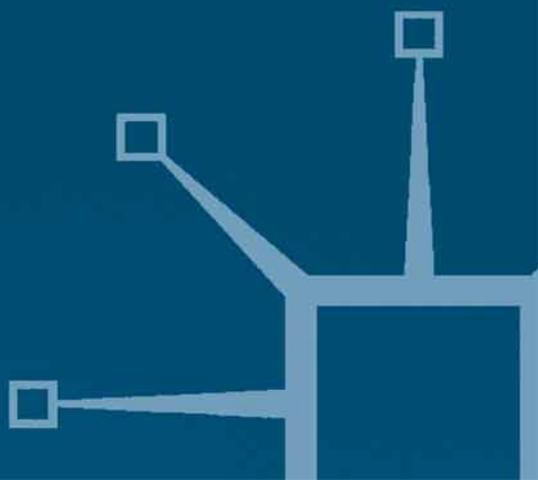


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Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2001 978-0-333-74547-2

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First published 2001 by

PALGRAVE

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE is the new global academic imprint of

St. Martin's Press LLC Scholarly and Reference Division and

Palgrave Publishers Ltd (formerly Macmillan Press Ltd).

ISBN 978-1-349-41049-1 ISBN 978-1-4039-1359-3 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781403913593

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Biressi, Anita, 1965–

Crime, fear, and the law in true crime stories / Anita Biressi.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Crime in popular culture—Great Britain. 2. Crime in mass media—Great Britain. 3. Crime in literature. 4. Crime writing—Social aspects. 5. Fear of crime—Great Britain. I. Title.

HV6947 .B57 2001

364—dc21

2001021869

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01

*For my parents,
Alfredo Carlo Biressi and Ruth Lina Biressi*

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Part I Issues, Histories, Contexts	
1 'True Stories Only!'	15
Looking at the Thompson family	17
Defining the true crime book	22
True crime: professional ethics	24
True crime: literary merit	29
Thinking through true crime	34
True crime and the production of knowledge	36
2 Histories of True Crime	41
True crime literature and its antecedents	41
Understanding change in true crime literature	43
The triumph of God's revenge: the place of providence in true crime narratives	45
<i>The Newgate Calendar</i>	48
Policing, property and the dissolution of the old order	53
Modern criminal subjects: the delinquent	56
Modern criminal subjects: the mob and the notorious criminal	58
Modern criminal subjects: the dangerous individual	63
The Moors Murders as a landmark case	67
Beyond belief	70
Concluding comments	72
3 Discourses of Law and Order in Britain from 1979 to 1995	73
'Keeping 'em peeled' – the vigilant citizen as moral subject	73
Privatisation and individual responsibility	77

'A very modern sort of watchfulness': security and surveillance	80
The citizen versus the criminal subculture	85
Public centurions: investigative and true crime programming	88
The moral subject of <i>Reader's Digest</i>	93
The discourse of <i>Reader's Digest</i> : individualism and responsibility	94
<i>Reader's Digest</i> and the language of common sense	96
Active citizenship and defensive individualism	98
Criminality and entrepreneurialism	102
The erosion of boundaries and diffused criminality	105
Concluding comments	107
Part II Stories, Bodies, Criminals	
4 Crime Magazine Stories: From American Idiom to an English Vernacular	111
'Yank mags' at Woolworth's	112
Exposed! Sex and violence, disciplinarity and control	116
'Read all about it!': the construction of a popular vernacular	122
5 Period True Crime: History from Below?	126
True crime: past into present	127
True crime as melodrama: the case of Kitty Breaks and Frederick Holt	132
Representing working-class violence: the case of George Vass and Margaret Docherty	135
The significance of the image: picturing the past in true crime stories	137
The potency of the image	139
Story-telling and recollection	142
6 Daring to Know: Looking at the Body in the New True Crime Magazine	146
True crime as esoteric knowledge	146
The body of the criminal and the body of the victim	148
Science and the body in <i>Real-Life Crimes</i> magazine	152
The victim's body as horror-spectacle	157

7	Figure in a Landscape: The Dangerous Individual in Criminal Biography	164
	New times, new crimes	164
	Villainy as privilege	173
	Brian Masters' <i>Killing for Company</i>	178
	Nilsen as artist <i>manqué</i>	181
	Subjects and objects	186
	Who are you? Categorising the killer	189
8	Concluding Comments	195
	<i>Notes</i>	197
	<i>Bibliography</i>	213
	<i>Index</i>	235

Preface

This book examines contemporary true crime narratives produced in Britain since the late 1970s. It unpacks the relationship between true crime, its popular fascination and appeal and the moment of its recent commercial success. It argues that an analysis of the ways in which true crime picks up and works with discourses of law and order, crime and punishment, violence and vulnerability provides valuable insights into the production of the modern social subject. It maintains that the real experience of violence upon which non-fiction draws must be taken into account by cultural criticism if critique is to move beyond a purely relative textual reading of true crime.

This work begins by signalling the generic antecedents of true crime literature, arguing that new literatures of crime arise partly through new knowledges and new practices and partly through the collision of a range of mainly non-fiction popular genres. It charts the emergence of modern notions of 'lawlessness', the divisions between the criminal subject and the law-abiding citizen and the creation of the 'dangerous individual' demonstrating how these become the main objects of scrutiny in contemporary true crime literature.

The rhetorical division between the criminal and the good citizen is interrogated through an examination of the discursive relationship between British true crime and the social construction of crime and criminality since the late 1970s. Topical discourses about home security and rising crime are unpacked in order to demonstrate how these intersect with dominant notions of individualism, citizenship and social responsibility. This analysis emphasises how subject positions such as the 'moral subject' are constituted through a range of discourses about crime, and also considers the likely pleasures offered by true crime. Illustration, humour and a popular vernacular all contribute to an understanding of true crime as a popular reservoir of experience and knowledge about crime and its social context and that the pleasure of recognition is a significant one.

An examination of the newer collect and keep true crime partwork magazines demonstrates that anxieties about agency, progress and mortality, which are central to an understanding of true crime in general, are particularly pointed in the new true crime. For while true crime presents the development of modern technologies as inherently

progressive, the images and stories of the destroyed body which lie at its core, suggest a profound ambivalence about the role of 'man' in the order of things. The book concludes by examining through close textual analysis the discursive clash between a literary aesthetic that elevates and privileges the murderer as a powerful agent and a moral imperative that aims to condemn him (rarely her) for turning victims into objects of atrocity and abuse. The overall argument is that the discursive conflicts played out across the range of true crime forms constitute a locus of fascination and repulsion with crime and criminality that says much about the production of the modern social subject.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to the British Academy, the University of East London and Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College for funding various stages of the book. Particular thanks also go to the Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at BCUC for funding the sabbatical that gave me the opportunity to complete this work. Thank you also to friends and colleagues at the Department of Cultural Studies at UEL and at BCUC for their help and friendly support throughout the period of this work.

I wish to thank staff at the following institutions for their help in locating materials. The British Library, Bloomsbury and St. Pancras; the Rare Manuscripts Reading Room, The British Library, St. Pancras; The British Newspaper Library, Colindale, North London; The Guildhall Library, London; Learning Resource Centre, University of East London; Senate House Library, University of London; The St. Brides Library, London EC1; Barking Central Reference Library and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Thanks goes also to Research Editor Lucy Wildman and Librarian Victoria Kearns, both at the *Reader's Digest* Archive, to Elizabeth Munroe, P.A. to the Director, Crimestoppers Trust and to Sergeant Bob Gray at the Press Office at Thames Valley Police.

Many friends and colleagues contributed to the development of this book, by reading manuscripts, offering criticism and new insights, collecting press cuttings, listening to my complaints and passions, cooking me meals and ensuring that I enjoyed a good night out once in while. Particular thanks go to Dr. Caroline Bainbridge, Professor Andrew Blake, Professor Clive Bloom, Pat Burn, Miri Forster, Dr. Laura Marcus, Bert Nunn, Sylvia Nunn, Berni O'Dea, Professor Alan O'Shea, Dr. John Parham, Professor Kenneth Parker, Bill Schwarz and Kathryn White. I owe a special debt to Dr. Susannah Radstone whose patience, commitment and untiring enthusiasm pushed me forward and to Heather Nunn without whom this book would not have been written.

Introduction

We all seem to be interested in murderers these days. They are our truth and our fiction; they are our truth *as* fiction, and vice versa.

Wendy Lesser (1993: 2)

As Wendy Lesser notes, extreme crime, especially murder, exerts a particular popular fascination. From conventional press reportage to the controversial death row images featured in the billboard advertisements for the Italian knitwear company Benetton, it is more than apparent that real-life crime sells. True crime entertainment, then, is just one contributor among many to the media debate about crime in society. Today, British true crime books and magazines address a heterogeneous range of criminal activity including multiple and domestic murder, gang warfare, grand robbery and serial rape. The genre may be broken down into sub-genres authored by detectives, relatives of murder victims and relatives of criminals, in addition to books written by journalists and other professional writers. Alternatively, these narratives may be organised by theme, according to type of killer, mode of killing, region or period – for example, ‘Women Who Kill’, ‘Doctors of Death’, ‘Classic Murder’, ‘Crimes of East Anglia’ and ‘Victorian Poisoners’. These stories are non-fiction narratives based on actual events, packaged and promoted for entertainment as ‘leisure reading’. They may be of any length from a feature article to a full-length book study but, unlike reportage, the event does not have to be contemporaneous or currently newsworthy. Again, unlike news or documentary, true crime is promoted primarily and explicitly as a leisure pursuit. For example, the ‘Summer Special’ editions of the monthly true crime magazines are promoted as ‘holiday reading’, a way to ‘put up your feet and relax’.

As will become apparent, the basic paradigm of the true crime narrative is built upon and modified in different ways by individual true crime writers, publishers and even readers. True crime is not, therefore, a single, monolithic genre. On the contrary, it is made meaningful to its audience precisely because it yokes together stories of the bizarre and the horrible with changing discourses of contemporary and immediate interest. The different forms of true crime entertainment are significant precisely because they produced and still produce knowledges of crime and criminality that intersect with the 'social experience of crime'. John Cawelti (1977) has argued that looking at the formulas of popular literature illuminates a range of fundamental questions, shedding light on how crime is defined in different periods and cultures, how crime literature is related to other elements of culture and the story patterns deployed to embody popular fascination with crime (Cawelti 1977: 52). This book examines formulas, codes and conventions, but then moves on to explore how these intersect with, and inform, a more complex problem – how the discourses of true crime help to produce the modern social subject who is both fearful and vigilant, but also intrigued by crime.

The main focus of this book is contemporary true crime literature in Britain since the 1980s. True crime publishing began to expand significantly at this time and only showed signs of entering a mild decline towards the late 1990s (Thorpe 1997). This decline demonstrates, perhaps, that the boom in true crime was congruent with the particular social, economic or political co-ordinates of the 1980s and early 1990s. In a commercial climate where all leisure interest magazines need to compete vigorously for shelf space, new true crime titles continue to enter the market successfully. Clearly, there is a significant readership for a variety of true crime magazines and indeed there is some evidence that the number of readers may have increased during the past two decades. *Master Detective* and *Master Detective Summer Special* (both established 1950) and *True Detective* and *True Detective Summer Special* (established 1952) are the longest running magazines. 1981 saw the launch of *True Crime* and its Summer Special and ten years later, in 1991, the quarterly magazine *Murder Most Foul* came on the market.¹ These magazines hold in common their distinctiveness in the marketplace as purveyors of non-fiction. The magazines' promotional material and front covers stress the authenticity of the material addressed in each edition. The cover of *Murder Most Foul*, for example, boasts the slogan 'NO FICTION' and 'EVERY CASE TRUE'.

Magazines are mainly sold in newsagents and by annual subscription.² Also, they frequently carry advertisements for other true crime periodicals and books, especially sister publications, suggesting that readers probably buy two or three titles per month. Circulation figures are approximate or in some cases completely unavailable.³ However, the publisher's statements for a typical year claim that their three main titles – *Master Detective*, *True Crime* and *True Detective* – have a circulation of 24,000 each.⁴ Their stated target groups are men and women between 25 and 85 in all socio-economic groups, a rather vague assertion whose commercial optimism is presumably intended to entice advertisers.⁵ Other research estimates that the combined readership for the three publications is 195,000 plus, with many readers probably buying all the titles each month (Cameron 1990: 131).⁶

These long-established monthlies frequently recycle stories across publications and from US to British magazines, retelling period or 'classic' cases and using rehashed press reports (ibid.: 133).⁷ This eclecticism is indicative of the non-specific geographical constituency of readers. Like national papers they both define what is of national concern (the 'big stories') and stress that these stories are meaningful to readers everywhere (Soothill and Walby 1991: 35). These sources, together with the often crude reproduction of monochrome photographs and drawings, recall the conventions of tabloid reportage (conflated, however, with the codes and conventions of generic fiction). The structural and formal resemblance of these magazines to newspapers suggests therefore that they may be viewed as 'ephemeral best-sellers' or one-day books, quickly read and soon to be discarded (Anderson, B. 1983: 39).

In February 1993 Eagle Moss Publications brought out a weekly, numbered series entitled *Real-Life Crimes ... and how they were solved*. This magazine is innovative because unlike many earlier publications it is designed to collect and keep in clip binders. *Real-Life Crimes* is published with colour photography, graphics and charts that contrast strongly with its competitors' monthly publications, which are entirely in monochrome and crudely produced on low-grade paper. This magazine resembles more closely other 'quality' leisure interest and self-instruction magazines such as those for cooking and DIY. It employs colour-coded sections, clear layouts and the higher production values of reference periodicals. The stated target readership of *Real-Life Crimes* is 68 per cent female, aged between 16 and 34 and occupies the C1, C2 bracket (a higher socio-economic bracket than that estimated for the more traditional magazines and a confirmation of the high numbers of

female readers). The series was scheduled to run for approximately 120 issues and achieve a circulation of 300,000 (Campbell 1993: 13). These figures suggest that a far larger market than that reached by more traditional magazines is potentially receptive to true crime.

March 1993 also saw the arrival of two more crime-related magazines: *Murder Trail* and *Crimesearch*. *Crimesearch* (anticipating an initial print-run of 80,000 copies) least resembles the traditional true crime magazine because it invites the reader to help resolve recent police inquiries by offering rewards for details of unsolved crimes, including recent murders. Its contents suggest that it is tapping into the 'law and order' market created in the main by television programmes such as *Crimewatch UK* and *Crimestoppers*. *Murder Trail*, promoted as 'frighteningly realistic', is a bi-monthly publication for armchair detectives. It contains elements of a puzzle book or murder mystery, providing forensic details, clues, maps and so on, to enable the reader to investigate crimes (Campbell 1993: 13).

This market was mined further when, in April 1994, *Killers – The Murder Magazine*, subtitled '*Shocking True Stories of the Ultimate True Crime*', was launched. It was immediately successful enough to be issued as a monthly publication. It began with an initial print-run of 50,000 copies, double the circulation figures of its more established rivals, and is expected to make a profit for the foreseeable future (Nadelson 1994: 18). It is possible, however, that the novelty of the arrival of these new-style publications in a previously long-established market may account, in part, for these commercially promising figures. *Killers* soon changed its name to *Ultimate Crimes*, ostensibly in response to reader concern that *Killers* was too 'hard' a title for them to be seen reading on public transport or to leave lying about the house (No. 10 editorial). However, the title had also received some negative coverage in an *Observer* article accusing the magazine of pandering to a growing 'cult' interest in vicious crimes in Britain (Roe 1994: 18). In an interview the editor defended the magazine rather inarticulately by arguing: 'People are interested in murder today. It's the last frontier of violence. Women are interested in reading about sex killings' (ibid.). *Ultimate Crimes* was followed three years later in January 1997 by the Marshall Cavendish Reference Collection series *Murder in Mind*. This fortnightly glossy publication, launched with the faces of Fred and Rose West, is designed to collect and keep. Its high production values and reference to 'consultants' already well known to true crime fans and even to the public in general, constructs an

image of responsible non-prurient interest in crime. Its promotional material reinforces this image:

This unique series has been written to set out the facts clearly. *MURDER IN MIND* allows the reader to examine the evidence of each case and draw his or her own conclusions and ultimately to comprehend the incomprehensible – the act of taking another life.⁸

In addition to these, dedicated articles about true crime are now part-and-parcel of other mainstream periodicals such as newspaper supplements, *Reader's Digest* and women's leisure and lifestyle magazines. New magazines launched in the 1980s such as *Chat* and *Bella* adapted the traditional woman's weekly into a new-style cheap tabloid package that delivered both women's issues and human interest news features, including true crime (Winship 1987: 148–62). The women's weekly magazine, in keeping with its generic relationship to tabloids and newspaper supplements, commonly deploys the language of the confessional and of sensation to let readers into a story of personal suffering or despair. Stories such as 'Let Me Bury My Son', an interview with the mother of a Moors Murder victim in *Chat* (Johnson J. 1992), provide an opportunity to revisit notorious crimes from the perspective of the victim's family. Other stories are presented in a murder-mystery format such as the story of one woman's discovery that her missing daughter had, in fact, been murdered, described in 'The Secret of the Sands; the dunes concealed John Cooper's crime – until the sands shifted', featured in *Bella* (Taylor E. 1994). *Chat* also ran a series of period true crime stories featuring Victorian female killers entitled 'Deadlier than the Male' (e.g. Mortensson 1992a and 1992b). These features are luridly illustrated in red and black, with scareheads and a sensational vocabulary in keeping with the flashy traditions of tabloid reportage. Their presence signals, above all, the ubiquity of the true crime feature article and its attraction to a broad range of readers. As a crime story loses currency it often moves away from the news pages and enters the arena of leisure reading, revealing in this transition a constituency of female and/or younger readers interested in reading about crime and its consequences for the people involved.

The launch of new book imprints also signals an expansion in true crime publishing. The early 1990s saw the peak of true crime's success in Britain, with the launch of true crime series by Virgin, Headline, Nemesis and Creation Books, the re-issue of Penguin's *Famous Trials*

series and Music Collection International's true crime audio books. More recently, notorious murder cases such as that of Fred and Rose West and Dr Harold Shipman have inspired a number of both well-researched and 'instant' books. The commercial success of British true crime also parallels the tremendous public interest in true accounts of crime in the United States (Provost 1991: 7; Stasio 1991; Nadelson 1994). Since the late 1980s, true crime in the US has achieved sufficient popularity to justify a spate of reprints and the retrieval of older or more obscure cases (Jenkins 1994: 92). These reprints, also appearing in Britain, are clearly indicative of consistent popular interest, which stands in stark opposition to critics who have generally regarded true crime as ephemeral, of limited interest and even somewhat distasteful.

A survey of *The Bookseller* catalogue from 1979 onwards indicates a notable increase in the numbers of true crime books published during the 1980s. However, the categorisation of books as 'true crime' is problematic for librarians and booksellers alike, which in turn confounds any attempt by the researcher to make a clear-cut assessment of its presence in the marketplace. *The Bookseller*, for example, collates its books under the heading 'Law and Crime' without differentiating between true crime, legal textbooks and investigative journalism by writers such as Paul Foot.⁹ One indication of the shifting borders of the genre may be the recent reissue of the Penguin *Famous Trials* series (originally Hodge and Hodge 1941–64). Covers bear a red and black margin-strip of an elongated fingerprint that renders them easily identifiable. An entry in *The Bookseller* of 12 August 1994 promotes the series as 'the classic series of true crime books', a claim that retrospectively locates them in a more lucrative category than that of 'legal history'.¹⁰ Penguin have also re-issued 'classic' individual accounts such as Sybille Bedford's *The Best We Can Do* (1958) as part of their *True Crime* imprint.¹¹ Other books in the series tend to focus on 'classic' or period murders such as those perpetrated by Crippen,¹² Mrs Maybrick,¹³ and so on. Otherwise they may feature more contemporary but little-known British murders such as the deaths of the elderly Luxton family on their isolated farm in 1975, analysed by John Cornwell in his book called *Earth to Earth* (1984).

Relying on publishers' own book promotions leads to inconsistency in identifying true crime books. For instance, in 1994 Penguin published Alexandra Artley's *Murder in the Heart*, the story of sisters June and Hilda Thompson who killed their father in 1988 after years of severe abuse. The story of 'one small, ordinary family gone completely

mad' (cover notes) won the Crime Writers' Association (CWA) Gold Dagger Award for Non-Fiction. Yet Artley's book is packaged somewhat differently. Its subtitle, *A True-Life Psychological Thriller*, elevates the book into 'Current Affairs, Psychology/Psychiatry' (cover notes) rather than the more stigmatised genre of true crime. But the book carries all the signifiers of 'quality' true crime: the CWA award, eleven pages of monochrome photographs, including a police Blue Book¹⁴ shot of Mr Thompson lying dead on his bed, and a foreword by the acclaimed true crime writer Brian Masters. Its packaging and promotion also signal a hierarchy of taste and distinction within the industry itself, where high production values, an acclaimed author or a quality newspaper or publisher can be drawn upon to signal a true crime product as uniquely 'serious', 'thoughtful', 'objective', 'judicious' and so forth.

Since the early 1990s true crime books have also appeared under imprints which more clearly signal their target market, – such as Time Life's *True Crime* series or the new imprint by Virgin, also called *True Crime*. The mid-1990s also saw the successful introduction of the true crime audio book from publishers such as Music Collection International which issued a series in December 1994 narrated by the true crime specialist and radio celebrity Martin Fido.¹⁵ Cases here included profiles of Peter Sutcliffe,¹⁶ John Reginald Christie,¹⁷ and so on. During the years 1992–96 17 imprints consistently carried true crime books, a number which is in itself indicative of the perceived capacity of the market for these publications.¹⁸

A flurry of books often follows close behind the trial and conviction of notable British criminals such the nurse Beverley Allitt,¹⁹ Rose and Fred West²⁰ and the Newell brothers.²¹ In 'Making a Killing in the Bookshops' (1994), a review of the books published after the sentencing of Roderick and Mark Newell for the murder of their parents, the journalist Alexandra Duval Smith investigated the notion that 'murder pays' in the publishing industry. She noted that three paperbacks telling the story of the Newell family would be available after sentencing, riding on the back of the very useful publicity generated by the case.²² Each book would have a 10,000 print-run and as 'instants' they would have a large, if short-lived market capitalising on public recognition of the case. She also observed that serialisation in the national press might well be as remunerative as an entire print-run of books. Cases such as the Newell brothers are small fry compared with that of Fred and Rose West where at least six books were commissioned, including two books co-authored by the Wests' own children (Oxford 1995: 4–5).²³