

ARRT Nonfiction Genre Study
True Crime
February 3, 2022

True crime consists of factual stories that deal with crime, criminal psychology, criminal investigations, trials, police work, and prison life. Murder tends to be the most popular topic, but a wide variety of crimes are covered within the genre.

-Novelist Genre Guide: True Crime for Adults by Yaika Sabat

People have been fascinated by true crime for hundreds of years

- 18th and 19th century murder pamphlets were hawked on street corners, town squares, taverns, news stands, and book shops. Pamphlets claimed to be a true account of the murder, included a narrative, trial transcript and sometimes a written confession by the murderer before execution.
- National Library of Medicine's True Crime Murder Pamphlets (1692-1891)
- Studies in Murder by Edmund Pearson (1924)
- True Detective crime magazine (1924-1995)
- In Cold Blood by Truman Capote (1966)
- Helter Skelter by Vincent Bugliosi (1974)
- The Stranger Beside Me by Ann Rule (1980)

True Crime is more popular than ever (see SNL's Murder Show skit)

Who reads true crime and why?

-Women are by far the main consumers of true crime books, documentaries and podcasts

[-Women, more than men, choose true crime over other violent nonfiction](#)

[-True Crime: Five Reasons Women Love it](#)

[-Why Women Love True Crime](#)

- Learning what to avoid makes women feel safer; knowledge is power
- Women may have more compassion towards/identify with victims
- Fascination with motives, understanding the criminal mind
- Solving a puzzle
- Enjoy details of investigation
- Sense of justice

Characteristics and Appeal

- Various perspectives: reporting, historical, sociological/cultural takes, bio/memoir
- Story: issue-oriented, unconventional
- Pace: fast-paced or leisurely paced, intensifying
- Writing style: well researched, gritty, richly detailed, conversational, compelling
- Tone: sobering, disturbing, thought-provoking, suspenseful, bleak, atmospheric

True crime subgenres

- **Serial Killers:** *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara
- **Medical murders:** *The Case of the Murderous Dr. Cream* by Dean Jobb
- **White collar crime + fraud:** *Bad Blood* by John Carreyrou
- **Organized crime:** *The Corporation* by T. J. English
- **Cults:** *Don't Call it a Cult* by Sarah Berman
- **Wrongfully Accused:** *Central Park Five* by Sarah Burns
- **Cold Cases:** *Highway of Tears* by Jessica McDiarmid
- **Historical Crimes:** *Furious Hours* by Casey Cep
- **Bio/Memoir:** *A Serial Killer's Daughter* by Kerri Rawson
- **Lives of the Victims:** *Boys Enter the House* by David Nelson
- **Criminal Psychology:** *The Killer Across the Table* by John Douglas
- **Forensics:** *18 Tiny Deaths* by Bruce Goldfarb

Key true crime titles/authors

- ***In Cold Blood*** by Truman Capote
- ***Helter Skelter*** by Vincent Bugliosi
- ***The Stranger Beside Me*** by Ann Rule
- ***Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*** by John Berendt
- ***Devil in the White City*** by Erik Larson
- ***Columbine*** by Dave Cullen
- ***A Thousand Lives*** by Julia Scheeres
- John E. Douglas
- M. William Phelps
- Kate Summerscale
- Harold Schechter

Crossovers to other media

- Podcasts
 - My Favorite Murder
 - Hollywood Crime Scene
 - Crime Junkie
 - Jensen and Holes: The Murder Squad
- Documentaries/Series
 - Dateline, ABC 20/20

- Netflix: True Crime
- BuzzFeed Unsolved: True Crime (webseries)

Resources for finding true crime

- Awards: CWA Daggers (UK), Mystery Writers of America, Ned Kelly Awards (Australia), Audible Destination: True Crime
- [Crime Reads](#)
- [27 Best True Crime Books Every Person Should Read](#)

Helping Readers

- Are there certain crimes you *don't* want to read about?
- Is there a particular subgenre you prefer?
- Is there a true crime podcast or documentary you've enjoyed?
- Will you read an open ending or do you need to catch the killer?

What did we read?

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote: well researched, heartbreaking, reads like a novel, Scott Brick narrates

Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done by Harold Schechter and Eric Powell: graphic novel, emotional, graphic illustrations, pop culture and Gein's influence on horror movies, may appeal to horror fans, read alike: *My Friend Dahmer* by Derf Backderf

The Stranger Beside Me by Ann Rule: well researched, author is part of the story, truth is stranger than fiction, reads like a psychological thriller, detailed, humanizes Ted Bundy

American Predator by Maureen Callahan: serial killer, graphic, necrophilia, compelling, fast, procedural, modern aspects of social media

We Keep the Dead Close by Becky Cooper: Harvard student murdered in the 60s, author involved in narrative, sexism, victim POV, botched investigation, CSI techniques, although not proven killer is identified

Slonim Woods 9 by Daniel Levin: cults, memoir, author's voice is foggy and confused—un enjoyable, unresolved, confusing journey, not a lot of information on the cult leader

In the Garden of Spite by Camilla Bruce: historical fiction based on real life female serial poisoner. May appeal to true crime fans

Catch Me if You Can by Frank Abagnale: conman, white collar crime, adventure/chase scenes

The Queen by Josh Levin: con woman, Chicago area, welfare fraud

My Friend Anna by Rachel DeLoache Williams: con woman, fraud, rich and fabulous crowd, jet setting, hard to identify/sympathize with wealthy author, reminds of excessive reality TV shows, Netflix series, try *Confident Women: Swindlers, Grifters, and Shapeshifters of the Feminine Persuasion* by Tori Telfer

Highway of Tears by Jessica McDiarmid: British Columbia stretch of highway where many women, especially Indigenous women, have gone missing or murdered and not properly investigated, not in chronological order-confusing, not specifically focused on crimes but on the apathy toward crimes and activism, try *Missing and Murdered* podcast or *If I Go Missing* by Brianna Jonnie (GN)

Black Hand by Stephan Talty: historical, early 1900s, start of Italian mafia/little Italy, detective who assembled all-Italian police squad, Irish vs. Italian police-prejudice, quick read but not fast paced.

Handsome Johnny by Lee Server: lots of famous names/characters, spans decades, conspiracy theories, mafia stories, celebrity stories

Black Mass by Dick Lehr: Whitey Bulger, Boston, Irish mob, social conditions, good for book discussion

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil by John Berendt: Savannah setting, insular, slower pace but builds toward ending, eccentric characters, city is a character, storytelling, broad appeal besides crime

American Sherlock by Kate Winkler Dawson: birth of forensics and CSI, not chronological, audio difficult to follow

Ground Breaking by Scott Ellsworth: Tulsa Massacre, African American history, race relations, social justice, mostly focuses on research process, attempts by authorities to

cover up, reckoning with the past, ongoing search for graves, archeology.

18 Tiny Deaths by Bruce Goldfarb: beginning of forensics, Gilded Age, Chicago history, 1890s Worlds Fair, short, self-educated woman using influence to promote medical examiner, anecdotes about famous crimes, created tiny dioramas of crime scenes used for police training

Yellow Bird by Sierra Crane Murdoch: bio of Indigenous woman who became obsessed with solving the mystery of a white man who went missing on reservation land, less focused on actual crime than on main character's journey, issues of big oil, investigations of crime on reservation land, may appeal to fans of *Killers of the Flower Moon* by David Grann

I'll Be Gone in the Dark by Michelle McNamara: good writing, sense of justice,

The Five by Hallie Rubenhold: tells the story of the five victims of Jack the Ripper, historical, victim focused, focused on victims' lives instead of crimes, lack of significant back stories of the victims, boring

A is for Arsenic by Kathryn Harkup: investigates the poisons used in 14 of Agatha Christie's classic cases, Christie's extensive knowledge of poisons

Last Call by Elon Green: serial killer targeting gay men in the 1980s and 1990s, LGBTQ stories, narrative, episodic, human stories of victims, sad, satisfying

Bad Blood by John Carreyrou: compelling story, white collar crime, fraud, good option for people who don't like violent true crime, see also *Bad Blood* podcast and HBO special, readers may also enjoy documentaries of the Fyre Festival or *Guilty Admissions* by Nicole Laporte