

The Library of America Interviews Harold Schechter about True Crime

In connection with the publication in September 2008 of *True Crime: An American Anthology*, edited by Harold Schechter, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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Luc Sante has written, “The nonfictional narrative of crime has chiefly been associated with such raffish vehicles as the ballad broadside, the penny dreadful, the tabloid extra, and the pulp detective magazine.” Why do we crave tales of true crime but give writings about it so little respect? Are we ashamed to acknowledge what Joseph Conrad called “the fascination of the abomination”?

Let me answer by quoting a stanza from one of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems, “One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—”:

Ourself behind ourself, concealed—
Should startle most—
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror’s least.

With her usual acuity, Dickinson (herself an avid reader of the sensationalistic “penny papers” of her day) acknowledges a discomfiting truth: that we dutiful citizens harbor a dark, savage self, deeply hidden from our own awareness, that revels in violence and destruction. This atavistic part—the flip side of our civilized persona—has been called many things: the Id, the Shadow, the Other, Mr. Hyde. William James describes it as “the carnivore within.” Appealing as powerfully as it does to our least socially acceptable impulses, true crime has always carried a strong whiff of the forbidden and incurred the censure of moralizing critics.

What critics of the genre fail to realize, of course, is that true crime isn’t just, or even primarily, about titillation. It’s an age-old form of storytelling,

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deeply rooted in folk tradition, that—by casting deeply disturbing events into shapely narratives—helps us cope with and make sense of the violence that is endemic to both our inner and outer worlds.

In your introduction you note that True Crime does not include accounts of killings by gangsters, assassins, and bandits. What criteria did you use to choose your selections?

I have to sketch in a bit of my own scholarly background to answer this one. I first became interested in the historical roots of true crime when I discovered, twenty or so years ago, a collection of old issues of the *Illustrated Police News* of London, the best-selling periodical of Victorian England. The equivalent of today's sleazier supermarket tabloids, this wildly sensationalistic paper offered graphically illustrated accounts of the most gruesome crimes, all trumpeted with headlines like "Shocking Murder!" "Singular Homicide!" "Frightful Slaying!" I realized that, though based in fact, these accounts were a variety of what folklorists call *wondertales*—stories designed to elicit a kind of childlike astonishment and awe in the reader. That same experience, I believe, remains central to the appeal of true crime today. As a result, I chose to focus my anthology on accounts of remarkable crimes, the kind that erupt into otherwise ordinary lives—as opposed to, say, gangland murders, which are, after all, an everyday part of life for your average hitman.

Many of the incidents chronicled in True Crime inspired some well-known works of literature. The Snyder-Gray murder inspired Double Indemnity. The Gillette-Brown drowning gave rise to An American Tragedy. And Ed Gein is credited with prompting both Psycho and The Silence of the Lambs. Do you have any personal favorites in this regard? Do you think any of the fictional accounts get us closer to the truth of what happened?

My own favorite would have to be Ed Gein, the subject of my first true crime book, *Deviant*. Besides *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, Gein was also the inspiration for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (whose secondary villain, Buffalo Bill, fashions a skin suit from his female victims, as did Gein). What intrigued me when I first began researching Gein back in the late 1980s was the way his case has been mythologized—transformed into archetypal stories that resonate with collective anxieties and obsessions, particular to the cultural moment. *Psycho*, for example, is a parable about the schizoid attitudes toward sex characteristic of the 1950s. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reflects counter-cultural fears—America as a death machine devouring its young—rife in the Vietnam War era. And *The Silence of the Lambs* embodies, I believe, deep-seated

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anxieties relating to our obsession with physical perfection and the surgical lengths we are willing to go to achieve it. None of these works represents the actual facts of the Gein case but, in the way of all myths, they shed a great deal of light on the different ways the communal psyche responds to such horrors. In that sense, they certainly “get us closer to the truth.”

In her article, “The Mystery of JonBenét Ramsey,” in The New York Review of Books, Joyce Carol Oates noted that “few writers of distinction have been drawn to [true crime].” In many ways your anthology demolishes that claim. Here we have Cotton Mather, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Damon Runyon, H. L. Mencken, James Thurber, A. J. Liebling, Elizabeth Hardwick, Truman Capote, Gay Talese. But taking up Ms. Oates’s gauntlet, would you say that any of the writers in this collection have distinguished themselves by their contribution to the genre?

This one is complicated. On the one hand, it’s undeniably true that a great deal of true crime writing over the centuries has been produced by anonymous hacks. This relates to the folkloristic roots of the genre. We don’t, after all, demand of folktales the kind of aesthetic qualities we value in “high” art. The audiences who shelled out a few pence for old broadside ballads and trial pamphlets weren’t looking for formal elegance or psychological complexity or thematic significance—they just wanted a thrill.

At the same time, “writers of distinction” have always been drawn to folklore and popular narrative as a source of material. Shakespeare, Dickens, Melville, Hawthorne, Poe—all were powerfully stimulated, often obsessed, by accounts of real-life crimes. Obviously, as this anthology demonstrates, some of our country’s preeminent writers have produced work in the genre. Many readers will be surprised to discover pieces by the likes of Edna Ferber, Susan Glaspell, and Zora Neale Hurston (not to mention Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln). I think, perhaps, that Oates, like most people, is simply unaware of the great range of important American writers who have contributed to the field.

What the anthology also demonstrates is that, as with any other “popular” form (detective novels, science fiction, comic books, gangster movies, etc.), true crime has produced genuine artists of distinction largely unknown to audiences unfamiliar with the genre: Edmund Pearson, John Bartlow Martin, Miriam Allen deFord, among others. My hope is that *True Crime* will not only lead to a reappraisal of the genre but will be a revelatory experience for readers who—largely out of intellectual snobbery, I fear—have turned a blind eye to the outstanding writing its finest practitioners have produced.

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True Crime is arranged chronologically, but I wonder if you might offer readers alternative pathways through it for, say, those interested in specific pathologies, like crimes of passion, or visions from God, or parricides, or the most lurid or comical selections.

A thematic table of contents, eh? The book contains such a rich variety of criminal pathologies that all kinds of permutations are possible. Here are a few suggestions:

Crimes that inspired important works of literature and/or cinema

Anonymous, "An Account of a Murder Committed by Mr. J— Y—, Upon His Family, in December, A.D. 1781"
Susan Glaspell, "The Hossack Murder"
Murder Ballads, "The Murder of Grace Brown," "Trail's End"
Damon Runyon, "The Eternal Blonde"
Robert Bloch, "The Shambles of Ed Gein"
Don Moser, "The Pied Piper of Tucson"

Crimes of the century

James Gordon Bennett, "The Recent Tragedy"
Murder Ballads, "The Murder at Fall River"
Damon Runyon, "The Eternal Blonde"
Edna Ferber, "Miss Ferber Views 'Vultures' at Trial"
James Thurber, "A Sort of Genius"
Jack Webb, "The Black Dahlia"
Miriam Allen deFord, "Superman's Crime: Loeb and Leopold"
Truman Capote, "Then It All Came Down"
Gay Talese, "Charlie Manson's Home on the Range"

Mass murderers and serial killers

Anonymous, "Jesse Harding Pomeroy, the Boy Fiend"
Edmund Pearson, "Hell Benders, or The Story of a Wayside Tavern"
Jim Thompson, "Ditch of Doom"
John Bartlow Martin, "Butcher's Dozen"
Meyer Berger, "Veteran Kills 12 in Mad Rampage on Camden Street"
W. T. Brannon, "Eight Girls, All Pretty, All Nurses, All Slain"
Robert Bloch, "The Shambles of Ed Gein"
Don Moser, "The Pied Piper of Tucson"
Gay Talese, "Charlie Manson's Home on the Range"
Truman Capote, "Then It All Came Down"
Jimmy Breslin, "Son of Sam"

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All in the family

- Benjamin Franklin, "The Murder of a Daughter"
Anonymous, "An Account of a Murder Committed by Mr. J— Y—, Upon His Family, in December, A.D. 1781"
Timothy Dwight, "A crime more atrocious and horrible than any other"
Susan Glaspell, "The Hossack Murder"
Murder Ballads, "The Murder at Fall River"
Albert Borowitz, "The Medea of Kew Gardens Hills"
Dominick Dunne, "Nightmare on Elm Drive"
Jay Robert Nash, "The Turner-Stompanato Killing: A Family Affair"

For love and/or money

- The Record of Crimes in the United States, "Jesse Strang"
Celia Thaxter, "A Memorable Murder"
Thomas S. Duke, "Mrs. Cordelia Botkin, Murderess"
Edmund Pearson, "Hell Benders, or the Story of a Wayside Tavern"
Damon Runyon, "The Eternal Blonde"
Theodore Dreiser, "Dreiser Sees Error in Edwards Defense"
Dorothy Kilgallen, "Sex and the All-American Boy"
A. J. Liebling, "Case of the Scattered Dutchman"
Zora Neale Hurston, "The Trial of Ruby McCollum"
Ann Rule, "Young Love"
Dominick Dunne, "Nightmare on Elm Drive"

I was struck in reading the 18th-century account of James Yates to find an analogue of the oft-heard contemporary comment, "He seemed like such a normal guy." Is this part of the attraction of these reports: that we can't believe that anyone we know could be capable of these horrific deeds?

Absolutely. Our fascination with psychopathic killers derives in no small part from their outward appearance of normality. Their atrocities provoke in us a powerful need to comprehend an ultimate human mystery: how people who seem (and often are) so ordinary, so much like the rest of us, can possess the hearts and minds of monsters. The sheer ordinariness of their daily lives also forces us to confront an even more unsettling question: to what extent do we share, on a level far below the lintel of consciousness, in their darkest urges and imaginings?

Would you agree that there seems to be a progression in the book from entries with a highly religious context—like the execution sermons which detail the horrors of the person to be hanged—to trial accounts to journal-

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istic reportage with more a psychological flavor? Do you detect other trends as true crime writing has evolved?

While true crime writings reveal certain constants of human behavior (most obviously our species' innate affinity for violence) they also reflect ever-shifting cultural conditions. As a result, as Luc Sante has observed, the selections in this anthology sketch out a kind of social history of the U.S. Readers who follow the chronological arrangement of the book will get a powerful sense of the social transformations that have occurred from Puritan times to the present—from the religious didacticism of Cotton Mather's "Pillars of Salt," to the Victorian sentimentality that infuses Celia Thaxter's classic, "A Memorable Murder," to the hard-boiled cynicism of Damon Runyon's Jazz Age gem, "The Eternal Blonde," to the 1950s Freudian preoccupations of Robert Bloch's "The Shambles of Ed Gein," all the way up to the sex-murder obsessions of our own time.

I was surprised (and amused) by the judgmental tone in many of the early 20th-century accounts. Damon Runyon has the longest piece in the book, "The Eternal Blonde," and it's filled with comments like "She is not bad looking. I have seen much worse. She is thirty-three and looks just about that, though you cannot tell much about blondes." Or Dorothy Kilgallen in "Sex and the All-American Boy": "If ever a truck driver would have whistled at Margaret, his license would have been revoked immediately because of defective vision." Did true crime writers feel they had more latitude to write like this than other reporters?

From the examples you cite, I assume that, by "judgmental tone," you are referring to the openly disparaging way that the writers refer to the physical appearance of certain women. I don't know if true crime writers were more guilty of such cattiness than other journalists of the day. But they certainly were less PC than their counterparts tend to be today—another example of the way true crime writings reflect changing social standards. (For extreme non-political correctness, it's hard to beat H. L. Mencken's "More and Better Psychopaths.")

You've toiled in the true crime field for several decades and have written several popular works of crime-related fiction and nonfiction. In fact, the Boston Book Review has called you "America's principal chronicler of its greatest psychopathic killers." How did this anthology come about and did you make any discoveries while compiling it?

While it's true that much of my writing over the past twenty years has been in the area of true crime, I've done other projects as well, including a book called *Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment*. While

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researching that book (essentially a polemic in which I argue that, contrary to the claims of various moral crusaders, popular culture is in many ways *less* violent today than it was in the past), I became very immersed in the long history of true crime writing and came to realize that there was an enormous body of fascinating material—old murder ballads, trial pamphlets, execution sermons, etc.—that most people knew nothing about. The idea for the book sprang from that discovery. In Geoffrey O’Brien, editor-in-chief of *The Library of America* and a cultural critic whose essays for *The New York Review of Books* I’ve long admired, I found someone very receptive to the idea.

As for discoveries—the answer is an emphatic yes. What I discovered, to my great delight and surprise (and what readers of the book will be equally surprised to discover) is just how much terrific writing has been done in the true crime genre—and how much of it has been produced by outstanding American authors we never normally associate with the genre, from Cotton Mather and Timothy Dwight to James Thurber and Elizabeth Hardwick.

*In your introduction you note that true crime writing finally began getting some respect after the popular success of *In Cold Blood* in 1966. Did that also change how true crime was written? Are there examples of this new trend in the book?*

Contrary to his claim, Capote didn’t invent a new literary form—the “non-fiction novel,” as he called it—with *In Cold Blood*. But his book certainly stands as a masterpiece of the so-called “New Journalism,” which deployed the techniques of fiction in the service of factual reportage. The enormous success of his book led directly to other major true crime works in the same vein, perhaps most significantly Norman Mailer’s 1980 “documentary novel,” *The Executioner’s Song*. Since we made an editorial decision to publish only self-contained pieces in the anthology, neither *In Cold Blood* nor Mailer’s Pulitzer Prize winner is represented. I did, however, include Capote’s fascinating and undeservedly obscure piece on Manson follower Bobby Beausoleil. The selections by Gay Talese and Jimmy Breslin are also prime examples of the same approach.

*Sex crimes don’t show up until midway through the book in John Bartlow Martin’s “*The Butcher’s Dozen*.” Would you say that this is true historically—that sex crimes have become more prevalent just over the past 100 years?*

It’s a popular misconception that serial sex murder is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the depredations of Jack the Ripper. The unhappy truth is that it is an age-old form of behavior that can be traced back to the very

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origins of our species—and probably even earlier (recent primate research makes it clear that chimpanzees, with whom we share something like 99% of our DNA, routinely engage in the kinds of atrocities we associate with serial killers). What *is* true, however, is that, until relatively recently, the public wasn't especially interested in reading about sex crimes. The reason for this relates, I believe, to an issue I raised earlier—i.e., the way certain crimes are essentially ignored by the press and the public while others are transformed into cultural myths. Back in the 1890s, for example, “lust murder” (as it was called) didn't speak directly to the fears and obsessions of the moment. At a time when the food and drug industries were entirely unregulated and everything from canned meat to over-the-counter medications were full of tainted, if not actively toxic, substances, the American public was much more preoccupied with the nightmare figure of the poisoner, who personified the dominant anxieties of the day. In the 1920s, when the culture was obsessing about out-of-control “flaming youth,” Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb (the subjects of Miriam Allen deFord's powerful piece “Superman's Crimes”) became the designated demons of the day (despite the fact that other, far more prolific killers were running rampant at the time). Starting in the 1970s, the serial sex killer became our own cultural bogeyman—the mythic embodiment of our unspoken fears about the perils unleashed by the liberated id.

What do you think we can learn about human nature from True Crime: An American Anthology?

Speaking for myself, I'd say that working on the anthology didn't necessarily teach me anything about human nature. But it certainly confirmed my long-held beliefs—beliefs that were shaped by a book that exerted a great deal of influence on me in my early adolescence. This was Robert Ardrey's *African Genesis*, published in 1961 when I was thirteen. A groundbreaking and beautifully written work of pop anthropology, Ardrey's “personal investigation into the animal origins of human nature” (as it was subtitled) argued forcefully (to my mind, irrefutably) that “man is a predator whose natural instinct is to kill with a weapon.” But Ardrey drew a paradoxically uplifting lesson from this fact, noting that what is so ultimately remarkable about our species, given our instinctual endowment of savagery, is how we have transformed those innately destructive energies into the products of high civilization. In the first draft of my introduction, very much with Ardrey's argument in mind, I wrote the following, and since the passage has since been revised, allow me to quote the original version here: “One purpose of true crime writing is precisely to provide decent law-abiding citizens with primal, sadistic thrills—to satisfy what William

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James called our ‘aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement.’ The worst specimens of the genre may not rise above that quasi-pornographic level. But the best—like those exquisitely ornamented warclubs, broadswords, and flintlocks displayed in museums—are a testimony to something worth celebrating: the human ability to take something rooted in our intrinsically bloodthirsty nature and turn it into craft of a very high order, sometimes even into art.”