Psychiatric Services,* vol. 42, no. 10, *American Psychiatric Association Publishing,* Oct. 1991, pp. 1044–48. https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.42.10.1044.

Kubrick, Stanley, director. *The Shining*. Warner Bros., 1980.

Link, B. G., et al. "Public Conceptions of Mental Illness: Labels, Causes, Dangerousness, and Social Distance." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 89, no. 9, American Public Health Association, Sept. 1999, pp. 1328–33. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.89.9.1328.

Lipczynska, Sonya. "'We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes': The Problematic Depiction of Psychotic and Psychopathic Disorders in Cinema." *Journal of Mental Health*, vol. 24, no. 2, Informa UK Limited, Mar. 2015, pp. 61–62. https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2015.1022252.

Mancine, Ryley. "Horror Movies and Mental Health Conditions Through the Ages." *American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, American Psychiatric Association Publishing, Sept. 2020, pp. 17–17. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp-rj.2020.160110.

"Paranoia and Delusional Disorders." *Mental Health America*, Mental Health America, 2023, https://mhanational.org/conditions/paranoia-and-delusional-disorders.

Shyamalan, M. Night, director. *Split Official Trailer 1 (2017)*. YouTube, 27 July 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84TouqflsiI. Accessed 10 Mar. 2023.

Stuart, Heather. "Violence and Mental Illness: An Overview." *World Psychiatry,* vol. 2, no. 2, Wiley, May 2003, pp. 121–24.

Webermann, A. R., & Brand, B. L. (2017). "Mental illness and violent behavior: the role of dissociation." *Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion* Dysregulation, 4(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40479-017-0053-9.

Yusfa, Weldina, et al. "The Schizophrenia of Jack Torrence's Character in 'The Shining' Movie by Stanley Kubrick." *Eliterate: Journal of English Linguistics and Literature Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, pp. 41–51.

Art by: Saddie Kendall

Original art modified from green with permission from artist

Money Moves: Class-Based Scapegoats and the Decolonization of Literary Crime Fiction

Riley Ellis, *Ball State University*

• • •

The crime fiction genre is one of many clichés, including isolated locations, technology struggles, law enforcement errors, red herrings, and more. These clichés interact with various class, gender, language, and religious identities that influence how investigations evolve and how the genre is received by its audience. Tana French's *The Secret Place* (2014) and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) both interact with these genre conventions through isolated boarding schools and mansions on hilltops, law enforcement errors, investigative dynamic duos, and more, but the most significant of genre conventions is their consideration of the scapegoat and its functionality. In this essay, a scapegoat is a character knowingly forced to endure the blame and punishment for another's actions. While these pieces follow genre conventions in the presence of a scapegoat, each piece of literature juggles red herrings and the class-based scapegoats in new lights. These pieces transcend the genre by forcefully calling out the class-based scapegoat, considering the perspective of the scapegoat, and vindicating the scapegoat. This essay will investigate the role of the scapegoat within *The Secret Place* and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* within the context of literary crime fiction genre conventions with Frantz Fanon's Wretched of the Earth (1961) as a framework to examine the significance of class, race, and violence in the decolonization of literary crime fiction. Tana French and Oyinkan Braithwaite transcend genre conventions established by wealthy, white English authors such as Agatha Christie by confronting contemporary issues through their consideration of the class-based scapegoat. This confrontational transcendence utilizes scapegoats to call out the marginalization and oppression of diverse populations by privileged individuals and subsequently replace the traditionally privileged individuals with the previously marginalized people.

Introduction

The crime fiction genre has a rich background with notable authors like Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle, both renowned, well-off British authors best known for *The Mousetrap* and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* respectively ("About Agatha Christie;" "Biography"). Christie and Doyle are often credited for many of the genre's popular conventions like isolated locations, technological struggles, red herrings, detective duos, and more. Within these conventions, one also finds considerations of class, gender, and language identities, all of which play large parts in those suspected, accused, and victimized within the chilling stories. Today, contemporary novels such as Tana French's *The Secret Place* and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* transcend genre conventions established by wealthy, white English authors like Christie and Doyle by confronting the class-disadvantaged scapegoat. French does this by grappling with the obstacles of investigating a murder at a wealthy, all-girls boarding school, while Brathwaite explores what it means to be and assist a murderer.

Within this essay, the term "scapegoat" will be used to identify a character knowingly forced to endure the blame and punishment for another's actions. This transcendence utilizes scapegoats to call out the marginalization of diverse populations by privileged individuals. After calling out the scapegoat, the authors subsequently replace the traditionally privileged individuals with the previously marginalized people. This replacement mirrors that prescribed by Frantz Fanon in his novel Wretched of the Earth (1963), which considers the actions necessary to decolonize a people through the class war. In accordance with the principles presented within Wretched of the Earth, contemporary crime fiction pieces, specifically Tana French's *The Secret Place* and Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, challenge and decolonize genre conventions by calling out, considering the perspective of, and ultimately vindicating the class-based scapegoat.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*

Within his text *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon considers violence, race, and the class war as he dissects the relationship between the colonist and the colonized. Most significant to this essay is Fanon's idea that "decolonization is quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another" that occurs in an "unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless" manner (1). Regarding literary crime fiction and the class-based scapegoat, this substitution would occur when the conventionally

suspected marginalized scapegoat takes the place of the traditionally untouchable privileged victims. For this substitution to take place, Fanon declares that "the last can be the first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists," the privileged and the marginalized (3). Additionally, any "proof of success lies in a social fabric that has been changed inside out" (1), meaning not only must the economic structures change, but any supplemental power structure dictated by gender, race, or class must also be substituted. Decolonization is the absolute destruction of colonial structures and systems within a society. In addition to the substitution of species, this essay addresses the figures, such as police officers, that work to protect and maintain the colonial or classist regime and status quo, otherwise known as the "legitimate agent" of the regime (Fanon 3). In crime fiction, this violent confrontation against the regime and its agents takes place both in the literal crime committed, as well as in the accruing of land, money, and social influence.

Calling Out the Scapegoat

Scapegoats are rife within literary crime fiction. These red herrings can be used to lead readers and detectives away from the truth, effectively making the conclusion more shocking and subsequently more entertaining. In the nineteenth century, crime fiction began with the understanding that "[i]f crime was the problem, then identification and removal of the perpetrator was the solution" (Lee 282). However, in contemporary novels such as *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *The Secret Place*, authors play with the many ways those falsely accused as the perpetrator are victims of a larger oppressive society. Today, the crime fiction genre has shifted to become a place of dissent, where previous conventions are transformed by radical decolonial politics (Roy 120). As contemporary authors begin the process of decolonizing the genre, they first call out the scapegoat, defining the many ways an oppressive regime is built and maintained.

Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite utilizes the scapegoat in a variety of ways. There's the primary and most prevalent scapegoat, Korede, who becomes increasingly suspected and blamed as Ayoola, Korede's sister, continues murdering her romantic partners. After Korede and her sister Ayoola have an interview with the police about Femi, Ayoola's third victim, the police request to see Korede's car (Braithwaite). The police's possession of her car prompts Korede to question "why should [Ayoola's] hands be clean, while [her's] become more and more stained" (102). Regardless of who committed the violent murder, Korede is repeatedly suspected of the murders, making her hands, as she says, "more and more stained." This passing of the blame to Korede is significant because of the sisters' differing jobs and social standings. While Korede is a

nurse who works at a local hospital, Ayoola "models the clothes she designs on social media" as a social media influencer (Braithwaite 68). While both sisters hold service-based jobs, the audience perceives Korede as the harder-working, grittier individual relative to Ayoola due to established societal connotations of influencers. Braithwaite maintains these perceptions when Ayoola invites Korede to lunch and gets upset and frustrated when Korede cannot abandon her workload to go out. Through the class distinctions established by the sisters' jobs, readers "are witness to the mobilization of a people, who now have to work themselves to exhaustion," a people represented by Korede, "while a contemptuous and bloated Europe," represented by Ayoola, "looks on" (Fanon 55).

Furthermore, Ayoola's beauty and adherence to feminine body and behavior standards, as illustrated in her modeling/influencer career, signifies higher social standing within the patriarchal order due to implications of masculine desire, as described by David Buchbinder, a professor of Masculinities Studies (108-110). In contrast, Korede's undesirable presentation relative to Ayoola's decreases her social standing within the patriarchal order (Braithwaite 84-166; Buchbinder 108-110). Women's beauty acts as a social currency that cultivates influence and power in the same way financial currencies garner power within the colonial order. Throughout the novel, Braithwaite utilizes Korede as an effective scapegoat, who is marginalized based on distinctions established between Korede and Ayoola's jobs and the pair's social standings within the patriarchal order.

In addition to Korede becoming a scapegoat for murder, Braithwaite also utilizes Mohammed, one of the janitorial staff members at the hospital where Korede works, as a scapegoat for thievery. After Tade, a doctor who works in the same hospital as Korede, finds his office a mess and his engagement ring for Ayoola broken, Yinka, a fellow nurse, decides that Mohammed likely trashed the office and broke the engagement ring because of drugs (Braithwaite 194). In response, Korede observes that "[i]t's easy to point the finger at Mohammed. He is poor, uneducated. He is a cleaner" (194). Despite his tenure at the hospital and how "Mohammed denies the charges vehemently," he is fired (194). Here, the class-based distinctions are clearer than those established with Korede, as there are direct references to Mohammed's socioeconomic status as lower-class and "poor," which is associated with being "uneducated" and his job as "a cleaner." These class-based distinctions allow those around him at the hospital to easily prosecute and fire him. The scene that encompasses suspicions of Mohammed, his accusation, and the subsequent punishment takes up no more than one page. The more elite at the hospital, Korede's fellow nurses and Tade, manage to utilize their social position and class to wrongfully punish Mohammed (194). Braithwaite reflects Fanon's observation that "[c]onfronted

with a world configured by the colonizer, the colonized subject is always presumed guilty" (Fanon 16).

While all of Braithwaite's characters exist within a colonized context since Lagos was colonized by Britain, the story's "colonist" is the one with power and social influence. Fanon understands the colonist as one who "derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system" and the "colonized" (2). In this context, the nurses and Tade hold the social and financial power, effectively making them the colonists and Mohammed the colonized (Bishku 361). Mohammed is automatically presumed guilty and is punished at the will of the "colonizer." Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite emphasizes how class-based distinctions and discrimination are used to keep the fiscally and socially wealthy in power and unpunished through the unjustified prosecution of poorer characters.

In *The Secret Place*, French, too, utilizes the class-based scapegoat to call out how society discriminates and punishes those of lower classes. After detectives Stephen Moran and Antoinette Conway return to St. Kilda's, an all-girls boarding school in Dublin, Conway recalls how "[o]ne of the groundskeepers came up on the system: prior for supply" and they "figured it was [their] lucky day: two solves for the price of one. Chris snuck out to buy drugs off the groundskeeper, some fight over money, bang" (French 39). However, the "groundskeeper alibied out…We got him for possession with intent, but the murder…I should have known it wasn't gonna be that simple" (39). Within this scene, there are a few instances of class-based discrimination. To find the "simple" answer, Conway and the previous detective on the case chose to go after the groundskeeper who would have stuck out at a rich, all-girls boarding school. As a blue-collar worker with "priors," the groundskeeper would make an easy target. Within this quick, off-hand comment, French establishes how the regime uses class-based scapegoats as an easy way to get answers and solve crime with a bow, regardless of whether their answers are genuine and truthful. In this moment, "[t]he agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination" (Fanon 4), but rather there is a proud display of the many ways society utilizes class-based oppression to more easily display control over the public. French's utilization of the class-based scapegoat, like that of Braithwaite's, works to "exacerbate inequalities" and reveal crime and its punishment as key elements of societal struggles for power (Roy 123).

After establishing the scapegoats within their stories, the contemporary authors face the challenge of "seiz[ing] th[e] violence as it realigns itself" (Fanon 21). By calling out scapegoats, these contemporary authors start the process of seeking justice, prompting the need to "seize their efforts" (Lee 289). This search for justice realizes itself in the many ways authors consider the scapegoat identity along with the different gender and racial identities that influence it. French and Braithwaite are two

women residing within postcolonial contexts in Ireland and Nigeria respectively. Both Ireland and Nigeria have been colonized by European powers and while those colonial powers have left, their structures have stayed. French and Braithwaite's understanding of this dichotomy allows them to utilize Korede, Mohammed, and the groundskeeper to establish class-contexts and subsequent identity politics necessary to prompt a confrontation against the status quo with regard to crime fiction genre conventions.

Considering the Scapegoat

While traditionally Franz considers the police officer to be "the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression" (122), Shampa Roy, an Associate English Professor at the University of Delhi, considers how detectives provide greater opportunities for marginalized peoples in crime fiction. Within Braithwaite and French's novels, scapegoats are marginalized by societal values and standards, implanted by colonial interests within several contexts. Braithwaite highlights Korede's identity as undesirable relative to patriarchal beauty and behavioral standards, one which Korede is "marginalized" and subsequently "demonized" for, as seen through her continuous persecution throughout the novel . However, Braithwaite deepens her consideration of the scapegoat by understanding the position of being colonized as fluid with many degrees of severity. In these moments, Braithwaite acknowledges Fanon's idea of the traitorous common person "who apparently gets along very well with the occupier and strives to succeed in the context of the colonial system" (67). While Korede and Mohammed are in a continuous state as colonized, Korede also often acts as a "spokesperson for the colonizer" or traitor to the fellow colonized by regularly chastising and disciplining Mohammed (Braithwaite). While Korede is "disenfranchised within colonial contexts," she also finds her voice within the same context as a powerful figure. In her consideration of the scapegoat, Braithwaite acknowledges the nuance of the colonial context concerning the various powers, including economic and patriarchal powers.

In addition to Braithwaite, French works to consider the scapegoat by consistently evaluating why the detectives, as well as the employees and students of St. Mary's, presumed and believed the scapegoat's guilt. For three-quarters of the novel, students, detectives, and other school faculty admit to believing "Groundskeeper Willy" was guilty of killing young Chris Harper (French 358). When first reviewing the murder, detectives only had the murder weapon, a hoe, that only had the groundskeepers' prints and access. However, this lack of information was not limited to just the detectives. Much of the general student body recollected that they were not even sure of the accused's name, claiming that "that's just what everyone else

called him" (89). Moreover, the girls of St. Kilda's even admitted that "[they] don't know if he was a pervert or just a drug dealer, but either way, ew" (89). The school readily associated the groundskeeper with being a "pervert," going as far as actively referring to him as "Willy" in reference to the colloquial term used for the male sexual organ.

Relying solely on rumors and weak police evidence, the entire school and police force fortified the colonizer-colonized system that relies on identity-based discrimination. While the audience never hears the groundskeeper's perspective, French provides insight into the weak and seemingly baseless assumptions that support the public's quick assumption of guilt concerning the groundskeeper. A blue-collar job and previous drug charges were enough for students, staff, and detectives to quickly think the worst—that a man was capable of murdering a child. French further considers the scapegoat, determining that detectives are "not going to suspect [someone like] Selena," a rich, white girl (404). Rather, they would suspect a groundskeeper. As illustrated by French, there are certain identities people more frequently associate with crime, specifically ones associated with socioeconomic status, gender, and race.

By highlighting the different biases involved in determining a scapegoat, French and Braithwaite participate in what Buchbinder determines to be "'mark[ing]' in the sense of being singled out for retribution" (99). The contemporary authors' acknowledgment of discrimination creates a vehicle for the retribution of the scapegoat. By considering the scapegoat within each novel, French and Braithwaite examine, poke, and spotlight the many biases and structural errors that influence the creation and perpetuation of the scapegoat determined by class distinctions.

Vindicating the Scapegoat

Within Braithwaite and French's works, vindicating the scapegoat takes many forms, most particularly given that only certain scapegoats are vindicated. In her article entitled "Crime Fiction and Theories of Justice," Susanna Lee remarks that "[t]heories of punishment include such traditional justifications as retribution, deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation and restoration" (284). Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and *The Secret Place*, scapegoats are vindicated primarily through means of retribution and restoration. These punishments are enacted against the people, powers, and institutions that actively work to marginalize and demonize the scapegoats. The punishments support those working against the marginalizing system and the marginalized themselves—victims are "not just the actual individual victim of the crime at hand, but also society at large, the city, moral fiber and even the individual detective" (Lee 284).

In Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, while Mohammed is not saved, the novel does end with an acknowledgment of the system's failures. While at work, after dealing with Muhtar and Ayoola, Korede calls for Mohammed only to be told, "Mohammed is gone, ma" (Braithwaite 221). In this moment, Korede must hold herself accountable for her part in supporting the status quo and forcing Mohammed to be a scapegoat. In addition to this reflection, which serves as Mohammed's vindication, Korede ends the novel with an understanding of retribution against several powerful identities, including men and the patriarchal order, that act as a colonizing power within Korede's space. There's also retribution on the class front since many of Ayoola's victims are rich men. Towards the end of the novel, when asked who stabbed her, Ayoola quickly blames Tade, determining that "he proposed to [her] and [she] said [she] wasn't interested and he lost it" (206-207). When Korede pushes back on her sister's statement, Ayoola remarks that "it's him or me," telling Korede that "[she] can't sit on the fence forever" (207). In this scene, Ayoola forces Korede to make the decision to either support her sister and fight against the larger patriarchal order, or fight against her sister. Both represent a colonial power in Korede's context. At the end of the novel, Korede, Ayoola, and any other person impacted by the masculine construct are vindicated when Korede happens upon Ayoola's new boyfriend: "They are in the living room—my mum, Ayoola and the man…The man smiles. I smile back" (223). At this point, Korede is not vindicated from her sister, but rather no longer letting her life be ruled by rich men. Within *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite vindicates the scapegoat by recognizing the intersectional nature of the colonized and the subsequent power dynamics within colonized populations.

In *The Secret Place*, there's retribution against patriarchal powers with a recognition of class influences. At the end of French's novel, detectives figure out that Becca, a boarding student at St. Kilda's, murdered Chris. The girl recounts that "all those stupid slimebags, James Gillen and Marcus Wiley, it could never have been them. They're nothing; they're totally worthless. You can't have a sacrifice that's worth less. It has to be something good" (French 424). Rather than killing one of the boys who fit the patriarchal order, the boys who had a history of teasing girls like Becca, Becca killed Chris, someone she described as "kind" (109). To protect her and the girls' sacred friendship, Becca follows through with Fanon's final violent confrontation. Rather than letting a wealthy, white boy that represented, in Becca's mind, the best of the patriarchal order rule over or destroy the girls' bond, she kills him. This murder substitutes the standing power of the wealthy man with a new power, the feminine. There's vindication in this moment because the girls get their vengeance—they maintain their friendship, as seen when, "in the center of the clearing, Holly dropped to her knees in the grass" and her friends "opened like a puzzle, arms unfurling, reached

out to draw her in and closed around her" (427). Despite Becca's criminal behavior, the standing societal order does not reclaim its power, rather there's a complete acceptance of the girls' power for a moment. French vindicates the scapegoat by disconnecting the groundskeeper from Chris's murder and by allowing the girls' sacred friendship to persevere contrary to the patriarchal order.

Conclusion

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* and Tana French's *The Secret Place* both deal with the scapegoat with considerations of class and subsequent identity influences, most especially gender. These deliberations, in alignment with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, illustrate how "[t]he crime fiction of the colonized or previously colonized writers is often a resistant force" (Roy 127). Braithwaite and French spotlight, consider, and vindicate scapegoats in such a manner that creates a confrontation between two forces created by the colonial context (Fanon 2). This confrontation is illustrative of the authors' efforts to "move away from 'classic' detective fiction and its formal conventions in order to engage critically with the compelling sociopolitical issues" and decolonize the genre (Roy 127). At the end of *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, Braithwaite encompasses contemporary crime fiction authors' efforts by acknowledging that in their deconstruction of the genre, any investigation is a game of " [their] word against *ours*" (213).

Works Cited

"About Agatha Christie." *The Home of Agatha Christie*, www.agathachristie.com/about-christie.

Anderson, Lisa. "'Shithole Countries': *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 85 no. 3, 2018, p. 487-502. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/sor.2018.0026.

"Biography." Arthur Conan Doyle, www.arthurconandoyle.com/biography.html.

Bishku, Michael B. "Nigeria and the Muslim Middle East: Historical, Political, Economic, and Cultural Ties." *Journal of the Middle East and Africa,* vol. 12, no. 4, Oct. 2021, pp, 361–383. proxy.bsu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=154040507&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Braithwaite, Oyinkan. *My Sister, the Serial Killer.* First Anchor Books, 2018.

Buchbinder, David. *Studying Men and Masculinities*. Routledge, 2013.

Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth. Anniversary*, Grove Press, 2021.

French, Tana. *The Secret Place*. Penguin Random House, 2014.

Lee, Susanna. "Crime Fiction and Theories of Justice." *The Routledge Crime Fiction Companion*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper, Routledge, 2020, pp. 282-290.

Roy, Shampa. "Coloniality and Decoloniality." *The Routledge Crime Fiction Companion*, edited by Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper, Routledge, 2020, pp. 120-127.

Photo by: Katelyn Mathew

Cogs in the Machine: An Analysis of *American Psycho*

Rae Keeler, *Ball State University*

• • •

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis is a post modern satire of the 1980s American culture. In this essay, I argue that Ellis uses the facets of a serial killer to methodically breakdown the impact that trickledown economics had on marginalized communities in the U.S. Trickledown economics is a tax policy which posits that favoring the rich in terms of tax breaks, allows the the wealthy to trickledown to the masses. While a seemingly good theory, the results devastated marginalized communities throughout the nation as the richer got richer and the poor got poorer. Ellis' novel establishes Bateman as the stand-in for this type of unchecked capitalism, and his violence is a representation of this. For example, Ellis' depiction of Bateman as a product killer establishes how capitalism treats its victims before leaving them behind in the form of the homeless and marginalized. Furthermore, these people become Bateman's victims, who in the true crime community are known as the "less dead." This is Ellis' commentary on how the justice system treats these individuals already and why Bateman ultimately gets away with his crimes.

The 1980s in America was a time marked by terror and blood. With the election of President Reagan came a revolution that would follow the Republican Party until today after the introduction of trickle-down economics or also called Reaganomics. In *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis methodically breaks down each facet of a serial killer through his protagonist Patrick Bateman and compares them to stages of capitalism in 1980s America. While the movie has become iconic in pop culture, this essay will focus on Ellis's book as it is how the author originally intended it and because the depictions of violence are more extreme. Much of the modern scholarship surrounding *American Psycho* argues about the identity crisis of the white male and whether Ellis is sympathetic towards the white male anxiety, which stems from the fear that their time at the top of society is ending as the acceptance of new identities arrives. Storey argues that "Ellis shows us the monstrous heart of masculinity at the outer limits, a frenzied pomophobia [a convergence of fear from late capitalism, including feminism, non-straight sexualities, and anything else diverging from 'normal']" (58). In other words, Bateman's desire to be in control, in conjunction with his anxiety over losing power, is ultimately what causes his downfall. While I would agree that Bateman being white and wealthy are key in understanding this novel, Ellis is not focused on Bateman's identity itself, but rather what it represents, which is that those who gained the most from Reaganomics and who hoarded wealth and power caused economic despair upon the middle and lower classes. I contend instead that Ellis uses the composition of a serial killer to illustrate the effects of capitalism in America.

The concept of trickle-down economics posits that if the rich were given giant tax breaks, then the wealth would trickle down and eventually be distributed to the rest of society. In practice, it favors the upper class, particularly large corporations and extremely wealthy investors. Those who idealize this practice believe that when big businesses receive tax benefits, they will treat their workers better. When it was advocated by former President Reagan, however, all it resulted in was the rich getting richer, hoarding their wealth as the poor became poorer (Hartsoe). Not only was trickle-down economics forcing economic disparity onto the masses, but also, this decade saw the highest levels of active serial killers than ever before and since (Aamodt). By putting these two ideas together Ellis depicts how the violence of unchecked capitalism is similar to the violence of serial killing.

Ellis begins his novel by establishing the importance of the setting, which reveals the significance of the plot that unfolds. Ellis reveals the core of the attitudes held by the newly rich of the era via the first spoken words in the novel as Bateman and his coworker Price ride in a taxi towards an event and Price suddenly says, "'I'm resourceful… I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled.

In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset'" (3). In other words, because of Price's identity as a wealthy white man working on Wall Street, he believes that he is more valuable to society than other people. This is significant because it reveals the inner psyche of the characters, which will be juxtaposed by the events that happen as the novel progresses as well as the economic disparity that is also shown throughout the novel, but especially as Ellis establishes the setting: "His voice stops, he takes in a breath and then quietly says, his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, 'That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count'" (4). Price's casual counting off all the homeless people he sees while just on a casual drive demonstrates the disparity of the economy. It is important to note how the powerful can look at those affected by the economy that they are directly benefiting from and remain unaffected by them while their actions directly impact the homeless. This is demonstrated particularly when Price sees another homeless person and jokingly says to Bateman, "'Ask him if he takes American Express'" (7). His cruelty towards the homeless reflects the attitude of American society during this period, which is key to understanding why Bateman's murders and mutilations relate to capitalism.

Furthermore, Ellis introduces another motif that is consistently returned to throughout the novel at integral moments. As Bateman and Price continue the drive, Ellis makes sure to note that there is "another advertisement for Les Misérables" (6). While it could be explained that the musical is frequently brought up because it was the most popular show on Broadway at the time, I contend that Ellis is alluding to the French Revolution and the story of Jean Valjean because the musical tells the story of not just the lower-class starting a bloody uprising, but also the story of a man who was punished for stealing a loaf of bread for his family. In essence, he is punished for the entirety of his life for being poor. This is something that Ellis is clearly considering when crafting the setting for his novel. Having the backdrop of the poor being punished shows how cruel society can truly be. Without these critical themes that Ellis establishes, none of the gore that follows would hold any significant meaning.

Ellis devotes an entire chapter to describe at extreme length Bateman's morning routine to establish him as the vehicle for his metaphor for capitalism. Ellis begins by showing how Bateman describes his apartment: "A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set; it's a super-high band Beta unit and has built-in editing function including a character generator with eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and three-week, eight-event timer" (25). The depiction of the apartment's features, especially with the inclusion of the brand names, becomes a representation of consumerism in the extreme and an embodiment of the slogan "greed is good," which was popularized during the era. Bateman's obsession with material things

reveals not only his wealth and the shallowness of his personality but also turns him into a symbol of capitalism. The objective of capitalism is to gain and maintain as much wealth as possible, which is made much easier by trickle-down economics. This is displayed through Bateman's obsession with having status symbols of his wealth and extends to his physical appearance, from his clothing and perfectly groomed hair to his in-depth morning ritual of skin care and workout routines, which Ellis takes the rest of the chapter to depict.

Another way that Bateman is both obsessed with his appearance and attempts to present himself the same as the rest of society is through his clothes, which are frequently brought up by Bateman himself. When he is leaving in the morning, he "find[s] a Burberry scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a little kid might wear) and it's covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front, darkening the lapels" (Ellis 30). Ellis is subtly hinting, not only at Bateman's materialism by again mentioning the expensive name brand and the details of the design, but also at his violence. "[W]hat looks like dried chocolate syrup" creates the image of dried blood, intrinsically linking violence as a part of his materialism. By creating this character profile for Bateman, Ellis establishes him as a symbol of capitalism and the violence that ensues from it.

An important feature of the novel is much like the economy at the time in which the novel is set, Bateman is already in a state of escalation with his killing. He needs increasingly more violence and deviance to get the same amount of pleasure. Graham argues that the intensification of capitalism is "comparable to the shocking amorality of transgression, this extremity is characterized by a process of escalation integral to Bateman's hyperviolence, demonstrated through his increasingly depraved but localized scenes of brutality" (228-229). In other words, Bateman feels the need to escalate his crimes because he is a representation of the economy at the time. While I do believe that Bateman is certainly acting as a representation of what the economy is doing at the time, I argue that Ellis is even more specific in what he is depicting through Bateman. As a member of the Wall Street class of the nouveau riche, the economic scale is tipped in his favor as the stock market skyrockets—of course before its inevitable crash—and he can hoard the wealth that he is gaining in extreme due to the policies of the Reagan administration. His escalation can be seen in the way that Bateman casually starts to incorporate violence into his thoughts. For instance, when he is spending time with his coworkers, he begins to have violent urges when his coworker says something he does not agree with: "I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket and I'm tempted to gut McDermott with it right here in the entranceway, maybe slice his face open, sever his spine" (Ellis 53). This is significant because it shows how casually Bateman regards violence at this point

because something small can set him off and something equally as small—such as going to a club—can convince him not to murder and or torture someone.

Bateman's violent personality traits continue to be depicted and gradually escalate as the novel continues through Ellis's demonstrations of how easily Bateman is angered. For example, when the waitress at the club ignores his flirting he states, "I tell her I would like to tit-fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off, but the music, George Michael singing 'Faith,' is too loud and she can't hear me" (Ellis 80). Not only is he set off by a minor inconvenience, which illustrates how Ellis is establishing that Bateman is in a state of violent escalation, but he also blatantly states several times the violent acts that he would like to commit or has already committed. Despite this, he is never taken seriously. This is comparable to the novel's depiction of the increasing disparity between the rich and poor as well as the increasing homelessness that was taking place, yet no one is attempting to solve or take it seriously.

Ellis continues to show how trivially Bateman's actions are taken and how it parallels how the privileged part of society treats those they can ignore. This is particularly clear during a scene in the dry cleaners in which he is angry about them not getting the blood stains out of his clothes: "The Chinese dry cleaners I usually send my bloody clothes to delivered back to me yesterday a Soprani jacket, two white Brooks Brothers shirts and a tie from Agnes B. still covered with flecks of someone's blood" (Ellis 81). When he is unable to get the dry cleaner to understand that he wants the bloodstains out because of a language barrier in conjunction with underlying racism and frustration at having to deal with someone below him in class, he becomes increasingly angrier, resulting in him having increasingly violent thoughts: "I have never firebombed anything and I start wondering how one goes about it—what materials are involved, gasoline, matches... or would it be lighter fluid?" (83). Bateman is prevented from acting out on his violent urges, however, because a woman who lives in his building also enters the dry cleaners. When she notices the bloodstained sheets, though, Bateman's response is, "'It's, um, cranberry juice, cranapple juice… I mean, um, it's really... Bosco. You know, like… Like a Dove Bar. It's a Dove Bar... Hershey's Syrup?'" (84). Despite Bateman's excuse being incredibly flimsy and practically incoherent, the neighbor does not care, which is clear when she still attempts to flirt with him. This is another extreme example of how society disregards issues that are staring them directly in the face, and in this case, how trickle-down economics is a disaster that is resulting in lower-class people paying the price.

Product versus process killers is a term colloquially used within the true crime community to characterize distinct types of killers. The difference between the two is whether the person kills because they want the outcome of having a dead body, such as in the case of Ed Gein or John Wayne Gacy, or whether the person enjoys the

process and does not want to deal with the body afterward, such as BTK (Kissel et al.). Ellis distinctly establishes Bateman as a process killer, which reveals how capitalism treats its victims. Significantly, the first time that Ellis depicts Bateman carrying out an act of violence the victim is a "bum, a black man [with a] handprinted cardboard sign attached to the front of the cart [which] reads I AM HUNGRY AND HOMELESS PLEASE HELP ME" (128). It is not a coincidence that the first victim Ellis has Bateman attack is a homeless man. Ellis is establishing that not only will this man become Bateman's victim, but he is already a victim of capitalism. In a game that is rigged for those who are already white and wealthy to win, this man has lost and now Ellis will demonstrate the consequences of losing the game of capitalism in America. Bateman, much like society, regards the man with disdain, asking the questions that privileged people untouched by economic despair frequently ask: "'Why don't you get a job?... If you're so hungry, why don't you get a job?'" (129). In other words, Bateman becomes not only a representation of capitalism but also the cruel attitudes of society at this moment when he berates a man who is most likely at his lowest and relishes in the process.

Ellis establishes Bateman as a process killer when he starts to depict the actual killing: "I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina" (131). The graphic description reveals how Bateman is enjoying the process of torturing and mutilating, not just getting it over with so that he can use the body. In other words, Bateman is relishing the process of mutilating the man and the feeling he derives from it but does not want anything to do with the person after he has received his pleasure from the act, which can be seen later in the text when Bateman progresses to killing and when looking at the body he claims, "I get very tired looking at it" (291). This is the same as what capitalism does to those who suffer from the consequences and what society does to the victims of it. In the exact same way that Bateman does not want to deal with the consequences of his actions—the leftover bodies—so too does capitalism not want to deal with its victims—the homeless and desolate.

As the plot continues, Bateman's victims, much like the homeless man, continue to be members of traditionally marginalized communities. Storey argues, "For Bateman to remain coherent, his unstable sense of self requires a particularly savage attack on the 'other' and a clear idea of who they are. Everyone he 'murders' presents some kind of challenge to his position of patriarchal supremacy" (Storey 65). While Storey is playing into the popular idea that Bateman's acts of violence may or may not be real, his point of Bateman's violence against others still stands on its own. In other words, to remain sane and in power, Bateman must attack others, especially those who are not white, wealthy, and male. While I agree that both Bateman's and his victims'

identities are essential to the understanding of the novel, it is less about maintaining the patriarchy itself, but the entire capitalist system, which is upheld by the patriarchy. I also contend that the others that he references are part of a population that has been titled "the less dead" in true crime, which was defined by Los Angeles Police Department officer Mitzi Roberts, who caught infamous serial killer Samuel Little, as "people who live on the margins of society and whose murders have historically tended to be not as thoroughly investigated as those of their wealthier, whiter, and perhaps more sober counterparts" (Lauren 3). In other words, serial killers can get away with their crimes for longer—and perhaps even reach the status of a serial killer—because the deaths of the populations that they normally prey on are not investigated in the same way that a wealthy, white person's death would be.

The fact that these victims' crimes go uninvestigated due to social and economic factors exemplifies how even the world of crime is not untouched by the politics and evils of capitalism, which Ellis is clearly aware of, proven by Bateman's murder victims. Ellis makes this clear, not only with Bateman's first assault being a black, homeless man but also when the first person he is shown killing is "an old queer... walking a brown and white sharpei" (164). Homophobic attitudes have prevented police from investigating crimes for many years, but particularly in the eighties with the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, the likelihood of a gay man's death to be investigated is significantly lower, which includes members of the LGBT+ community in the "less dead" population. Ellis demonstrates the cruelty that society unleashes on members of the communities through Bateman's violent killing as he "start[s] randomly stabbing him in the face and head" (166). Unlike before, however, where his victim was left alive and wounded, Bateman opted to "make sure the old queer is really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do) I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave" (166). By depicting the violence and killing of a gay man, Ellis argues that in capitalism members of the LGBT+ community also suffer.

As the plot progresses, Bateman turns to sex workers as his next category of victims, which then includes them in Ellis's own definition of the less dead and victims of capitalism. After Bateman picks up two sex workers, brings them back to his apartment, and engages in a sex act, his reoccurring urge to escalate takes over as he describes, "I stand up and walk over to the armoire, where next to the nail gun, rests a sharpened coat hanger, a rusty butter knife, matches from the Gotham Bar and Grill, and a half-smoked cigar; and turning around, naked, my erection jutting out in front of me, I hold these items out and explain in a hoarse whisper, 'We're not through yet...'" (Ellis 176). This extreme act of violence he commits on the two women he does without fear of repercussions because he is aware that as sex workers, they are not able to report the crimes that are taking place against them. Those who are lumped

into this category share the fact that both in capitalism and in death, they lose their value and identity.

Ellis broadens who he believes loses value in capitalism, however, when Bateman starts to pick off people within his own class. Colby contends that "[t]he novel exhibits a present-day society devoid of values, one that has been made vacuous by the violence of global capitalism, revealing an unbearable nihilism that has deeply affected the family unit and the individual in everyday life" (340). In other words, the violence in Ellis's work reveals the belief that no one and nothing matters in globalized capitalism because of the deep devaluation of individuals. In capitalism, the only thing that is valued is your output of work, which should be sacrificed more than anything else. This can be seen in the ways that up until this point, Bateman's victims were homeless people, gay men, and prostitutes.

When he kills Paul Owen—another Wall Street yuppie, whom Bateman is in fact frequently mistaken for—Ellis begins to show the ways in which people are devalued in capitalism and how the extreme lack of identity leads to everyone being interchangeable, which can be seen in the way that Owen has the same kind of violent death as all of Bateman's other victims: "The ax hits him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up" (217-218). In other words, capitalism has turned him into just another body that is only meant to be used, and when the system has decided that its use is finished, it eliminates it. This can also be seen in the way that Bateman treats Owen's corpse: "I carry the body up four flights of stairs until we're at the unit I own in the abandoned building and I place Owen's body into an oversize porcelain tub, strip off his Abboud suit and, after wetting the corpse down, pour two bags of lime over it" (219). In other words, Bateman, as the hand of capitalism, starts to treat those within his own class the same way that he has treated the "less dead." Ellis is showing that in the world of capitalism, no one's identity truly matters—that everyone is valueless in this system.

Ellis continues to develop this theme when he introduces a private investigator hired to investigate Owen's disappearance. At first, Bateman believes he will be caught, but his alibi is created by another co-worker who claims "'[h]e was at Atlantis with Craig McDermott, Frederick Dibble, Harry Newman, George Bunter and... you [Bateman]'" (Ellis 274). Ellis shows how even Bateman is replaceable in a capitalist system because while he is murdering someone an unknown person can take his place and the people that he spends the most time with will not notice that it is not Bateman that is having dinner with them. Ellis even begins to depict Bateman as taking the place of the now-dead Owen: "I decide to use Paul Owen's apartment for a little tryst I have planned for tonight" (301). Much like a job opening, once the position for Owen is open, Bateman can seamlessly slip into that role, and no one questions it. In fact, Bateman goes as

far as to buy expensive items "charging them on Paul Owen's gold American Express card" (301). In other words, Bateman becomes a spiritual replacement for Owen, which he can do because who Paul Owen is does not matter—only the output of the work he creates. Ellis is subversively showing how it is not just those who suffer from the violence of capitalism who lose value and identity but that in a capitalist society, no one's identity actually exists and therefore does not matter.

The climax of the novel is reached when Bateman's largest killing spree is triggered. Ellis depicts at this point that the bloody spree serves as a cautionary tale of what will happen if unchecked trickle-down economics is to continue. The biggest economic failure of Reaganomics did not occur until the recession of 2008, which left those who played the stock market penniless in some cases (Hartsoe). This spree, however, warns of this collapse as foresight as early as the 1990s because of the great inequality that was already apparent. Ellis begins to show the economic collapse when Bateman kills a street performer:

> I screw a silencer onto the gun... I raise the gun to his face and midnote pull the trigger, but the silencer doesn't work... [T]he booming sound of the gunshot deafens me... I pop the clip and replace it with a full one, then something bad happens... because while doing this I've failed to notice the squad car that was traveling behind me. (Ellis 348)

Up until this point, Bateman has not feared being caught, but when his power is threatened by the means of being caught by the police it causes a break in his psyche. Not only does he begin to murder people without abandon, seemingly not even enjoying the process, yet almost as a reflex, like it is the only thing he knows how to do, but he also begins to have an out-of-body experience, which is seen when Ellis, without warning, switches perspectives: "Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab" (349). In other words, Bateman's perception of his body representation has shifted from inside him to the external, as though he is a spectator watching his actions—as if he is trying to distance himself from what he has done. I contend that this out-of-body experience is a type of depersonalization, which represents what society does when it inflicts violence on others via capitalism—it tries to distance itself from it as much as possible. This switch in a moment of heightened drama is a physicalized version of what society inflicts upon the left-over bodies of capitalism after it has wreaked havoc. The kind of mass destruction both Bateman and capitalism are capable of is truly portrayed, however, when "a stray bullet, sixth in a new round, hits a gas tank of a police car, the headlights dim before it bursts apart, sending a fireball billowing up into the darkness" (350). The

explosion draws attention and even more police to the scene, yet Bateman escapes out of sheer luck. While this moment is the largest display of mass violence in the book and ultimately causes him to call his lawyer to confess to all his crimes, Bateman's escape from the law reveals Ellis's argument that the criminal justice system allows the white, straight, cis, upper class to get away with crimes, leaving the rest of society to suffer at their hands.

As the bodies have piled up after his killing spree and the novel reaches its conclusion, Bateman starts to feel the need to compulsively confess his crimes. However, Ellis depicts how confession is not an option or exit: "[H]e confesses at the end of the novel that all of his violent acts come to nothing... [Therefore,] the text seems to warn that white male crisis is the latest form of justification for fascistic violence against racial, sexual, and classical minorities" (Kwon 66). In other words, Ellis turns his novel into a cautionary tale that warns against the dangers of indulging the excuse of the white male crisis against social injustice. While I would agree that this is true, this view ignores the fact that capitalism is already committing "violence against racial, sexual, and classical minorities," and that Bateman is merely a stand-in and an extreme expression of what capitalism is already doing. Therefore, the confession that follows shows that there is no solution or escape from capitalism. When Bateman confronts his lawyer to whom he had previously confessed and who tells him it is impossible that he killed Paul Owen, Bateman responds, "'I chopped Owen's fucking head off. I tortured dozens of girls. That whole message I left on your machine was true'" (Ellis 388). Instead of believing him, though, Ellis shows exactly how interchangeable people in society are when he reveals that Owen cannot be dead "'[b]ecause... I had... dinner... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... just ten days ago'" (388). Ellis depicts how the people of Wall Street—just like Bateman's victims—are also valueless in capitalism. They are interchangeable just like a cog in a machine that can be swapped out with another identical part.

Ellis establishes that whether or not Owen is alive is irrelevant because either he has been replaced by someone who serves the same function or Bateman killed someone whom he believed was Owen, but either way the machine of capitalism hums on. Therefore, Bateman's confession is meaningless because his crimes mean nothing in the end. They are all a part of the endless violence of capitalism that will not end with Bateman, which is demonstrated in the very last words of the novel: "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (Ellis 399). In other words, the end of the novel is not an end to the system that Bateman is a representation of. There is no escape or "exit" from the violence of capitalism. In doing this, Ellis creates a space within the crime fiction genre to allow for critique, especially within the justice system and how it is corrupted by capitalism. Just like Bateman, the wealthy, white upper class gets away, while everyone

else suffers at their hands.

Through the portrayal of Patrick Bateman, Ellis depicts several facets of a serial killer and methodically relates each one to capitalism devaluing individuals and creating violence in the form of economic terror. Akin to the way that the capitalist machine chews up its victims and spits them out, so does Bateman, which is portrayed in the way that Ellis characterizes him as a process killer. His victims are all members of the "less dead," who are people who have already lost at the game of capitalism until he reaches Paul Owen—a member of his own class. Ellis does this to show how eventually, everyone loses their identity because capitalism only values measurable output. Finally, Bateman's last killing spree and confession reflect how there is no escape from the system that America has created. This is a fact that remains hauntingly true as we consider the most recent events and the economic despair that continues to grow in our country, which reminds us that there is never an exit.

Works Cited

Aamodt, M.G., "Serial Killer Statistics." *Radford University and Florida Golf Coast University*, www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Aamodt-2/publication/342501023_RadfordFGCU_Annual_Report_on_Serial_Killer_Statistics_2020/links/5ef75a6492851c52d6007c8c/Radford-FGCU-Annual-Report-on-Serial-Killer-Statistics-2020.pdf. Accessed 02 February 2023.

Colby, Georgina. "Repressive desublimation and the great refusal in Bret Easton Ellis's fiction." *Textual Practice*, vol. 26, no. 2. 19 September 2011, pp 319-345. *MLA International Bibliography*, www.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2011.602550. Accessed 31 January 2023.

Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. New York, Vintage Books: a division of Random House Inc., 1991.

Graham, Matt. "Twenty-First Century Postmodernism: The Legacy of *American Psycho* in the Era of Donald Trump." *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 44, no. 3, September 2021, pp 223-235. MLA International Bibliography, www.doi.org/10.1111/jacc.13281. Accessed 22 January 2023.

Hartsoe, Steve. "The Road to Trump Began with Reaganomics & The Loss of the Middle Class, Economist Says." *Duke Today*, Duke University, today.duke.edu/2019/01/road-trump-began-reaganomics-loss-middle-class-economist-says. Accessed 02 February 2023.

Kissel, Ben, Parks, Marcus, and Zebrowski, Henry. *Last Podcast on The Left*. Last Podcast Network. www.lastpodcastontheleft.com/.

Kwon, Jieun. "White Male Crisis in and Its Discontents: Revisiting Ellis's *American Psycho*." *The Explicator*, vol. 2, no. 2, 08 May 2019, pp 63-67. MLA International Bibliography, www.doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2019.1604485. Accessed 31 January 2023.

Lauren, Jillian. "The Serial Killer and the 'Less Dead.'" *New York*, vol. 51, no. 26, Dec. 2018, pp. 24–92. Academic Search Complete, www.thecut.com/2018/12/how-serial-killer-samuel-little-was-caught.html. Accessed Jan 19, 2023.

Storey, Mark. "'And as things fell apart': The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Ellis's *American Psycho* and Dennis Cooper's *Frisk*." *Critique*, vol 47, no. 1, Fall 2005, pp 57-72. www.doi.org/10.3200/CRIT.47.1.57-72. Accessed 31 January 2023.

Photo by: Jaxson Kidd

Original art modified to black and white with permission from artist

The Mysteriously Murderous Manors of Crime Fiction: An Examination of Setting in *Knives Out*

Angelo Gonzalez, *Ball State University*

• • •

Crime fiction has many common tropes often associated with its setting, including large houses with wealthy families, isolated homes in vast expanses of forest, and technological deserts in which everyday things like cell phones are all but useless. These characteristics assist with the plot, and oftentimes are key contributors to the facts of the case. The manor in the 2019 film *Knives Out*, directed by Rian Johnson, displays these tropes outrightly, as it is in a large expanse of woods, and the family living in the house is built upon a family legacy of vast amounts of wealth. In many cases of crime fiction, the old manors come from old generations of money. Many characters throughout the film believe victim Harlan Thrombey to be from old money, although it is revealed later that this may not be a genuine portrayal of his rise into wealth, altering the perception of how his manor and ultimately his legacy is viewed. Unlike other crime fiction settings, *Knives Out* utilizes technology in order to put together pieces of the crime, instead of eliminating its use, as is common in crime fiction settings. The setting of the film is as important a piece to a crime fiction narrative as any other plot devices, like characters or events. This essay seeks to examine the tropes utilized in the film, and how they worked in providing evidence towards the case of the murder of Harlan Thrombey. The film also plays with crime fiction tropes in terms of technology. The mansion has aspects that are both archaic, like the VHS tape security system, but also modern, in the use of social media throughout the film. This essay will also show how the film used inverse versions of crime fiction stereotypes to craft a crime narrative.

In the 2019 film *Knives Out*, directed by Rian Johnson, the setting plays a crucial role in the narrative. As Stephen D. Rogers writes, "Setting, the time and place of a story, is particularly important in the mystery genre. Not only do carefully chosen details enrich the tale, but they may also very well assist or impede the investigation, even after possibly being an accessory to the crime" (1). Set in a gothic manor in modern-day New England, the film follows the investigation into the death of crime novelist Harlan Thrombey. As one reviewer notes, "Johnson goes back to his roots with an updated homage to the Agatha Christie whodunnits he loved as a child, and to those 'cheekily self-aware' screen adaptations in which Peter Ustinov would lead an all-star cast through a labyrinthine murder mystery" (Jones 1). The mention of Peter Ustinov leading an all-star cast suggests that Johnson is incorporating the tradition of the grand ensemble cast, which has long been a staple of murder mystery films. The reference to a labyrinthine murder mystery highlights the film's intricate plot, which adds to the suspense and excitement of the story. In this way, Johnson's work can be seen as a nostalgic tribute to the mystery genre that shaped his formative years, imbued with a contemporary, humorous sensibility.

The film's setting, described as a "gothic pile," adds to the film's success. This isolated setting is a common trope in crime fiction, as it allows for a sense of mystery and isolation, making it easier for the crime to take place without interference. The manor itself is also a trope in crime fiction, as it is often associated with old money and a family legacy of wealth. In *Knives Out*, the Thrombey family is seen as having old money, although this is later revealed to be a façade. The setting not only serves as a backdrop for the crime, but also plays an active role in shaping the narrative and the perception of the characters. This essay seeks to examine the tropes of setting common to crime fiction utilized in the film and how they contribute to the narrative, aiding Rian Johnson in creating a nostalgic film that harkens back to the stories of Agatha Christie, but offers a unique vision of the future of crime film.

Background on Crime Fiction and Setting Tropes

Crime fiction has come to be recognized as a crucial element in the preservation of social order. Readers of crime fiction are given the opportunity to participate in the penalizing of perpetrators and to be active members in a moral framework that maintains order in society. The genre's focus on what it means to be human and the complex motivation behind crime also allows readers to engage with ideas of justice and punishment. The appeal factors of crime fiction, including story, setting, character, and language, draw readers to the genre and allow for a wide range of sub-genres to

exist. As the critic John Scaggs argues, "Crime has nevertheless been the foundation for an entire genre of fiction for over one hundred and fifty years" (23). For over a century, crime fiction has been drawing readers in with its focus on humanity, justice, and punishment.

In addition to its exploration of crime and its consequences, crime fiction also offers readers the opportunity to participate in the penalizing of perpetrators and to be active members in a moral framework that maintains social order. The ending of a crime fiction story offers the possibility of restoration and a return to innocence, making the genre particularly appealing to readers who "suffer from a sense of sin" (Auden 411). Despite the fact that many readers know of the genre's "tricks," crime fiction continues to be popular and relevant because it allows readers to engage with important moral and societal issues. Despite its popularity, the genre of crime fiction is not without its pitfalls, as it can be seen as perpetuating harmful stereotypes and supporting the status quo. However, its ability to experiment and critique social issues makes it an important genre in world literature. The setting of the film ties into the framework Auden sets up, as it allows the audiences to connect the scenery to the events that take place within the film.

Application of Tropes in *Knives Out*

The opening scene of *Knives Out* takes place on the third floor of the Thrombey Estate, in the master bedroom suite, which is empty and unslept in. This sets a somber tone and immediately creates a sense of unease, as it is not typical for the master of the house not to have slept in his own bedroom, and it was known he was there the night before. The setting is further emphasized when Fran, the housekeeper, heads out onto the landing and up an even narrower half-flight of stairs, which leads to a single door, creating a feeling of claustrophobia and a sense of foreboding as Fran ascends to the top of the house in search of her boss. She arrives at the top of the stairs and knocks, not waiting long before entering what will soon be a highly investigated crime scene. The cramped attic study where Harlan Thrombey's body is discovered is described as having every shelf crammed with curios, adding to the sense of clutter and disarray. The fact that the murder takes place in such a wealthy and extravagant setting also emphasizes the power dynamics at play in the story. The manor's status as a symbol of old wealth and power adds a layer of complexity to the narrative, as the motivations of the characters are informed by their association with this world of privilege and prestige. The manor's implied history and elegant design serve as the backdrop for the unfolding events, and its central role in the narrative underscores the importance of setting in the creation of a successful crime story. In this opening scene,

Knives Out demonstrates how the careful selection of setting can play a crucial role in the success of a modern homage to classic crime fiction.

Figure 1. Film capture the outside of the Thrombey Estate. 2019, Knives Out.

The next scene after the opening credits is in direct contrast to the glamor and extravagance of the manor seen before. Instead, the audience is put in the bedroom of a 20-year-old woman living in a small, cramped apartment with her family. The differences between the Thrombey manor and Marta Cabrera's housing project could not be starker. Marta's apartment is plain, modern, and cramped, in sharp contrast to the opulent, spacious mansion in which Harlan met his untimely demise. Her family's kitchen is humble, with her sister Alice watching CSI on an iPad at the kitchen table and her mother concerned for Marta's well-being while preparing for the day. The contrast between the two settings emphasizes the class divide at the heart of the film's narrative, and highlights the unique challenges faced by Marta Cabrera as she navigates a world that is both alien and hostile to her.

One of the key tropes of crime fiction is the isolated manor, often belonging to a wealthy family with a dark past. In *Knives Out*, the Thrombey family's expansive manor in a secluded forest is a fitting setting for a crime fiction novel, as it provides the necessary seclusion and secrecy for the crime to take place. As Cathy Cole writes, "the settings of crime fiction are often associated with power and money, the places of

privilege and authority that are closed to most people" (116). The use of such exclusive settings in crime fiction highlights the idea that crime and wrongdoing are often associated with positions of power and wealth. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the Thrombey manor is only accessible to those within the family or those who have been invited, like Marta. This exclusivity emphasizes the gap between the wealthy and the poor in society, as everyday people are shut out from these places of privilege and authority. This idea is also reflected in the parallels between the trick window and Marta's own use of trickery to protect herself and her family, highlighting the need to be careful and use wits to stay ahead of those in positions of authority.

Figure 2. Film capture of Marta Cabrera's family in thier kitchen. 2019, Knives Out.

In a setting framing scene from *Knives Out*, Lieutenant Elliott expresses his frustration with the case, stating that it's an open-and-shut case of suicide and that he expected something more interesting from the great Benoit Blanc as they take a stroll outside, revealing the exterior of the mansion they are working with. While walking, Blanc picks up an old baseball lying in the grass and asks about the method of death, noting the dramatic nature of a throat slit for a suicide. This exchange highlights the tension between the expectation of a straightforward resolution and the possibility of a more complex mystery, often sought after by Detective Blanc. This tension is mirrored in the film's setting, which is described as a "giant Clue board" by Lt. Elliot.

Figure 3. Film capture Marta Cabrera and Harlan Thrombey in his office. 2019, Knives Out.

This comparison to the classic board game serves to reinforce the idea that the Thrombey manor is a labyrinthine mystery waiting to be solved. Additionally, the varied elements and tropes common in crime media add to the tension of the film and reinforce the significance of the setting, which serves as more than just a physical location, but as a character that affects the events of the story. By utilizing timeless cinematography and comparisons to classic crime media, *Knives Out* effectively creates a sense of mystery and unease, inviting the audience to join Blanc and Marta in solving the puzzle of Harlan's death.

Another common trope of crime fiction is the lack of technology in the setting. In *Knives Out*, detectives use a variety of devices, including cell phones and VHS tapes, to gather evidence and piece together the events leading up to the murder. This use of technology adds a twist to the traditional crime narrative, setting it apart from other works in the genre. The film also utilizes technology in a unique way in comparison to other crime fiction narratives. Rather than eliminating technology, as is often done in order to create a sense of isolation, the characters in *Knives Out* use technology to uncover clues and piece together the crime. For example, the manor has a VHS tape

security system, which is an old and outdated technology, but the characters also use their cell phones to keep tabs on other members of the family to uncover secrets about them. In a key scene of *Knives Out*, the conversation between Ransom and Marta at a restaurant is interrupted by the ringing of Marta's phone. Meg's phone call to Marta, in which she pretends to be alone on the phone while the rest of the family listens in, demonstrates her utilizing a manipulation tactic, something Meg, a friend of Marta, would not normally do. However, due to the additional familial pressures and the threat of their way of life, she gives in and begins playing the game with the rest of her family.

Figure 4. Film capture of Meg Thrombey on the phone with Marta. 2019, Knvies Out.

The sprawling estate of the Thrombey family, with its ornate furnishings and expensive artwork, gives off the impression of a family steeped in generational wealth and prestige. The reveal of Harlan Thrombey's family home being bought in the '80s and their generational wealth being a lie, as unveiled by Blanc in one of the final scenes, serves as a critical turning point in the perception the audience has of the Thrombey family. This revelation discredits the family's presumed prestige, shattering the illusion of their wealth and power. It reveals the deceitful and corrupt nature of those in positions of authority, subverting the audience's expectations and reinforcing the notion that crime media often employs the settings of power and

wealth to question morality. As all the Thrombeys become increasingly antagonistic in a last-ditch effort to save the fortune they feel entitled to, Marta remains the only character to sympathize with, representing the working-class background that is often overshadowed by those of the elite. Overall, the scene and the revelation of the family home's history highlight the underlying theme of *Knives Out*, which is that even those with wealth who are enabled by the power wealth gives can be motivated by their greed and desire for more.

Figure 5. Film capture of Benoit Blanc sitting on a throne of knives. 2019, Knives Out.

As Joel Goldman writes, "A setting with a heartbeat represents the difference between good and great crime fiction; and allows readers to develop a true attachment to protagonists and, yes, a deep-seated fear and loathing of the villain" (1). The manor in *Knives Out* acts as a symbol of the family's wealth and power, as well as the conflicts and tensions that arise among the family members as they navigate the investigation into Harlan's death. It is not just a static backdrop for the action, but a living, breathing presence that influences and is influenced by the characters. By using the manor as a character, Rian Johnson creates a more immersive and engaging story, deepening the reader's connection to the characters and the environment that they are in, and further, how that environment influences their behaviors and actions throughout the film.

Overall, the setting of *Knives Out* plays a crucial role in the narrative, adding to the film's success as a crime fiction story. As David Geherin argues, "[W]hen a writer uses location as more than backdrop by weaving it into the very fabric of the novel, affecting every other element of the work, the reader gets far more than local color" (1). When the setting becomes more than just a physical location, but rather a character affecting every other element of the work, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the story. This results in a richer and immersive experience for the reader, as they can fully grasp the impact of the location on the events of the story. By weaving the setting into the narrative in this way, the writer can create a more nuanced and impactful story. The same can be applied to films of the crime fiction genre, as is the case with *Knives Out*. The isolated manor and the use of technology subvert common tropes in the genre, making for a unique and engaging narrative. The setting of the film is an important part of the narrative, as it allows for the development of attachment to the characters, as well as adding to the foreboding undertones. Rian Johnson utilizes the tropes of crime fiction in order to create a piece of media that makes the setting into a delightful character for the viewers to enjoy, instead of just leaving it as scenery. Even as the audience believes they know exactly what happened to Harlan from the beginning, there is a sense that there is another layer of the story still waiting to be told. The use and subversion of common crime fiction tropes in the setting of the film make it a standout in the genre and add to the tensions during the rising action.

According to writer Donald Cawelti, the evolution of the classical detective genre has been to give "increasing importance to the intricacy of the puzzle surrounding the crime and less prominence to the detective's initiative in the investigation" (84). This runs in accordance with Benoit Blanc's more passive investigative method in the film, where the emphasis is set on the mystery of the crime itself, with the backdrop giving important context along the way. Films must focus more on the complexity of the plot, so utilizing a classic setting formula, as done in *Knives Out*, aids in allowing for the plots to become odd and whimsical, and therefore original in nature. This film serves as a prime example of how the setting can be used to enhance the genre and create a standout piece of media. The future of crime films may rely on including more nostalgic tropes from crime media in order to create the mix of nostalgia and real-world narratives that contemporary audiences crave, just as *Knives Out* has displayed.

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, From an Addict." Harper's Magazine, harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/.

Cawelti, J.G. "Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture." *University of Chicago Press*, 1976.

Cole, Cathy. "Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction." *Fremantle*, 2004.

Franks, R. "A Taste for Murder: The Curious Case of Crime Fiction". *M/C Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, Mar. 2014, doi.org/10.5204/mcj.770.

Geherin, David. "Scene of the Crime: The Importance of Place in Crime and Detective Fiction" *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*, 2008.

Goldman, Joel. "You Set Me Up: Importance of Setting in Crime Fiction." *PML Media*, 6 June 2013, joelgoldman.com/you-set-me-up-importance-of-setting-in-crime-fiction/.

Huang, Chi-Chieh. "*Knives Out* (2019) and the Classical Detective Formula." *Diggit Magazine*, 10 Dec. 2022, www.diggitmagazine.com/papers/knives-out-2019-and-classical-detective-formula

Johnson, Rian. *Knives Out*. *Lionsgate*, 2019.

Rogers, Stephen D. "The Scene of the Crime: Choosing Your Setting." *Writing World*, 2002, www.writing-world.com/mystery/setting.shtml.

Scaggs, John. "Crime Fiction Theory." *SlideShare*, 23 Apr. 2016, www.slideshare.net/tirsinacristina/crime-fiction-theory.

Photo by: Ellen Bain

The New Law of the Land: The Monster in *No Country for Old Men*

Will Callan, *Ball State University*

• • •

Monsters are tied to what we consider normal or abnormal in our cultures. Jeffrey Cohen's "monster theory" states that society places its own anxiety or fear of something or someone who breaks cultural expectations into the monsters they create. The fear we have of these monsters makes them incredibly popular in our cultures. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, the main antagonist and cold-blooded killer Chigurh fits the mold of the monster theory perfectly in many ways. In the novel, after stealing millions of dollars from a drug deal gone awry, Moss is hunted down by Chigurh ruthlessly. He represents both the fear and desire of our societal norms by rejecting all humanity via his brutality; however, he maintains a playfulness when it comes to deciding his victims' fates, utilizing coin-flipping to determine whether the victims live or die. By looking at Chigurh through the lens of "monster theory," we see that he fits the mold of the traditional villain in crime fiction stories, while also managing to surprise readers by just how nefarious he really is. Of course, it would be unwise to assume that Chigurh is without humanity; he is often given shockingly human characteristics to ground him in reality, which makes him and the state of lawlessness he brings about all the more terrifying. What we gain by applying monster theory is seeing how a society's fear of violent crime is personified; it also lets us attempt to reassure ourselves of our own humanity in comparison to the absolute inhumanity of Chigurh. Through Chigurh, McCarthy has created one of the most memorable and remarkable monsters in crime fiction.

Jeffrey Cohen's original "monster theory" states that monsters are representative of our fears of something or someone that breaks our cultural norms. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*, many tropes of the monstrous villain are both exhibited and contradicted by the primary antagonist Chigurh. Recruited to hunt down Moss for stealing millions of dollars in cash from a drug deal gone awry, we are given practically no knowledge of the person Chigurh was before the events of the story. The fact that he is a calculating, cold-blooded killer fits the monster theory lens present in crime fiction, but because Chigurh remains free at the end of the novel, lacks a motive or backstory, and is childishly characterized via his ignorance of his personal evil, he differs from the usual crime narrative monster. Chigurh still being free to commit more crimes is what makes McCarthy's central message about crime in general stronger. It paints an incredibly bleak picture of crime in modern America. To McCarthy, crime has gotten more violent since the old days, and there's nothing that can be done to stop it. This has real-world implications, with the primary message that Bell's friend Ellis tries to convey being that it is futile to try to change the world by oneself.

Chigurh uses coin-flipping to decide his victims' fate, creating a sense of arbitrariness to his crimes. This shows that he operates on chance rather than an actual moral system. While it would be misguided to assume Chigurh is completely inhuman, analyzing him with monster theory can reassure us of our own humanity in comparison to his ruthlessness. This is important in a world where crime grows more violent and ruthless. Using the lens of monster theory, we can identify the tropes of crime fiction, understand why they are relevant to society and crime in general, and analyze how our fears of violent crime are personified through monsters like Chigurh. All these aspects lead to a unique approach to crime narratives in which we anticipate the monster to be foiled by the good guys of the story. For the purposes of this examination, the novel will be used as the primary source as opposed to the film, owing to the narrative choices offered in the novel which alternate between sections narrated in the first person by Sheriff Bell and sections narrated in the third person perspective.

Monster theory encapsulates the fears of many different cultures' definitions of what is considered abnormal. In the theoretical framework, monsters are defined as anything that challenges established norms. To this end, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock says of monsters, "[T]he monster is the thing that, from a particular perspective in a given context, shouldn't be, but is" (3). In other words, monsters represent everything that could foreseeably go wrong in a thing or person from a certain perspective. There is little doubt that monsters have been related to a negative connotation in culture,

associated with something to fear and to be disgusted by. However, another facet of monster theory is how viewing monsters allows for introspection into one's own humanity. This is a key tenet of monster theory and one which Asma acknowledges when the author writes, "The monster is a beneficial foe, helping us to virtually represent the obstacles that real life will surely send our way" (293). A way of interpreting this is by recognizing monsters as a stand-in for hurdles in our lives that we compare to our own humanity. Reassuring ourselves that we are normal is a coping mechanism, and monster theory also states that another way of coping with potential flaws is by placing all irregularities on one monster.

Another key tenet of what monsters are is defined by Beal, who uses Sigmund Freud's idea of unheimlich, or the inability to feel at home. Beal writes, "Monsters are personifications of the unheimlich. They stand for what endangers one's sense of at-homeness, that is, one's sense of security, stability, integrity, well-being, health, and meaning" (297-298). This is a way of saying that monsters contradict everything that makes us feel safe and stable. Monsters may appear to us in countless situations, but we never truly get over how uncomfortable they make us feel. Monsters are strikingly inhuman most of the time, and this reassures us that we are human in comparison. But this begs the question of how monsters fit into crime and crime fiction.

Monsters appear quite commonly in crime fiction. We often perceive fictional criminals as monsters, since they reject everything we hold dear in a civilized society. By applying monster theory to crime fiction, we can reassure ourselves of our faith in the criminal justice system. Chigurh, of course, breaks this faith in law enforcement by managing to evade them, as they are portrayed as helpless to stop the chain of events in the novel. As is typical in crime narratives, our faith in criminal justice and punishment is jeopardized because of this. In an article on the ineffectiveness of police leadership, Simmons-Beauchamp and Sharpe argue, "The internal divide sustains the Eurocentric, male-dominated perspectives as police organizations are not typically reflective of the communities they serve" (1). The barrier this speaks of is the "us vs. them" mentality, which allows for police leadership to be perceived as helpless.

This ineffectiveness of the law is made more apparent by McCarthy only being able to provide details about how things used to be. Our expectation that monsters take advantage of the weakness of ordinary people to be dealt justice, a typical aspect of crime fiction, is subverted by McCarthy's thesis that criminals can get away with what they intend to do. Through Chigurh, McCarthy also makes a statement about the growing violence of crime in America and our desensitization towards it. Sheriff Bell laments the time when his father was a man of the law and didn't even need to carry a gun, but those times seem to be gone in the novel. At the end of the novel, Bell retires, essentially giving up on punishing the monster in this story. By retiring, the sheriff

represents how the old ways he's depended on in the past do not work any longer; this is not a country for old men. Near the end of the novel, Bell has a conversation with his friend Ellis. He talks about the nostalgia he has for the old days when things were simpler. Ellis, however, speaks to the fact that it's not one person's job to fix the world and rid it of evil as Bell had hoped, and that there have always been monstrous criminals such as Chigurh. He also reiterates that the good old days are based on Bell's nostalgia and perception of the time rather than actual fact.

Monster theory has been established thus far in terms of how we define it and the shapes it takes. We have also determined why this is useful for us. The question remains how this relates to the monster of *No Country For Old Men*, Chigurh, and how this helps us better understand crime fiction. Moss is hunted ruthlessly by Chigurh, who is also in his own way a symbol of the law of the new world or lack thereof. Chigurh neatly fits into the definition of a monster in many respects, but he also has many human moments in which he becomes even more terrifying to us.

McCarthy's characters, particularly Bell, lament the time when law enforcement had an easier time on the job, saying, "Even when I say anything about how the world is going hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I'm gettin' old" (196). This is an explanation of McCarthy's very concerns for civilized society. It is because of monsters like Chigurh that this long-lost, old way of life is unachievable when the novel's events take place. The change from civilization to the onset of anarchy seems to have taken place when people abandoned the rules which held society together in old times, allowing monsters to gain power and prominence. This also aligns with what McCarthy is saying about breaking the pre-established rules of a cohesive society in general and how monsters influence how violent crime can become. Commentary on crime fiction such as this paints a grim picture of violence in America and how monsters represent that sort of violence. Of course, more can be said about this violence and its significance.

The brutal world Chigurh inhabits is one which is made for a monster like him. Society's fear of violent crime is personified through Chigurh, who also manages to break many of the expectations for crime fiction villains and monsters in general. Chigurh spends the novel hunting Moss and tormenting Bell, and even the law cannot prevent the world from sliding into anarchy. This is a concerning message for those who respect the law. The old world that Bell mourns for is long dead in *No Country For Old Men*. However, it is in this world that criminals like Chigurh, who is immediately portrayed as a giant and cunning man, thrive. Favero writes of this brutal world that exists in the novel: "The world Bell must confront is one to which Chigurh has already assimilated. It is materialistic, nihilistic, deterministic, mechanistic, and neoliberal, and Chigurh has risen to its challenges to become successful in his line of work" (159).

Through this, we learn that the world Ed Tom Bell started his career in has changed for the worse, and only those who can adapt will be able to survive it. It is also implied that only those who are truly evil are capable of assimilating into this world so hostile to old men like Bell.

This all is an incredibly grim statement about what we can expect from the heroes of our typical stories. The idea of evil triumphing over good is reinforced when in the novel Bell says, "[i]t takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people can't be governed at all" (McCarthy 64). Through this, McCarthy lays out what he thinks of good and evil. Chigurh obviously falls into the category of evil, which fits the trope of the villainous criminal. Nevertheless, it's Chigurh's triumph over Bell and the law as a whole that makes him different from this trope. A monster theory view of this problem would say that this is a product of our culture's fears of a monster that cannot be vanquished or easily removed from society, and this creates problems for the resolutions we expect in crime fiction. There is even more to be said about the monster theory view of crime and how one becomes the monster capable of these sorts of acts.

Chigurh has many monstrous moments in the novel, such as when he kills Moss's wife, Carla Jean, for seemingly no reason. Upon returning from the funeral of her mother, she finds Chigurh in her house and instantly knows why. Even Carla Jean herself says that there is no reason for her to have to die, but Chigurh shoots her anyway to fulfill the promise he made to her husband that he would kill her. The section in which she is killed is narrated omnisciently at first before returning to the perspective of Bell, who has his own reaction to the horrific coldness of it. Of course, to assume that Chigurh is without any humanity is not only wrong but runs contrary to McCarthy's message. Chigurh has many surprisingly human moments in the novel. Even the way he rummages through the fridge for milk at Moss's house after barging in to search for him is incredibly human and almost childlike; there are several instances in which this is done. This all makes him even more terrifying because it suggests that even the most monstrous characters are essentially human. It also opens the question of what it takes for someone human to become such a monster.

McCarthy gives almost no details on Chigurh's past, leaving this incredibly important question decidedly ambiguous. One of his more human moments is revealed by forcing his victims to reflect on the nature of life and death. Phipps writes of this very introspection, "The novel lends itself well to philosophical and theological questions about life and death since its main antagonist, Anton Chigurh, forces many of his victims to take up introspective reflection even as he dispenses death with cold ruthlessness" (38). In other words, there is an inherent contradiction in how Chigurh acts when killing people. On the one hand, he is utterly brutal and without conscience,

but on the other, he also sees it as being necessary to force his victims to reflect psychologically. In the text, when considering what he needs to do to survive the people hunting him after hiding the money he took, Moss thinks to himself, "[b]y the time he got up he knew he was probably going to have to kill somebody. He just didn't know who it was" (McCarthy 87). This is significant because it shows that Moss must resort to acts he doesn't want to do just to survive. The question becomes whether Chigurh started on a similar path. The sparse details of Chigurh's past leave open the possibility that he started off in a similar situation compared to Moss, slowly doing more and more criminal things just to survive. By looking at this through the monster theory lens, we can attempt to unlock how monsters come about and what their synthesis is. Still, matters are further complicated by the role fate has in Chigurh's killings.

Chigurh uses coin-flipping to decide the fate of his victims, which is a playful spin on the cold-blooded murder he specializes in. This also gives the reader the impression that Chigurh is a dispatcher of justice. Our expectation for justice to be served by the good guys of the crime narrative is again subverted in this way because Chigurh serving his own cruel form of justice displays a law of the land that relies on violence as a means to an end. Moreover, the use of coin-flipping makes this all seem arbitrary and tragic to McCarthy's audience. Mangrum writes of the tragic nature of "justice" in *No Country For Old Men*, saying, "McCarthy's characters are subject to the tragic tension between aspiring for justice and the absence of the good, searching for the real and misunderstanding the presence of the transcendent because of the inherent limits of their world" (108). In other words, the author is elaborating on how the absence of justice is just another form of the new law of the land that is present in McCarthy's novel. The bleakness of *No Country For Old Men* allows for a statement on the primal nature of justice when evil individuals take the law into their own hands. Also present is the idea that even if Carla Jean were to survive Chigurh by correctly calling the coin toss, it would have simply been someone else's turn to die on perhaps a different day or under other circumstances. This approach towards chance and determining who gets to live or die is certainly befitting of a monster. The arbitrary nature of crime in the novel is a way of saying that it is pointless to try to stop it.

Chigurh also differs from typical monsters in crime narratives where the villain is caught in the end, because he escapes. After killing Carla Jean, he is involved in a vehicle collision while driving and breaks his arm. He pays a boy to give him his shirt to use as a sling and gets away before the police arrive. Ultimately, by evading capture and justice at the novel's conclusion, No Country For Old Men contradicts the traditional crime narrative where the villainous monster is captured. The significance of Chigurh remaining free is that we are never truly safe from monsters. Chigurh remains

Chigurh remains uncaptured to presumably commit more horrendous crimes, and this breaks many traditions of crime narratives where it is expected that the bad guy will be foiled in the end. The expectation that the culprit is busted at the end of the crime narrative reassures us that violent criminals can never succeed.

Figure 1. Film capture of Anton Chigurh in the movie adaption of No Country for Old Men*. 2007,* No Country for Old Men.

Through an incredibly austere view of justice and crime, *No Country For Old Men* presents a world where evil and monsters are allowed to reign. This world is one in which old men like Sheriff Bell cannot hope to survive like in the days of yore. The villain Chigurh, by constantly subverting our expectations for crime narratives in the novel, represents the new law of the land over which he presides in a terrifyingly bleak commentary about the state of anarchy and justice. Chigurh is truly monstrous in the way he plays with his victims and takes pleasure in hunting people down, allowing us to get a glimpse of McCarthy's grim perspective on monstrous criminals. While it is important to make the distinction that not all criminals are inherently monsters, monsters often happen to be horrible criminals in how they break the expected rules of society. Monster theory is thus shown as being present in *No Country For Old Men*

via Chigurh. With Moss's death and Chigurh escaping to presumably commit more crimes at the novel's conclusion, McCarthy is suggesting that lawlessness will prevail because of monsters like Chigurh; moreover, the good guys such as Bell don't have a chance to stop the bad guys by holding to the old ways. Not only is this a serious departure from what is anticipated in crime stories, but it also is symptomatic of a general shift in our perception of the trust we place in law enforcement to protect us from this state of anarchy described in the novel. Via analysis from the lens of a monster theory perspective, it becomes clear that Chigurh's monstrosity provides commentary for how we analyze criminals. At the end of the day, McCarthy suggests that we will never be truly safe from these kinds of monsters and that trying to rid the world of them is futile.

Works Cited

Asma, Stephen. "Monsters and the Moral Imagination." Monster Theory Reader, edited by Jeffrey Weinstock. University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 289-294.

Beal, Timothy. "Introduction to Religion and its Monsters." Monster Theory Reader, edited by Jeffrey Weinstock. University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 295-302.

Favero, Douglas. "You don't have to do this: Cormac McCarthy's and the Courage to Be." The Cormac McCarthy Journal, vol. 19, no. 2, 2021, pp. 157-177, www.muse.jhu.edu/article/814965. Accessed 10 December 2022.

Mangrum, Benjamin. "Democracy, Justice, and Tragedy in ." Religion and Literature, 2011, pp. 107-133, www.jstor.org/stable/23347090?pq-origsite=summon#metadata_info_tab_contents. Accessed 16 January 2023.

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country For Old Men*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Phipps, Gregory. "Death and the Search for Heideggerian Authenticity in ." The Cormac McCarthy Journal, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 37-55, www.muse.jhu.edu/article/751604. Accessed 11 December 2022.

Simmons-Beauchamp, Bobbi, & Sharpe, Hillary. "The Moral Injury of Ineffective Police Leadership: a Perspective." Frontiers in Psychology, vol. 13, 2022, www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.766237/full.

Weinstock, Jeffrey. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory." The Monster Theory Reader, edited by Jeffrey Weinstock. University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 1-36.

Photo by: Katelyn Mathew

"Realistic Villains": Examining Social Commentary in Crime Films through *Knives Out* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*

Caitlin Davis, *Ball State University*

• • •

Regardless of their subgenre, crime films share the fundamental element of presenting audiences with society's intricate executions of law and punishment. Because of this relationship, crime films are able to use their genre-specific elements to include social commentary within their storylines. Using their victims, suspects, and crime resolutions, modern crime fiction pieces such as Rian Johnson's 2019 film *Knives Out* and Halina Reijn's 2022 film *Bodies Bodies Bodies* both implement the larger conversations of class division within their stories. In *Knives Out*, the audience follows the mystery behind the sudden death of the renowned author, Harlan Thrombey—the suspects being his family and staff. Within the film's mystery, Johnson uses elements of the story to recognize and critique those in power who benefit from privilege, suggesting America should change the bias system it currently upholds. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* focuses on couple Bee and Sophie as they join Sophie's upper-class influencer friends for a weekend of partying, but mystery ensues when one of the friends is found dead, leaving only those within the house as suspects. Throughout the film, Reijn critiques the privileges of modern influencers and their often problematic culture, using the critique to warn younger generations about utilizing technology harmfully. This essay will use these pieces of modern crime fiction to explore how fictional crime narratives can use their stories to include social commentary.

Regardless of their subgenre, crime films share the fundamental element of presenting audiences with society's intricate executions of law and punishment within their elaborate storylines. This is the subject that Sociology and Law professor Ferdinando Spina introduces in the article "Crime Films" by recognizing that crime films "dramatize the uncertainty of moral categories and the ever-present tension between the social order and its violation" (2-3). Crime films explore society's "social order and its violation," and by doing so, they become representational of society—their elements and themes becoming reflective of relevant societal topics. Spina concurs, analyzing the relationship between crime films and society:

> On one hand, crime films reveal something important about the social context that they represent and from which they have been fashioned. On the other, they themselves have an effect on the social context, since their representation of crime, law, justice, and punishment itself becomes culture, acquires meaning, and provides an interpretation of reality. (3)

Within the reflective relationship between crime films and society, these films are able to use their genre elements to include various types of social commentary, creating larger conversations and developing new "interpretations" of pertinent topics within society. In her novel *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*, criminologist Nicole Rafter expands on the specific effects of these "interpretations," explaining that they "sculpt our assumptions about the nature of reality and fill our mental reservoirs with a vast supply of imagery for thinking about crime, criminals, and the role of criminal justice institutions in society" and "guide us in defining justice, heroism, and the illicit" (179). Because of the meaningful societal representations crime films create, they can inform and educate audiences, producing and reshaping how they interpret significant topics that play roles in how they define elements such as "crime" and "justice"—vital elements that likely will determine future perceptions of the justice system itself.

After establishing the relationship between crime films and society, recognizing social commentary within crime films, and acknowledging its importance, it is vital to exemplify these points with recent crime films that epitomize certain types of social commentary using their story elements. Both Rian Johnson's 2019 mystery *Knives Out* and Halina Reijn's 2022 thriller *Bodies Bodies Bodies* are exemplary models of the subject as they comment on a perpetual and relevant topic within modern society—class division. As films structured as whodunit stories, both pieces use their specific genre and story elements—victims, suspects, and crime resolutions—to examine the

different positions members of society are placed in based on their socioeconomic status. *Knives Out* depicts and critiques America's prejudice system that seems grounded in benefitting the privileged upper class by focusing on the class differences between a wealthy family and their staff, hoping to exhibit and propose a new society that America should stray toward. *Bodies Bodies Bodies* similarly criticizes this same system, using the privileged positions of modern influencer characters to exhibit class divisions, working to ultimately caution younger generations about the harmful use of technology and influencer culture they see online. This essay will analyze how these pieces of crime fiction use their story elements to include social commentary regarding class divisions within their storylines, expanding on their crime narratives to not only depict socio-economic issues within modern society but also to help audiences recognize and form newfound perceptions regarding this particular societal issue.

> The victim in a fictional crime story is a vital element as they are what ignites the mystery—the circumstances of their death often being used to symbolize deeper meanings. In *Knives Out*, the film's central victim is the renowned and wealthy author Harlan Thrombey; however, because of the particular decisions Johnson makes revolving around Harlan's death, it is plausible to interpret Harlan as both the victim and the killer within the film's story. Specifically, under the belief that his nurse, Marta, has made a fatal mistake with his medications, Harlan refuses to seek medical attention and instead insists that they hatch a plan to cover up the incident—one of which involves him killing himself (Johnson 00:40:25).

Establishing Harlan as both the victim and instigator, Johnson seemingly uses his passing to depict the figurative death of the long-established systems that have bred the current prejudiced class system society continues to implement today. In the moments the audience sees Harlan, it is obvious that he detests his family's greedy and egotistical behavior, desperately wanting them to change their ways. In an attempt to do so, he confronts the family about their behaviors by threatening his unfaithful son-in-law, cutting off funds to his daughter-in-law, and firing his son. Harlan explains his sudden choices in a flashback scene by saying, "It's unfair of me to keep you tethered to something that isn't yours to control. I've done you a great disservice. All these years, I've kept you from building something of your own, that was yours" (Johnson 00:16:00). Harlan regretfully recognizes that he has raised his family within society's classist system from which they benefit—a decision Harlan comes to regret as it has turned his family into money-driven, egotistical perpetrators of this privilege. Although Harlan's efforts leave a fearful impression on the family, it is clear that the Thrombeys still feel secure in their positions. This leads to Harlan's final move—his will

reading. It is not until the Thrombeys learn that everything is left to Marta that their perceptions change, and they begin to grow fearful (Johnson 1:07:18). In the article "*Knives Out* Is a Surprisingly Subversive Mystery," editor and writer Olivia Rutigliano elaborates on the significant meaning of Harlan's death in terms of the Thrombeys:

> Harlan Thrombey...comes to represent a longstanding system of influence and control that rejects the privileged descendants it has begotten, needing to die for this rejection to be fully meaningful and for a new, more productive world order to be born. His death is a sacrifice, it can prevent the ascension of his terrible family—from a 'body-politic' angle, it might help save America. (Rutigliano)

Using Harlan's death, Johnson implies that to prevent the perpetuation of unfair systems that reward those who are privileged, those who benefit from America's classist system society must recognize the unjustness in society's current ways and be willing to make changes or sacrifices for the sake of a more equal system. This is seemingly the interpretation Johnson wants the audience to take away from the commentary within the film—an interpretation that, if taken into serious consideration, could "save America" from continuing to perpetuate the biased system that Harlan strives to and eventually does end.

When continuing to analyze the deeper meaning of victims within crime fiction stories, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* follows the death of a social media influencer to serve as a warning to younger generations about enabling the harmful behaviors they see these influencers exhibiting online. Similar to *Knives Out*, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* focuses on a group of upper-class individuals; however, in this case, it is a group of young-adult influencers who, during the night of a party, begin to suspect each other of murder after their friend—central victim David—is found dead. The mystery that plagues the majority of the film is solved when it is discovered that there was no murder at all. The cause of David's death is that he accidentally slits his throat when attempting to post a TikTok (Reijn 1:26:53). In the "Digital Technology" chapter of the novel The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction, Nicole Kenley, twenty-first-century detective fiction and global crime researcher, elaborates on the critical role that technology plays within fictional crime pieces: "The formulation that technology simply equals novelty is problematic because it obscures the true role of digital technologies, which is not as a marker of newness but rather as a signifier of the choices such innovations force upon society" (261). In modern society, being in a position to become an influencer—a position that will be discussed in more detail later on—comes with certain attributes that have become favorable to younger generations. As exemplified by David, these attributes include attention, popularity, and perhaps monetary gain; however,

though technology has generated access to these attributes, it also has "innovated" a harmful mentality "upon society." Specifically, David's need for recognition on social media establishes a lack of recognition, one so severe that he blatantly ignores how dangerous it is for him to wield a weapon that he is clearly inexperienced with. David's mentality is reminiscent of the behaviors seen in real-life with trends such as the Tide Pod challenge—a social media challenge that, despite being obviously dangerous, was popularized during its time of relevancy by many influencers and their followers. By purposefully setting up David's death in this way, Reijn reflects on these behaviors, wanting to make it clear to the younger audiences that, despite the powerful influence influencers may wield, they should be mindful and careful about the harmful behaviors that are being perpetuated within social media spaces.

Though exemplified differently, it is worth recognizing here the use of technology in *Knives Out* as it exhibits similar ideas presented in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. Despite being in the same time period as *Bodies Bodies Bodies* where the use of technology is popularized, *Knives Out* does not make technology a core subject throughout the film. Therefore, when technology is shown, its use seems meaningful. There are scenes in which technology is presented purposefully, such as when the Thrombeys instantly resort to their cell phones to search for ways to obtain Harlan's will and when Marta's blackmailer communicates with her through email (Johnson). These scenes seem to depict moments of the upper-class utilizing their access to technology as a weapon against Marta in attempts to selfishly gain something for themselves. As discussed previously with *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, Johnson's decision to portray technology in this way highlights the typical socioeconomic status of those who can gain access to technology. However, this decision also presents a similar theme as Reijn—the theme that technology has the potential to inflict dangerous innovations upon society, especially when in the hands of those who are in positions of privilege.

Within fictional crime pieces, suspects are another key element to analyze as they are who the audience primarily focuses on and ultimately follows to solve the mystery that is presented; therefore, their behaviors during the time they are present are often significant and purposeful. As mentioned, *Knives Out* focuses on Harlan's family, the Thrombeys, being questioned about his death. Johnson characterizes the Thrombeys as greedy and narcissistic people, making their behavior reflective of the types of figures in real life that benefit from the prejudiced system society has established. For example, during their questioning by the police, the Thrombeys praise Marta as Harlan's caregiver, insisting that she is "part of the family" (Johnson 00:13:05).

Flashback sequences during this scene exemplify the Thrombeys' claims—one showing a push-in shot of Richard, Harlan's son-in-law, smiling at Marta as he seemingly invites her to join the family in conversation (00:13:05). However, the audience is later shown that, as a Latina immigrant, Marta was only invited into the family's conversation because Richard started a debate regarding immigration policies—one in which some of the Thrombeys think immigrant detention facilities are rightful punishments for "breaking the law" while others compare them to concentration camps (Johnson 00:45:52). Johnson is purposeful in making the scene representative of the societal topics that were relevant for the time the film is set in, allowing the audience to recognize the types of people that the Thrombeys represent. Rutigliano analyzes the characterization of the Thrombeys:

> As invested as *Knives Out* is in exposing the culprit masterminding the mystery at hand, it's more invested in exposing more realistic villains...That the Thrombeys variously believe themselves to be allies to the less-privileged or marginalized only makes their selfishness and wickedness feel more true-to-life...*Knives Out* is very clear that these kind of dynastic families should lose their power, but it's loudest about the kinds of shady characters that hide in plain sight, professing to be allies... to an inclusive system that plans to share power, resources, and rights up and down the ladder and across demographics, as long as it is convenient for them. (Rutigliano)

Though the family may claim to be in alliance with Marta, Johnson makes a point to show that between criticizing immigrants right in front of her and fighting her over Harlan's will later on, they clearly are not. Representing figures in real life who falsely claim to stand with those who are oppressed in society, yet continue to benefit from privilege, the Thrombeys are used to expose and warn audiences about society's "realistic villains"—the ones who endanger the hopes of the more equal system that Harlan strives to create.

In *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, similar to Johnson's utilization of the Thrombeys, Reijn uses the characterization of the suspects to expose "realistic villains," creating audience interpretations regarding problematic behaviors within modern influencer culture. As already established, the film's suspects are mostly young-adult influencers—social media figures, actors, and podcasters—who come from upper-class families. This representation is fitting considering that, often, those who can be influencers are able to do so because they are in a position of privilege, having access to the necessary technology as well-off individuals. Reijn clearly depicts these positions of privilege and nepotism; the group resides at an exceedingly lavish mansion owned by David's parents, utilizing its many rooms to partake in expensive alcohol and drugs while they party, record themselves, and merely talk about their jobs that require "a lot of work"

(Reijn 1:12:59). By characterizing and portraying the characters in this manner, Reijn not only creates representational figures based on modern privileged peoples, but she also expands on this representation to recognize and curate audience thoughts based on the problematic behaviors within the influencer realm.

As exemplified earlier with the character of David, in an age where recognition on social media has become more enticing to younger generations, it is much more common to see influencers who neglect their privilege, often playing the victim and saying whatever will gain them the most sympathy or positive attention from an audience. Reijn uses the suspect characters to exemplify this behavior as their quick willingness to blame each other or label themselves as the victim in the situation prohibits them from sensibly handling the events of the night. A scene that best depicts this behavior is shown toward the end of the film. After the deaths of more characters, one of the deaths being the group's fault after a false accusation about who the murderer is, tensions rise, and an argument begins amongst those who are left. However, the disagreement has little to do with the murderous events of the night and consists of the group attacking each other over their flimsy friendships. The group uses generational terms such as "red flags" and "triggering" to critique each other, debates over who is more "rich," and defends themselves so as to appear as the victim within the situation—podcaster Alice attempting to excuse any wrongful behavior by claiming, "I'm an ally" (Reijn 1:08:46-1:10:04). Even though the group is no longer in front of a camera, they still exhibit these harmful behaviors that are becoming so prominent amongst modern online platforms. Author and film critic Justin Chang recognizes Reijn's critique of these behaviors in the article "It Has Its Sharp Moments, but *Bodies Bodies Bodies* Could Use a Few Corpse Corrections":

> In an age when everyone makes a fetish of authenticity, friendships are shown to be the flimsiest and least authentic of constructs, mediated by TikTok...there's promise in [Reijn's] understanding of how, even in a politically progressive, racially and sexually inclusive crowd, people can and do wield the language of social justice to hide their own glaring privilege. (Chang)

Reijn focuses on these characters in hopes of showing audiences that they are representational of those who perpetually misuse their positions on social media to gain popularity—a behavior that the film critiques as an unhealthy and dangerous cycle that only works to protect those who are in privileged positions and should be abolished.

Using suspects as a symbol, both Johnson and Reijn further the discussions about class divisions throughout their films by establishing particular circumstances

for their unique suspects, Marta and Bee. Similar to Marta, Bee is also a working-class immigrant; therefore, both women not only stand out amongst the respective suspects but also are put into different positions based on their ethnicity and class throughout their situations. In *Knives Out*, as a minority and member of the working class, Marta already has less privilege in the situation than the other suspects. Academic writer Katarina Dulude recognizes Marta's position in the article "The Roles of Class and Gender in Popular Films of 2019: Hustlers, *Knives Out*, and Avengers: Endgame": "[Marta] would have never obtained so much money had Harlan not deviated from the norm and given it to her, not because she wasn't deserving of it, but because the system rarely rewards those who work hard, but do not start their lives with the resources to propel them towards substantial affluence" (6). Johnson uses Marta's vulnerability as a working-class citizen within the situation to highlight the unfairness in the justice system—a vulnerability that is compounded due to the fact that Marta's mother is undocumented. This theme recurs in scenes throughout the film. Specifically, Marta insists that they call for help when she believes she has switched Harlan's medications; however, knowing there would not be enough time, Harlan hatches the plan discussed earlier, telling Marta in a close-up shot that "[y]our mom is still undocumented, and if this is your fault, she'll be found out, and, at best, deported, and your family will be broken" (Johnson 00:39:56). Despite desperately wanting to tell the truth, Marta is made well aware of the consequences if she does. A later scene where Harlan's son, Walt, threatens to expose Marta's mom if she does not renounce Harlan's will only raises the stakes (Johnson 1:25:50). Johnson writes Marta's character in this way to present and reflect the unjust irony of the justice system—a system that, despite being dedicated to preserving equal treatment, forces an innocent person like Marta to play the part of a murderer covering up their crime out of fear that she will lose her family if she trusts law enforcement.

Although Bee from *Bodies Bodies Bodies* is not a person of color, she is still vulnerable within her situation because, based on her socioeconomic status, the respective suspects treat her with prejudice and essentially view her as an outsider, similar to Marta. Their lack of hospitality toward Bee is present from the beginning of the film. An early scene of David interrupting Bee and her girlfriend Sophie's time together to talk to Sophie "in private" about bringing Bee "without telling anyone" whilst the rest of the group probes Bee about her romantic past and nationality, serves as a clear example (Reijn 00:10:40-00:17:00). Though Bee and the group seemingly begin to feel more comfortable around each other, the group's disdain resurfaces after murders begin to take place and they openly suspect and accuse Bee without solid evidence and lock her out of the house—a harsh and dangerous choice considering, at this point in the film, the audience is aware of Bee's innocence and still believes a

murderer is killing off the group one by one (Reijn 1:01:10). Similar to Johnson's choices regarding Marta, Reijn makes a clear point to viewers by having well-off individuals quickly suspect and endanger someone who does not share the same economic status as them—a point that society's unfair beliefs have embedded a distinct division between people that has reached an unfathomable and dangerous level.

Perhaps the most essential of the fictional crime elements, the resolution of a crime story best emphasizes the story's central purpose, solidifying the conversations presented and the interpretations that have been established. Rafter expands on what the conclusions of crime films offer, explaining that crime films' resolutions give "us contradictory sorts of satisfaction: the reality of what we fear to be true and the fantasy of overcoming that reality; the pleasure of entering the realm of the forbidden and illicit and the security of rejecting or escaping that realm in the end" (3). In different ways, both films achieve this type of "satisfaction;" Johnson achieves it by the end of *Knives Out* by ending the film with Marta overcoming the Thrombey's attempts to reclaim Harlan's will from her—a final closeup shot of her watching the Thrombeys from the balcony and sipping a mug that reads "My house, my rules, my coffee," solidifying her victory (Johnson 2:05:08). Visually, the whole setup is symbolic; Marta's placement above the Thrombeys represents the power she now holds over them as she has acquired the inheritance the family was convinced that they had earned. Rutigliano concurs with Marta's success by the film's ending, remarking that "[t]he film's defensive-sounding title is the first and last sharp point it makes—that taking on a thorny, rotting system like the Thrombey family sovereignty isn't easy, and won't happen without a big fight, or at the very least, screaming bloody murder." In the film's finale, the previous conversations Johnson included come together to represent the metaphorical overthrowing of the modern biased system that the Thrombeys embody. By having this system lose to Marta, Johnson creates a new reality—one he seemingly suggests that society and the audience should stray toward. Less optimistically, by its conclusion, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* achieves the same "satisfaction" *Knives Out* does. After discovering the true cause of David's death, the film concludes with a final scene in which Max, the only one in the group who was not present for the night's events, returns and promptly asks Bee and Sophie, the sole survivors, what happened. In a final close-up, the girls, who are clearly in shock, are both silent as they are brought back to reality (Reijn 1:27:41). While this is can be seen as an unfortunate fate for the characters, the film's conclusion does supply a sense of contentment by having the influencer's egotistical attempts to save themselves backfire, leaving them either dead due to their unprincipled decisions or in a reality in which pretending to be the perfect influential figure will not be enough to dismiss a murder charge. The film's final moments not only further execute Reijn's themes regarding younger generations

recognizing harmful attributes of online and influencer culture, but they also, similarly to *Knives Out*, make a proposition—a reality in which those in privileged positions are unable to fake their way out of the critical or, in the film's case, fatal mistakes they made.

Using the films *Knives Out* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, this essay exemplifies specific and individual aspects of crime narratives that are capable of including social commentary. Both films, utilizing their victims, suspects, and resolutions, discuss and critique the relevant societal topic of class division. Focused on the upper-class Thrombey family who benefits from privilege, *Knives Out* criticizes the current bias system that society perpetuates, creating a new, more hopeful reality by its ending that Johnson believes modern American society should strive toward. Similar yet different, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* follows a group of wealthy social media influencers who, due to their economic statuses, are in privileged positions. The film uses the characters to critique social figures' harmful behavior with technology and behavior within modern influencer culture, working as a cautionary tale for younger generations if they do not recognize the harm in this behavior and choose not to perpetuate it.

Works Cited

Chang, Justin. "It Has Its Sharp Moments, but *Bodies Bodies Bodies* Could Use a Few Corpse Corrections." *Los Angeles Times*, www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2022-08-04/bodies-bodies-bodies-review-a24-pete-davidson.

Dulude, Katarina. "The Roles of Class and Gender in Popular Films of 2019: Hustlers, *Knives Out*, and Avengers: Endgame." *The Macksey Journal*, 2022.

Johnson, Rian. *Knives Out*. Lionsgate, 2019.

Pepper, Andrew, et al. *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Routledge, 2021.

Rafter, Nicole. "Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society." *Oxford University Press*, 2006.

Reijn, Halina. *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. A24, 2022.

Rutigliano, Olivia. "*Knives Out* Is a Surprisingly Subversive Mystery." *CrimeReads*, 7 Nov. 2022, www.crimereads.com/knives-out-is-a-surprisingly-subversive-mystery/.

Spina, Ferdinando. "Crime Films." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*, pp. 1-29.

Photo by: Will Callan

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*

Katelyn Mathew, *Ball State University*

• • •

When we read crime fiction, we often expect a cast dominated by adult characters. This is likely a result of decades' worth of popular crime fiction narratives almost exclusively containing adult characters. The earliest literature in the mystery and crime genre that was targeted towards younger audiences contained teenage detectives and adult criminals because it allowed the younger audiences to read about powerful teenagers overthrowing adult authority while still only engaging in acceptable moral activities in an attempt to decrease or discourage juvenile delinquency. A newer trend among young adult crime fiction novels is the adolescent playing the part of the criminal in addition to the detective. Applying social cognitive theory explored in the study conducted by Black and Barnes to the roles of adolescents in Karen M. McManus's young adult mystery novel *One of Us Is Lying* and its sequel *One of Us Is Next*, this essay will analyze the novels' adolescent characters to show how adolescent characters in young adult crime fiction reflect their young audiences' desires to subvert adult hierarchies while still displaying acceptable morals and how they possibly influence their sense of morality.

Crime fiction as a genre has notably been geared towards adult audiences, most likely a result of the violent subject matter including but not limited to murder, rape, torture, and gore. However, the crime fiction genre isn't exclusive to adult audiences. Young adult (YA) crime fiction, emerging in the 1920s and gaining popularity around the 1950s, is targeted towards younger audiences between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Despite catering towards a younger audience, young adult fiction—including young adult crime fiction—is a genre that deserves recognition and serious discussion. Focusing on the roles of adolescents in Karen M. McManus's young adult mystery novel *One of Us Is Lying* and its sequel *One of Us Is Next*, as well as research on the effects of YA fiction, this essay will analyze the adolescent characters to show that adolescent characters in young adult crime fiction reflect and possibly influence young audiences' sense of morality, especially in a society in which technology plays an integral role in adolescents' everyday lives.

To understand the genre of YA crime fiction and its audience, it is important to note its origins. In "Teenage Detectives and Teenage Delinquents," Ilana Nash analyzes the society which created YA crime fiction and traces its roots back to 1880s writer Edward Stratemeyer, who wrote many teenage heroism stories for boys in the ten–fifteen age range. It wasn't until the 1920s when Stratemeyer's publishing company, called Stratemeyer Syndicate, published the Hardy Boys series, which became one of the first, if not the first, children's detective series featuring recurring teenage characters as detectives (Nash 73–74). The *Nancy Drew* series was quick to follow in the 1930s, and around twenty years later, both series' popularity rocketed. This was after World War II, which brought an onslaught of teenage independence and social influence. Nash explains, "The literatures of teens and crime used the image of the teenager to address anxieties about social control and the future of American society" (Nash 73). Many believed that these stories and other similar stories would encourage behavior that was deemed acceptable and would discourage teenage delinquency as well as, ultimately, the erosion of American morals in the younger generation. To accomplish this, the role of adolescents in YA crime fiction was that of detectives upholding traditional values that reinforced conservative hierarchies of class, race, and gender. For example, those who came from lower-class households were depicted as more susceptible to delinquency and violence. Girls faced sexual activity as a factor to determine their delinquency whereas the boys' sexual activity was under less scrutiny, their delinquency being primarily focused on violence and vandalism (Nash 76). The desired result would be to encourage readers to adhere to the boundaries and values portrayed.

While it is still true today that adolescent characters in this genre are given the

role of the detective to bring the criminal to justice, the morally sound detective is not the only role adolescents occupy anymore. John G. Cawelti identifies four essential character roles in mystery fiction: The victim, the criminal, the detective, and those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it (91). The original YA crime fiction writers from the 1930s up until recently have ensured their teenage characters filled the roles of the detective in an attempt to decrease juvenile delinquency, as Nash explained, but modern YA crime fiction seems to have changed this convention. Now more than ever, audiences of this genre are seeing teenagers in the roles of all of those presented by Cawelti, and some even redefine these roles.

A modern example of YA crime fiction redefining some of these roles is McManus's *One of Us Is Lying*. For some background, in this novel, high school student Simon runs a notorious gossip app called "About That" that regularly exposes Bayview High's students' secrets. During an after-school detention where the supervising teacher exits the room for a short amount of time, leaving students Bronwyn, Nate, Cooper, Addy, and Simon alone, Simon mysteriously dies. The four other students in detention, later dubbed the Bayview Four, are all potential suspects in his death because the gossip app Simon ran had queued up their secrets next, providing them all with a motive for murder. In the end, it is revealed that Simon suffered a fatal allergic reaction that he caused as a form of suicide because he wanted to die in infamy while bringing down the four other students with him. In his manifesto, which gets revealed towards the end of the book, Simon wrote down that he thought about conducting a school shooting but "that's been done to death. It doesn't have the same impact anymore. I want to be more creative. More unique. I want my suicide to be talked about for years" (McManus 322). In this book, it is clear that Simon is simultaneously playing the role of the victim and also of the criminal, with the other criminals being his two friends who helped him execute the phases of his plan after his death. Like Simon, the four students who are blamed for Simon's death—Bronwyn, Addy, Nate, and Cooper—fill two roles in the narrative, the detective and those threatened by the crime. Unlike Cawelti's original formula, which stated that those who were threatened by the crime were unable to solve it, the characters in *One of Us Is Lying* are the ones who solve it. In fact, it seems as though it is up to them because the adult authority falls short of discovering the truth themselves.

More unique to *One of Us Is Lying* compared to early YA crime fiction is modern technology's consistent, and almost intrusive, role in adolescents' lives. Technology has become an integral part of modern teens' lives, and the novels reflect that and use those technologies—more specifically, social media—to create a plot that generates relatability among young readers. Simon finds a community online that fuels his hatred towards his classmates of a higher social ranking. According to Janae, Simon

"started spending all his time online with a bunch of creepers, fantasizing about getting revenge on everyone who made him miserable" (McManus 322). In this context, "creepers" refers to individuals who shared Simon's twisted and masochistic fantasies of causing harm to others with a sense of higher self-worth. Furthermore, Simon's "About That" app spreads secrets among Bayview High and exposes its students for the sake of drama and gossip. Simon later uses it to expose the four students at the top of the social ladder—the Bayview Four—because he is jealous of their social status and wants to be the catalyst of their downfall. In the early stages of the investigation following Simon's mysterious death, Detective Wheeler told Addy in a conversation that read as a soft interrogation, "Kids your age are under a lot of pressure today…The social media alone—it's like you can't make a mistake anymore, can you? It follows you everywhere" (McManus 83). The intent of this quote in context was to persuade Addy into admitting guilt, but in the greater context of the novel, and even in reality, it shows how prevalent the impact of social media and technology is on adolescents. Young readers who have grown up in the age of social media have most likely faced some form of cyberbullying, so when they read of Simon facing the consequences of his actions, they must feel some sort of satisfaction. It enables them to read a situation in which a bully loses and the victims win. Although it was in Simon's plan to die, his ultimate plan was to ruin the lives of the Bayview Four and frame Nate as his murderer. The Bayview Four, along with the help of Maeve, ruin Simon's plans and end up exposing his detestable and manipulative actions. The genre of young adult literature (YAL) provides a sense of wish fulfillment, though Connors claims it is not fulfillment as "the life we wish we could live, but as the power and influence we wish we could have" (3). This is what grants readers satisfaction: The bully facing justice and the consequences of their actions, something that victims of cyberbullying or other types of bullying undoubtedly want to experience.

With this context of modern adolescents and their roles in mind, one can begin to analyze modern YA crime fiction as it pertains to its effects on audiences today. A study done by Jessica Black and Jennifer Barnes assessed how fiction—with a focus on YA fiction—impacts readers' empathy, moral identity, and moral agency. Their findings concluded that exposure to adult fiction and YA fiction were both connected to integrity, or "the desire for consistency between moral principles and actions," but perceived moral agency was exclusively linked to YA fiction (Black and Barnes 157). Furthermore, across studies, YA fiction was found to be consistently associated with empathic concern, integrity, and moral agency. These findings align with social cognitive theory, which states that "learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior" (Black and Barnes 149). Or, when applied to the context of this paper, consumers of literature can absorb

the moral behavior displayed by fictional characters. This would support the efforts made by publishers in the 1950s when they were pushing for the representation of traditional values in the form of teenage detectives in YA crime fiction, though those traditional values were imposed by white conservative middle-class Americans and are no longer the exclusive standard by which Western society at large judges morality. As a result of Black and Barnes' study, which shows how influential the genre of YA fiction is to its audience, it is paramount to critically analyze its content because the adolescent audience will soon assimilate into and assume active roles in society.

These research findings provided by Black and Barnes apply to *One of Us Is Lying* because morally ambiguous, morally sound, and morally unsound actions are all performed by adolescent characters in the major roles identified by Cawelti. As previously mentioned, in *One of Us Is Lying*, the criminals are high school students. Simon runs a gossip app that was designed to expose his peers for his own entertainment, something that many would agree is not particularly morally sound across multiple standards. Furthermore, Simon's two friends that agree to help him in his plan to kill himself and then pass the blame to his classmates—whom he hates because they were ranked high on the social hierarchy whereas he, despite his best efforts, was always on the bottom—also make questionable choices, including the instance where one of them, Jake, attacks Addy and nearly kills her because she messed up the plan near the end. Janae, Simon's other friend who initially agreed to help execute his plan, decides near the end that she would no longer go along with his plan to plant evidence on Addy because she realized Addy was not as awful as Simon led her to believe. When Addy asks Janae why she didn't stick to the plan to plant the evidence on her, Janae says, "You were nice to me…I know we're probably not really friends and you probably hate me now, but…I couldn't do that to you" (McManus 327). When Jake attacks Addy after she discovers the full truth, Janae also helps her then. This blurring of lines between roles redefines Cawelti's roles for mystery narratives.

The four main characters who play the part of detective also blur the lines of roles because they were actively hiding something viewed as morally wrong. Bronwyn, for instance, was hiding the fact that she stole the answers for a chemistry exam to uphold her perfect GPA to be accepted into an Ivy League university. Nate's secret is that he had been selling drugs. For Addy, it's how she cheated on her boyfriend. Cooper's secret was that he is gay, and although his secret is not nearly on the same level as his peers', it was still something that wouldn't have been widely accepted. He is also rumored to have been using steroids to enhance his athletic performance in sports, though this would be revealed as a lie. With each of these characters not upholding the traditional values, one might argue that despite their ability to bring the truth to light, they are not the role models Nash wrote about in her discussion of

adolescents in YA crime fiction.

However, as a result of Black and Barnes' study which found strong associations between the consumption of YA fiction and empathy, it can be said that reading books such as *One of Us Is Lying* is not inherently detrimental to their audiences simply because their adolescent characters occasionally misbehave. The main characters in the Bayview Four adhere to more progressive standards of morals. The teen delinquents, Simon and Jake, are written in a negative light and are met with justice. For Simon, this means his malicious plans are ruined and are brought to life. For Jake, this means being arrested. Consequently, this novel still encourages youth to be more aligned with the adolescents who fill the detective role and those threatened by the crime than the teen criminals.

As previously mentioned, these adolescents adhere to a more progressive and modern moral code that does not, for example, villainize promiscuity or homosexuality. These depictions could be an attempt to change the YA crime genre's penchant for supporting the white middle class values that were being pushed by the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* series. As well as attempting to change these genre conventions, they reflect the shift in morals present in younger generations, who are the target audiences for these novels. For example, a poll conducted by Gallup, a global analytics firm, found that the percentage of U.S. adults who identified as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community has "increased to a new high of 7.1%, which is double the percentage from 2012," which is largely due to the influx of LGBTQIA+ identifiers in Generation Z (Jones). The representation of non-heterosexual characters in *One of Us Is Lying*, though minimal, reflects this trend. While this representation is small in comparison to the representation of heterosexuality in McManus's novels, it does not villainize or demoralize the characters who identify as such. In fact, Cooper, one of the main characters, is gay and helps the other three of the Bayview Four solve Simon's death. His boyfriend also aids in the uncovering of the truth of the crime. Audiences also want to see more representation of POC characters in YAL, which also diverts from the focus of the first YA crime fiction narratives since they aimed to represent and prioritize the white middle and upper class. *One of Us Is Lying* takes a step to cater to this with the character of Bronwyn. She diverts from the stereotypes maintained by the era of *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* by representing a POC adolescent woman who is intelligent and has attainable aspirations of attending an ivy league university. YAL is seeing an influx of diversity, but the YA crime fiction genre still has plenty of room to become more diverse and inclusive. *One of Us Is Lying* is a step towards this representation. Having the more diverse teen detectives—those who are meant to display the behaviors which young audiences are meant to draw influence from—demonstrates how McManus's YA crime novels have begun to push the genre forward

as well as reflect the progressive values of their audience.

While the YA crime genre has shifted since the *Nancy Drew* series and the *Hardy Boys* series to reflect changes in audiences' values, one aspect that has prevailed is the adolescent desire to overthrow adult hierarchies. The first notable signs of fear of teenage rebellion sprouted from post-war America when adults' anxieties of atomic warfare during the Cold War shifted "to the image of the nation's youth" (Nash 76). The fear of teenage rebellion was met with the desire to subdue and control teenage behavior, which has continued to the present. Today, similar acts of teenage rebellion from the past are still apparent. Also increasingly present is the number of youth involved in organized protests and rallies, such as March for Our Lives and climate change demonstrations. Psychologist Carl Pickhardt identifies two common types of teenage rebellion: Rebellion of non-conformity and rebellion of noncompliance, otherwise stated as rebellion against adult authority (Pickhardt). This rebellion against adult authority comes from adolescents' "desire for power and control," according to Sean P. Connors, researcher of YAL (Connors 3). The adult authority falls short in *One of Us Is Lying* in multiple instances, such as failing to discover the true person who is at fault for Simon's death, and even wrongly arresting Nate, causing the rest of the Bayview Four to have to prove his innocence in their process of uncovering the real murderer. When Bronwyn first learns of Nate's unfounded arrest, she says, "You've seen how screwed up this investigation is. They thought I did it for a while. They're wrong. I'm positive they're wrong" (McManus 276). The reason the authorities believe Nate to be the murderer is because it was in Simon's plan for Janae to plant evidence and frame one of the Bayview Four. Janae is meant to plant the evidence on Addy, but after Addy is friendly to her, she changes the plan. The rest of the Bayview Four rebel against adult authorities' ruling and investigate the murder case themselves because the adult authorities fell for the lie. Reading about these adults' shortcomings and the adolescents' ability to subvert their authority by solving the mysteries themselves reflects and satiates young adult readers' desires to overthrow adult hierarchies in reality.

The sequel to *One of Us Is Lying*, *One of Us Is Next*, contains the same aspects of the first novel that reflects and influences its modern adolescent audience. As a basis for context, the novel follows the younger sister of Bronwyn, named Maeve, and two other students named Phoebe and Knox. These three are the targets of a dangerous, and even fatal, game of "truth or dare" that sprung up as a copycat of Simon's infamous gossip app to continue Simon's legacy. While none of the main three characters are suspected of being behind the anonymously run game of "truth or dare," they are each impacted by it as they all have secrets that could get out if they choose truth instead of the perilous dare. In *One of Us Is Next*, Cawelti's identified roles are also mainly filled by

adolescent characters. Maeve, Phoebe, and Knox fill the role of the detective and are also somewhat threatened by the crime, though in a different way compared to how the four students in the previous book were threatened. The victims are all high school students, and the main criminal is an adult named Jared, who is brought to justice in the end. It could be argued that Phoebe's younger siblings Emma and Owen could also be classified as criminals since they teamed up with Jared for a short amount of time, but when assessing their intentions, it is clear Jared took advantage of their young age and emotions. A deeper analysis of these characters' situations will be conducted later in this essay to support the claim that the adolescent characters who have contributed in some way to the crime are not used as positive models for the young audience to imitate in their formation of morals and behaviors. While Jared, an adult, is the main criminal in this novel who exemplifies a corrupt and violent standard of morals, it still stands that adolescents fill the major roles.

Like the first novel in the series, technology plays a major role in *One of Us Is Next* as well. However, the gossip app "About That" is gone and is instead replaced with a "truth or dare" game conducted over text that results in the death of a student named Brandon. The digital footprint left by the one controlling the game and picking its victims leads Knox, Maeve, and Phoebe to discover a Reddit thread that gives them enough clues to reveal their identities and motive. In the first book, technology's role was the root cause of the issues that arose; in the sequel, it helped track down the one responsible and bring him to justice. In both, technology—specifically social media—is a method of exposing students and enacting revenge. In real life, the same can be true. Cyberbullying—such as the "truth or dare" game in the novel—is increasingly prevalent among modern adolescents as they become more reliant on social media and technology because individuals feel a sense of protection from their words and behavior when they are conducted online. Gianesini and Brighi explain that this is because when individuals communicate online, "they feel that they are a part of an anonymous mass and therefore tend not to take responsibility for their actions or do not perceive their actions as particularly harmful because 'virtual' is not 'real'" (8–9). The perceived disconnect between "virtual" and "real" enables cyberbullies to victimize their targets easier. However, the pain and torment victims face as a result of cyberbullying is not easier to manage just because it is facilitated online. After Knox's secret is revealed during "truth or dare", he narrates, "How the hell am I supposed to show up at school tomorrow? Or ever?" (McManus 151). When adolescents read these lines, many of them are likely to relate to how Knox is feeling because of how prevalent cyberbullying has become in recent decades. These instances in *One of Us Is Next* reflect not only the constant use of technology in modern adolescents, but they also reflect the unique struggles they face as a result.

Similarly to how each of the Bayview Four characters all have flaws (or perceived flaws) in *One of Us Is Lying*, the main protagonists in the sequel are also written with more moral ambiguity than the earliest YA crime fiction adolescent protagonists discussed by Nash. For example, Phoebe sleeps with her sister Emma's boyfriend behind her back and Maeve tells an embarrassing secret about Knox to her sister Bronwyn which gets leaked to the whole school. Again, although the findings of Barnes and Black's research that assessed how YAL impacts audiences in terms of empathy, morality, and integrity, reading about these characters' flaws are not inherently causing their audiences to misbehave. There are not as many teen criminals present in *One of Us Is Next* as there were in *One of Us Is Lying*, but there are a few examples of adolescents who, intentionally or not, contribute to the main crime. These examples would include Emma and Owen, Phoebe's siblings. Emma wanted revenge on a student named Brandon, who accidentally killed her father and cheated on her with her sister Phoebe, and started chatting with Jared—the main criminal—on Reddit, but she backed out as soon as she realized how violent and cruel Jared's plans were since she only wanted to expose unflattering secrets. When revealing the truth at the very end, Emma says, "As soon as the Truth or Dare game started, I hated it. I regretted everything. I told Jared to shut it down, and he said he would…But the game kept going. I didn't understand why, but I was afraid to get in touch with Jared again." She begins to cry and adds, "Brandon wasn't supposed to die" (McManus 336–337). Owen took his sister's place in the chat room without Emma's knowledge because he saw how devastated she was as a result of her ex-boyfriend cheating on her and tried to continue speaking with Jared, but once he realized how far Jared was taking the game, he also backed out. After Brandon died fulfilling a dare from "truth or dare," Owen messages Jared still under the guise of his sister and says, "That wasn't supposed to happen" and then promptly "ghosts" him (McManus 371). It is evident that their intentions—publicly humiliating the one who caused their father's death with teen gossip—were not criminal or malevolent, though the consequences were. As such, these books still encourage youth to be more aligned with the adolescents who fill the roles of detective and those threatened by the crime than those who contribute to the crime.

Like *One of Us Is Lying*, *One of Us Is Next* also reflects its audience's more progressive values compared to the traditional values identified by Nash. The three main protagonists—Maeve, Knox, and Phoebe—as well as some tertiary characters, demonstrate these shifts. Younger audiences have an increased desire to see representation of diverse characters in narratives. It is important to note that *One of Us Is Next* is undoubtedly not the most diverse YA crime novel, but it is worth noting the difference in representation compared to the earliest YA crime fiction narrative

to recognize the progression of the genre. Representation of illness has increased in YAL—a notable example would be John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*—but its representation in YA crime fiction is still low. Maeve's character represents a character who struggled with leukemia in her past and grapples with a potential relapse throughout the novel. Representation of race is also present in the novel with Maeve's Columbian heritage and Luis and his family's Mexican heritage. Another aspect of the novel that reflects the desire for more diverse characters and the audiences' more progressive values is the—somewhat limited—representation of sexual orientations. Cooper, who was in the closet in *One of Us Is Lying*, appears in this novel as openly gay and in a happy relationship with his boyfriend. Having more diverse teen detectives—those who are meant to display the behaviors which young audiences are meant to draw influence from—demonstrates how McManus's YA crime novels have begun to push the genre forward as well as reflect the progressive values of their audience.

As well as catering towards its audiences' desire for more representation and progressive values, *One of Us Is Next* provides readers with teen detectives who overpower adult authority. Like the first novel in the series, the adult authorities are unable to solve the crime of Brandon's death; in fact, they do not recognize that the death of Brandon is even a crime until the three teen detectives—Maeve, Knox, and Phoebe—solve it for them. The adults are written as primarily uninvolved, resulting in the responsibility of solving the crime to fall onto the kids. Their connections and unique perspectives grant them the ability to uncover things the adult authorities were unable to. In one scene where Maeve and Knox are attempting to hack into Knox's mother's work computer, Maeve succeeds without any struggle. She does not even have to hack into it because she guesses common passwords until she gets it right on the third try. She tells Knox, "Parents are the single worst threat to any type of cyber security" (287). It is by the adults' incompetencies that they are able to succeed. Seeing these adult authorities failing and the teens succeeding feeds into the wish fulfillment many readers of this genre seek. Connors explains that reading about adolescents pushing back against authority "challenges readers to look critically at the power structures that envelop and seek to construct them" (3). He asserts that it is important for adolescents to read these types of novels, even in school settings, because allowing students to read YAL that includes characters who resist oppressive power systems "invite[s] students to acknowledge their own potential to act" (Connors 20). Although Connors is discussing YA dystopia, the same can be said about YA crime fiction. This is especially true concerning McManus's *One of Us Is Lying* and *One of Us Is Next* because they are both set in the mostly relatable setting of a public school and reflect the struggles adolescents from their technology-infused generation face.

Although YA crime fiction is for a younger audience, it would be unreasonable

to be skeptical of the merit of the literature that falls under this genre. In fact, because this genre contains subjects that are geared more towards mature audiences—such as crime and violence—and is targeted towards a demographic who are in one of the most critical moments for their development, it requires our attention. The findings of Black and Barnes's study as well as the research by Nash prove the importance of YAL, and when applied to YA crime fiction—especially more modern YA crime fiction—these implications are even more critical for this reason. Not only does the analysis of YA crime literature reveal the desires and practices of its audience, but it also influences its audience in ways that may contribute to their formation of morals.

Works Cited

Black, Jessica and Barnes, Jennifer. "Fiction and Morality: Investigating the Associations Between Reading, Exposure, Empathy, Morality, and Moral Judgment." *Psychology of Popular Media*. 2021, Vol. 10, No. 3, 149-164. dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000281.

Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976.

Connors, Sean P. ""I Have a Kind of Power I Never Knew I Possessed": Surveillance, Agency, and the Possibility of Resistance in YA Dystopian Fiction." *Study & Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, Sept. 2017, https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2376-5275.2017.3.1.1-23.

Gianesini, Giovanna, and Brighi, Antonella. "Cyberbullying in the Era of Digital Relationships: The Unique Role of Resilience and Emotion Regulation on Adolescents' Adjustment." *Technology and Youth: Growing Up in a Digital World*, vol. 19, 2015, pp. 1–46, https://doi.org/10.1108/s1537-466120150000019001.

Jones, Jeffrey M. "LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks up to 7.1%." Gallup.com, *Gallup*, 10 June 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx.

McManus, Karen M. *One of Us Is Lying*. New York, Delacorte Press, 2017.

—. *One of Us Is Next*. New York, Delacorte Press, 2020.

Nash, Ilana. "Teenage Detectives and Teenage Delinquents." *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, 2010, pp. 72–85, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521199377.007.

Pickhardt, Carl. "Rebel with a Cause: Rebellion in Adolescence." *Psychology Today*, 6, Dec. 2009, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/surviving-your-childs-adolescence/200912/rebel-cause-rebellion-in-adolescence. Accessed 18 Jan 2023.

Photo by: Jaxson Kidd

Original art modified to black and white with permission from artist

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=130994359&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).

Contributors' Bios

Caleb Hardesty is a senior at Ball State University majoring in Creative Writing. He is on the Editorial staff of *The Digital Literature Review*. In the future, he plans to pursue an MFA. He looks exactly like a racoon, and was born in the dark. His hobbies include writing and going to live music and comedy shows.

Riley Ellis is an undergraduate student at Ball State University, double majoring in Political Science and Professional Writing with minors in Spanish and English Literature. She is currently the Teaching Assistant for Ball State's *Digital Literature Review.*

Caitlin Davis is a sophomore English student at Ball State University. She currently is a part of *The Digital Literature Review*'s publicity team.

Rae Keeler is a junior at Ball State University majoring in English Literature with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. She is a member of the Editorial staff for *The Digital Literature Review*. She is also involved in Ball State's choral program and is a member of Operation Blackout, an inclusive dance club. In her free time she enjoys reading, listening to podcasts, and crocheting.

Ellen Bain is a junior at Ball State University majoring in Secondary English Education. She is currently a part of the design team for *The Digital Literature Review*. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing poetry, and spending time in nature.

Makayla Edwards is a junior at Ball State majoring in English Studies with a minor in Creative Writing. She is an editor for the 2023 issue of *The Digital Literature Review*. Makayla is also the Vice President and Assistant Director of Ball State's Rocky Horror Picture Show Club as well as the student supervisor at Pruis Hall. Her hobbies include karaoke, thrifting, and writing creative non-fiction.

Angelo Gonzalez is a junior at Ball State University majoring in English Studies. He is currently part of *The Digital Literature Review*'s publicity team. In this free time, he enjoys spending time with his spouse and their two rambuntious cats admist their vast collection of houseplants.

Katelyn Mathew is a senior at Ball State University majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing. She is currently the design team leader for Ball State's *The Digital Literature Review.*

Bella Hughes is a junior at Ball State University majoring in English Studies with a minor in Creative Writing. She is currently the Lead Editor for Ball State's *The Digital Literature Review.* She enjoys reading, writing, and spending time with her friends. She dedicates her essay to her mom, Corey, a fellow Murderino.

Will Callan is a junior at Ball State University, majoring in creative writing with a minor in literature. He is on the Design team of the *DLR* and hopes to enter graduate school in the near future. He enjoys struggling to write about himself for contributor's bios.

Art by: Kallie Hunchman