

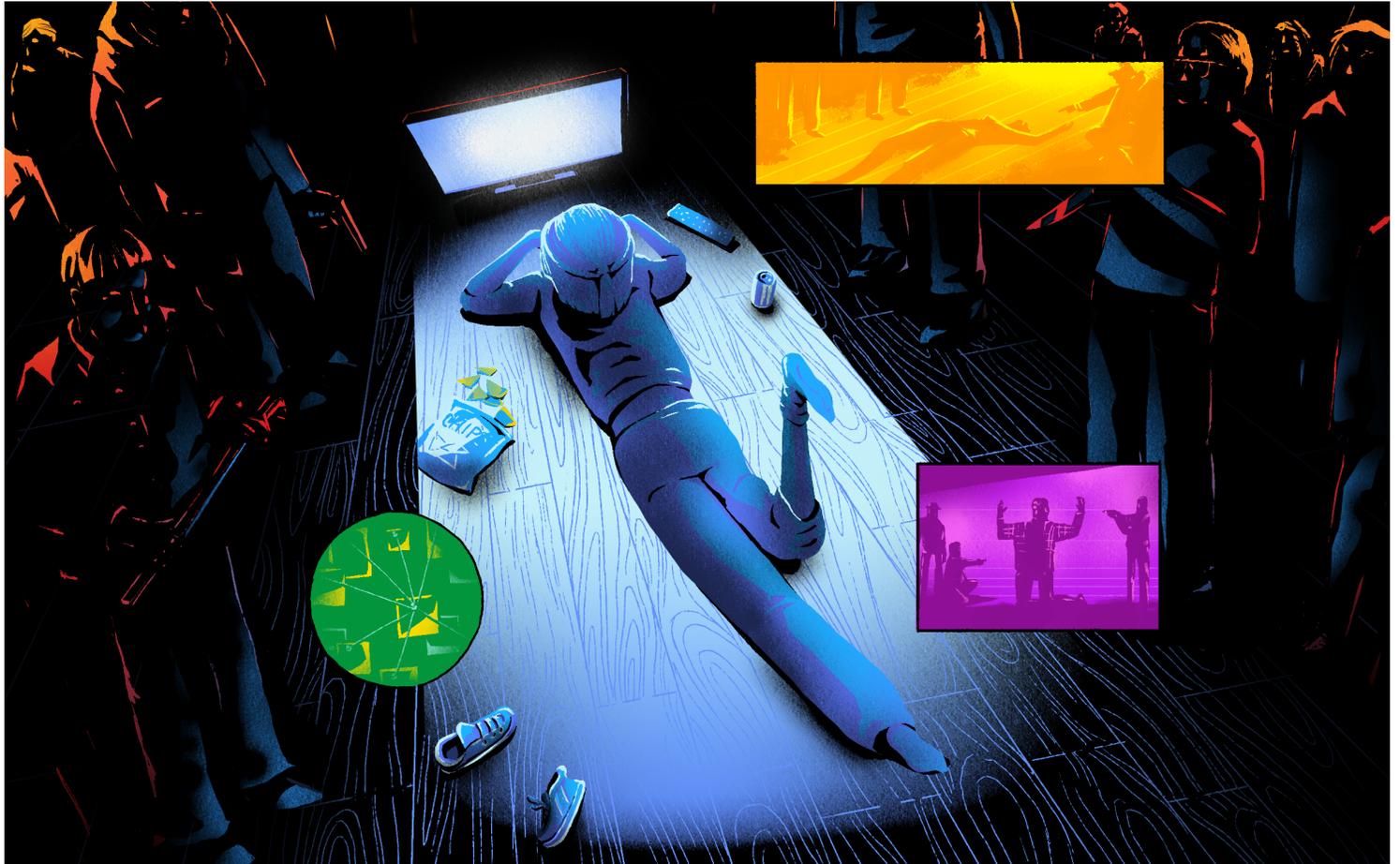


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Why Women Are Obsessed With True Crime

For many female fans, true crime is exposure therapy



Laura Barcella Dec 5, 2019 · 8 min read ★



he summer before my sophomore year of high school, a classmate of mine was murdered by a stranger while he was doing yard work on his parents' front lawn. His name was Alain Colaco, and while we weren't close, I knew

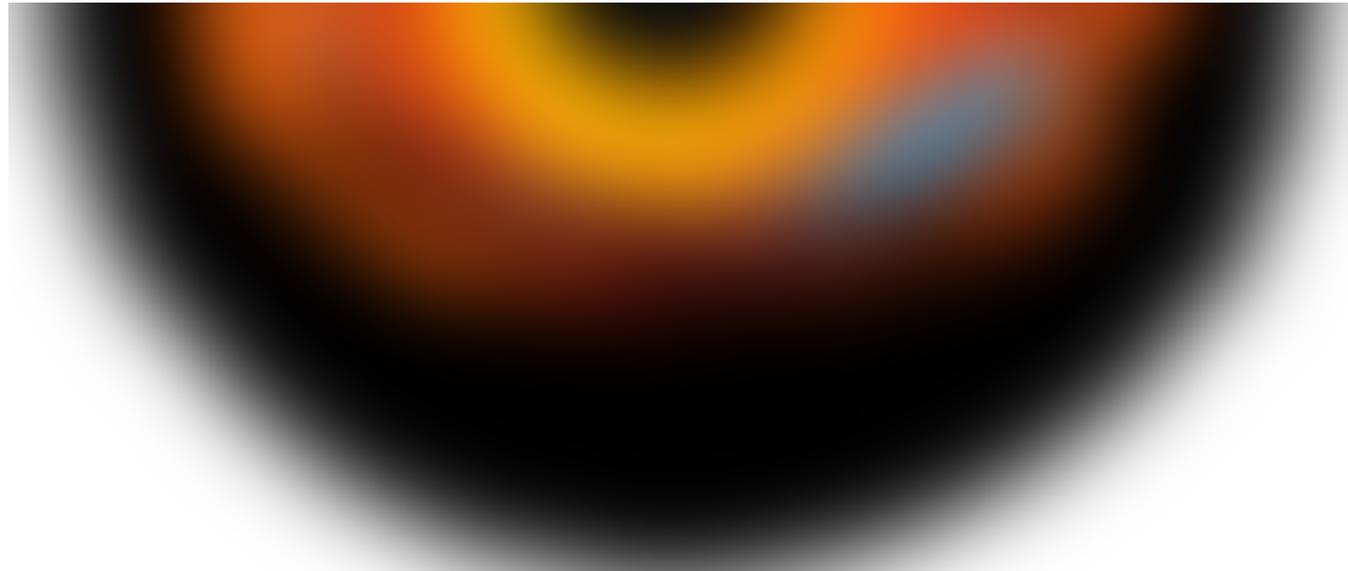
him as ridiculously smart, very cute (he was the object of various friends' crushes), and extremely polite.

Not that any of that matters when it comes to senseless acts of violence. Alain was shot six times in the head and chest by a man who later said he "had the urge to do it." The killer, Sean Lee Qualls, was sentenced to 15 years to life.

This was Washington, D.C., in the early 1990s, back when the city was known as the murder capital of the United States. In 1991 alone, there were 485 homicides. Even with my relatively sheltered, upper-middle-class upbringing, I knew multiple people who died horrible, random deaths: My seventh grade science teacher, Fred Parris, was shot to death in a botched robbery on his front stoop. A janitor at my tiny elementary school was caught in the cross fire of a shoot-out near a Maryland 7-Eleven. The parents of a girl a few grades below me were killed with an axe during a home invasion.

As a kid, I didn't fully understand how these murders affected me. There were things I absorbed by osmosis: that life was tenuous; that death was everywhere and often horrific; that it might arrive without warning, brought screamingly into one's reality by a total stranger. But I didn't deeply reflect in any meaningful way on what the ever-presence of brutal, random violence might mean.

Instead, I became obsessed with serial killers.



I was 15 when Jeffrey Dahmer's trial began, in January 1992. It was a gruesome spectacle, unpacking a series of unspeakably lurid crimes, but I watched as much as I was able to catch on Court TV. I was fixated on deciphering what made Dahmer tick: What could have led this Midwestern kid down a path of such extreme, callous cruelty? What could possibly make someone choose to butcher 15 people, and then freeze their body parts as souvenirs?

Soon, I moved on to other killers, buying any book that I thought might help me understand. I got no concrete answers, of course, but analyzing criminal psyches still brought me a morbid satisfaction. Whenever I felt like I'd reached some new insight about what fueled violent compulsions, it made me feel slightly smarter.

And not just smarter: Safer. More prepared.



It's a good time to be someone with my interests. The true-crime space is booming, with podcasts such as *Crime Junkie*, documentary series like *The Staircase*, books, movies, websites, and more. In fact, I owe my job to the rising obsession with true crime: I work as the crime news editor for a national magazine.

And overwhelmingly, as one 2010 study found, the people responsible for this boom are women.

You might find this surprising. But you won't if you're a fan of *My Favorite Murder*, a podcast hosted by two women that has a thriving Facebook group of mostly female devotees. Or if you watch the true-crime channel Investigation Discovery, one of the most popular cable networks for women, with its lineup of documentaries featuring real-life kidnappings, killings, and sexual assaults.

This holds true in fictionalized crime content, as well as true crime. The graphically described and often sexual violence on NBC's massively popular primetime show *Law & Order: SVU* is also enduringly popular among women: It was recently renewed for a record-setting 21st season, after consistently leading its prime time slot for all adult female demographics. And then, of course, there are Lifetime movies and their ilk, with lurid titles like *Mother, May I Sleep With Danger?* and *Death Clique*.

Research has shown that men tend to have higher thresholds of disgust for gore, and that they are generally more interested in war stories, another violent genre. But significantly, women tend to fear crime more than men do.

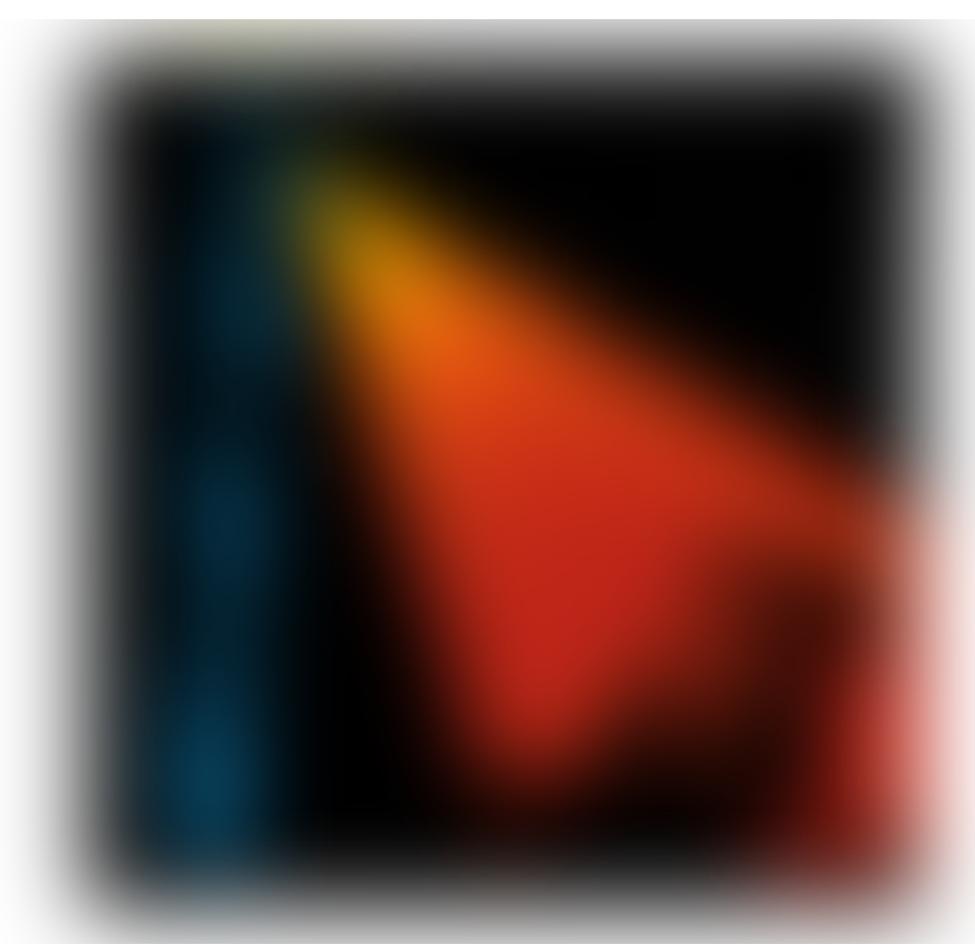
And they're not wrong: Life is undeniably more dangerous for women than it is for men. Intimate partner violence, the vast majority of which is directed at women, accounts for 15% of all violent crime in the U.S. Black women are about three times more likely to be killed by a partner or ex-partner than other groups, and trans women are especially at risk — in 2019, the level of homicidal violence against trans people, especially people of color, led some to dub it an "epidemic." The Margaret Atwood quote, "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them, women are afraid that men will kill them" comes to mind.

That's exactly why women flock to true crime, says Amanda Vicary, the lead author of the 2010 study and a psychology professor at Illinois Wesleyan University. "It wasn't until I stepped back and looked at the data as a whole that I realized it's all about survival," Vicary explains. For women, Vicary says, crime stories can be a mental dress rehearsal of sorts, a way of unpacking and understanding dangerous situations that haven't yet happened to them.

“A lot of it might be subconscious,” she says. “But *My Favorite Murder* gives tons of tips on safety, and I think a lot of women have changed their behavior after watching shows on Investigation Discovery.”

To be clear: No one is saying the onus is on women to prevent themselves from being attacked, nor that safety tips for women are a solution to male aggression. But some find that stockpiling survival tips like this is its own form of anxiety relief — a way of easing, if only slightly, the inescapable stress of being a woman in a brutal world.

For female fans, consuming crime content, real or fictional, can feel like the mental exhale that comes from knowing you’ve faced your fears and come out the other side. It’s almost like exposure therapy, Vicary says — a place to work through our darkest fears about being a target of violence.



“I think it’s primarily women consuming true-crime content because women are the victims in so many of the stories,” agrees Erin Parisi, a Florida-based therapist and a true-crime addict herself. “It’s as if women learn vicariously through the experiences of

other women and feel as though they're better able to avoid becoming victims themselves.”

Parisi considers herself a “Murderino,” or a fan of *My Favorite Murder*, partly because of the show's feminist fusion of crime talk, humor, and self-care-tinged survival advice. “I love that they talk about how the way society trains women to act plays a role in how women end up victimized,” she says. “The easiest example is when the hosts say things like ‘Fuck politeness.’ How many women were lured in by Ted Bundy's broken-arm routine... because they didn't want to be rude?” (Bundy often captured his victims by faking a broken arm or leg and asking for help carrying things to his car.)

This sense of looking behind the curtain — of understanding how serial killers (who are usually men) entrap their victims (often women) — also offers up a comforting illusion of control.

The New Jersey-based writer Rachel Kramer Bussel has been reading true crime books since she was a teenager. They used to scare her: “Every stranger was a potential serial killer,” she says, “because so often it was the totally ‘nice’ and normal-seeming person who went on to murder their spouse.” But as an adult, her forays into crime literature have become a comforting escape from her daily anxieties.

“As an adult, I have a lot of anxiety and phobias,” she explains. “I worry about my personal safety, my home's safety, the safety and health of my family members and loved ones.”

By contrast, the crime books Bussel reads feel like a respite from her day-to-day fears, because the stories “don't seem as close to home,” she says.

Parisi says there can be psychic benefits to this type of thinking. “When someone uses their anxiety in a way that's productive, that can be really helpful,” she says. “Maybe you get an alarm system. Maybe you take self-defense classes.”

Of course, if staying safe were truly that simple, the true-crime genre wouldn't be nearly as expansive. But when so little is truly within our control, perhaps it's okay sometimes to engage in some soothing self-delusion.



don't know if I've ever consciously changed my behavior as a result of something I heard on a podcast or saw on TV. But each time I devour a new story of a real-life victim meeting a gruesome end, or read about another case of horrifying sexual violence, I play out the worst-case scenario with myself at the center, envisioning both how I might handle it and how I might feel in it. And I've built up a formidable internal hard drive of information about misogyny, violence, and how the two intersect.

In some ways, crime is the most candid genre when it comes to discussing violence against women. It's one of the only forms of entertainment that honors how scary it can be to exist as a woman today, and doesn't minimize the inherent dangers of being, well, anything other than a white cis man.

Nor does crime content gloss over the structural challenges that victims of violence, including sexual violence, can face when trying to protect themselves. For instance, I know from my years of reading these stories that if I were in an abusive relationship, a restraining order wouldn't necessarily stop my partner from killing me; I would likely need to take more drastic steps to protect myself.

When I spoke last year with the criminal behavioral analyst Laura Richards, co-host of the *Real Crime Profile* podcast, she argued that the consumption of true crime can be a consciously feminist act. For example, in *Real Crime Profile* and her other work, Richards focuses her stories on the victim's experience, never the criminal's. "We want to correct the narrative," Richards told me in 2018. "The narrative is, most often, about blaming and shaming victims."

These books, films, and podcasts can also feel satisfying because, in certain cases, they're the only place we can experience the high of justice or closure. In real life, things rarely end so neatly: The serial killer is never caught; the rapist gets away with his crime and finds a new victim. But the tidy narrative conclusions of some crime programming can feel like an antidote — especially for people who have been touched in some way by violence themselves.

However, there can be such a thing as too much true crime, Parisi warns, especially if you suffer from severe anxiety, phobias, or past trauma.

“For someone who has their own trauma, especially of a violent or sexually violent nature, it can be really triggering to listen to stories that are similar, or even that don’t seem similar on the surface,” she warns. “For some, it could be like picking a scab off a wound over and over and over again.”

For me and apparently many others, though, consuming crime stories can feel like putting a Band-Aid on an existential wound: not enough to heal what ails, perhaps, but in the moment, a good enough fix.

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