

Chapter 2

Public Interest in Mass and Serial Murder

Abstract This chapter will provide a discussion and analysis of the public's interest in both serial and mass murder and true crime in general. This increase is demonstrated by the increase in the number of criminal television shows and movies being consumed by the public, murderabilia sales, the interest in murder homes, and persons who are attracted to violent perpetrators. Also discussed will be an analysis of the public's growing fascination with these topics and several relevant critical thinking exercises.

If media consumption habits are indicative of personal interests, then it is reasonable to suggest that many Americans are intrigued by murder. There is no shortage of criminological-oriented television shows, documentaries, and books, and now an entire television channel devoted to the subject, the Investigation Discovery (ID) channel. The *New York Times* characterized the ID channel as “one of the fastest growing cable television networks in the country” (Steel 2015, para. 5). Their viewership extends beyond 100 million homes in over 157 countries. Investigation Discovery network executives believe there is room for even more growth and plan to expand to 200 global markets. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in April, 2016, that for the first time ever, Investigation Discovery had its first-ever convention for true crime television “addicts” called IDCon.

Consider the popularity of *Serial*, a podcast that in its first season featured a two decades old murder case of 18-year old Hae Min Lee, and her ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed, who was given a life sentence for her death (Mallenbaum 2015). *Serial* is considered “the most popular broadcast in history,” according to *Time* magazine (Dockterman 2015, p. 1). Now its second season, *Serial* explores the case about U. S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl who became a prisoner of the Taliban for five years after some believed that he voluntarily deserted his unit in 2009. Thus far, the podcast has been downloaded at least 80 million times (Mallenbaum 2015).

HBO's 2015 documentary series *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* has also generated a great deal of interest. *The Jinx* followed the case of Robert Durst, a wealthy and infamous serial murder suspect. Mr. Durst participated in the

six week documentary series which culminated in his arrest for the suspected December 2000 murder of Susan Berman (Yan and Shoichet 2015). Ms. Berman was a close friend of Mr. Durst's. It is believed that she was killed by Mr. Durst because she "knew too much" about his alleged involvement in the disappearance of his wife Kathleen Durst, who has been missing since 1982. Including the rebroadcast, later in the evening, over one million people watched the finale, a series high for a HBO documentary (Collins 2015).

Another popular documentary includes the Netflix series *Making a Murderer*. The 10 hour, exceptionally detailed documentary features the stories of Steven Avery and his teenage nephew, Brendan Dassey (Shattuck 2015). Steven Avery spent 18 years in prison for a crime for which he was exonerated. Two years after his release from prison, in 2003, he was arrested again and eventually convicted for the murder of 25-year-old Teresa Halbach, a freelance photographer. *Making a Murderer* thoroughly documents what some believe to be yet another case of wrongful conviction. Those convinced of Mr. Avery's innocence asked the President of the United States, Barack Obama, for a pardon to which he responded that he cannot grant state pardons. The documentary has since prompted a national debate about the integrity and inadequacies of the American criminal justice system. Netflix has announced a second season of *Making a Murderer*.

Before the popular *Making a Murderer* documentary, were the original standard-bearers of this genre including: Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), detailing Randall Dale Adams who was sentenced to death in Texas for killing a policeman; *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996) about Damien Echols, James Baldwin, and Jessie Misskelley, known as the "West Memphis Three," who were alleged to have killed three young children during satanic rituals; and *The Staircase* (2005), an eight-episode reality series on the Sundance Channel about the 2001 murder of Kathleen Peterson, by novelist and husband Michael Peterson.

Other crime documentaries of notable interest include: *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* (2008), an emotional and dramatic film concerning the murder of Andrew Bagby and their child by Shirley Jane Turner (Horeck 2014); *The Cheshire Murders* (2013), a deep investigation into the lives of Joshua Komisarjevsky and Steven Holmes who burglarized, raped, and murdered the three female members of the Petit family; *Captivated: The Trials of Pamela Smart* (2014), who was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder after prosecutors successfully argued that she convinced several young male lovers to kill her husband; *Tales of the Grim Sleeper* (2014) about Lonnie Franklin Jr., a serial killer who targeted South Central Los Angeles prostitutes over the course of 25 years; and *3 ½ Minutes, Ten Bullets* (2015) which explores the 2012 murder of 17-year-old Jordan Davis by 47-year-old Michael Dunn who claimed to have been threatened by the African American teen outside of a convenience store in Jacksonville, Florida. Referred to by the media as the "loud music" trial, the film explores the events that resulted in the death of Jordan Davis and the conviction of Michael Dunn, who after a second trial was sentenced to life without parole.

Finally, there has been renewed interest in O.J. Simpson, as evidenced by FX's *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (2016) and ESPN's *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), the latter being a nearly eight hour documentary considered by some to be a "masterpiece" (Leitch 2016).

Women and True Crime

Research suggests that women are especially fascinated with true crime. The ID channel was "the most watched ad supported cable network among women ages 24–54" (Battaglio 2016, p. 1). Vicary and Fraley (2010) note the paradoxical fact that men are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of crimes, yet it is women who are more fascinated with the subject matter. It is not a heavily studied phenomenon and there is no clear consensus as to why more women than men are drawn to true crime and murder as a form of entertainment. Some studies suggest that women watch these shows because they want to learn survival skills to prevent their victimization (Vicary and Fraley 2010).

Relatability might be another factor. Women tend to be more interested in true crimes stories about other women (Vicary and Fraley 2010). Sharon Martin produces the real-life crime television series *Snapped* that focuses only on female criminals. She noted that the stories revolve around bad relationships and "that's a theme every women can understand." She noted that these stories might also serve as examples of how not to behave in the world. Some of the anecdotal feedback she receives, through social media, also supports the possibility that like other reality-based television shows, they make people feel better about their own lives (Why women love crime 2015).

The emotional and dramatic nature of true crime stories makes them compelling. They involve real-life stories of individuals who have been affected by extreme violence, something that most people never experience in their own lives. The stories are deeply emotional and visceral. They allow an individual to vicariously experience highly emotional events without having to actually experience them. People fear what they do not know but are also fascinated by it. Likewise, many people are frightened by what they consider to be evil and are drawn into stories that involve villainous characters.

Some experts believe that true crime television is unhealthy. They have likened it to pornography and have dubbed it "murder porn." Cultivation theory suggests watching many hours of television creates a distorted view of reality (Gerbner et al. 2002). One crime and justice media expert suggested that: "Ultimately, these shows are 'infotainment,' morality tales spun with (mis) information about crime and the justice process (Steel 2015, para. 22)." Network executives have increased the drama and number of sex scenes featured in ID channel programming, presumably hoping to attract even more women; but the question remains what impact, if any, does it have upon women. The following critical thinking exercise explores those possibilities.

Critical Thinking Exercise: Women and True Crime

To begin the exercise, ask participants to review the ID channel television series lineup. This information can be found on their website (www.investigationdiscovery.com). Ask participants to review the names of the shows, the show's synopsis and to make a list. What do they observe about the list? Then ask that participants consider the following questions for discussion:

- If these shows are providing misinformation about crime and justice, as has been suggested, what effect might it have upon women, who are the majority of viewers?
- Why are women drawn to these shows more than men?
- What does it mean if women are, in fact, being targeted with misinformation and salaciousness? How might this be corrected?
- What responsibility, if any, do television entertainment companies have in presenting accurate information about crime and punishment? Participants can consider how they would advise television executives to create shows that more accurately represent reality.
- What positive impact, if any, do these shows have upon their viewers?

A variation of this exercise can involve asking participants to view several ID television shows and then compare the information presented to actual research findings concerning crime and punishment. Participants could also review multiple ID channel shows to determine if some are more realistic than others and in what ways. Finally, participants can review the Twitter hashtag #IDAddicts and observe the interactions between the network and its followers. What kind of information is being shared between the two?

Fascination with Serial Murder

The American public seems to have a particular affinity for serial murderers. Consider the following examples, chosen from the thousands of highly popular, mainstream television shows, books, and movies explicitly about murder, most often serial murder. (See Aamodt and Moyse (2003) for a comprehensive bibliography of true crime books about multiple murders.)

- *Helter Skelter* (1974) written by Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry about Charles Manson and his cult-killing “family,” considered by some to be possibly the “best-selling American true crime book of all time” (Murley 2008, p. 63).
- *Cruising* (1980): written and directed by William Friedkin (who also made *The Exorcist*) about a real-life serial killer whom he met while filming *The Exorcist* who killed gay men in New York City.

- *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986): A film loosely based on the lives of serial killers Henry Lee Lucas and Otis Toole.
- *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), a film based on a series of novels by Thomas Harris about a genius and former psychiatrist turned cannibalistic serial killer named Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Harris 1988); and relatedly, *Hannibal* (2013), a popular television show, and *Red Dragon* (2002), the most recent serial killer movie installment, all based on the works of Thomas Harris.
- *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a fiction film written by Quentin Tarantino and directed by Oliver Stone about a serial killing romantically involved couple Mickey and Mallory Knox who become media sensations after embarking on a killing spree (August et al. 1994).
- *Seven* (1995): a fiction film about two detectives attempting to capture a serial killer who chooses his victims based upon the seven deadly sins.
- *Summer of Sam* (1999) a Spike Lee film about 1970s serial murderer David Berkowitz, also known as the “.44 caliber killer.”
- *American Psycho* (2000), a movie based upon a book with the same name by Bret Easton Ellis about a Wall Street psychopath named Patrick Bateman who sadistically murders people to fulfill his needs (Ellis 1991).
- *Monster* (2003) a film based on the real life of Aileen Wuornos, identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as “America’s first female serial killer” (Pearson 2007).
- *Zodiac* (2007), a film based on the true story of the “Zodiac Killer,” an unidentified serial killer who operated in California during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Graysmith 1976/2007).
- *The Iceman* (2012), a film about Richard Kuklinski, a hit man who was convicted of killing five individuals on behalf of members of organized crime (Carlo 2006).
- *Dexter* (2006–2013), a series based upon the successful novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* featured on the Showtime network about a serial killer with a conscious who only kills “the bad guys” (Howard 2010);
- *The Following* (2013–2015), a television drama series shown on the Fox broadcasting network about a serial killer named Joe Carroll who develops a cult-like following of other serial killers.
- *The Killing* (2011–2014), an American Movie Channel (AMC) (and then Netflix) series about two Seattle-based detectives who, during at least one season, chase a serial killer targeting the city’s youth.
- *Criminal Minds* (2005), a television series on CBS about criminal profiling based upon the work of the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit; the show has featured more than 100 serial killers.
- *Bates Motel* (2013), an A & E television network series prequel about arguably the most famous killer in pop culture Norman Bates, the subject of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 movie thriller *Psycho* (Friedlander 2014).

- *True Detective* (2014), an HBO crime drama whose first season featured two homicide detectives attempting to capture a serial killer who was on the loose for 17 years, possibly inspired by the true life case of satanic sex crimes in Louisiana.
- *Mindhunter* (2016), a Netflix series about the pioneering work of FBI criminal profilers based on the book titled, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* by John Douglas and Mark Olshakes.
- *The Night Stalker* (2016), a movie about the satanic serial killer Richard Ramirez, who burglarized homes, sexually assaulted and killed his victims during the summer of 1985. What is most noteworthy about the film is that the majority of the writing, photography, directing, and production personnel are women, which is apparently “a rarity in Hollywood.”

Part of the fascination with serial murderers might stem from their near mystical status. For instance, it is common for them to be depicted as evil geniuses who can outsmart the investigators trying to catch them. Many of the myths about serial killers stem from how they are portrayed in media. Haggerty and Ellerbrok (2011) find that “serial killers [in particular] have become an inescapable point of reference in movies, television fiction, novels, true crime books and video games” (p. 6). It is no surprise, then, that many criminal justice students often desire a career as an FBI profiler (Walker et al. 2008). They want to be the ones to bring the media-conceived evil geniuses to justice.

Murderabilia

Serial killers are often thought of as being “cool” and “fascinating.” That might explain the popularity of “murderabilia” the term used to describe the selling and purchasing of violent crime-related memorabilia linked to notorious killers. Murderabilia can include art produced by the offender, body parts including hair and nail clippings, crime scene materials, manifestos, and other merchandise including T-shirts, trading cards, mugs, board games, and other souvenirs (Jarvis 2007). The Internet has made the buying and selling of these items easy and lucrative. Generally, it is legal to sell these items but states are increasingly attempting to pass laws that would impose fines or jail time for proprietors of these websites. Relatedly, the *Dallas Morning News* reports that prison officials in Texas have established formal policies prohibiting inmates from possessing social media accounts (Knodel 2016). The new policy stems from an incident involving Texas inmate Elmer Wayne Henley who was convicted of killing 28 people in the early 1970s. His account was deactivated after jewelry and art items said to have been produced by the inmate were being sold on his Facebook page. Whether or not prison officials can legally force the deactivation of social media pages has yet to be determined.

“Son of Sam” Laws

“Son of Sam” laws have been enacted in many states to prevent convicted offenders from profiting from his or her crimes. “Son of Sam,” also known as the “.44 caliber killer” is the moniker of David Berkowitz, who is responsible for killing six people and injuring 15 others in New York City, in the 1970s. Mr. Berkowitz claimed to have had schizophrenia and believed that he was commanded to kill by his neighbor’s dog. Mr. Berkowitz experienced a profound religious conversion while in prison and later self-identified as the “Son of Hope.” Those curious about his conversion asked him to write about it. By publishing his story, he would be profiting from his crime. Naturally, the prospect of profiting from murder upsets many people and in response, the New York legislature made it illegal (Chang 2005). Although the New York law was eventually ruled unconstitutional, the majority of states still have “Son of Sam” statutes in place (Hammit 2011).

In many states, it is illegal to profit from one’s crimes, but some felons may have found a way to circumvent the law. For example, Jodi Ann Arias was convicted of first-degree murder for killing her ex-lover Travis Alexander in 2013. Ms. Arias shot, stabbed, and nearly decapitated her victim. She was sentenced to life in prison in Arizona. Probably through friends, family, and/or supporters, she has established a website where she sells her artwork and domestic violence “survivor T-shirts.” According to her website, she is attempting to raise money for unspecified nonprofit organizations as well as for her appellate fund. Her ability to continue to receive indirect compensation for her artwork has upset the victim’s family and members of the public but to date there have been no legal challenges to this practice.

Murder Homes and Hybristophilia

The existence of murderabilia is one example of the ongoing fascination with notorious criminals. There are others, including murder houses and murder groupies. For instance, several companies offer tours of the serial killer Jeffery Dahmer’s Milwaukee home. The “murder house” of Lizzie Borden has become a tourist attraction. It is now a popular bed and breakfast. Houses that once were considered stigmatized property are now highly sought after by realtors.

The Washington Post featured a story about the Savopoulos family home in Washington DC. Four members of the family were brutally killed in the home before it was set on fire. Not long after the murders, the home was purchased for \$3 million.

Living in a “murder home” is not enough for some people. Some people desire close relationships, even sexual relationships, with perpetrators of extreme violence. Hybristophiliacs, also known as “murder groupies,” are sexually aroused by dangerous people who have committed heinous crimes. Hybristophilia is a paraphilia commonly associated with more women than men (Gurian 2013). The more

gruesome and heinous the crime is, the greater the sexual attraction. Ted Bundy, a serial killer who claimed to have killed as many as 100 women, attracted many female suitors during his trial. Others perpetrators have also attracted a great deal of sexual interest from female fans including Richard Ramirez, Charles Manson, and the Mendez brothers, among others. More recently, Scott Peterson, who was convicted of killing his wife Lacy Peterson and their unborn child, has had many female admirers. News reports indicate that Mr. Peterson receives money and marriage proposals from people all over the world. Convicted killer Richard Poplawski shot three city of Pittsburgh police officers in April, 2009. Although he is on death row in a penitentiary, he has been able to post ads on two websites seeking female pen pals. In his profile he writes: "For years, I've battled to maintain my identity, to not become unduly impressed upon by my environment on Pennsylvania's Death Row...You can help. I'd like to see my reflection in your eyes. That's partly how we know ourselves. If I write you, it'll be for the right reasons. I don't need your money. Don't try to save my immortal soul. I've lost all faith in true love... take it from me, Richard Andrew, Too late lasts forever" (The Associated Press 2016 para. 10). The mayor of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is threatening legal action to remove the ads.

Convicted mass murderer James Holmes seems to have an extensive fan base known as "Holmies." Mr. Holmes killed 12 people and injured 70 others during a mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater. According to *The New York Daily News*, Mr. Holmes receives thousands of letters, mostly from women. Some just want to see how he is doing. Others report finding him to be mysterious and intriguing. Many send pictures of themselves, members of their family, including their children, and confide in him about their personal lives. Susan Klebold, in her 2016 book about the aftermath of Columbine, reported receiving letters from women describing their romantic attraction to her son Dylan.

In 2016, *Yahoo! News* published a series of letters written to and by Theodore "Ted" Kaczynski, also known as the "Unabomber." The letters were acquired by Julie Herrada who served as curator of the Labadie Collection, which contains a series of documents representing various radical movements throughout the world (Herrada 2015). The Labadie Collection is housed in the University of Michigan's Special Collections Library. Herrada negotiated the acquisition of the documents with Mr. Kaczynski himself and in doing so learned that hundreds of people from all over the world have been writing to him, including many women wanting to be romantically involved with the killer. He grew close to one woman in particular, Joy Richards. Ms. Richards was terminally ill and died in 2006. Prior to her death she regularly corresponded with Mr. Kaczynski. After her death, her correspondence with Mr. Kaczynski was donated to her alma mater, Smith College, but to date, those letters have not been made public (Baily 2016).

Relatively speaking, there has been little empirical study of what attracts some people to infamous criminals. Several possibilities exist including loneliness, a desire to become famous, a desire for attention, and low self-esteem (Vitello 2006). Some people may find it exciting to know someone who committed a crime or they desire to become vicariously involved in the commission of a crime. Being

involved romantically with someone who is incarcerated offers a certain degree of safety. When you know that an individual is going to be incarcerated, perhaps for the rest of his or her life, the chances of being physically harmed by him or her are virtually nonexistent. Finally, serial killers and mass murderers are often considered celebrities in American popular culture. It is not uncommon for them to be featured on the covers of popular magazines. They are the subjects of many books and movies. Many people desire to have a connection with someone famous. Incarcerated individuals are more easily accessible, when compared to celebrities, and therefore might make for more responsive pen pals (Fox and Levin 2015).

Mass Murder and Public Fascination

Americans seem to have much less of an entertainment appetite for mass murder than they do for serial murder. In 2012, the television network *Lifetime* announced that it was planning to produce a miniseries about the Columbine shootings based on David Cullen's nonfiction book titled, *Columbine*. The series has yet to be made and there is no indication that it will ever come to fruition. Many were upset when a *Sons of Anarchy* episode (an FX series about a violent motorcycle gang) depicted an 11-year-old boy engaging in a mass shooting at his middle school. Generally, films about mass shootings do not fare well at the box office. *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011), a movie about a teenager who committed a massacre at his high school, earned less than \$2 million. *Beautiful Boy* (2010), shot from the perspective of the parents of the teenager who committed a mass shooting at his university and then committed suicide, only grossed \$77,000 (Ge and Donnelly 2015).

Fear might account for the lack of entertainment appeal of mass murder. Many people believe that mass shootings are common occurrences despite their rarity. They are unpredictable and cause the deaths of innocent people; they occur in places that seem like they should be safe, such as schools, churches, malls, movie theaters, and other seemingly innocuous settings. In the aftermath of these events, people often report feeling unsafe in their own communities, fearing that they too could be a victim. Some view it as a type of narcissism. As one criminologist suggested, people are focused on mass shootings at the moment because "they believe it can happen to them" (Roeder 2016).

Public mass shootings generate intense media coverage which heightens fear and anxiety. In the age of 24 hour news cycles, it is common for media outlets to quickly descend upon crime scene, staying for days or weeks and interviewing anyone willing to speak to them. The early news coverage is problematic because it both heightens fear and anxiety and encourages misinformation. Dave Cullen, author of *Columbine*, highlights the problem in his book. Members of the media, interviewed acquaintances of the two shooters and presented information that ultimately turned out not to be true. Despite it being untrue, many people continue to believe the media's narrative.

While the interest may be intense shortly after a massacre, it quickly fades. Some refer to this as the routinization of mass murder (Meyer 2015). When President Barack Obama addressed the nation following a mass shooting he noticed a similar trend. “Somehow this has become routine. The reporting has become routine. My response here, from this podium, has become routine.” Although it has not been thoroughly tested empirically, recent analyses of Google Trends data supports the notion that mass killings have become routine and that the American public is becoming desensitized to these violent events (Meyer 2015).

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