

# Antiheroes on the Rise?

## Considering the True Crime Boom in the Dramatic Miniseries Sphere

Daniel Papia

### Abstract

There has been a continually swelling true crime boom within the English-speaking television world for at least the last half decade, with 2022 having seen a number of new records set before the year has even ended. When one media consumer site ranked the best 11 miniseries for the year so far (published September 8th), five of the titles were true crime dramas. And this was two weeks before the release of *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* which then broke several Netflix records for viewership. This paper explores the true crime explosion and considers various factors that might be driving the unprecedented interest in this less-than-transcendent narrative form. Possibly relevant forces include: (1) The Robin Hood Principle (audiences gravitating toward lawless heroes when times are tough); (2) the revival of the audio narrative form and interest in true crime subjects that the podcast *Serial* and its many clones have created; (3) the novelty effect of female criminals, which traditionally were less common and less considered. This is a preliminary study and it is not intended to draw definitive conclusions. Instead it presents ideas and builds upon the previous body of research into the relationship between fact and fiction in literary narratives that the author has contributed to.

Keywords: Narratives, Fact and Fiction, True Crime, Miniseries, Antiheroes, Television, Streaming, Podcast

### I. Introduction

My research is concerned with looking into the spaces where fiction and fact intersect—historical novels, science fiction, the newer wave of “info-narrative” stories (wherein the explanatory content is often the main draw), biographical TV dramas and biopics, even documentaries and news features when the structure has been clearly influenced by fictive storytelling techniques. I am interested in both how fact is sometimes compromised for the sake of effective fiction as well as how readers and audiences will conversely make allowances for imperfect narratives when they believe the story that they are consuming is true-to-life.

There has been a continually swelling true-crime boom within the television sphere for at least the last half decade. In terms of the true-crime dramatic series (scripted and performed content as opposed to the also booming docu-series form), as many as five of the 11 titles listed by MovieWeb in its September 8th feature “Best Miniseries of 2022, So Far” fell into this category. Also worthy of note is *Monster, the Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, which did not make the MovieWeb list as it was not released until two weeks later, but which now stands as the all-time most watched Netflix property.

It seemed appropriate, therefore, to take a closer look at the true crime narrative form in the year 2022 and to see what patterns could be discovered and what conjectures might be made. I have limited my consideration to dramatized productions for television and/or other streaming media.

This paper represents the beginning of a journey into a better understanding of the driving forces behind the current true crime trend and what it might tell us about the western cultures where it is being produced and consumed. Some speculation is included; and definitive conclusions are not drawn. However, three objective and observable patterns have been detected which will be further discussed below: (1) the boom includes a “new wave” of true crime content wherein the point-of-view character is the criminal and the audience is encouraged to empathize with the offenders to a greater degree than in previous years; (2) a larger proportion of the perpetrators are female; and (3) other media tie-ins (most specifically podcasts, documentaries, and news specials) seem to be a more relevant production consideration than had previously been the case.

The arena of focus will be western media (content produced by the Hollywood-based system and/or targeted at the English-speaking world). It is likely very relevant that general socio-economic decline, hastened by the coronavirus lockdowns and counter-measures, has left the citizenry of the United States and many of its English-speaking cousins primed for antiheroes. It might be appropriate to consider the booming popularity of the dramatic true crime miniseries in the light of what the British literary critic Eric Hobsbawn called “Social Bandits” and what the American scholar Graham Seal nicknamed the “Robin Hood Principle.” This, more or less, is the idea that hard times and consequent dissatisfaction with the current system lead to a craving for lawless heroes. It would seem at first glance that today’s true crime antiheroes are a bit harder to lionize than Robin Hood, but it would also have to be allowed that the Robin Hood legends did have centuries to congeal.

## II. Robbing from the Rich and Giving to the Perverts

The 11 titles presented in MovieWeb’s “Best Miniseries of 2022, So Far” are as follows (the five that represent true crime dramas are underlined): *We Crashed*, *Pam & Tommy*, *Irma Vep*, *Essex Serpent*, *Candy*, *The Thing About Pam*, *Girl From Plainville*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, *Pistol*, *Ptolemy Grey*, and *Black Bird*.

An important point can be clarified by noting that *Pistol*, the Danny Boyle-directed six-installment biographic drama that tells the story of the Sex Pistols, is not a true crime miniseries. It certainly has true crime elements (which may also be telling)—it opens with then hoodlum Steve Jones stealing a car, and it makes no bones about the fact that Malcolm McLaren's intent throughout was to create a criminal band and encourage lawbreaking and wrongdoing—yet ultimately it is about the musical group and/or performance art movement that was The Pistols.

*Pam and Tommy*, by contrast, is about criminals. Pam and Tommy, the people, are Pam Anderson and Tommy Lee, the actress from the TV beach drama *Baywatch* and the drummer from the heavy metal band Mötley Crüe. These two people recorded a tape of their lovemaking in or before 1995, only to have it stolen from their home, illegally copied and sold through the internet, then eventually distributed as a downloadable file just as home computers were evolving to make that possible. But the series is not about these two people as much as it is the thieves, gangsters and pornographers that took their property and profited (or tried to profit) from it. When one watches the series, one realizes that it is probably not as fair to say that the title refers to the two people as much as it does to the tape.

The first point-of-view criminal character presented in *Pam and Tommy* is Rand Gauthier. He is the disgruntled contract worker and adult film actor who will break into the couple's home and steal their safe (inside which, he will be surprised to find a tape hiding among the other valuables he was after). However, the audience does not learn of Gauthier's criminal tendencies and seedy connections until he is first established as protagonist. He is initially introduced as a poor working man, running salve on his aching carpenter's hands and struggling to finish building a bed platform at the Pam and Tommy house so that he can finally get paid. He has sunk some of his own funds into parts and materials and is hoping that completion is not far off. When Tommy Lee enters the drama, he is portrayed as mean and irrational, now insisting that the work that has been done so far must be torn up because he has whimsically decided he wants the bed in a different place.

Other incidents that were revealed to have actually occurred in the non-fictional *Rolling Stone* feature article on which the series is based then play out. Gauthier wanders into the house and happens upon an only partially dressed Pam, leading Tommy to have words with him over this. Gauthier demands up front payment for what is left of the job, prompting Tommy to fire him. Gauthier returns to fetch his toolbox and lies to the gardener to gain access, whereupon Tommy catches him and pulls a gun. Yet, all of these scenes present Gauthier's intentions as honorable (almost to a fault) and Tommy's responses as unwarranted and undeserved.

Additionally, the audience is given access to Gauthier's home life and even flashbacks on his childhood—he is the unchallenged sole protagonist of the first episode—so that sympathies are intended to be with him when he makes the decision to break into the house late at night and steal

the safe. There is even the suggestion that the burglary ought to be a defensible moral act according to some of the world's religions, with Gauthier being an amateur theologian and arguing to an associate over drinks that evil needs to be punished and victims compensated.

As the saga progresses, the baton is passed on. Because the tape is stolen, it cannot be sold or marketed through traditional means. However, with gangster backing, it can be advertised anonymously via the 1995 internet with the buyer never knowing from where the seller was shipping. In a couple of years, this business plan will prove unsustainable. But by 1997, Seth Warshavsky, a dot-com-bubble entrepreneur specializing in smut, has built a system that can now deliver adult content *through* the internet. This is to become the home base for the Pam and Tommy video. After having begun the tale with Gauthier essentially the hero in the first episode, the series manages to keep rooting interest on the side of the criminals and sympathies away from the victims until very close to the finale. The focus often drifts instead toward how history is being made and how these lawbreakers are also pioneers.

Interestingly, of the true crime dramatic miniseries released in 2022, one is hard pressed to find a story that is *not* delivered from the criminal's point of view. *Black Bird* would probably be the closest to an exception. The *Black Bird* protagonist is one of the Chicago area's biggest independent drug dealers of the 1990s. However, once he is sentenced to ten years in prison, the FBI offers him an early release if he can extract information from a known serial killer that will keep the latter permanently behind bars. The serial killer is the bigger criminal (hence the *Black Bird* protagonist is heroic for trying to lengthen the incarceration of a serial killer), and no excuses are offered for the unconscionable crimes of the second, larger villain.

### III. Waiting for the Bloody Shoe to Drop

Pulling the audience into the criminal's world view is by no means a new trick. Truman Capote famously humanized and even brought sympathy to a pair of confessed and ruthless killers by telling much of the story as they saw it in his 1966 "every word true" novel *In Cold Blood*. But in Capote's time, and even as recently as just a few years ago, such an inversion of morality would have been the exception. In 2022 (in terms of true crime content for television, anyway) the opposite seems true.

In 1967, Tom Wolfe wrote an essay entitled "Pornoviolence" in which he criticized the telling of a story the way that Capote had done, asserting that it encourages the reader or viewer to stay with the narrative for the wrong reasons. As Wolfe put it, "the audience's attention [is retained] with the promise of disclosing gruesome details about the true crime it discusses." In other words, it is less the anticipation of character growth, plot resolution, or thematic argument that fuels the audience's

interest in the ending. Rather, it is the knowledge that something awful has happened and this must be seen before it can be forgotten.

To be fair, *Pam and Tommy* is smartly crafted and it does manage to keep the audience engaged for other reasons as well. But part of the reason that one feels compelled to watch to the end is that the injury that this cluster of crimes inflicted on the victims has received too little attention for most of the enterprise. The audience has witnessed the blows delivered (while being reminded all the while that history is being made), but it has not yet seen the wounds.

#### IV. Walking In Her Moccasins

*The Girl from Plainville* is another miniseries depicting a historic first. It is a dramatic telling, in eight episodes, of the first-ever case in which a defendant was convicted for wrongfully causing a death as a result of actions taken long-distance via the internet.

At 17, Michelle Carter lived in Plainville, Massachusetts, 33 miles from the 18-year-old Conrad “Coco” Roy in Fairhaven. On July 12th of 2014, Coco took his own life by deliberately pumping carbon monoxide fumes from a portable generator into his truck and inhaling them. What made the case exceptional was the text messages that were obtained by the local police which showed that the two teens were in communication at the time of the incident, that Coco decided to abort his suicide attempt and actually exited his vehicle, but that Michelle’s messages then urged him to get back in and go through with his plan. There were other factors: (1) Coco had attempted suicide prior to meeting Michelle and (2) he was taking antidepressants which may have impaired his judgment in then unforeseen ways. In the end, the Juvenile Court Justice could not ignore the fact that Coco would have survived were it not for Michelle’s texts. He sentenced her to 2.5 years in prison and his ruling is said to have likely set a new legal precedent.

The dramatic miniseries, released in the US in March by Hulu, is told chiefly from Michelle’s point of view. It recounts her first meeting with Coco two years prior to the 2014 tragedy when both were visiting relatives in Florida, follows the deep and private relationship that they maintained via texting, and allows Michelle to voice her secret thoughts to Coco, even following his death, through the inclusion of a phantom Coco character that appears for Michelle to engage in dialogue with when she is alone.

The writing and directing credits are mostly female and the target audience would likely have been teenage girls or those who were once teenage girls. Michelle is portrayed as a sympathetic but lonely youth who has trouble holding on to her female friends, let alone romantic interests. The clique that she likes to sit with at school are quick to leave her behind, and there is another girl that Michelle tries to get close to but whose mother worries that Michelle is a lesbian and forbids the two from interacting. While the Michelle character post-suicide may have been presented as creepy

at times (the narrative jumps back and forth chronologically), the Michelle trying desperately just to find her place and fit in feels relatable to all ages and genders. Her frailties, such as a previously diagnosed eating disorder, are underscored; while more incriminating details, such as the fact that she had actually suggested the carbon monoxide suicide, are either omitted or withheld until very late in the drama. The intent, surely, was to get the audience buckled in on the same seat as this main character.

When the young girl, so full of familiar teenage angst, meets the more mature and seemingly better grounded Coco, she understandably wants to keep him in her life. But Coco's obsession is suicide, and so to engage him and thereby have someone to spend the lonely nights with (albeit long-distance via text messages) Michelle talks to him about his suicide dreams and participates in conversations that Coco can have with no one else.

The text records show many instances in which Michelle was seemingly helping Coco to find the courage he needed to take his own life. But these are also peppered with "I love you"s. By contextualizing these paradoxical exchanges against the backdrop of fickle cliques, perplexing hormones, peer pressure, and young love, the drama succeeds in humanizing the perpetrator of this new type of crime. One could argue that *The Girl from Plainville* erred to the other extreme and made Michelle Carter too sympathetic. But perhaps this also explains the attraction of this new wave of true crime: the potential audience is first presented with a headline detailing something unthinkable, and then it is offered the opportunity to view the crime through the eyes of the offender and thereby (perhaps) understand what the thinking actually was.

All human beings appear more sympathetic the closer and the longer one looks. In a sense, the history of drama and literature in the west represents a journey toward the deeper and more intimate. Narratives as they are consumed today permit instant access to the inner minds of characters of different genders, cultures, social classes, world views, or time periods, simply through the opening of a book or the watching of a film. In a sense, compassionate insight into the perspectives and motives of criminals may well be the next frontier.

Meanwhile, a technique that has become increasingly more common since the advent of smartphones has been the superimposing of a character's text messages onto a portion of the screen. Michelle's texting is obviously relevant in *The Girl from Plainville*, but it is also one of the most intimate glimpses the audience is offered into her private self. It is akin to seeing her thoughts.

Michelle and Coco had only met five times face-to-face, but their text messaging was constant and very personal. The impression left is that this was paradoxically the dearest relationship that either of them had.

## V. Riding with Villains

The evolution of narrative and dramatic forms track a movement toward closer and more personal glimpses of human life, with protagonists falling from grace, less perfect and more flawed. Greek epics, Elizabethan prose, and French heroic romances were tales of gods and nobles. Yet, when the novel arrived in the west in the 18th century, it offered the intimate secrets of the more average citizenry. Stage plays had demanded that characters project and emote—they said only things that were intended to be said. Yet, the moving picture media transported audiences into much closer quarters, so that subtle whispers and sublime gesticulations could be understood and appreciated.

A true-life perpetrator of crimes who was also humanized in her miniseries was Elizabeth Holmes in *The Dropout*.

Holmes had been a darling of the media for roughly a decade, particularly in the years following the death of Steve Jobs. Jobs, the quintessential Silicon Valley visionary, passed away in 2011 and, for several years following, his heir apparent was a young pretty female. The media loved that Holmes had a big-hearted idea for a black box that could painlessly deliver an instant array of lab tests as a screening against disease. They loved that, on the back of her vision and the supporting tech, she had become the world's youngest and wealthiest self-made female billionaire. They loved that she was a kid taking on the medical industry. And, probably most of all, they loved that she dressed and talked like Steve Jobs but was of a different gender. And so when it was revealed that her company was simply a house of cards, fraudulently pretending to have the tech that is likely still decades away, the media struck back hard.

In 2019, the best-selling expose *Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup* was released in paperback, the HBO-produced documentary film *Inventor: Out For Blood in Silicon Valley* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and both a six-series true crime podcast (on which the *Dropout* miniseries is based) and a two-hour *20/20* episode (which piggybacked on the popularity of the podcast) won accolades by revealing the other side of Elizabeth Holmes. Just a handful of years before, a smiling Holmes had graced the covers of *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Inc.*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire*. In 2022, Holmes was found guilty on four counts of defrauding investors. This occurred on January 3rd, just two months before the first installment of the *Dropout* miniseries was scheduled to drop, so the media was already saturated when the series premiered.

As *The Girl from Plainville* had, *The Dropout* began with its protagonist in her teen years with young girl hopes and fears. Unlike Michelle Carter, the teenage Elizabeth was already very sure of herself and what she wanted to do. She desired to change the world, *a la* Steve Jobs, and she didn't have a lot of respect or patience for the old guard that insisted one had to wait, pay dues, and learn.

Like Michelle Carter, however, she was isolated (albeit by choice). On her Stanford-sponsored language immersion trip to China, her desire to stay in, study, and speak only Chinese won her no friends apart from fellow maverick Sunny Balwani, the 37-year-old Pakistani man who had made his millions in the dot-com boom.

Elizabeth Holmes is initially portrayed as insecure in the social realm, making her easy to sympathize with. In the first episode, she is depicted practicing responses such as “oh, that’s so funny” in front of a mirror before attending a party. (That mirror will, significantly, reappear.)

At said party, Elizabeth is unable to handle the liquor she is given and is then taken advantage of by a male guest, further garnering audience sympathy. In real life, she reported a sexual assault in 2003, but would claim at her 2021 trial for fraud that it had been rape. The miniseries does not take a stand, cutting from Elizabeth accepting a drink from a boy to friends whispering about what happened as she lies in bed. Whatever occurred was traumatizing, and Elizabeth’s mother tells her that awful things sometimes happen and the only thing to do is tuck the bad feelings away and go forward. This gives Elizabeth a ghost and further serves to step up rooting interest.

Seemingly in this way, the production was able to help audiences accept and get behind Elizabeth Holmes as its leading character. Another, more traditional approach might have been to tell the story from the eyes of Tyler Shultz and Erika Cheung. These were the two young staffers who joined her firm Theranos excited to be part of its new solution for medical testing, but then discovered the fraud and felt they had no choice but to expose it. Another possibility might have been to start with a victim of the inaccurate test results that users could have received at any of the 40 deceptive testing centers that Theranos had installed throughout Arizona. One gets the feeling, however, that these approaches might have seemed old and less inspired in the year 2022.

Instead, the noble dreams of a young Elizabeth Holmes are offered for perusal and the audience travels with this dreamer on her journey to make them come true. Had she succeeded in making her instant test patches and “Edison” boxes a reality, it would have been a blessing for the world. Had she been able to avoid the wrong turns she chose and at least kept the company afloat and still trying, it would have been hope for someday. The viewer desires similarly noble outcomes, and so is inclined to understand, if not approve of, the protagonist’s indiscretions.

Holmes’ greatest feat was stepping into the shoes of Steve Jobs and convincing the world that she could do for medical testing what he had done for computing devices. Arguably, her greatest flaw was believing exactly that. Steve Jobs was famous for creating what has been called a “reality distortion field.” His engineers would assert that something was impossible, Jobs would convince them that they were wrong, and in time the engineers would have built what only Steve had believed in. Holmes seemingly tried to employ the same principle, but she did not apparently have quite the same insight into the mechanics of her field that Jobs had had into his. She had invented



the idea of a magic black box (she called it “the iPod of healthcare”) which she could sell investors on. Yet even the most inspired engineers could not get over the hurdle that the laws of physics and biology seemed to impose.

Elizabeth’s first wrong turn depicted in the series is when an early prototype that can perform a single type of blood test stops working the evening before it must be demonstrated to investors. Elizabeth struggles with her team to fix the bug that had not been there just a few hours prior, but she and her people are stuck in a hotel ahead of the meeting and they cannot isolate the source of the problem. So Elizabeth decides to demonstrate the device, present fabricated test results as though they had just been delivered, then repair the prototype on returning to Theranos. It cannot be established as of this writing to what degree these circumstances represent real events. However, as a narrative set piece it does a commendable job of keeping audience sympathies with the protagonist, even after she has officially started down the wrong path.

It should be noted at this point that during the years that Elizabeth was posing for magazine covers, the Theranos fraud machine ran like clockwork. Elizabeth would drop a bit of a visitor’s blood in a dummy Edison machine whose only job was to blink and look like it was working. Then, while she and her guest were touring the facilities, lab workers would run in, retrieve the blood, test it, and prime the data so that Elizabeth could make a show of calling it up when they returned. None of this is presented in the miniseries.

To the extent that the public loved the real Elizabeth Holmes in 2016, they resented her in 2021. Feeling conned and betrayed, many focused, obsessively almost, on her voice. The charge was that it was not naturally that low, that she artificially down-shifted it (as Margaret Thatcher had once done) to give it more power. *Dropout* addresses this too, with a scene in front of the mirror, recalling Elizabeth practicing her party responses as a teenager. The scene comes after a potential investor had failed to take her seriously. Thus, the (alleged) voice alternation becomes a response to pain as opposed to an offensive tactic.

In this way, relatable step by relatable step, Elizabeth travels toward her eventual ruin. She courts and wins over such high-profile investors as Rupert Murdoch, the Walton family, and the Cox family. She is interviewed by medical experts who are taken enough by what they see that they write glowing reviews of the operation. She gets such big names as George Shultz and Henry Kissinger to join the board of her company. Meanwhile, she cannot have the world know the technology isn’t there yet, so she continues to fake tests and deny entry to certain areas of the company in order to protect alleged trade secrets. The firm must show some revenue, so Elizabeth makes a deal with Walgreens to put Theranos testing in 40 of their stores, with the tests actually being done back at the Theranos labs via traditional means and samples often contaminated en route.

Lie begets lie and, by the time Elizabeth approaches the end of her road, she is now a monster. At some point the audience detaches its sympathies and looks at what she has become in horror. But that is arguably part of the appeal of this new wave of true crime drama which puts the viewer in the same seat as the perpetrator. The viewer knows that the protagonist is going to take actions along the way that he or she will not likely approve of. But the viewer plays the game and gets in next to the eventual criminal. The storytellers endeavor to subvert the viewer's call to judgment for as long as possible. The longer they succeed, the more chilling the effect.

## VI. *Joker* as a Cultural Milestone

The director Quentin Tarantino spoke about the 2019 film *Joker* in a recent podcast conversation and observed that the in-theater reaction to the climactic scene when Arthur (Joker) shoots the late night talk show host character played by Robert De Niro is “subversion on a massive level.” The film follows the transformation of a trodden-upon clown to a super-villain. Filmmaker Todd Phillips manages to lure the audience into appreciating Arthur's (Joker's) point of view so sufficiently that, when he is allowed to appear on a talk show and the host of that show had previously made fun of him, the audience is also hungering for revenge. “He's not a movie villain. He doesn't deserve to die,” Tarantino remarks. “Yet, while the audience is watching the Joker, they want him to kill Robert De Niro...and if the Joker didn't kill him, you would be pissed off.”

Lawless heroes are obviously nothing new for Hollywood. A purely good character, such as a Forrest Gump or a George Bailey or a Luke Skywalker, is probably more the exception than the rule in western film. The three movies at the summit of the IMDb “Top 100” (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Godfather*, and *The Dark Knight*) are about convicted killers, a mafia boss, and a lawless vigilante, respectively.

However, Red and Andy (the *Shawshank* heroes) are better than the warden—the latter kills for greed and is unrepentant. Vito Corleone is better than the dons of the other families—they want to get into the heroin racket, but Vito refuses. The Dark Knight is mean and gritty, but he's better than the Joker—and the mean and gritty response proves the only way to defeat the Joker.

Almost every other film in IMDb's “Top 100” (at least those that have a comedic as opposed to a tragic structure) features a protagonist who is noble, or at minimum nobler than his peers. This is certainly the case from *Shawshank* at #1 all the way down to #54. *Joker* at #55, released just three years ago, may be indicative of something new. The film has a comedic structure, the audience experiences the story from the Joker's perspective and initially (despite the knowledge that he is to become a super-criminal) wants him to win.

Yes, his world is dark and oppressive. However, the Joker proves himself to be not better than those around him, but the most evil person in the film. Before appearing on the talk show, he will kill

a co-worker and he will kill his own mother. But, as Tarantino argues, and as appears to be the experience of those who have seen the movie, the audience does not completely detach from the protagonist until Joker kills the De Niro character.

Does the audience so despise the De Niro character simply because he and his talk show friends mocked the Joker on their broadcast (and even after the Joker has already been revealed to be a killer)? It is suggested that what the audience despises is rather what the talk show and its host represent. The Joker is a clown and has worked very hard at his craft yet the world he lives in will no longer grant him even a 20-person audience to entertain. Meanwhile, the Robert De Niro character reads jokes off of cue cards to an audience of millions. Nonetheless, it seems a forgone conclusion that the De Niro people will never let the Joker people into their club.

When the world seems to have locked you out of the system, crime may appear to be the only answer. It is, perhaps, a 21st century variation on the Robin Hood Principle. There are undercurrents of that theme in other narrative forms as well coming out of the west. It is possibly one of the most significant components of the current boom in true crime on television. It is a message that seems to resonate.

## VII. The Masses Like Monsters—No Redemption Necessary

A miniseries whose producers did not want to humanize the criminal they were chronicling or present the tale from the perpetrator's perspective was *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Whether or not they succeeded is open to debate, but co-creator Ryan Murphy's guiding principle on the project was said to be that the show "would never be told from Dahmer's point of view."

Instead, with the attempted killing that is presented in the first episode, the audience is encouraged only to sympathize with Glenda Cleveland (the neighbor that reported Dahmer to the police) and Tracy Edwards (the intended male victim that was brought to Dahmer's home on July 22nd, 1991, but managed to escape and inform authorities). These two characters have less screen time than Dahmer, and neither could correctly be considered the episode's protagonist. However, Dahmer is presented as cold, distant, and dispassionate, while the other two have human problems and needs.

The episode begins in the apartment of Glenda Cleveland who hears strange sounds and smells the stench of rotting meat through the air duct. When Dahmer passes her door en route to the Milwaukee gay bar Club 219, Glenda complains about the smell and Dahmer tells her without emotion that he will address it over the weekend. Glenda will represent the most frequently recurring character in the 10-part series apart from Dahmer and his parents. Also, one episode will center on Glenda as she tries to convince the police that Dahmer is worth a closer look.

At Club 219, Dahmer meets Tracy Edwards and offers money for him to come to Dahmer's apartment and pose for some pictures. The point-of-view character becomes Edwards for a time, who, once trapped in Dahmer's apartment, watches for any signal or opportunity that might permit him to escape.

With minimal marketing and five other Jeffrey Dahmer film and TV properties already in the universe—including a psychological drama released on Hulu as recently as 2018—*The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* surprised many with the record ratings that it took in. Its first episode was the most watched Netflix series debut of all time, and the program was seen by more than three times as many viewers as the number two show the same week. The entire series also stands as the most popular ever Netflix-produced title. Such would suggest that there was a very strong appetite for true crime in 2022.

That said, however, the critical reaction remains lukewarm at best. Stuart Heritage of *The Guardian*, for example, called *Dahmer* “almost unwatchably queasy.” And, in an article for *The New Statesman* faithfully titled “Abolish True Crime”, another critic argues, “the show's sheer compulsiveness is its appeal...it appeals to the worst part of our psyche...True crime is a gift to [the streaming service companies]: it is gruesomely engrossing and endlessly recyclable...”

Creator Ryan Murphy's dictate that the series not be told from Dahmer's point of view wound up manifesting itself in only the literal sense. The series takes the time to humanize the victims only minutes before they are to be slaughtered. And the series spends some time exploring Dahmer's mother and father for answers as to what caused him to turn out this way; yet, in a certain sense, the parents are simply Dahmer by proxy. An effort was also made to introduce racism, gender-biased, and gay-biased themes. Many of Dahmer's victims were black and Dahmer managed to keep the police at bay for a time by dismissing suspicious activities as “a gay thing.” Murphy's telling puts forward the argument that Dahmer might have been caught sooner and many of his victims spared were those he preyed on and those that tried to report him not from marginalized communities. But this does not seem to be why viewers tuned in or what they took away.

### VIII. From the 2000s to the 2010s, then Back to the Radio Days

It might be useful at this point to look back at a more traditional example of the true crime miniseries form. *The People Vs. O.J. Simpson* aired as recently as 2016. It captured a very large American audience (it was also popular elsewhere, but less so) and won Emmys, Critics Choice awards, the British Academy prize for Best International Program, and the Golden Globe for Best Miniseries. It followed a true crime story, but in the fashion of a procedural drama. The tale begins when the crime is reported and concludes when the court verdict is rendered. The police, the prosecuting attorneys, and the defense team all have more screen time than O.J. And, significantly,

the work does not take a definitive stand on whether O.J. actually committed the crime or not, because the narrative follows the cops and the lawyers—the viewer knows what they know, not what O.J. knows.

Procedural dramas were fictional crime-and-punishment justice shows that evolved from the cop shows of the 1970s and 1980s (which, arguably, were updated versions of the cowboy shows of the 1950s and 1960s). With names like *Law and Order*, *NCIS*, *CSI*, *Something-Something Special Unit*, etc., they were very popular in the 1990s and 2000s, and many are still being produced today. The stories typically follow the trail of a crime through the investigation and legal processes until justice is eventually served. While not true accounts, the narratives almost always expose the viewer to factual details about how crimes are investigated and prosecuted—forensic medicine, data collection, legal procedures, etc. It can be argued that a large part of their appeal has been the insight into real-world police and court proceedings that they offer.

Similarly, it might further be argued that, after so many years and so much content, the format was beginning to run its course. Perhaps viewers were looking for the next thing, and perhaps the new popular true crime form will someday be called the following inevitable link in the chain.

In 2014, a new podcast premiered called *Serial*. It was produced by the creators of *This American Life* and the idea was that a true-to-life story would be narrated over several episodes. For a podcast, it was quite popular, the first season boasting more than 211 million downloads. But more telling was the obsessive fans that it spawned, who would research the details of the true crime cases being presented between shows and initiate meet-ups to discuss them. *The New Yorker* ran a cartoon in December of 2014 in which a woman on the sidewalk flags down a random man and says, “Excuse me, sir. Do you have a minute to talk about the latest episode of ‘Serial’?” In 2021, a mystery comedy-drama co-created by Steve Martin called *Only Murders in the Building* tells the story of several tenants in a New York apartment building who learn that a neighbor has been killed and decide to start a *Serial*-like podcast about it.

*Serial* spawned several companion podcasts and inspired many to produce their own copycat podcasts. True crime proved perfect for the podcast medium as the stories were (in part) pre-written, they tended to have already been reported on in the newspapers so they were in the public domain, and the chilling reality that they all really happened arguably kept the listener more engaged than an invented narrative could have. The take-it-with-you and stop/start/rewind capabilities of podcasts plus the further research and meet-ups that the internet allowed seemingly conspired to now revive a dramatic radio show style from the 1930s and 1940s. A key element was that these dramatically told tales were real ones.

*The Thing About Pam*, a black comedy true crime series that premiered on NBC television March 8th, told the story of Pam Hupp, a charismatic woman who convinced her friend Betsy to

make her the beneficiary in her insurance policy, and then killed her four days later and tried to frame Betsy's husband. The husband was convicted and served time in prison before Pam went on to commit other crimes and her charisma proved insufficient to save her from the mounting evidence against her. It was first developed and presented as a podcast for *Dateline NBC*, and from the success of that, it was green-lit as a TV miniseries.

*The Dropout* was presented first as a podcast by ABC, and this was used as a vehicle to bring viewers to the network's two-hour 20/20 episode on Elizabeth Holmes before the TV miniseries was collaboratively produced by Hulu from the same material.

*WeCrashed* is a *Dropout*-type "Fortune 500 on false premises" tale. It tells the true story of Adam Neumann who created the office space conglomerate WeWork, exaggerated its earning potential, and then jumped ship before the vessel inevitably sank. *WeCrashed* does not qualify as true crime because Neumann was not accused of any crimes (apart from recreational drug use and the literal mishandling of female employees). He managed to convince Masayoshi Son that WeWork was the next Alibaba, and so fresh fund injections by SoftBank—\$17 billion USD total—and a \$1.7 billion USD golden parachute for himself allowed Neumann to bail with Son holding the bag just before the stock began to tank. *WeCrashed* is worthy of mention here because (a) it's a true story (though not true crime), (b) it was one of the most popular TV miniseries of 2022, and (c) it was first developed and presented as a podcast.

Many podcasters are currently working on content that they hope will one day be optioned for film or television. Podcasting allows producers to develop shows cheaply, to build an audience, and to benefit from a sort of "preliminary presentation" through which they can get the proverbial bugs out.

## IX. Fact vs. Fiction—We Engage Differently

A point worth making one last time, but here—by way of conclusion—in a broader sense, is that the knowledge (or the belief) that a story is true seems to give it more currency in the mind of the audience. There are many theories about why human beings respond to art in the first place, but one of the most popular of these is that something in the beauty and the truth of the artistic work seems to offer the promise of answers to life's mysteries. If this is at all correct, it is most obvious in the world of drama and narrative. Ladies are drawn more to romance, gentlemen more to action because, perhaps, subconsciously, ladies are looking for strategies that will help them succeed in romance while gentlemen want to know how they can be ready for action.

*Candy* is a five-part miniseries released on May 9th about a woman that murders a neighbor with an axe. In the first episode, Candy is introduced as a busy but hard-working and well-meaning church woman. She must break away to visit her neighbor Betty and something awful appears to

happen because she returns to the church function out of sorts and already rehearsing an alibi. It is then revealed that Betty is not answering her phone; after that, that she's been killed.

Much of the next three episodes are about the events that happened some months earlier. Candy and Betty's husband begin a love affair. They break it off and Candy tries to make up for her secret sin by hosting Betty's baby shower. But Betty and her husband are now doing marriage therapy and Candy is worried that the affair will be revealed. It plays like a well-written soap opera and the producers seemingly felt the need to remind viewers that a horrible bloody crime has been committed by cutting to the axe on the garage floor between acts or offering similar brief callbacks. With the crime looming in the background (a real one, no less), the more casual dramatic interplay has significantly greater currency.

The 1996 film *Fargo* begins with the title card: "THIS IS A TRUE STORY. The events depicted in this film took place in Minnesota in 1987. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred." The title card is completely false. The story is entirely fictional. It is a well-directed crime thriller but it fails to tie up all the elements neatly at the end the way that viewers would like a fictional Hollywood film is do for them. The writing and directing team Joel and Ethan Coen therefore decided to help their audience past that hump by convincing them at the outset that what they were watching happened as presented, in exactly that order. One can assume the trick worked. The film won two Academy Awards—one for best screenplay—and it spawned a TV series in 2014 that is still running.

On the one hand, true crime has traditionally commanded little respect and for good reason. It tends to be hacky, gruesome, and sensationalist. Examples of fine true-crime literature are few and far between. On the other hand, it has endured in part because humans continue to be interested in the truth. Perhaps something will come from all the work being done in the genre today that is worth preserving. For now, in the fast crumbling west anyway, true crime is the new hot ticket. The desire to know more is a powerful thing.

## References

- Allyn, Bobby. "Police Document: 19-year-old Elizabeth Holmes Reported Sexual Assault from Stanford." *NPR*: 25 Jan, 2022. Web.
- Cunningham, Kathryn. "What's behind the obsession over whether Elizabeth Holmes intentionally lowered her voice?" *The Conversation*: 3 Mar, 2022. Web.
- Daalmans, Serena. "From Good to Bad and Everything in Between." *Journal of Media Ethics*, V.23, 11: 28-44. 2017. Web.
- IMDb, "IMDb Top 100." [http://imdb.com/?groups=top\\_100](http://imdb.com/?groups=top_100). Web. Note: list ranking by user rating; accurate as presented at time of submission.
- James, Roxie J. *Criminals as Heroes in Popular Culture*. Oklahoma, US: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020. Print.
- Herman, Susan N. "Thelma and Louise and Bonnie and Jean: Images of Women as Criminals" *Southern*

- California Review of Law and Women's Studies. 2.S: 53-62. 1993. Web.
- History Vs. Hollywood. www.historyvshollywood.com (n.d.). Web.
- Haughton, Melanie. "Why Are We So Obsessed with True Crime?" *University of Derby Magazine*: 111. Web.
- Hallowell, Billy. "Hollywood Once Had a Vibrant Moral and Ethical Code. What Happened?" *MovieGuide*: 2017.
- King, Neal. *Heroes in Hard Times*. Philadelphia, PA, US: Temple University, 1999. Print.
- Leszkiewicz, Anna. "Abolish True Crime." *The New Stateman*: 6 Oct, 2022. Web.
- Lewis, Amanda Chicago. "Pam and Tommy: The Untold Story of the World's Most Infamous Sex Tape." *Rolling Stone*: 22 Dec, 2014. Web.
- Maglio, Tony. "Dahmer Just Had Netflix's Biggest Series Debut on Record." *IndieWire*, 27 Sep, 2020. Web.
- Mendez II, Moises. "How Dahmer Became Netflix's Most Controversial Show in Years." *Time*: 6 Oct, 2022. Web.
- Papia, Daniel. *The Info-Narrative*. Bangor, U.K. 2014. Print.
- Rao, Sonia. "'Serial' helped spark an explosion of true crime stories. Will its new season be heard above the noise?" *The Washington Post*: 18 Sep, 2018. Web.
- Sanders, Sam. "Serial Killers Are Now Just IP Too." *Vulture* (via *New York Magazine*): 7 Oct, 2022. Web.
- Sayles, Justin. "The Bloody Bubble" *The Ringer*: 9 Jul, 2021. Web.
- Seal, Graham. *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History*. New York, US: Anthem Press, 2011. Print.
- Sharf, Zack. Quentin Tarantino Analyzes 'Joker' Climax. *IndieWire*: 4 Feb, 2021. Web.
- Short, Em. "Best Miniseries of 2022, So Far." *MovieWeb*: 8 Sep, 2022. Web.
- Watson, Courtney. "Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 6.2 (Aug, 2019): 37-48. Print.