



Indholdsfortegnelse:

Tekster:

• <i>True Crime - on Real-Life atrocities</i> fra Narrating Truth af Brøndsted og Larsen	s. 2-4
• <i>Framing - different aspects of reality lead to different perceptions</i> fra Narrating Truth af Brøndsted og Larsen	s. 5-7
• <i>Murder Ballads - an introduction</i> fra Narrating Truth af Brøndsted og Larsen	s. 8-9
• <i>The Knoxville Girl</i> (sang) af ukendt forfatter	s. 10-11
• <i>Mr. Charles Dickens and the Execution of the Mannings</i> (klumme) af Charles Dickens	s. 11-15
• <i>Serial</i> , sæson 1, afsnit 1, af Sarah Koenig	s. 16-17
• <i>In the Dark</i> , sæson 1, afsnit 1 af Madeleine Baran	s. 18-19
• <i>Is Today's True Crime Fascination Really About Justice?</i> Article by Jennifer M. Wood (Wired Magazine, Culture, Nov 5, 2018)	s. 21-27
• + <i>The Jinx, - the Life and Deaths of Robert Durst</i> , HBO - sæson 1 -afsnit 1-6	HBO

TRUE CRIME

– On Real-Life Atrocities

BEFORE YOU READ

01

Have a conversation. Fiction and nonfiction about crime seem to be perennially popular. Why do you think that is?

02

Have another conversation. Murder is often at the center of crime stories. Why would such a brutal crime be so popular to tell stories about?

03

Vocab. Look up the following words and write down their denotations and connotations. Write one or two headlines that would fit the semantic field(s) the words could belong to.

crime fascination frighten mystery heist
escapism double-cross corruption victim
framing suspect antagonist perpetrator
suspense bias sleuth embezzlement

1 Real-Life Horror

It seems to be very human to be fascinated with bad behavior. Sordid crimes often make for popular stories in newspapers, TV, and online. Perhaps a part of that is fascination with other people's motives and the circumstances that have led to someone committing a crime or being the victim of one. Crime is by definition transgressive, and perhaps that is the reason why it both fascinates and frightens.

10 In fiction, crime is often a plot device that makes events exciting and the story move forward. In murder mysteries, you want to find the killer; in heist movies you want to know whether they can pull off their intricate plan, and who will double-cross whom; in dramas there might be corruption, embezzlement, violent incidents, or other things to stir the pot of the plot.

15 In nonfiction, crime is also often at the center of longform articles, documentaries, podcasts, and more. If you think of a popular nonfiction piece, there is a chance that it probably deals with some kind of crime. The first season of the podcast *Serial* has been downloaded more than
20 175 million times, the so-called "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood*, about a grisly murder case, sold millions of copies and was translated into
22 30 languages. True crime also seems ubiquitous in online media with

behaviour opførsel
sordid umoralsk, forkastelig, stærkt ubehagelig

motive motiv, årsag eller anledning til at handle på en bestemt måde

transgressive grænseoverskridende

plot device mekanisme i fortællingen

intricate kompliceret

grisly gruopvækkende

ubiquitous allestedsnærværende

headlines like "The 20 best true-crime shows ever" (*The Guardian*), "17 True Crime Shows & Movies On Netflix That Are Total Hidden Gems" (*Bustle*), and "The 10 True-Crime Podcasts That Changed Everything" (*Vulture*).

A Guilty Pleasure

While crime fiction and true crime share traits, they play by different rules. Fiction may be realistic and have credible, complex characters, but it is still escapism and make-believe. With nonfiction it is more complicated because it deals with real people, and this opens up some new questions about our fascination with crime. You could discuss whether it is wrong to be excited about crime stories if they happened to real people. Is it alright to turn tragedy into entertainment? And while fiction has had its share of violent antagonists who fascinate the audience, it is perhaps irresponsible to turn actual convicted murderers into fascinating characters. Also, what happens if the writer/journalist/documentarian is tempted to reduce a complicated case with real people into a tight thriller with "good guys" and "bad guys"?

This is why we could call our intrigue with true crime a guilty pleasure; we thoroughly enjoy it while knowing it is wrong to revel in other people's misery. Criminologist Scott A. Bonn has studied our fascination with serial killers in particular, and he argues that we get an adrenaline rush when witnessing the horrible actions of a serial killer. And this adrenaline has an addictive effect on our brains. Horror writer Stephen King argues that since we love to stop and look at car accidents, this also explains why we are drawn to horror stories. Furthermore, we are particularly drawn to serial killers, Bonn argues, because most of them are so average and they blend into society so well, that anyone we meet potentially could be a serial killer.* Moreover, we are fascinated by serial killers because we fail to understand their actions.

If you look at true crime stories like you do with fictional crime stories, there is an issue about how to interpret them. With fiction, you are often encouraged to "read between the lines" which is to say you look for depth and themes that are only implied by the story. Plot points become symbols of something else, and we wonder whether characters are hiding something. And this way of interpreting fiction might be something that we also use when reading nonfiction. For example, *In Cold Blood* has a true crime plot that is about solving a murder case, but you could also argue that it is really about rural America, about traumatic childhoods and random violence. So, potentially, people who have been involved in crimes (be they victims or perpetrators) are not just part of a plot in a nonfiction "novel", a podcast, or a documentary, but also perhaps used as so-called "narrative hooks" or complicated "characters" to get

trait træk, karaktertræk
credible troværdig

irresponsible uansvarligt
convicted kendt skyldig

tempt friste, lokke

revel in svælge i

* Bonn "The Delightful, Guilty Pleasure of Watching True Crime TV"

interpret fortolke, fremstille
encourage opmuntre, ansøre
implied antydnet

traumatic traumatisk, rystende
rural landlig
random tilfældig

True Crime

- 1 you interested in a story. Therefore, their personal tragedy and horror
are perhaps just starting points to a discussion about broader issues in
society, and their real lives become stories and symbols. You could argue
that some true crime becomes a constructive way of shining a light on
5 systemic issues and not just a guilty pleasure.

You Do not Have a Clue

- So, crime – fictional or nonfictional – fascinates. And in terms of structure,
texts that deal with crime tend to share similarities: suspense, gruesome
10 details, various suspects, protagonists, antagonists, red herrings, twists,
climaxes, etc. News stories about a recent crime will give you the basic
facts of the events as they have been relayed to the reporter, but the
longform true crime stories will more often be structured like fiction
where clues are slowly revealed. Crime stories are often mysteries,
15 and we tend to like mysteries, whether they are real or made up. Or,
rather, we like to solve the mysteries because that is a way of finding
patterns and meaning. The human brain is wired to find patterns and
make up stories, and crime stories allow our brains to freely explore,
connect dots, and try to figure out who did it, if they did it, and how
20 they got away with it as we watch, read, or listen. Perhaps it is the same
psychological mechanisms as when we indulge in a conspiracy theory:
We, the consumers of true crime, as underdog sleuths who better all
the professional investigators, and if we figure it out, we might help the
victims and society. However, before patting ourselves on the back, it is
25 worth remembering that both crime fiction and true crime stories have
been put together in a way to make us feel clever, intrigued, mystified,
appalled, and shocked.

similarity lighed

red herring vildledende spor

pattern mønster

indulge hengive sig til

be intrigued by være fasci-
neret af
appal forfærde

I Was Framed!

- 30 Whether the writer behind a true crime drama does it intentionally
or not, there is an element of "framing" going on when presenting a
story. Like when you frame a picture or construct a frame when you are
building a house, framing in the context of communication indicates that
you encircle a particular meaning; the order in which you tell a story,
35 and what you focus on when you tell a story, will influence the way it
is perceived. For example, if you catch a man stealing some food, you
could say that he is a criminal who is stealing from a business owner. But
if the man is stealing the food to feed his children, you could also say
that he is a desperate hero trying his best to survive. Criminal or hero?
40 The same thing can be framed in different ways, and this also applies
to true crime where a complicated event might be told from a range of
perspectives, and thereby influence our way of thinking.

intentionally bevidst, med vilje

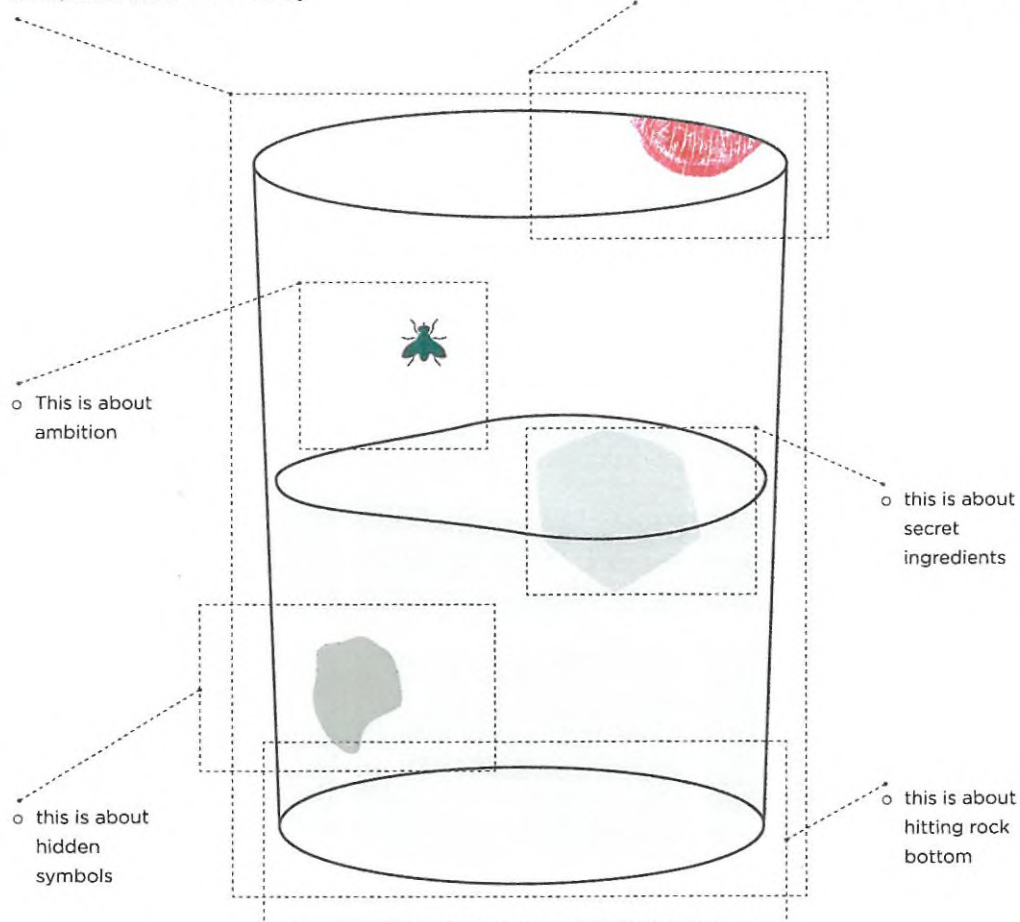
perceive opfatte, forstå

range række

FRAMING HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?

Different aspects of reality lead to different perceptions.

- This is about a glass which is half full
- No, this is about a glass which is half empty
- No, this is about translucency
- This is about seduction
- No, this is about assumed gender norms



Artist credit: Rasmus Brøndsted

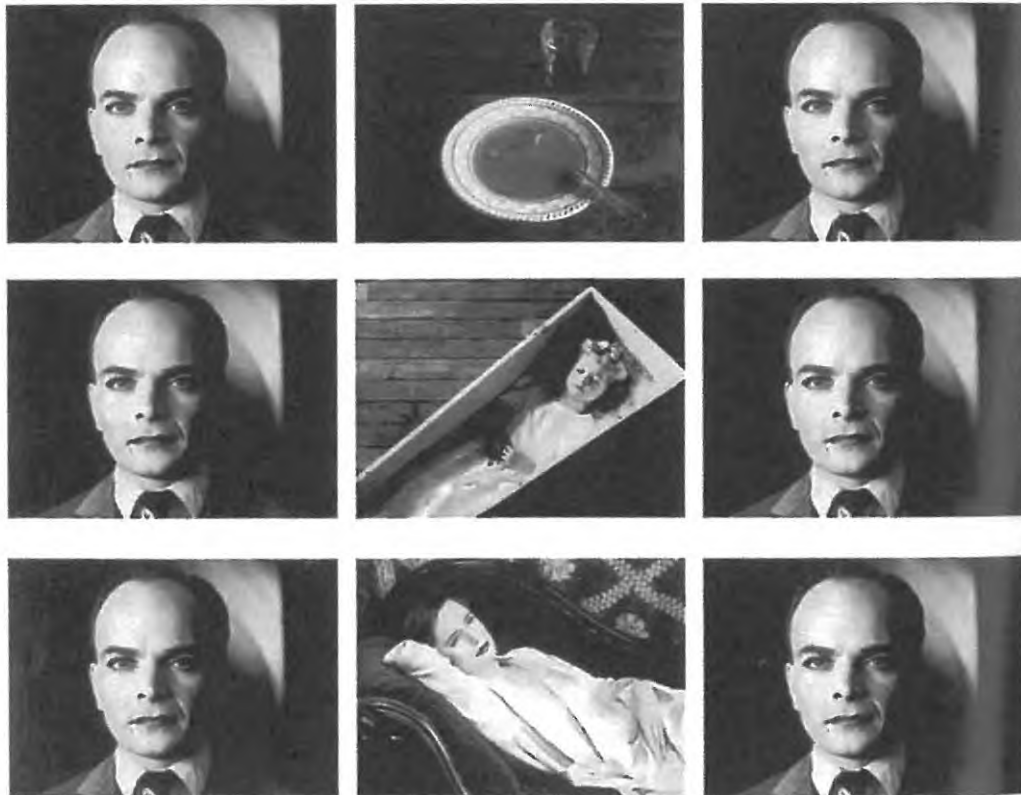
True Crime

- 1 If you are told that men with funny hats are more likely to commit crimes, you will naturally be very suspicious of that man wearing a pink beret who is introduced in the next chapter or the next scene. In a way, framing is inevitable no matter how neutral you try to be when you tell
- 5 a story, but as a reader/listener/viewer you should simply be aware that you draw conclusions and make up theories based on the manner of how things are presented to you. In visual media, a variation of this effect is also seen in editing where the sequence of images leads the audience to make up stories which connect the images and consequently attribute
- 10 feelings and intention to the people on screen. An experiment showing this is attributed to Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, and the experiment aims to show how viewers derive meaning from a sequence of shots.
- 12

consequently som følge deraf

derive udlede

The Kuleshov Effect.
A juxtaposition of two shots. Same face but different meaning based on the sequence of images.



inevitably uundgåeligt

The montage is a building block in fictional movies but also inevitably a part of documentaries, regardless of how objective they aim to be. Documentaries are also a collection of edited sequences, just like articles and podcasts.

1

5

Armchair Sleuth

wicked ondsindet

Despite the issues of ethics and bias mentioned above, true crime does not seem to be going away anytime soon. Dealing with crime might be a way of dealing with extreme challenges. Similar to how some believe that horror fiction functions as a way to educate ourselves about what we would do if we were faced with something wicked, and that vampires, werewolves, and the like are merely metaphors for things in life that fascinate and frighten, you could argue that crime fiction also offers ways of dealing with transgressions in a safe space. After all, think of how much crime fiction is associated with hygge. We train our deductive skills and may find comfort in the idea that although crimes are committed, many good people try to solve them; perhaps even a master detective. And so, it is elementary, dear reader, to see the same mechanism in true crime; the horrors here might be even worse because they actually happened, but the fact that so many people are interested in understanding them and solving them is comforting.

10

15

20

deduct at udlede noget

elementary simpelt, grundlæggende

distorted forvrænget, fordrejet

Real-life tragic events might have been distorted by media, books, movies, podcasts, and more. That distortion may have caused victims and their families even more pain. But on the other hand, the fascination with the cases has also led to increased awareness about social issues and has sometimes brought new evidence and nuance to unsolved mysteries. To dismiss all that would be a crime.

25

28

dismiss afvise

Find suggestions for further studies including videos, texts, and podcasts on narratingtruth.org

MURDER BALLADS

BEFORE YOU READ/LISTEN

01

Have a conversation. Do you know of songs that deal with something gruesome and/or tragic? What is the point of writing music about something like that?

02

Vocab. The following words could be useful when analysing murder ballads. Look up words you are unfamiliar with:

ballad **motive** **motif** **chorus** **point of view**
victim

- 1 A ballad is a form of verse often set to music, so murder ballads are essentially songs about killing, and they often deal with a grisly murder. A lot of murder ballads can be considered macabre fiction, but a great number of the songs are based on true crimes and will give the listener an insight into the motives behind a murder, and how the case was resolved. Some of the ballads are based on cases that go back several centuries, and they are then reshaped and adapted to suit a contemporary audience.

- 10 Writer Paul Slade argues that old murder ballads essentially were a form of journalism describing real-life crimes in a time before newspapers and mass media: "Cheerfully vulgar, reveling in gore, and always with an eye on the main chance, these songs were tabloid newspapers set to music, carrying news of all the latest 'orrible murders to an insatiable public." Songwriter Tom Waits has referred to old murder ballads as "oral tabloids of the day."**

ballad vise

grisly uhyggeligt, gruopvækkende
essentially i bund og grund
macabre makaber, uhyggelig, frastødende

resolve løse

vulgar vulgær, tarvelig, folkelig
revel in svælge i
gore blodige scener
tabloid tabloidavis, sensationssblad
'orrible (h)orrible, frygtelig
insatiable umættelig

* From *Planet Slade's* frontpage, Paul Slade. Slade is the author of *Unprepared to Die - America's Greatest Murder Ballads and the Stories that Inspired Them*.

** From *Howls & Echoes*, "Feature: Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 'Murder Ballads,' 20 Years On", Mark Molyneux 2016.

depicted vist, afbildet

reveal afsløre

apt passende

When analysing murder ballads, it might be interesting to look at where they originate from and ask whether or not a true story is depicted in the song. You may also consider the following:

- Characterize the narrator of the song as well as the point of view. Is it told from the perspective of the murderer, the victim, or a bystander? Is a motive for the murder revealed, and if so, what is it? If a motive is *not* revealed, what does *that* tell you?
- Characterize the tone of the song. You may include the melody. Does it seem apt for the subject? Substantiate your answer.
- Look for the representation of gender(s) and class society in the song.
- Characterize the setting: Where and when does the story take place? Does it matter?
- Is imagery used for effect? If so, what type (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory? See explanations and examples in chapter 7)? Substantiate your answer with examples from the song.
- Is there a moral to the song?

19

Go online and search for more murder ballads and check out their lyrics. The following is a list of titles that might get you started. Which are fiction, and which are based on actual events?

- "Tom Dooley" (folk song - various recordings, even a Danish version!)
- "Stagger Lee" (folk song also found in a version written by Nick Cave. You may compare the different versions of the song - there is one by James Brown, and yet another one seen in the movie *Black Snake Moan*)
- "Deep Red Bells" (written and performed by Neko Case)
- "Little Water Song" (performed by Ute Lemper, written by Nick Cave and Bruno Pisek)
- "Joey" (performed by Bob Dylan, written by Dylan and Jacques Levy)

Go further. Listen to the podcast *Dolly Parton's America* episode 1 ("Sad Ass Songs"), where she talks about her own experience with murder ballads and what inspired her to write "sad ass songs". That part begins around 21 minutes into the podcast. What does she say about the genre?

THE KNOXVILLE GIRL

author unknown

This murder ballad is referred to as an "Appalachian murder ballad" recorded at the beginning of the 20th century, but according to author Paul Slade the story recounted in the lyrics can be traced as far back as the 17th century to the town of Shrewsbury in England where a young miller got a woman pregnant and then was encouraged by her father to marry her. Instead he murdered her. The story spawned various

versions through the centuries and eventually became the "The Knoxville Girl".

See narratingtruth.org for a link to Paul Slade's introduction to "Knoxville Girl" as well as the ballads that inspired it and links for other popular murder ballads.

BEFORE YOU READ/LISTEN

01

Speculate. What do you think will be the plot of a ballad called "The Knoxville Girl"?

02

Research. Knoxville, Tennessee, is part of Appalachia, but where is that, and what are some of the things which the region is known for?

1 The Knoxville Girl

I met a little girl in Knoxville, a town we all know well
And every Sunday evening, out in her home, I'd dwell
We went to take an evening walk about a mile from town

dwel hvile, ophoide sig

5 I picked a stick up off the ground and knocked that fair girl down

fair smuk

She fell down on her bended knees, for mercy she did cry
"Oh Willy dear, don't kill me here, I'm unprepared to die"
She never spoke another word, I only beat her more

10 Until the ground around me within her blood did flow

I took her by her golden curls and I drug her round and around
Throwing her into the river that flows through Knoxville town
Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl with the dark and rolling eyes
15 Go down, go down, you Knoxville girl, you can never be my bride

I started back to Knoxville, got there about midnight
My mother, she was worried and woke up in a fright
Saying "dear son, what have you done to bloody your clothes so?"

20 I told my anxious mother I was bleeding at my nose

anxious ængstelig, bekymret

I called for me a candle to light myself to bed
 I called for me a handkerchief to bind my aching head
 Rolled and tumbled the whole night through, as troubles was for me
 Like flames of hell around my bed and in my eyes could see

1

5

ball kaution

They carried me down to Knoxville and put me in a cell
 My friends all tried to get me out but none could go my bail
 I'm here to waste my life away down in this dirty old jail
 Because I murdered that Knoxville girl, the girl I loved so well

9

AFTER YOU READ

01

Is the reason for the murder clear?

02

Do you sympathize with Willy? Why/why not?

03

Find the rhyme scheme and comment on the use of rhymes in general in a song about murder.

04

Comment on the role of "the girl" in the ballad.

05

What kind of a narrator is used to tell the story of the Knoxville girl, and what is the effect of having this type of narrator? How does this contribute to your analysis of the song as a whole?

06

Comment on the last verses/lines "I'm here to waste my life away down in this dirty old jail/Because I murdered that Knoxville girl, the girl I loved so well".

STYLE OF WRITING

Comment on the use of adjectives in the song.

- o How does this excerpt contribute to your analysis of the text as a whole?

CREATIVE EXERCISE - WRITING

Try writing a few stanzas about the same event but seen from the perspective of "the girl".

MR. CHARLES DICKENS AND THE EXECUTION OF THE MANNINGS

by Charles Dickens (1849)

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was an English writer perhaps most known for his classic novels *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Great Expectations*. However, he was also a journalist, an editor, and, as you will soon see, a social commentator.

In 1849, more than 30,000 people gathered outside a prison in South London to witness the public execution of Marie and Frederick Manning, the first married couple to be hanged in over a century. The spectacle was also witnessed by Charles Dickens who wrote of his experience in the newspaper *The Times*.



Charles Dickens

BEFORE YOU READ

01

Do some research. Who were Maria and Frederick Manning, and why were they executed?

02

Have a conversation with your classmates: What do you imagine would happen at a public hanging in 1849? What would the crowd look and act like?

03

Have another conversation. Come up with some arguments for and against public execution, so that you can have a nuanced conversation about the topic. You may use the following discourse markers:

It can be argued ... Furthermore...

By the same token... Naturally...

Others might argue... In opposition to this...

On the other hand...

- 1 **Mr. Charles Dickens and the Execution of the Mannings**
MR. EDITOR, – I was a witness of the execution at Horsemonger-lane. I went there with the intention of observing the crowd gathered to behold it, and I had excellent opportunities of doing so, at intervals all through
5 the night, and continuously from daybreak until after the spectacle was over. I do not address you on the subject with any intention of discussing the abstract question of capital punishment, or any of the arguments of its opponents or advocates. I simply wish to turn this dreadful experience to some account for the general good, by taking
10 the readiest and most public means of advertizing to an intimation given by Sir G. Grey in the last Session of Parliament, that the Government

execution henrettelse

intention hensigt
behold se, betragte
interval mellemrum

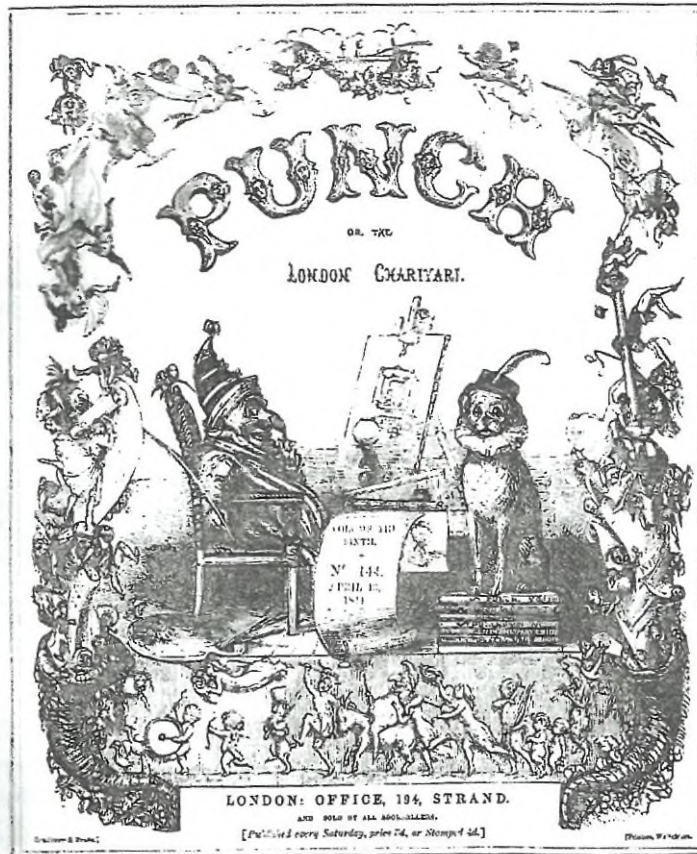
spectacle forestilling, skue

address henvende sig til
capital punishment dødsstraf
opponent modstander
advocate fortaler
advertizing gøre opmærksom på
intimation tilkendegivelse,
meddelelse

Sir G. Grey en engelsk soldat,
opdagelsesrejsende og
administrator i nogle af de
engelske kolonier bl.a. New
Zealand

session of Parliament parla-
mentets samling

OF THE WEEKLY NUMBERS, as well as the Monthly Parts, may be had of all Booksellers & Newsmen, and a STAMPED EDITION, to send free by post, is also published, price 4d.



Just Published, Punch's Guide to the Chinese Collection Price Sixpence.

Induced fremprovokeret,
fremkaldt
infliction tildeling
solemnity højtidelighed
inexorably ubønhørligt, nådes-
løs, ubøjelig

earnestly alvorligt, seriøst
beseeking bønfulde

legislative lovgivende

inconceivably uendelig,
utænkeligt
wickedness ondskab
levity letsindighed
heathen hedning, ofte om
en person som fornægter
kristendommen
gibbet galge

might be induced to give its support to a measure making the infliction of capital punishment a private solemnity within the prison walls (with such guarantees for the last sentence of the law being inexorably and surely administered as should be satisfactory to the public at large), and of most earnestly beseeching Sir G. Grey, as a solemn duty which he owes to society, and a responsibility which he cannot for ever put away, to originate such a legislative change himself.

I believe that a sight so inconceivably awful as the wickedness and levity of the immense crowd collected at that execution could be imagined by no man, and could be presented in no heathen land under the sun. The horrors of the gibbet and of the crime which brought the

wretched murderers to it, faded in my mind before the atrocious bearing, looks and language, of the assembled spectators. When I came upon the scene at midnight, the *shrillness* of the cries and howls that were raised from time to time, denoting that they came from a concourse of boys and girls already assembled in the best places, made my blood run cold. As the night went on, screeching and laughing, and yelling in strong chorus of parodies on negro melodies, with substitutions of 'Mrs. Manning' for 'Susannah,' and the like, were added to these. When the day dawned, thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians and vagabonds of every kind, flocked on to the ground, with every variety of offensive and foul behaviour. Fightings, faintings, whistlings, imitations of Punch, brutal jokes, tumultuous demonstrations of indecent delight when swooning women were dragged out of the crowd by the police with their dresses disordered, gave a new zest to the general entertainment. When the sun rose brightly – as it did – it gilded thousands upon thousands of upturned faces, so inexpressibly odious in their brutal mirth or callousness, that a man had cause to feel ashamed of the shape he wore, and to shrink from himself, as fashioned in the image of the devil. When the two miserable creatures who attracted all this ghastly sight about them were turned quivering into the air, there was no more emotion, no more pity, no more thought that two immortal souls had gone to judgment, no more restraint in any of the previous obscenities, than if the name of Christ had never been heard in this world, and there were no belief among men but that they perished like the beasts. I have seen, habitually, some of the worst sources of general contamination and corruption in this country, and I think there are not many phases of London life that could surprise me. I am solemnly convinced that nothing that ingenuity could devise to be done in this city, in the same compass of time, could work such rich ruin as one public execution, and I stand astounded and appalled by the wickedness it exhibits. I do not believe that any community can prosper where such a scene of horror and demoralization as was enacted outside Horsemonger-lane Jail is presented at the very doors of good citizens, and is passed by, unknown or forgotten. And when, in our prayers and thanksgivings for the season, we are humbly expressing before God our desire to remove the moral evils of the land, I would ask you readers to consider whether it is not a time to think of this one, and to root it out.

I am, Sir, your faithful servant,
CHARLES DICKENS

Devonshire-terrace, Tuesday, Nov. 13.*

atrocious grusom
bearing fremtræden
spectator tilskuer

shrillness skinger

denote betegne
concourse sammenstimlen,
folkemængde

chorus kor
parody parodi, overdrevet
efterligning af noget eller
nogen for at opnå en
komisk effekt
ruffian bølle, voldelig person,
alfons

Punch et engelsk ugeblad fyldt
med humor og satire
indecent uanstændig, usøm-
melig
swooning ved at besvime

zest lyst, iver

inexpressibly ubeskriveligt
odious afskyelig, modbydelig
mirth munterhed
callousness hjerteløshed,
ufølsomhed
fashioned formet

quivering skælvende, rystende

restraint tilbageholdenhed,
tøven
obscenity uanstændighed

perish omkomme, dø

contamination forurening,
urenhed

ingenuity opfindsomhed
devise finde på

astounded forbløffet, lamslået
appalled forfærdet
exhibit vise
prosper have fremgang,
blomstre

* From the British Library
collection - bl.uk

AFTER YOU READ

01

Make a summary of Dickens' points in about 50-100 words. Ensure that you use your own wording.

02

What kind of text is this? And what seems to be the main purpose?

03

What is Dickens' main claim and what are some of his grounds? Substantiate your answer with examples from the text.

04

Speculate. Why would a public execution attract a large audience?

05

Have a conversation. Do you think people today would behave in the same way as that Victorian era audience? Can you think of examples from today? Substantiate your answer.

STYLE OF WRITING

Comment on Dickens' style of writing in this excerpt. Focus on the atmosphere he creates in this text, and how it is created. You may look at his use of adjectives. Substantiate your answer with examples from the text.

- o "When the day dawned, thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians and vagabonds of every kind, flocked on to the ground, with every variety of offensive and foul

behaviour. Fightings, faintings, whistlings, imitations of Punch, brutal jokes, tumultuous demonstrations of indecent delight when swooning women were dragged out of the crowd by the police with their dresses disordered, gave a new zest to the general entertainment."

CREATIVE EXERCISE - WRITING

What do you think of the death penalty in general? Do some research and pick a country that practices capital punishment. Include the methods of execution and degree to which members of the public can view the death itself. Argue your case using the discourse markers below. Use the first row to support your own opinion, and mix in some of the phrases from the second row as rebuttal to strengthen your argumentation:

To begin with... In addition to this... Moreover... Finally, ...

However... On the contrary... In spite of this... Admittedly...

SERIAL, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1: THE ALIBI

Produced and hosted by Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder (2014)

Serial (season 1) is a true crime investigative journalism podcast from 2014 that deals with the story of Adnan Syed, convicted of killing his ex-girlfriend Hae Min Lee in 1999. Sarah Koenig recounts the case and investigates the clues further, talks to witnesses, and more. The series became the most listened-to podcast in the world at the time. *Serial* won a Peabody Award in 2015 for its innovative telling of

a long-form nonfiction story, and it was noted how "*Serial* rocketed podcasting into the cultural mainstream", and it has been hailed as having created "the great podcast renaissance".**

You can listen to the podcast and see additional information about evidence and timelines on the website: www.serialpodcast.org/season-one

* <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/serial>

** "How *Serial* shook up the podcast industry" by Lauren Davidson *The Telegraph* (2015)

BEFORE YOU LISTEN

01

Have a conversation. What would make a true crime podcast interesting to you? How could the story engage you when only sound is used to tell the story?

02

Vocab. The following words are used in the episode. Look up the words you are unfamiliar with.

**persuasive convict (v) bummer affidavit
heinous alibi witness (n) technicality
to puncture somebody's balloon (idiom)
demeanor contradict**

SERIAL

AFTER YOU LISTEN

01

What is the focus of this episode of the podcast?

02

What/who is "the donkey" of this podcast (see the introduction to literary journalism in chapter 1)? Substantiate your answer.

03

In terms of dramaturgy, discuss how Sarah Koenig engages the listener. Give examples from the episode. You may include the use of different types of audio, structure, intonation, etc. For more on this, see chapter 7.

04

What narrative devices are used in this episode to create suspense? You may include some of the following terms:

- foreshadowing (a hint of something to come)
- surprises (events/people that are not what they seemed)
- hooks (something that keeps the listener engaged during the episode, e.g. pieces of information that suggest something interesting is coming up shortly)
- cliffhangers (endings to passages/chapters that tease further dramatic development)

05

Have a conversation. Despite its immense popularity, *Serial* has also been criticized for its ethics, and Sarah Koenig has been accused of being biased. Can you think of why?

STYLE OF SPEAKING

Comment on the language used by Sarah Koenig in this episode. Include the choice of words and their denotations and connotations. Think about how this frames the people you encounter in the podcast. You may include the following examples:

- What does it mean when someone is "loosey-goosey" (08:09) with details? How is the denotation and connotation different from "lying" or "committing perjury"?
- How is a "teeny weeny bag of marijuana" (06:58) different from "a small amount of drugs"?
- What does Sarah Koenig mean when she says Adnan and his friends were "healthy American teenagers who were going to do what teenagers do, so long as they didn't get caught" (10:00)?

- The state calls Adnan "duplicitous". What does that mean? Rabia and Saad Chaudry phrase it differently: "We all grew up with that dual personality" that comes with being a "normal kid with immigrant parents." (10:00) What's the difference in denotation? What is the difference in connotation?
- The narrator describes Adnan as having "big brown eyes, like a dairy cow" (19:45). What is the connotative meaning of this?

How do these excerpts contribute to your analysis of the podcast as a whole?

IN THE DARK, SEASON 1, EPISODE 1: THE CRIME

Produced and hosted by Madeleine Baran (2016)

In the Dark is an investigative podcast. In the first season, Madeleine Baran looks at the disappearance of the boy Jacob Wetterling. The case had been unsolved for almost 27 years, and when Baran investigates it, she tries to figure out why the case had gone cold. She discovers how law enforcement mishandled the case, and how this particular case

sparked a nationwide fear of child abduction – “stranger danger” – and resulted in the nation’s sex-offender registries. Taking its point of departure in the Wetterling case, Baran takes a critical look at America’s sheriff system where sheriffs are elected and not always with relevant qualifications which may lead to poor investigations with terrible outcomes.

BEFORE YOU LISTEN

01

Have a conversation. What are some of the threatening and scary things you have been told to look out for in your childhood?

02

Vocab. The following words are used in the episode. Look up the words so you are able to define them in English:

investigation offender appearance abductor
recognition expansion

03

Vocab. Change the nouns above into verbs and write sentences using the verbs.

AFTER YOU LISTEN

01

There is a comment in the first 11 seconds of the podcast. What is the effect of this quick comment?

02

What is the role of the host? And what is the effect of her role in the podcast?

- o What is the point/effect of the questions she asks in the episode?

03

What is the focus of this episode of the podcast?

04

What/who is “the donkey” of this podcast? Substantiate your answer. Read about “the donkey” in chapter 1 of this book.

05

In terms of dramaturgy, discuss how Madeleine Baran engages the listener. Give examples from the episode. You may include different types of audio (music, archival footage, interviews, narration, etc.) For more on this, see chapter 7.

06

What are examples of “ambience” (birds chirping, a door squeaking, etc.) do you hear in this episode, and what is the effect?

- o What is the effect of including a conversation between, for example, Baran and the Wetterlings which appears to not be part of the interview? (e.g. timestamps 07:21-07:30 and 30:00-30:13.)

AFTER YOU LISTEN CONTINUED →

In the Dark

In the Dark graphic from Minnesota Public Radio.
© 2016 Minnesota Public Radio®.

Used with permission. All rights reserved.

AFTER YOU LISTEN CONTINUED

07

Who do you think uses a manuscript and who do you think speaks without one? Substantiate your answers.

- o What are the different effects of speaking from a manuscript or without one?

08

What narrative devices that create suspense are used in this episode? Examples:

- o foreshadowing (a hint of something to come)
- o surprises (events/people who are not what they seemed)

- o hooks (something that keeps the listener engaged during the episode e.g. pieces of information that suggest something interesting is coming up shortly)

- o cliffhangers (the end is surprisingly abrupt that leaves the listener wanting more)

09

How does the episode end? What is the effect of this way of ending an episode?

10

Have a conversation. What do you think are some of the ethical issues that journalists and writers must consider when working on crime stories?

GO FURTHER:

LISTEN TO ALL OF SEASON ONE OF *IN THE DARK*

01

Listen to *In the Dark* (S01, Ep01-05). What is the main focus of the podcast in these 5 episodes?

02

In terms of structure, what elements do you hear in this podcast so far (speak, interview, music, ambience)? Give examples from the podcast of each of the elements you hear.

03

At the end of episode 5, the podcast seems to introduce a new focus. What is it? Substantiate your answer.

04

What does the podcast initially seem to be about, and what larger topic does it turn out to also be about?

05

Have a conversation. What is the role of a podcast like this in creating conversations about societal issues?

**TALK ABOUT TRUE CRIME:
IMPORTANT WORDS AND CONCEPTS**

Make sure you know these words and terms, so you will be able to talk eloquently about the main ideas from this chapter.

Arrange the words and terms in a way that makes sense for you and which will help you remember them.

victim	bias	alibi
framing	guilty pleasure	persuasive
suspect	the Kuleshov effect	investigative
antagonist	sleuth	credible
atrocities	murder ballad	prosecution
transgressive	bystander	defense
perpetrator	murderer	
suspense	portray	

JENNIFER M. WOOD CULTURE NOV 5, 2018 2:44 PM

Is Today's True Crime Fascination Really About Justice?

Networks and streaming services are placing viewers at the scene of the crime, but what's keeping them there?



Making a Murderer's second season launched last month on Netflix. NETFLIX

ROBERT DURST. MARJORIE Diehl-Armstrong. Adnan Syed. Michael Peterson. Brendan Dassey. Steven Avery. Any self-professed true crime fan worth their weight in luminol is undoubtedly familiar with just these names but with the minute details of the crimes of which those individuals have been accused (wrongly or otherwise). While the genre is not new—its roots in pop culture can be traced to writer Edmund Pearson's 1924 Lizzie Borden book *Studies in Murder*—there's no denying that true crime is having a major moment, one fueled by streaming services and all-crime-all-the-time networks that feed an ever-growing audience hungry for whodunit docs.

RELATED STORIES



TV

***Making a Murderer* Gives the Internet Its Hottest Case Yet**

BRIAN RAFTERY

CROSSING THE STREAM

Netflix Is Finally So Big It's Canceling Shows

ANGELA WATERCUTTER

MOVIES

7 True Crime Docs You Should Stream Right Now

JENNIFER M. WOOD

"I have been working in nonfiction film and television for a very long time, and there's never been a better time to be a nonfiction storyteller," says Joe Berlinger, the director and executive producer of Oxygen's *Unspeakable Crime: The Killing of Jessica Chambers*. This golden age of true crime probably dates back to Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* in 1988 and his own 1996 documentary *Paradise Lost*, which played a part in seeing Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin, and Jessie Misskelley, Jr., aka the West Memphis Three, released from prison. But the true tipping

point, Berlinger notes, didn't come until 2014 with the arrival of the *Serial* podcast, which unpacked Syed's case in fascinating detail and even led to a new trial for its subject. It was quickly followed by HBO's Durst doc *The Jinx* and the first season of Netflix's series about Avery's trial, *Making a Murderer*, in 2015. Soon, the public's fascination with the genre—and interest with finding true justice for its subjects—was hitting a peak.

Netflix, of course, is leading the surge—and with good reason. Its deep pockets, access to eyeballs, and binge-ready format make the streaming service the ideal place for documentarians to set up shop. "Traditional models, while they can be very powerful, don't always work for every film. You might read a review about an incredible documentary on Tuesday, but come Friday, maybe you just want to go see a rom-com, right?" Lisa Nishimura—Netflix's vice president of original documentary and comedy programming, who has shepherded such projects as *Wild Wild Country* and *Making a Murderer*—told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2016. "If we make it available across every single device that connects to the internet, with what I believe is one of the best, if not the best, personalization algorithms out there, do you engage in it? Overwhelmingly we have found that the answer is yes."

True Crime or Social Justice?

But why crime? And why now? Documentarians have been looking under every rock on Earth for decades, and have found success—and audiences—chronicling everything from basketball to Enron, why are viewers so tuned in to stories about old murder cases?

"I think this explosion is due in part to the aesthetics of true crime storytelling: Crime stories, especially ones that involve a trial, have perfect dramatic structure—there is a clear beginning, middle, and

end to the story," Berlinger says. "Something horrific occurs, there is a search for the guilty person, a conclusion to the legal proceeding, and then hopefully justice is served."

"Documentary films have gotten the wrongfully convicted out of prison, advocated for victims' rights, and have shined a light on problems within the criminal justice system. I think viewers find that aspect to true crime to be very satisfying."

— *UNSPEAKABLE CRIME: THE KILLING OF JESSICA CHAMBERS* DIRECTOR JOE BERLINGER

death or somehow exploiting someone's tragedy, and that's certainly not at all what we were about," Ricciardi told Deadline. "We also never set out to investigate the crime. So it was never a whodunit for us either. It really was about taking this opportunity to look at the American criminal justice system and to see whether it's living up to its founding principles."

"Hopefully" being the operative word. While audiences were divided over Steven Avery's guilt following the first season of *Making a Murderer*, most agreed that the evidence presented in the documentary and at his trial—at least what they saw—made a strong argument for it to be reexamined. *Making* is less about a case being closed and more about how Avery was prosecuted, which is why series co-directors Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos prefer to call it a "social justice" series, rather than a true crime one.

"I think what scares me about [the true crime label] is often people think it's fetishizing

[#video: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/Nu4GgQ1LWiI>]

Turning Audiences to Activists

In some cases, the most successful documentaries have transformed viewers into activists. In 2016, following the release of *Making a Murderer*, more than 130,000 people signed a White House petition asking President Obama to issue full pardons to both Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey, who were both convicted in the murder of Teresa Halbach. Given that they were tried and convicted by the state of Wisconsin, Obama explained that he was in no position to pardon them. But that doesn't mean that documentaries don't have the power to enact real change—much of it fueled by grassroots online efforts where viewers from around the globe can connect in large numbers.

"Documentary films have gotten the wrongfully convicted out of prison, advocated for victims' rights, and have shined a light on problems within the criminal justice system," Berlinger says. "I think viewers find that aspect to true crime to be very satisfying."

Two-time Oscar-winner Barbara Kopple has made a career out of highlighting individuals who are fighting for social justice and standing up for themselves with documentaries like *Harlan County U.S.A.*, *American Dream*, and *Shut Up & Sing*. On November 17, she'll debut *A Murder in Mansfield*, which chronicles the 1989 murder of Noreen Boyle and her son's ongoing quest to find out exactly what happened, on Investigation Discovery.

"I'm drawn to stories like these, as are we all—they're a chance to observe the human

"When a crime is committed, the emotions of all involved—the victim and the accused, their families, the representatives of the system seeking justice, etc.—are at their most raw," Kopple

drama play out in front of our eyes, and offer us a chance to formulate our perspectives on how we might act if we were ever faced with a situation like this."

— DOCUMENTARIAN BARBARA KOPPLE

says. "No matter how the situation is eventually reconciled, these experiences are so intense they reverberate for many years to come. I'm drawn to stories like these, as are we all—they're a chance to observe the human drama play out in front of our eyes, and offer us a chance to formulate our perspectives on how we might act if we were ever faced with a situation like this."

Psychiatrists, too, have cited the "this could happen to you" factor as one reason for our current obsession with true crime stories. Couple that with the binge-ability of Netflix and you have the makings of a massive television marathon. "You want to see what happens next in a crime story, so the advent of streaming and the move toward more and more unscripted series really makes this a golden age for nonfiction content," Berlinger says. "It has been a boon to true crime, allowing it to move beyond just tabloid fare and to actually showcase social justice."

Though Netflix doesn't share its viewership data with the public, Nishimura recently told *Vanity Fair* that 75 percent of its subscribers have watched at least one documentary from Netflix's library. But even just that "one" documentary could encompass 628 minutes of the viewer's time, as is the case with Jean-Xavier de Lestrade's *The Staircase*, or nearly 21 hours with *Making a Murderer*, now that the second season has dropped. Still, viewers seem anxious for more.

And streaming advantages and social activism aside, Kopple believes

there's just one thing that keeps those audiences so invested. "The overarching draw of any good drama—whether it be documentary, true crime, western, horror, etc.—is the chance to witness human emotions at play," she says. "Any additional layers—such as social critique—comes secondary. Yes, the storyteller might be using the emotions to draw the viewer in, and then challenge their perspectives on some other larger issue, but it always starts with raw human emotion."

More Great WIRED Stories

- Step inside the Air Force's [sound-swallowing chamber](#)
- A stupid simple wonderful way [to make Google Docs](#)
- My dad says he's a "[targeted individual](#)." Maybe we all are
- In Texas, techies are trying to [turn the red state blue](#)
- PHOTOS: A *Blade Runner*-esque [vision of Tokyo](#)
- Hungry for even more deep dives on your next favorite topic? Sign up for the [Backchannel newsletter](#)

[Jennifer M. Wood](#) writes about movies, television, and pop culture. She is the editor of *The Curious Viewer: A Miscellany of Bingeable Streaming TV Shows from the Past Twenty Years* and the author of *The Curious Movie Buff: A Miscellany of Fantastic Films from the Past 50 Years*.

TOPICS

NETFLIX

CRIME

TV