

The Case of Missing Morality in True Crime

True crime is one of the most popular genres of our time – but why?

The Ted Bundy Tapes. My Favorite Murder. Abducted in Plain Sight. Criminal. The Disappearance of Madeleine McCann. Making a Murderer.

The atmosphere of cuddling on a cold autumn night with a warm blanket and tea can quickly be ruined by the gruesome reality of terrible acts humans have committed against each other. It seems to me that everywhere I look, there it is: true crime. In other words, stalking, abduction, rape, and murder. In the age where true crime is one of the most popular entertainment forms, one might notice a change in the media, and consequently, the society. Suddenly thousands of people are monetarily benefiting from graphic rapes and murders. From movies and documentaries to TV shows and podcasts, people around the world are earning their living by retelling the stories of how different psychopaths around the world tortured and killed real people. Now, Dear Reader, I'm not saying that I have never been entertained by true crime - I know how addicting it is. It's almost like cigarettes. Once you get your first taste, it's hard to stop - no matter how bad it feels. But aside from that individual level of dread, is there a responsibility we as a society are ignoring, to leave death alone when it has nothing to do with us? Or, to put it another way, can these stories be considered public property? In order to contemplate this question, we must first ask another one: why are we so entertained by these real-life horror stories?

It is easy to compare true crime entertainment to fictional movies or TV shows like *Game of Thrones*, but there is one big distinction, and one magic word. *True*. These stories are not just stories, but memories. These murders actually happened. The people who died had family who are most likely still suffering from the trauma of losing their loved ones. To twist that into something that profits people who are detached from the entire event just seems immoral.

I spoke to Eelia, a student whose true crime podcast has over 150,000 listeners on Spotify and nearly 2000 followers on Instagram, despite having launched less than six months ago. I asked Eelia why they think people are so entertained by true crime. After a brief moment of pause, the answer sounded clearly: "It's like horror. Being able to experience anxiety and fear in a safe environment feeds to our boredom as a society."

True crime, like any horror movie, releases adrenaline. Basically, it's just a chemical reaction in our brains that makes us feel good. However, there is a catch. With horror, for example, it is easy to make yourself feel better by thinking about the behind the scenes of a production. On the other hand, with true crime and especially true crime documentaries, most of the evidence presented is indeed factual - one might even encounter images of bodies or bloody crime scenes. The viewer is compelled to realize that what they're seeing isn't a set, but a real image. And still, they enjoy it.

"For me, it's more about the psychology behind these murders. I want to find out what allowed for these people to become such cold-blooded killers", Eelia continues. It's true - many people do enjoy the psychology behind these murderers. They like to ask questions such as 'how?' and 'why?', but while those questions are interesting, they don't quite explain the fascination with the accurately described acts of violence. Eelia thinks that by removing these details, one would be removing something important from the story. "I always try to keep in as many details as possible. Personally, I can't stand it when someone is telling a

story but doesn't go into the details. I want to know everything – nothing is unnecessary. Without the details, it's a little bit boring. However, it's important to recognize that there is a line to be drawn in some of the most gruesome cases.”

“Sometimes I do ask myself why I want to tell these stories to people. I think that these real-life examples and the numbness we feel towards them reflect on the history of audio-visual culture. It's no secret that violence has increased in media, and I think that has made us numb to a certain extent. Additionally, I have noticed that as my mental health has gotten better, I have been able to explore more of these horrible stories than I would have a couple of years ago. I guess people need something other than this constant flatness of emotion, and true crime offers that.”

Indeed, with the 24/7 news stream, we as a society are bombarded with bad news from the moment we wake up in the morning to when we finally lay our phones down before going to bed. This has accounted for a massive desensitization in relation to terrible events. In the culture that connects us, we find ourselves disconnected. Numb. We might understand that these horrible acts have happened, but it doesn't quite register in our brains – at least as strongly as experiencing it in real life would. Sometimes we might even find ourselves laughing while listening to a true crime podcast. Eelia points out that humour has long been a defence mechanism for dealing with awful things. “I never make fun of the victims. Any jokes I make are targeted towards the murderers - you want to laugh at them, not with them. I do sometimes question my own morality in making a podcast about true crime. I mean, it's fun! Surely, it's not supposed to be fun? Mostly, however, I just strive to be appropriate.”

So, is it possible for anyone to own the memories of these tragic events? It can be argued that the people closest to the tragedy do. In early 2019, Denise Fergus and Ralph Bulger's two-year-old son's murder became public property when a short film about the crime was nominated for an Academy Award. The parents of the deceased boy did not want him to be a subject of a short film. In fact, no one even asked for their approval. Denise Fergus commented on Twitter: “It's one thing making a film like this without contacting or getting permission from James' family, but another to have a child re-enact the final hours of James' life before he was brutally murdered and making myself and my family have to relive this all over again!” I can't imagine she is the only family member of a victim who feels this way.

Perhaps the retelling of these stories will help improve the justice system. Perhaps we, as students and teachers, sometimes need something more exciting to think about than what our subjects have to offer. Perhaps some of the victims would be okay with their stories being told. The harsh truth is that we will never learn the answers to most of the questions presented in this text, much like we will never know answers to many of the murder mysteries we've heard of. But one thing is for certain – humans are storytellers. We have always been, since the inception of culture. As long as bad things happen, there will be people to tell the stories onward. That is just one of the reasons why we are human. It is up to you to decide whether you want to listen.