

12 Reasons We Love True Crime, According to the Experts

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Everywhere you turn these days, it seems like there's a new—and wildly successful—book, podcast, or show devoted to a crime. Investigation Discovery, a hit from when it debuted in 2008, continues to top the ratings (and even throws its own true crime convention, IDCon). From Serial and Dr. Death to In the Dark and Atlanta Monster, there's no shortage of true crime podcasts. The genre is so huge that Netflix—whose offerings in this arena include The

Keepers, *Evil Genius*, *Wild Wild Country*, *Making a Murderer*, and *The Staircase*—even created a parody true crime series (*American Vandal*). Which raises the question: Why are we so obsessed with true crime? Here's what the experts have to say.

1. BECAUSE IT'S NORMAL (TO A POINT).

First things first: There's nothing weird about being true crime obsessed. "It says that we're normal and we're healthy," Dr. Michael Mantell, former chief psychologist of the San Diego Police Department, told NPR in 2009. "I think our interest in crime serves a number of different healthy psychological purposes." Of course, there are limits: "If all you do is read about crime and ... all you do is talk about it and you have posters of it, and you have newspaper article clippings in your desk drawer, I'd be concerned," he said.

2. BECAUSE EVIL FASCINATES US.

The true crime genre gives people a glimpse into the minds of people who have committed what forensic psychologist Dr. Paul G. Mattiuzzi calls "a most fundamental taboo and also, perhaps, a most fundamental human impulse"—murder. "In every case," he writes, "there is an assessment to be made about the enormity of evil involved." This fascination with good versus evil, according to Mantell, has existed forever; Dr. Elizabeth Rutha, a licensed clinical psychologist at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, told AHC Health News that our fascination begins when we're young. Even as kids, we're drawn to the tension between good and evil, and true crime embodies our fascination with that dynamic.

We want to figure out what drove these people to this extreme act, and what makes them tick, because we'd never actually commit murder. "We want some insight into the psychology of a killer, partly so we can learn how to protect our families and ourselves," *Lost Girls* author Caitlin Rother told Hopes & Fears, "but also because we are simply fascinated by aberrant behavior and the many paths that twisted perceptions can take."

3. BECAUSE OF THE 24/7 NEWS CYCLE ...

Even if we've been fascinated by crime since the beginning of time, we likely have the media to thank for the uptick in the true crime fad. "Since the '50s, we have been bombarded ... in the media with accounts of crime stories, and it probably came to real fruition in the '70s," Mantell said. "Our fascination with crime is equaled by our fear of crime." Later, he noted that "The media understands, if it bleeds, it leads. And probably 25 to 30 percent of most television news today [deals] with crime particularly personal crime and murder. Violent predatory crimes against people go to the top of the list."

4. ... AND BECAUSE WE CAN'T LOOK AWAY FROM A "TRAINWRECK."

"Serial killers tantalize people much like traffic accidents, train wrecks, or natural disasters," Scott Bonn, professor of criminology at Drew University and author of *Why We Love Serial Killers*, wrote at TIME. "The public's fascination with them can be seen as a specific manifestation of its more general fixation on violence and calamity. In other words, the actions of a serial killer may be horrible to behold but much of the public simply cannot look away due to the spectacle."

In fact, the perpetrators of these crimes might serve an important societal role, as true crime writer Harold Schechter explained to Hopes & Fears. "That crime is inseparable from civilization—not an aberration but an integral and even necessary component of our lives—is a notion that has been advanced by various thinkers," including Plato, Sigmund Freud, and Émile Durkheim, he said. "If such theories are valid (and they have much to commend them), then it follows that criminals can only fulfill their social function if the rest of the world knows exactly what outrages they have committed and how they have been punished—which is to say that what the public really needs and wants is to hear the whole shocking story. And that is precisely what true crime literature provides."

5. BECAUSE IT HELPS US FEEL PREPARED.

According to Megan Boorsma in Elon Law Review [PDF], studies of true crime have shown that people tend to focus on threats to their own wellbeing. Others have noted that women in particular seem to love true crime, and psychologists believe it's because they're getting tips about how to increase their chances of survival if they find themselves in a dangerous situation.

One study, published in 2010, found that women were more drawn than men to true crime books that contained tips on how to defend against an attacker; that they were more likely to be interested in books that contained information about a killer's motives than men were; and that they were more likely to select books that had female victims. "Our findings that women were drawn to stories that contained fitness-relevant information make sense in light of research that shows that women fear becoming the victim of a crime more so than do men," the researchers concluded; "the characteristics that make these books appealing to women are all highly relevant in terms of preventing or surviving a crime." Amanda Vicary, the study's lead author, told the Huffington Post that "by learning about murders—who is more likely to be a murderer, how do these crimes happen, who are the victims, etc.—people are also learning about ways to prevent becoming a victim themselves."

Watching, listening to, or reading about real crimes "could be like a dress rehearsal," Dr. Sharon Packer, a psychiatrist and assistant clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mt. Sinai, told DECIDER.

According to crime novelist Megan Abbott, men are four times more likely than women to be victims of homicide—but women make up 70 percent of intimate partner homicide victims. “I’ve come to believe that what draws women to true crime tales is an instinctual understanding that this is the world they live in,” Abbot wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. “And these books are where the concerns and challenges of their lives are taken deadly seriously.”

6. BECAUSE THERE MIGHT BE AN EVOLUTIONARY BENEFIT.

Dr. Marissa Harrison, associate professor of psychology at Penn State Harrisburg, told Hopes & Fears that she believes people are interested in true crime because we’ve evolved to pay attention to things that could harm us so that we can better avoid them. “You would pay attention to, and have interest in, the horrific, because in the ancestral environment, those who ‘tuned in’ to horrible events left more descendants, logically because they were able to escape harmful stimuli,” she said.

7. BECAUSE WE’RE GLAD WE’RE NOT THE VICTIM ...

Psychologists say one of the main reasons we’re obsessed with true crime is because it gives us an opportunity to feel relieved that we’re not the victim. Tamron Hall, host of ID’s *Deadline: Crime*, identified that sense of reprieve at ID’s IDCon last year. “I think all of you guys watch our shows and say, ‘But for the grace of God, this could happen to me’ ... This could happen to anyone we know,” she said.

Packer told DECIDER that a big factor in our true crime obsession is something sort of like schadenfreude—getting enjoyment from the trouble experienced by other people. “It’s not necessarily sadistic, but if bad faith had to fall on someone, at least it fell on someone else,” she said. “There’s a sense of relief in finding out that it happened to someone else rather than you.”

8. ... OR THE PERPETRATOR.

On the other hand, watching true crime also provides an opportunity to feel empathy, Mantell said: “It allows us to feel our compassion, not only a compassion for the victim, but sometimes compassions for the perpetrator.”

“We all get angry at people, and many people say ‘I could kill them’ but almost no one does that, thankfully,” Packer said. “But then when you see it on screen, you say, ‘Oh someone had to kill someone, it wasn’t me, thank God.’ [There is] that same sense of relief that whatever kinds of aggression and impulses one has, we didn’t act on them; someone else did.”

9. BECAUSE IT GIVES US AN ADRENALINE RUSH ...

“People ... receive a jolt of adrenaline as a reward for witnessing terrible deeds,” Bonn writes. “If you doubt the addictive power of adrenaline, think of the thrill-seeking child who will ride a roller coaster over and over until he or she becomes physically ill. The euphoric effect of true crime on human emotions is similar to that of roller coasters or natural disasters.”

10. ... AND BECAUSE WE’RE TRYING TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY.

Humans like puzzles, and true crime shows and podcasts get our brains going. “By following an investigation on TV,” Bonn writes, “people can play armchair detective and see if they can figure out ‘whodunit’ before law enforcement authorities catch the actual perpetrator.”

“True crime invites obsession for three reasons,” Dr. Katherine Ramsland, a professor of forensic psychology at DeSales University, told Hopes & Fears. “People gawk at terrible things to reassure themselves that they are safe; and most true crimes on TV and in books are offered as a puzzle that people want to solve. This gives them a sense of closure. It is also a challenge that stimulates the brain.”

11. BECAUSE WE LIKE TO BE SCARED ... IN A CONTROLLED WAY.

“As a source of popular culture entertainment, [true crime] allow[s] us to experience fear and horror in a controlled environment where the threat is exciting but not real,” Bonn writes. “For example, the stories of real-life killers are often for adults what monster movies are for children.” Schechter told the BBC the same thing—that stories about serial killers are “fairytales for grownups. There’s something in our psyche where we have this need to tell stories about being pursued by monsters.”

Our interest in what motivates violent crimes boils down to being afraid, A.J. Marsden, assistant professor of human services and psychology at Beacon College in Leesburg, Florida told the Huffington Post; true crime allows viewers to “dive into the darker side of humanity, but from the safety of the couch.”

12. BECAUSE THE STORYTELLING IS GOOD—AND COMFORTING.

Ask Investigation Discovery’s hosts why people love true crime, and most of them will mention one thing: storytelling. “For thousands of years, people have gathered around the fire and said, ‘Tell me a story,’” Lt. Joe Kenda, former detective and host of *Homicide Hunter*, told Mental Floss in 2017. “If you tell it well, they’ll ask you tell another one. If you can tell a story about real people involved in real things, that draws their interest more than something some Hollywood scriptwriter made up that always has the same components and the same ending.”

Tony Harris, host of *Scene of the Crime* and *Hate in America*, echoed Kenda's sentiment about storytelling, noting that many true crime shows have a definitive ending: "In most of the shows, we button it up."

Not only that, most true crime shows follow a similar format—which could also play into our obsession.

"In order to see why people are obsessed with true crime, you have to see the bigger metanarrative that nearly all true crime stories share," Lester Andrist, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, told Hopes & Fears. "In the typical true crime story, it's easy to identify the good guys and the bad guys, and most importantly, the crimes are always solved. Mysteries have answers, and the justice system—imperfect though it may be—basically works."

And so, in a weird way, these true crime stories—as horrific as they are—end up being comforting. "While living in a world where there is rapid social, political, economic, and technological change," Andrist said, "true crime comforts people by assuring them that their long-held ideas about how the world works are still useful."

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