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Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories

Anita Biressi

Senior Lecturer in Media Studies

Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College

High Wycombe

Buckinghamshire

palgrave



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*For my parents,
Alfredo Carlo Biressi and Ruth Lina Biressi*

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Preface

This book examines contemporary true crime narratives produced in Britain since the late 1970s. It unpacks the relationship between true crime, its popular fascination and appeal and the moment of its recent commercial success. It argues that an analysis of the ways in which true crime picks up and works with discourses of law and order, crime and punishment, violence and vulnerability provides valuable insights into the production of the modern social subject. It maintains that the real experience of violence upon which non-fiction draws must be taken into account by cultural criticism if critique is to move beyond a purely relative textual reading of true crime.

This work begins by signalling the generic antecedents of true crime literature, arguing that new literatures of crime arise partly through new knowledges and new practices and partly through the collision of a range of mainly non-fiction popular genres. It charts the emergence of modern notions of 'lawlessness', the divisions between the criminal subject and the law-abiding citizen and the creation of the 'dangerous individual' demonstrating how these become the main objects of scrutiny in contemporary true crime literature.

The rhetorical division between the criminal and the good citizen is interrogated through an examination of the discursive relationship between British true crime and the social construction of crime and criminality since the late 1970s. Topical discourses about home security and rising crime are unpacked in order to demonstrate how these intersect with dominant notions of individualism, citizenship and social responsibility. This analysis emphasises how subject positions such as the 'moral subject' are constituted through a range of discourses about crime, and also considers the likely pleasures offered by true crime. Illustration, humour and a popular vernacular all contribute to an understanding of true crime as a popular reservoir of experience and knowledge about crime and its social context and that the pleasure of recognition is a significant one.

An examination of the newer collect and keep true crime partwork magazines demonstrates that anxieties about agency, progress and mortality, which are central to an understanding of true crime in general, are particularly pointed in the new true crime. For while true crime presents the development of modern technologies as inherently

progressive, the images and stories of the destroyed body which lie at its core, suggest a profound ambivalence about the role of 'man' in the order of things. The book concludes by examining through close textual analysis the discursive clash between a literary aesthetic that elevates and privileges the murderer as a powerful agent and a moral imperative that aims to condemn him (rarely her) for turning victims into objects of atrocity and abuse. The overall argument is that the discursive conflicts played out across the range of true crime forms constitute a locus of fascination and repulsion with crime and criminality that says much about the production of the modern social subject.

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