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Can True Crime be Feminist?

Amy Beddows

It has been a difficult year to be a woman. We have seen the murders (and hideous disrespect) of Nicola Smallman and Bibaa Henry, the ‘unexplained’ death of Blessing Olusegun and the killing of Sarah Everard by one of those we are supposed to trust. Alongside police manhandling of women at her vigil and the true picture of [sexual violence committed by officers](#), we have had to accept that the justice system cannot be relied on to protect any of us, especially women of colour.

[Like many women](#) I enjoy true crime, the retelling of real-life crime stories through books, documentaries and podcasts. Discussions around gender-based violence often question our obsession with violated female bodies on screen and whether these stories – [much like pornography](#) – fuel real crimes against women, by glamourising rape and murder and portraying half the population as lesser and therefore disposable. As a trauma therapist and PhD student studying victim blame, these different identities do not always sit comfortably with each other and I have to ask: am I part of the problem? Is my steady consumption of bloodied, broken women and aggressive, entitled men feeding the endless cycle of gendered violence?

Most criticisms of true crime are fair. Stories often focus on the abuser more than the abused, exploring his psychology, his unmet wants or unhappy childhood (the fault of the archetypal terrible woman, his mother) and encourage us to emphasise with even the most violent acts. Victims are reduced to lists of names or pornographic images of bloodied, naked flesh, or are branded with one-dimensional epithets which justify their obliteration: ‘prostitute’, ‘addict’, ‘homeless’. Women of colour are overlooked, as are older women, in favour of young, middle-class white victims, which sends a hideous message about who is worthy of sympathy and which crimes are most heinous.

The influence of true crime on societal attitudes can be messy, as the genre treads a fine line between reality and fiction; from documentaries with all their biases (*Making a Murderer*, *Serial*) to ‘inspired-by’ dramas like *Mindhunter* or *American Crime Story* and soap opera procedurals (*Law & Order*, *Criminal Minds*). The bleedthrough into reality extends even further when [actors](#) decide to ‘go method’ when portraying violent men (Jamie Dornan’s artistic dedication must have been terrifying for the woman he stalked; trust us, we know when we are being followed). Despite such range and variety, true crime criticisms usually view the genre as a homogenous entity, when it can draw attention to complex societal issues that are often privately experienced. Like all media, these stories can [challenge](#) the status quo of women as victims and men as aggressors through their perspective, use of language and representation. They can also provide community, [meaning and sources of support](#) for victims and survivors.

True crime can centre victims’ voices whilst calling out the abusers and societal factors which enable our culture of violence. Haille Rubenhold’s *The Five* details the complex lives and struggles of five women whilst making their killer little more than a footnote. Other

content creators discuss rapists and murderers without revering them; I particularly enjoy *That Chapter* on YouTube, whose host regularly refers to abusers as ‘that bastard man’. The *All Killa No Filla* podcast scrutinises the language used to describe violence against women as well as the rape myths and victim blaming so prevalent in our criminal justice system, while *The Fall Line* tells stories of women and girls from minority communities who are otherwise overlooked and less known than their white counterparts.

True crime also fosters activism and community, with creators using their platforms to raise money for women’s organisations and anti-violence campaigns. There is kinship in hearing and sharing ‘the worst’, whether it is personal experiences of violence or the [safety work](#) we do every day and unsurprisingly, the genre has created expansive communities of ‘legends’, ‘murderinos’ and other like-minded fans. Hearing stories of violence may not reduce our risk of victimisation but they may help us feel informed or in control, whilst humour and irreverence – of the atrocities, not the victims – can diffuse our fears and become a rallying call of defiance: in the words of *My Favourite Murder*, “stay sexy and don’t get murdered”.

While popular culture is an easy way to access information and meaning around societal issues, it can influence our attitudes towards victims of crime or our feelings of safety. It is important that we continue to interrogate the media we consume but these conversations need to be more nuanced; even in 2021, women are blamed and shamed for being female, for being assaulted or killed, for walking home, for staying in a relationship, for liking the things we like, for just existing. We do not need to be shamed for anything else.

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