Narrative Criminology

Narrative Criminology:

Crafting True Crime Stories with Integrity and Insight

By

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To Andy Rugger. It was just a mix up.

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PREFACE

THE ECHOES OF AN ENCORE

"What did I ever do to you? I don't deserve this, that much is true."
The Hives, What Did I Ever Do to You

This book is an encore of sorts, but more importantly, it is a manual for those who wish to explore the popular genre of true crime documentaries and programs in the context of criminology. In this book, multiple disciplines are woven together: criminology, psychology, and sociology; however, there are other non-analytical elements in this weave, including storytelling. It is tempting to veer to one extreme or another in the name of one-upmanship: too much empiricism makes for uninspiring storytelling and misses the entire point of the genre; too little empiricism, and the story has no context or alignment with reality. True crime is a unique category of storytelling as it is a *radial* form of conveying information: it requires analytical, emotional, and primal literacy to do each story justice.

What you are about to read is a construction of my notes as I was making a switch from book writing to television production. While I had decided not to write more books, my research and work in television began to take the form of a manual; ergo, I decided to codify my work in book form.

After my research and experimentation, I called what I had re-created and refined a form of *narrative criminology*, but it could just as easily be called applied criminology. This is a guide for those who wish to fuse criminology and storytelling through the common medium of psychology. For those wishing to explore the notions of television ethics and radial thinking, my previous books *Ethics for Television Researchers and Associate Producers* and *Radial Journalism* will supplement this guide. My true crime book *Murder in a Sundown Town* will give insight into a specific case from the perspective of a true crime television researcher. The nexus of empiricism and storytelling is an important, if murky, and this book is a guide to this enigmatic fusion.

One final note: I am recounting my direct experience from not only my time as a true crime researcher for Cineflix's true crime documentary series *A Time to Kill* (also known as *Homicide: Hours to Kill*) but also my foray into creating true crime programs through my production company KlueIQ. I will focus on one case on the program that had never been on another true crime program that I worked on: the murders of Elsie Steppa and Clarence Thornton. As usual, I conducted real-world experiments and gathered data to analyze it to maintain ecological validity. I will also cover the disappearance of Dana Zelic, a case I covered through my experimental news site Chaser Investigative News as I interviewed Zelic's mother, brother, former schoolmates, and ex-boyfriend in 2007. This book's mandate is to show how to balance academic considerations with commercial ones without sacrificing empirical standards while presenting informative and compelling stories of crime to give appreciation to an important, if misunderstood genre as we understand the complex dynamics of one agent causing life-altering harm to others.]

Alexandra Kitty

PART ONE:

THE REALITY OF CRIME

CHAPTER ONE

THE BASICS OF CRIME

Criminology is the academic analysis of law-breaking and of those who perpetrate crime; however, it is crucial to understand that there are *layers* of elements: the actual crime, the criminals, the police investigations, the court proceedings, the *study* of these elements separately and together, and then the publication of the results of these various analyses before delving into the *interpretations* of those practical and empirical investigations. In that regard, there are two fronts of research: the line from police and law enforcement along with the legal investigation, taken as a single unit, and then the scholarly analysis, which has no direct bearing on the formal investigations but is pertinent to how the former investigations evolve.

But there are *other* sets of investigations to consider: the journalistic ones that report on crime and the aftermath, but also investigations from the realm of true crime reportage. The former is meant to both inform the public and encourage those with information on a crime to reveal their knowledge to the police and the press, while the latter has a more complicated and little-understood mandate, yet it is the latter medium that the public understands the structure of crime as well as the history of homicides and disappearances. While the true crime genre is often seen as frivolous popular culture, it is, in fact, far more potent in shaping the public's understanding of the dynamics of crime. An average person will more likely watch a true crime program than read an academic study on the mechanisms of crime, which, in turn, impacts the academic's latent understanding of it. It is a narrative which pulls the facts together.

It is for this reason that it is important to look at the definition of crime from both an empirical and narrative standpoint, as the two definitions may be similar but have shades of differences as well as an emphasis on different components.

But how crime is interpreted depends on many factors, from framing to mandate. For instance, the *New York Times,* on April 15, 1983, with the staid and clinical headline "Owner of a bar shot to death; suspect is held":

> A 25-year-old man shot the owner of a Queens bar to death, abducted two women and raped one of them, and was arrested several hours later in Manhattan yesterday while asleep at the wheel of a stolen gypsy cab, the police said.
>
> The suspect - Charles Dingle of 155 Woodruff Avenue, near Prospect Park in Brooklyn - was on parole after serving time on a robbery charge.
>
> He was taken into custody at 168th Street and Broadway after the women fled into a subway station and called the police.
>
> Found in a box in the cab was the head of the slaying victim, Herbie Cummings, owner of Herbie's Bar at 182-41 Jamaica Avenue in Jamaica.

However, on the same day, its rival newspaper, the *New York Post,* upstaged the *Times*, not by presenting more information, but with the iconic front-page headline "Headless body found in topless bar." Interpretation of criminal activity matters, and the clinical lens often hides the primal and emotional pull that narrative ones make clear.

Crime is a reality which is engrained in emotionality: fear, terror, loss, rage, and hatred are emotions that are triggered by such undertakings, and the reason why we will begin our journey looking at the scaffolding through a detached, analytical lens before we begin to bring in more emotional and primal elements into play.

The Elements of Crime

To understand the narrative of criminology, it is essential to see a criminal act as a link in a chain or a domino effect: a crime does not happen in a vacuum; there are mitigating factors from the environment to the financial to the neurobiological. The genesis of corruption can be interpreted in many ways; however, there are separate acts that follow a sequence. The better we can define each link in the chain, the easier it is to understand the narrative aspects of criminality:

The Personality of Offenders and Victims: It is essential to use emotional literacy to see people as *people*: who they are, how they were formed, and why they came to a critical juncture. Was the criminal abused as a child? Was the victim? What is their educational level? Their jobs? Their temperaments? The more factors we know, the more texture we have and the more closely aligned our perceptions come to reality. We do not want to fall into stereotypes based on race, socioeconomic status or even beliefs, so

it is important not to resort to labels or pop culture references that taint our understanding of people.

The Impetus: Before an actual crime takes place, there are factors which will contribute to the criminal act. There may be targeting and planning, but there may be stressors or financial or psychological motivations. Sometimes, a couple has been married for decades and is in the midst of a contentious divorce with a hefty life insurance policy in play; other times, someone with substance abuse issues needs a fix and suddenly sees a wealthy-looking pedestrian who could be robbed for drug money. The crime may be spontaneous or planned years in advance, but there will be motive and activating factors which contribute to the criminal act itself.

The Criminal Acts: While it may be tempting to see the criminal act as a single unit, it is more helpful to break the act into distinct components: stalking, threats, ambush, deception, abduction, torture, extortion, theft, sexual assault, murder, disposal, and staging. It becomes easier to see time frames, movements, confederates, evidence, witnesses, other criminal acts, and psychological dynamics when we break down precisely how a crime or series of crimes were committed.

This method allows us to see that there is an action, but not necessarily a plan: a crime may be one of opportunity or emotional outburst. We can compare and contrast competing theories of what has happened and who is responsible. We can spot post-offence deception, and the more precise we are with mapping the geographical movements and time frames, the more we can find new information as we will have a better idea of where to look, from eyewitnesses to surveillance footage. We can also find police and court records, as well as victim and felon interviews, to give us as much information as possible.

The Investigation and Arrest: If the crime has been discovered and law enforcement has been summoned, then each step of the process should be examined, from crime scene investigations to police interrogations. Precisely how evidence was gathered is as important to know as how the crime was perpetrated. How many detectives were involved? What are their insights? Was this a cold case? Did detectives work solve the crime, or was genetic genealogy the test that solved it? Has there been an arrest? Is the case still open or closed? Why and how? How closely do you work with the victim or the victim's family? What was the dynamic? We are looking past empirical evidence gathering: we are actively including therapeutic (i.e., emotional) data points as well.

Media Coverage: Here, we should also look at how the crime was presented to the public through legacy and online media, such as podcasts. How is the victim portrayed? The investigators? The criminals? How much information was available to the public? Were the names held back? Was the precise address given? Who gave interviews and when?

The Trial and Appeal: How an accused was tried, acquitted, or convicted will be based on a prosecutor's *narrative*. There will be evidence, but the thread will be a narrative, with the defence presenting a counter-narrative. There may be a mistrial, meaning there will be more than one trial to investigate. Was there a plea bargain? What were the circumstances? Were there any appeals? Were they successful? Some evidence will be disallowed. In the US (but not in Canada), it is possible to interview jurors to gain insight. If there is an appeal, there will be information which will also give more context and information.

The Aftermath: How the victim, family, community, and the convicted think, behave, and fare after the appeals gives us clues as to the consequences of such actions. There are times when the outcome is seemingly obvious and times when the unexpected happens. As we will see in later chapters, there will be case studies where beliefs and behaviours radically alter, producing shocking results. For instance, Mary McElroy, a 25-year-old woman was kidnapped and ransomed in 1933. When she was first ambushed by her abductors who told her their plans, she quipped, "I'm worth more than that!" At first, she seemed no worse for the wear after she was released. She then expressed sympathy for her kidnappers during the trial, but as time progressed, she became increasingly distressed as there was a backlash to her actions post-kidnapping, and she took her own life seven years later leaving a note which made it clear the aftermath of her ordeal had made it impossible for her to endure. From a nervy response to despair, the trajectory of her life after the event is striking, and follow-ups are essential to understanding the dynamics of crime.

Understanding Arcs

The above list of actions is more than the organic progression of crime: these are *arcs* in the progression of events in reality. We understand actions as groupings that serve as milestones, each one shapes both our view of reality as well as the reality of the ecosystem. The planning of a robbery is a separate entity from committing one as the stakes are higher, yet both arcs are linked to one another. We must see the whole as well as the sum of the parts. We often see events as a single event, when they are, in fact,

interconnected components which must be examined individually before we pull back and extrapolate from the whole.

For us to understand the how and the why of criminal activity, we must be able to map clusters of events to see the progression. This form of mapping is not only essential to understanding reality from an empirical standpoint, but also through a narrative, and mapping is the nexus of both academic understanding and popular culture: the difference is the analysis and final disseminated outcome of the data. The same series of events can produce multiple formats, from a study to a story. This common thread means that actions can be *translated* into multiple forms and that the difference between those forms is not the reality of the crime, but the *interpretation* of it. Arcs make the similarities between study and storytelling more overt and easier to translate empirical studies into narrative forms and vice versa.

While fictional narratives have arcs, they are not interpreted as such, but as *acts* or *chapters,* an arc, by contrast, is in the realm of unfolding reality. We do not live in a chapter of a book or an act in a play: we live in time and space where distinct events bring clusters of consequences with them, and we respond to those external stimuli, which further trigger new events over time and across geographical locations. For instance, we may take a walk in a dangerous part of town right after we have bragged to friends about having a wallet filled with money, only to be violently mugged. We report the crime to the police and must go to the hospital to tend to our injuries. We may blame ourselves for the crime, and if there is an arrest, there may or may not be a trial, meaning the charges may have been dropped, there was a plea bargain, or we will have to testify in court. We may become angry, disappointed, or stressed depending on the outcome of the arrest. If there is no arrest, we may become nervous or angry, and form an activist group to deal with the lack of resolution, take to social media to complain, or suffer in silence. Each subsequent arc has its obstacles, consequences, feedback, realities, problems, and solutions. As a criminologist, we compare and contrast arcs of different people and groups to understand the dynamics, but as storytellers, we may see overarching themes and groups of individual cases differently than the empirical researcher, but both rely on arcs to understand events, yet will interpret the meaning of those arcs differently.

When we are examining case studies, it is important to break down each one into arcs to notice subtle shifts in behaviours, beliefs, advancements in technology and science, and environments. For instance, evidence which could provide no insight in one moment suddenly gives the solution thanks to advances in DNA technology, or witnesses who kept silent out of fear

have left the abusive ecosystem and now can approach law enforcement with what they have seen and heard. When we compare and contrast arcs, we tease out pertinent information about both the environments and their actors as well as the flow of events and how time and place impact them both. When we construct empirical stories through narrative criminology, we can do so through the use of arcs.

The Elements of Criminology

Criminology is the empirical lens we use to study crime from a variety of angles, from the victim to the perpetrator. Our understanding of these dynamics is often shaded by the academic literature, which takes a look at the trends and common threads rather than individual cases. The discipline's extrapolations of crime may become a theme in serial storytelling, but individual cases are the heart of the mandate of narrative: general trends are faceless and, thus, less interest to audiences, while crimes, where there is a face (the victim, the felon), gain prolonged attention and empathy. While there are many academic aspects to criminology, some crime analyses are more pertinent to the narrative of crime than others, and we can glean insights from these disciplines. While we will examine studies about these concepts in further chapters, it is important to become familiarized with them first:

Causation: Why do people become law-breakers? Why do they steal, embezzle, or launder money? Why do they kidnap or murder someone? Why do they stalk innocent people or target someone of a different race? We often look for warning signs to protect ourselves from becoming victims, but criminologists look to understand the internal and external factors which push individuals over the line. Can knowing these factors prevent crime? Are there common factors among certain groups of people to make it possible to predict future criminal behaviour? Does poverty play a role? Child abuse or neglect? Peer pressure? While narrative structures require this knowledge to build connections and suspense, criminologists look for empirical measurements to gain insight into the dynamic which creates an ecosystem for criminal activity to transpire.

Conflict: This concept refers to the idea that crime is a natural consequence of unequal classes where there is a struggle between the wealthy elites and the poor. While there may be socioeconomic conflicts, true crime narratives rarely venture upon this theoretical scaffolding, but often, the offshoot of these conflicts brings interest in such cases. For instance, should a wealthy murderer receive a lighter sentence than a comparable killer from a lower

economic class, there is a story of inequality. If a wealthy serial killer preys upon the poor, he will be seen as more villainous than if a poor serial killer targeted the same demographic. The former will be seen as being without mercy despite his numerous blessings, while the latter will merely be seen as someone who picked more accessible victims.

Deviance: The focus here is on those who defy social norms, and the consequences of defying them. In the true crime genre, the deviant tendencies of an offender will be highlighted. If the offender is seen through a sympathetic lens, then the narrative will focus on challenging how deviant the behaviour was and whether it should have been outlawed in the first place. It is in this grey area where political and partisan spin will taint the narrative, regardless if the deviance is seen as inconsequential or tantamount.

Rational Choice: Simply put, this theory assumes that offenders are functional adults who weigh the costs and benefits of their actions, and decide to break the law as it is deemed to be advantageous to their goals. This cost-weighing analysis leads to the conclusion that it is better to break the law than not. Narratives usually heavily rely on this assumption: there is a clear motive (murdering a spouse for a life insurance policy and preventing a costly divorce, for example), and that the perpetrator knew of the benefits when committing the crime. When a documentary revolves around the wrongfully convicted or the injustice of a teenager or individual with mental health problems being incarcerated for a crime, there will be care to dismantle the notion that the individual would have benefitted from the enterprise, and thus, would not have committed the act in the first place.

Profiling: The psychological makeup of an offender plays a prominent role in narrative criminology. What makes a psychopath turn violent? Why do serial killers feel compelled to hunt their fellow humans? What makes these individuals different from those who do not commit crimes? While profiling is one of the most well-known offshoots of criminology, it is often presented as more absolute in popular culture than it is academically, yet there are empirical elements which overlap the two spheres.

Environment: How the socioeconomic environment impacts offender behaviour is rarely the focus of documentaries, but has a greater emphasis in criminology. How does society cause crime? Here, various ecosystems are compared and contrasted to look for patterns specific to one ecosystem, but rare or non-existent in others. The focus is on building neighbourhoods which prevent criminal enterprise from occurring. Should a narrative pick

up on the environment, it will show institutional failure and neglect which caused the needless death or assaults of innocents, which an offender took advantage.

Culture: What role does culture play in crime? How do societies define what is taboo and what isn't? Traditionally, narrating real-life cases focuses on homicides, meaning the range of crimes examined is limited, yet there are many kinds of criminal undertakings, from human trafficking to art crimes. How does culture shape an offender's worldview and justification for breaking the law? It is an important question, yet not one explored narratively. Related to culture is *social control:* how do personal factors (family, friends, authority) lead to self-control, and how and why do these controls break? As narrative criminology tends to be personal, these factors are expressed implicitly and are seen as part of the *motive.*

Punishment: This aspect focuses on deterrents to crime, and narratives which focus on punishment will either end the narrative of an offender receiving just punishment for the crime or how the lack of punishment resulted in injustice and a real or perceived chance of recidivism. In criminological studies, on the other hand, the focus is on how various methods of punishment result in the decrease or increase in crime. The former looks at punishment as a static entity, while the latter sees it as more fluid and a work in progress.

Recidivism: The probability of a convicted offender breaking the law again is an important category in criminology. Why does a person not reintegrate into society? What has gone wrong? This question has much empirical value; however, in terms of narrative, a repeat offender is a sign of a society's failure to protect the innocent.

Victimology: This is the empirical study of victim traits and the victim's relationship with the offender to look for predictive patterns. Manuals such as the *Crime Classification Manual* emphasise understanding the victim and how the individual became one. In narratives, the focus will be on the offender and how this individual chose victims and/or perceived them. The reason for the shift is one of balance: in criminology; there is a depersonalisation of victims to be seen as empirical units to be studied and understood, meaning the focus is with an analytical lens; however, as narratives are more emotional, such an examination is offensive as it mimics how offenders see their prey. The point of narratives is to personalise players in such ecosystems, not study them to glean empirical insights, even if those empirical insights help give more data to narratives.

Psychopathy: While many offenders can be clinically diagnosed as being psychopaths, the vast majority of offenders are not psychopaths; however, psychopathy is often a central focus in narratives, but far less so in criminological study. Psychopathy brings suspense to a narrative as it better defines the offender (i.e., the villain) from the victim, but in narratives and documentaries, it is often overemphasised to bring interest in the story. Criminologists are under no such pressure and are free to study the mundane as well as the extraordinary.

The Elements of True Crime Storytelling

Unlike criminology, the true crime genre is not tethered to empirical standards; however, it still must use facts in its storytelling, culling information from law enforcement, police, news articles, and those who were impacted by the crime. Often, it is shading and emphasis that allow multiple retellings of the same cases: one program may focus on multiple suspects, while another may focus on the fact that the killer was a neighbour of the victim. In each case, there is a *hook,* and the hook will determine which facts go into the story, which are downplayed, emphasised, or omitted entirely. While no story can rely on every fact in a case, the combination of facts presented or omitted may give varying interpretations of the case. Looking at multiple suspects implies the victim may not be the kindest of individuals, and to counter the embedded assumptions, the story may begin by emphasising how much the victim was loved by most who knew the individual. On the other hand, a program that emphasises timelines of crimes is more neutral in the approach taken. Should both of these scaffoldings be used in a single story, then there are both objective and subjective elements. There is a balance, and it is important not to veer into speculation: the facts of the case must be presented honestly.

But it doesn't mean that some editorialising doesn't take place. An innocent person who was a suspect may have made threats to the victim and, hence, would be a natural person of interest. The individual's temper and poor impulse control will be emphasised to underscore how an innocent person fell onto a detective's radar. While interpreting behaviours is acceptable in narrative criminology, it must always be *justified:* did the individual have a prior criminal record? Did the individual and victim have a history of conflict? What do others who know the person of interest have to say about this person's temperament? The more data points we have, the easier it is to make sound judgment calls when presenting information, but an editorial should never hint at unjustified conjecture. For instance, should a person of

interest have been threatened by the victim and never responded or even provoked the conflict, then implying anything else is not just dishonest and unethical, it taints the empirical and factual value of the story. Police may have an initial assumption that the person of interest had a potential motive to kill the victim, but if their investigations come up empty-handed, then the information presented must reflect this reality.

Understanding individuals involved in a criminal ecosystem, from victims to witnesses, requires emotional literacy. Unlike fictional stories, where an author can make characters perfectly align with tropes and stereotypes, nonfiction stories must account for the texture and plurality of characters, even if there are clear classifications of individuals in the aftermath of an illegal activity. While each role has common threads, individuals do not always align perfectly with expectations entrenched by fictional narratives. Yet it is important to understand nonfiction equivalents in roles to present empirical narratives, as the next chapter discusses.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLES IN CRIME

Storytelling imparts lessons in wisdom. Empirical studies, on the other hand, impart lessons in knowledge. These are two separate but related spheres of communication. One is not better or superior to the other. There are those with wisdom but scant knowledge, while there are those with knowledge but scant wisdom. Neither one has a full grasp of the nature of reality, and their feints and ruses do not alter this dilemma of deficits. When there is a fusion of storytelling with any empirical underpinning, there must be a balance to ensure both credibility and audience interest. Recounting cases of true crime is a form of applied criminology, and it is easier to understand the importance of accurate information when the genre is seen as such.

Stories of illegal activities are wholly based on human interaction, and here, the lines between roles seem more differentiated than other events in life, even if the reality of the situation can be very different: a robber who is mugged or a killer who is attacking are both offender and victim, yet many will attribute their victim status to karma, justice, or an offshoot of their villain status receiving their just desserts. There will be less sympathy. On the other hand, should a victim of crime attack the offenders who harmed them, they may not be seen as villains but as justified heroes instead. The perceptions of these roles can be swayed by personal experience, culture, evolutionary drives, and psychographics.

The backbone of narrating and curating criminal cases is the interaction of various roles and how those assigned specific roles perceive their surroundings and how others perceive them. Criminology is the study of predators and prey, but also the study of the dark side of humanity. While we will examine specific case studies on nonfictional accounts of real-life cases in later chapters, it is important to understand these narrative roles and elements first:

Villain: Simply put, the villain is the perpetrator of the crime and its mastermind; however, a villain can also be a confederate who aids and abets

the perpetrator, from hiding evidence to destroying it or intimidating or bribing potential witnesses. The villain is the offender, the instigator, and the predatory factor in the dynamic, which causes physical and/or psychological harm which is specifically against the law.

Victim: The victim is the target of harm. The harm may be physical: kidnapping, trafficking, torture, rape, abuse, assault, and even murder; however, there may be no physical assault, but there may be theft, embezzling, stalking, or other non-contact violations. The victim is prey to the offender and is at the offender's mercy, and the harm done is defined as illegal.

Hero: A hero is someone who helps a victim and impedes a villain. A hero may be a good Samaritan or a bystander who intervenes to rescue the victim, a family member who goes looking for the victim, a detective who solves the case, or a prosecutor who helps convict the offender of the crime in question.

However, some are not directly involved but have a specific function in the offender-victim dynamic:

Witness: This is an individual who has seen a crime being committed.

Left Behind: The murdered victim's loved ones who are impacted by the death or disappearance. In this case, the victim is either murdered or has been abducted but may still be alive but cannot leave the offender's confines.

Falsely Accused: This is a person who is innocent of a crime but has been convicted of the offence as the real offender is free.

Red Herring: This is an individual who may, at one time or another, be a person of interest or a suspect but will rarely be arrested or convicted. This is someone who may have had some motive to cause harm to the victim but didn't participate in the crime on any level.

When we understand the players involved in these dynamics, we understand these roles as signposts and a chain of command; however, in the telling of these stories, these roles may seem to become set in stone, and the connotations of these roles shade how we view individuals. Reality is not as simplistic as the designated roles suggest. A hero who works as a detective may be breaking the law elsewhere and misusing the position of authority to do it. Someone who has lost a loved one may become a vigilante. A victim

may turn the tables on the offender and become a hero but be traumatised and become a villain. These roles must not become stereotyped: they are a guide to understanding a series of related events.

Of course, these roles are not mutually exclusive or set in stone. A victim may become a hero – or villain. A villain may be a victim. Usually, when discussing nonfiction accounts of real-life crime, we are looking at a snapshot in time. Rarely will we look at the biography of an individual who has been in multiple roles, but it is imperative to understand the fluid nature of human behaviour as it gives valuable insights into motives and mindsets. An empirical approach requires expanding ideas, not confining them.

However, in the true crime genre, these lines are more defined: a victim will most often be seen as someone without villainy, and an offender may receive little to no sympathy or empathy. Heroes are seen as honourable and above reproach. The lines between roles are clearly defined, particularly in television and podcasts. Documentaries and books, on the other hand, can afford to cross those lines and explore other facets of both the crime and the players.

The interactions and interconnectedness of victims and offenders are at the heart of both criminology and true crime storytelling. Rarely will ideas of social conflict play in a true crime television program, but maybe the backbone of a documentary film outlining social injustices and their organic outcomes. It is imperative that the story not become a patronising lecture to audiences: while important conventions can and should be challenged, the facts should speak of them, not an editorial laden with connotations. You are not issuing demands and decrees as you are dependent on an audience's goodwill; what you are doing is imparting knowledge and wisdom. If people wish for a lecture, they have the benefit of taking criminology classes; what they are seeking is a story which will guide them to safety and comfort.

Understanding Fear

To understand criminal narrative, we must first break down what elements hook audiences into investing cognitive and emotional interest in a story. Stories about criminal activity are grim by nature, even if they are tales of so-called "dumb criminals" who make comical errors and are easily apprehended. For example, such dark humour was the focus of one homicide case in a *Fox59* article published on July 11, 2024:

> Police ended up viewing surveillance footage, which reportedly showed the shooting. In the footage, a man matching Glaspar's description walks behind Davidson and fires a point-blank shot into the back of the victim's head.
>
> Glaspar then allegedly is seen "dancing around the body immediately after the victim dropped to the ground" along with "skipping away through the parking lot."
>
> "He's a very dumb criminal," an informant told police, sharing how Glaspar has been claiming "nonstop" about killing Davidson.

We are still dealing with violence and loss; however, the sense of a villain's comeuppance by his own defective nature brings a sense of justice and reassures audiences that the offender will be caught. Yet despite the sense of reassurance, there is an element of death: most of us will be safe from the offender, but someone wasn't so fortunate. Justice is usually the consolation prize for a system breakdown, regardless of whether there is a comedic element to the tale or grimness. Most times, the story falls into the latter category rather than the former, meaning there will be an element of danger and from the danger comes a sense of terror.

Fear is an addictive emotion: many horror films are long-term franchises with a myriad of sequels and prequels, video game tie-ins, graphic novels, and even television programs with an entrenched fan base. Fear sells, and though it is often thought to be an unpleasant emotion to avoid, it is also one that often brings neurobiological rewards. As the *Independent* noted in a November 1, 2023 article:

> Other benefits of horror movie dates rose to the surface in the survey, with 51 per cent of participants saying it was an opportunity for couples to get physically close – cue the typical moment in a theatre when a man wraps his arm around a woman during a jump scare scene. In addition, respondents found that the activity is not only an unconventional way to break the ice among daters, but it also means an opportunity to enjoy feelings of excitement and adrenaline.

True crime has its own addictive elements based on cultivating emotions of fright. In stories of crime, the most deep-seated fear audiences hold is becoming a victim; however, there is fear of being someone left behind and falsely accused. The genre brings suspense: we may not know the fate of the victim, the identity of the offender, or if the offender will strike again. Homicide is a high-stakes element as lives are on the line, and in cases of mass killers and serial killers, there will be a significant loss of life, impacting families and communities. Whether it is a stalker hunting down

a specific individual, a random killer, or a first-degree relative, there are no notions of a "safe space." The murder can happen anywhere, including one's own home, with surveillance cameras and an alarm. There may be a single offender or a mob. Anything bad can happen to anyone at any time, and fear is a dominant emotion, yet the genre has only increased in popularity over the decades.

But there is something more significant to consider: if fear is an addictive element to a genre, it means certain benchmarks will appear in the message and those benchmarks reinforce and encourage feelings of helplessness. Rotes, fortresses, rituals, avoidance, and a focus on inevitable defeat will all ensure that the source of fear generation is kept in place. These messages recondition the brain and alter how audiences perceive reality. The trick is to warn about danger truthfully and honestly but without conditioning an audience to feel passive or defenceless.

Because fear is a powerful element in learning, it is also used in manipulative arts, such as propaganda, which is based on fear-mongering. It is a way to manipulate and control the masses.

Criminology may be the study of crime, but it should not have manipulative elements in its scaffolding. Narrative criminology should also be carefully crafted so as not to imply or overtly assume that victims or potential victims will have no means of survival or prevention. The mandate of narrative criminology is a therapeutic one where we create new paths which favour a victim's survival, even prevent the harm from coming to someone in the first place. Should those measures fail, how victims find justice and restore peace should be considered.

When we are stressed or made afraid, the pre-frontal cortex is taxed, in many cases, and can recondition the target into obedience. Memories can be distorted or forgotten. We begin to rewrite history as we forget our previous personal strengths and triumphs, looking for mobs or authorities to make our decisions, and cognitive outsourcing removes our autonomy. The goal of narrative criminology is to enlighten and positively and constructively stimulate the prefrontal cortex as well as the limbic system and the archipallium and harmonise them, not fragment them. Hence, it is imperative to understand how dire fear-based messaging can be to targets who become overstimulated and thus, cannot function and freeze.

For instance, many kidnapping victims may not make any attempts to escape, even if there are multiple opportunities to flee. It is not as if staying

is a sign of compliance or agreement: it is a sign of an overtaxed prefrontal cortex. Fear is a mechanism of creating an inner prison where the individual cannot escape, and, hence, by default, can be predicted, manipulated, and controlled. It is a form of conditioning and creates a feedback loop: the perceptions of reality become skewed and reinforce the notion that the situation is helpless. When we precondition minds to use analytical, emotional, and primal literacy, we give audiences a key which can help them when they find themselves under horrific circumstances, from natural disasters to physical assaults.

However, it is not necessary to invoke or feed into fear: by showing that weaknesses are not permanent, viewers can devise their own strategies, even if they are not overtly mentioned. While sensationalist narrative invokes fear, responsible narrative criminology can be a guide to finding solutions, without blaming victims or implying their actions or mistakes were the cause of their suffering. For instance, should a neighbourhood have vulnerable areas where a pedestrian can be ambushed, it is important to mention this deficiency without becoming simplistic. It was not the victim's fault such a vulnerability existed. Perhaps the victim opened the door to a stranger, believing it was a relative because the family member was supposed to arrive at that time: the subtle lesson is not to make assumptions and pause before making oneself vulnerable to strangers outside. When we are given constructive information, we can make use of it. By placing the centre of gravity on regaining control and learning to exercise one's primal literacy, audiences can learn and be liberated from fear, breaking a destructive cycle.

Understanding Narrative Flow

Criminal offences, despite being widely different and evolving, usually have some static elements: a law has been broken, and an individual or group have been victimised in some way. There is loss, confinement, and chaos which needs to be remedied. There is often danger and trauma which doesn't end even if the offender is convicted and sent to prison. Crime is a natural medium for storytelling as it contains characters with specific roles, emotional pull, relatability, organic suspense, moral underpinnings, and a line of progression, and often contains natural twists and turns that hook audiences. The emotional value of such stories is far greater than many other common events, such as graduating from an educational institution or spending time with coworkers.

However, if done irresponsibly, the morals of such stories can be weaponised and used to manipulate audiences to fear, hate, and become prejudiced. The audience may be given a false sense of safety or danger. They may trust the wrong people or distrust the right ones. They may see the situation in simplistic terms and make rash judgements based on manipulative narrative.

A story has a beginning, middle, and end, where there are players who interact with each other in a common ecosystem or work toward or against a common purpose. They may clash or collaborate, but there are motives for their actions and beliefs. There will be conflict, which actions have organic, but also unforeseen consequences where other players will be drawn in. At some point, there is either resolution, or there is no more relevant information to add to the story. While a fictional story will have a climax and resolution, a nonfiction story may have neither, but there will be a *point* to the story: to relay facts and communicate understanding or insight.

Narratives about crime fall easily into narrative structures. The focus can be on a variety of illegal actions, usually physical violence or financial skulduggery. Audiences will want to know the status of both the victim and the villain, and should there be a Good Samaritan, knowledge of what happened to the hero; however, when the hero is a detective or prosecutor, there will be almost no emphasis on the hero. In that regard, fictional crime stories greatly differ from nonfiction ones.

Although we will be using the term narrative, what we are looking at is *flow*: how events in the real world unfolded. What is the beginning of this criminal act? Who are the main players and how did they collide? What are the facts? In what order did these actions happen? What was the aftermath? When we rely on flow, we are using emotional literacy to lay out data *points* of a real event so that audiences can accurately understand the facts of the case and weigh what those facts mean. Did a witness lie to the police? Did the offender preplan the crime? How did the victim become a target? With flow, audiences gain emotional literacy and understanding of the facts, while traditional narrative requires forcing an audience to agree with the narrator's moral thesis and judgements of players. As narrative criminology seeks to find and analyse empirical and factual information, it is important not to shade the facts, but to ensure they flow to tell a complete story.

When done properly, we create a compelling *case study* with arcs which give us insight into a negative and destructive event. While narrative usually implies a story and a fixed moral assumption, narrative criminology gives

up information which helps us better understand players and events, and we can see gaps, contradictions, manipulations, and deceit.

By focusing on the flow of events, it is easier to weave empirical data into stories without losing audience interest. A story can be told truthfully and accurately without bias. Now that we have a grasp on the basic elements of crime, criminology, and storytelling, let us begin to understand the methods of extracting data and data points which shape the narrative of the genre.

CHAPTER THREE

INVESTIGATION, INTERROGATION, AND EVIDENCE

The backbone of true crime content is police reports. It is not the only source for information: interviews, books, news reports, and trial transcripts are also essential, but it is the findings of detectives which drive the machine. True crime television series and documentaries require them, while podcasts may be as rigorous, though many smaller ones do not use the resource as there is a significant cost to procuring them. Edit assets, such as crime scene photos and videos are essential to understanding the empirical and factual context of crimes; however, so are re-enactments (known as "recreas") of events with actors who do not have any speaking lines, but whose actions are explained by a narrator; this bringing the crime to life. Podcasts do not use recreas, but true crime documentary programs rely on them heavily to bring suspense and drama to the episode.

These recreas animate the story, and will often heavily rely on police reports: what outfit was the victim wearing on the night of the homicide? What clues were found at the scene of the crime? How was the victim found? How did the killer overpower the victim?

Law enforcement will provide the bulk of the information, while the prosecutors will also have information pertinent to the crime, and some flourishes will be found in news reports. How detectives conduct an investigation is an integral part of the true-crime narrative. The fewer the facts, the less reliable and valid the empirical study, but a narrative may not be able to form at all. Both require a depth and wealth of information to inform.

Yet information needs to have quality, not just quantity. How police gather information is as important as the facts themselves. As there have been those who were wrongfully convicted of crimes that they did not commit, it is obvious that there are cases with poor-quality information, and those telling stories or analysing data must be aware that not all investigations are created equal. We cannot always take information at face value. Sometimes people