

NARRATING TRUTH

ANTHOLOGY

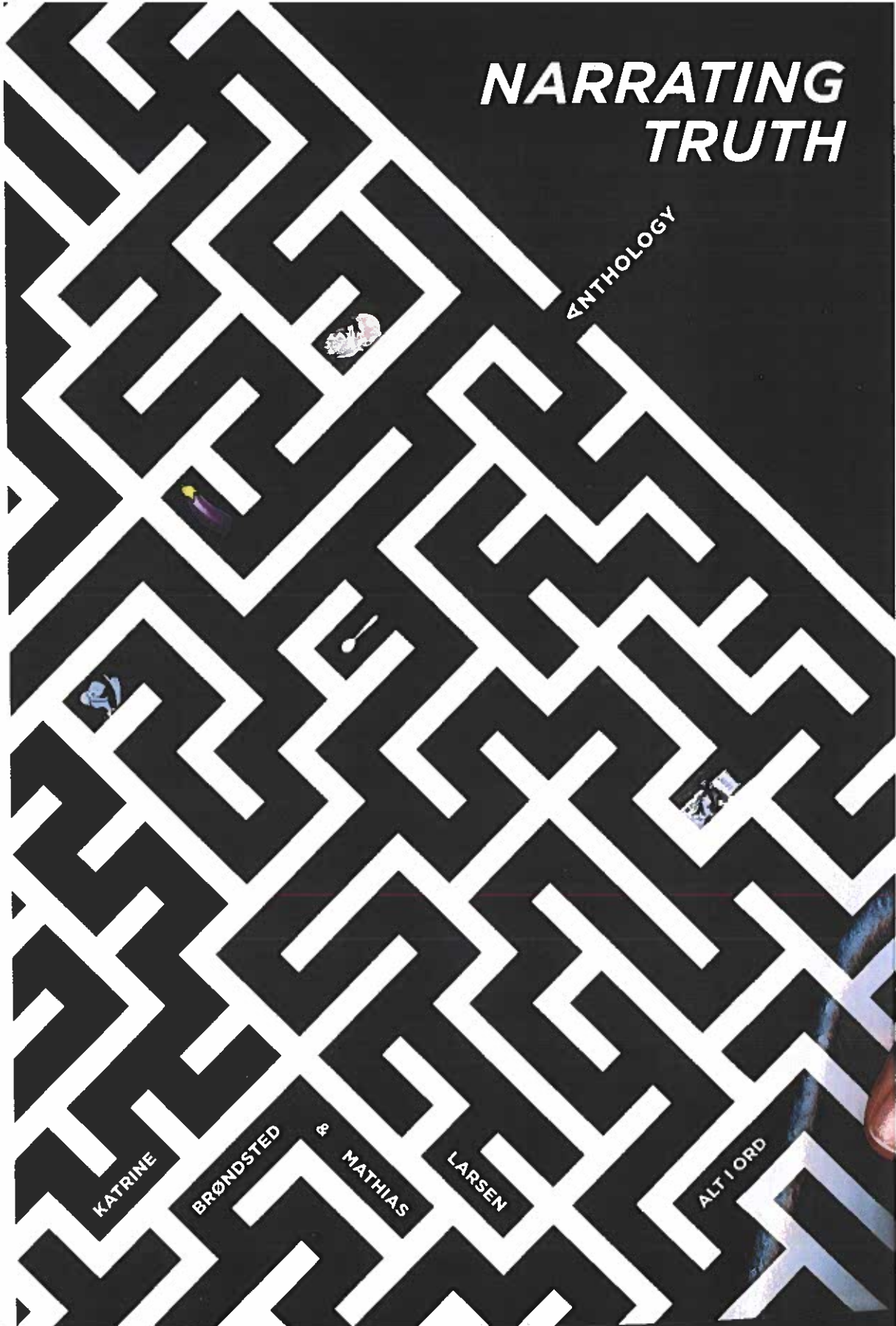
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TRUE CRIME

- 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

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.

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.

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 175 million times, the so-called "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood*, about a grisly murder case, sold millions of copies and was translated into 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 grænseover-
 skridende

plot device mekanisme i
 fortællingen

Intricate kompliceret

grisly gruopvækkende

ubiquitous allesteds-
 nærværende

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 track, 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, ansoppe

implied antydte

traumatic traumatisk, rystende
rural ländlig
random tilfældig

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 monster
 indulge hengive sig til
 be intrigued by være fasci-
 neret af
 appal forlærde

I Was Framed!

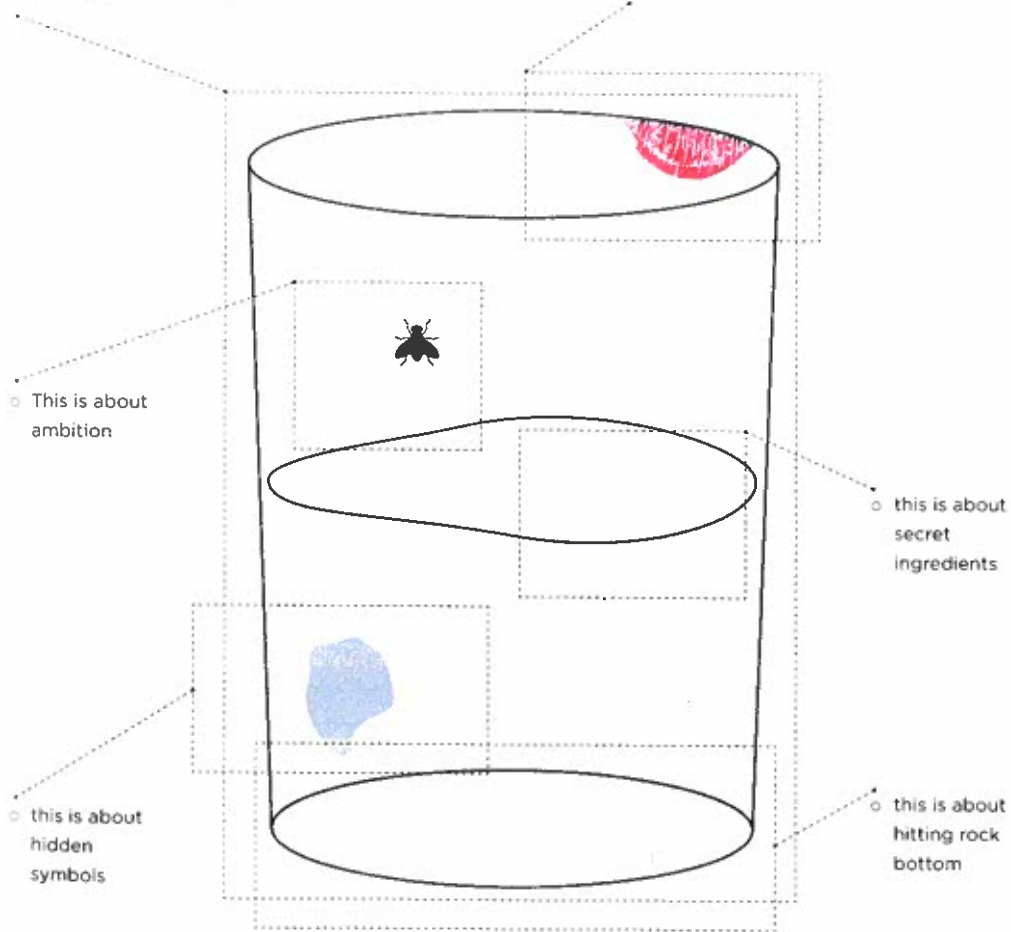
30 Whether the writer behind a true crime drama does it intentionally
 or not, there is an element of "framing" going on when presenting a
 story. Like when you frame a picture or construct a frame when you are
 building a house, framing in the context of communication indicates that
 you encircle a 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



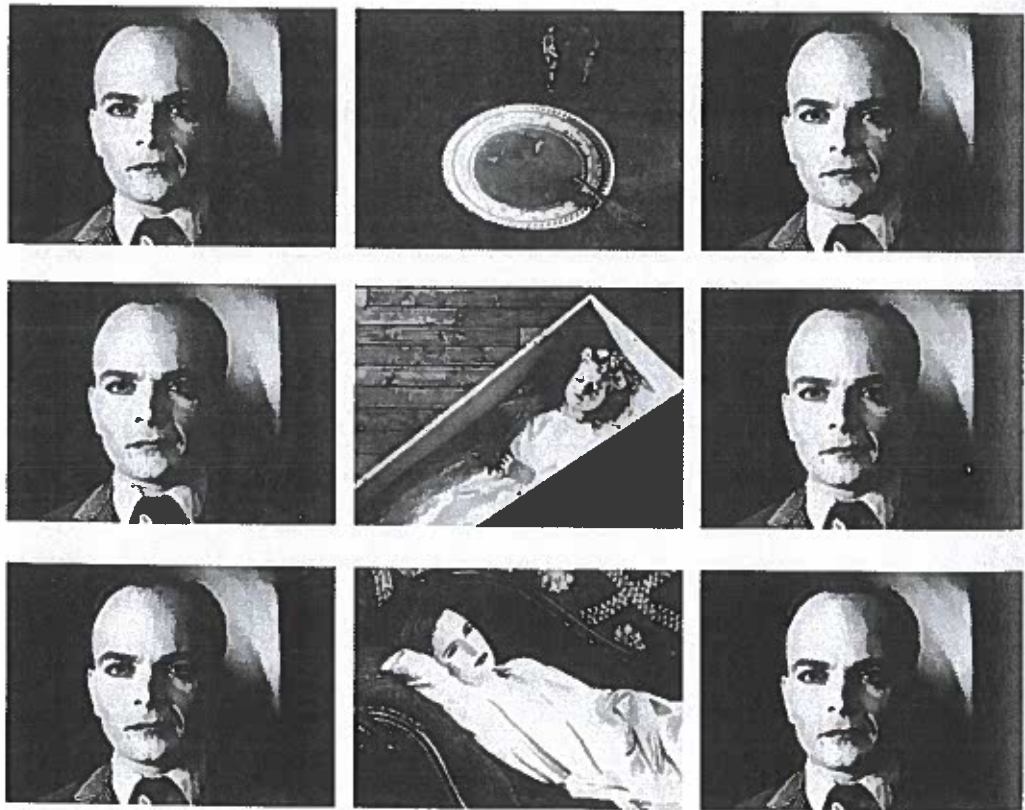
Artist credit: Rasmus Brøndsted

- 1 ~~if you are told that men with funny hats are more likely to commit~~
2 ~~crimes, you will naturally be very suspicious of that man wearing a pink~~
3 ~~beret who is introduced in the next chapter or the next scene.~~ In a way,
4 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
6 you draw conclusions and make up theories based on the manner of how
7 things are presented to you. In visual media, a variation of this effect is
8 also seen in editing where the sequence of images leads the audience to
9 make up stories which connect the images and consequently attribute
10 feelings and intention to the people on screen. An experiment showing
11 this is attributed to Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov, and the experiment
12 aims to show how viewers derive meaning from a sequence of shots.

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.

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.

deduct at udlede noget

elementary simpelt, grundlæggende

distorted forvrænget, fordrejet

dismiss afvise

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.

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