

# Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?

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## Abstract

The true crime genre, which consists of nonfiction books based on gruesome topics such as rape and murder, has amassed an extensive audience. Many people might assume that men, being the more aggressive sex, would be most likely to find such gory topics interesting. But a perusal of published reader reviews suggests that women enjoy these kinds of books more so than do men. The purpose of this research was to shed light on this apparent paradox. In Studies 1 and 2, the authors conducted a study of reader reviews and a study of book choices that demonstrated that, in fact, women are more drawn to true crime stories whereas men are more attracted to other violent genres. In Studies 3 to 5, the authors manipulated various characteristics of true crime stories to determine which features women find appealing. The authors discuss the findings in light of contemporary evolutionary perspectives on aggression and murder.

## Keywords

aggression, crime, evolutionary psychology, homicide, sex differences

In 1959 in a small town in Kansas, the bodies of four family members were found in their home. The father's throat had been slit and the mother and two children had been shot through the head. The killers were on the run for weeks until they were finally arrested, tried, and, ultimately, hung for their crimes. Despite the horrific details of the case, Truman Capote's book based on this crime, *In Cold Blood*, became a best seller. Indeed, since the publication of *In Cold Blood* in 1966, nonfiction books based on real crimes, including murder, robbery, and rape, have become extraordinarily popular. Although it might seem that these gruesome topics would have little appeal, the "true crime" genre has amassed an extensive audience. In fact, these books often occupy coveted spots on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List ("Paperback Best Sellers," 2004).

Who finds these books appealing? It might be reasonable to assume that men would be more likely than women to find such gory topics interesting. After all, a great deal of research has demonstrated that men are more violent and aggressive than women (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Wilson & Daly, 1985). In addition, men commit the vast majority of violent crimes, accounting for 79% of aggravated assaults and 90% of murders in 2007 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2007).

Moreover, many true crime stories include details that women would presumably find distasteful. For instance, these books often include horrific accounts of women being

kidnapped, raped, tortured, and killed. Research by Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994) demonstrated that women are more disgusted than men by thoughts of gory experiences, such as touching a dead body. As such, it seems reasonable to presume that these types of stories would be not only unattractive to women but also repulsive.

Curiously, a brief perusal of reader reviews of true crime books on Amazon.com and related Web sites suggests that women may in fact be more drawn to these kinds of tales than are men. And although it is the case that women are more likely to read for leisure than men (Griswold, McDonnell, & Wright, 2005), it seems from these sites that women are less likely than men to contribute reviews to other kinds of books characterized by violence, such as accounts of war. In sum, there seems to be a paradox: Despite being the less violent sex, women may be more drawn to accounts of true crime than are men.

The purpose of this research is to shed light on this paradox by, first, demonstrating that it exists and, second, testing several potential explanations for why women may be drawn to true crime. To document the phenomenon itself, we conducted

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two studies—an investigation of reader reviews and an investigation of which books people would select to read if given the choice between true crime and another violent topic. To investigate potential explanations for the phenomenon, we drew on contemporary evolutionary theories of aggression and homicide. According to Buss, evolved survival strategies include not only the propensity for people to commit murder in some situations (Buss, 2005; Buss & Duntley, 2008) but also people's obsession with murder. In other words, by learning the motives and methods of murderers, people learn ways to prevent becoming their victims. In fact, it might be the case that fascination with murder arises from evolved mechanisms more broadly concerned with monitoring fitness-relevant information.

But why would women, more so than men, be interested in crime, especially given that men are more likely to be victims (Chilton & Jarvis, 1999)? The answer may lie in *fear* of crime, as much research has shown that women fear becoming the victims of a crime more so than do men (Allen, 2006; Mirrlees-Black, Mayhew, & Percy, 1996). As such, we might expect women to be more interested in true crime books because of the potential survival cues contained therein. In Studies 3 to 5, we manipulated various features of true crime stories, such as the presence of fitness-relevant cues, to determine the effect of that content on reader's preferences for the stories. In sum, this research provides two significant contributions to the social-personality literature: (a) a documentation of a novel and previously unexplored phenomenon, both verifying its existence and teasing apart the factors that result in the aforementioned sex difference, and (b) a deeper understanding of how evolved survival strategies pertaining to aggression and murder may play out in modern times.

## Studies 1 and 2: Do Gender Differences Exist in Reading Preferences?

The purpose of our first two studies was to determine whether, in fact, women and men differentially prefer true crime stories.

### Study 1

**Method.** Data were collected from book reviews posted by customers on the Web site Amazon.com. We used these reviews to investigate whether reviews of books in the true crime genre were more likely to have been written by women and whether reviews of books in the war genre were more likely to have been written by men. We coded the reviewers' user names for gender when those names had unambiguous gender assignments (e.g., "MissClaudia" was coded as female, whereas "MikeLikesBooks" was coded as male). For the war genre, we used the first 25 books listed under the "military" category, specifically focusing on books in the subcategories of "Biography," "World War II," "Vietnam," "Korean," and "United States." Because there was not a specific crime section, we searched for "true crime" and selected the first

25 books listed. (A list of these books is available from the authors on request.)

**Results.** More women than men reviewed books in the true crime genre (70% vs. 30%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 306) = 22.08, p < .001$ . More men than women reviewed books in the war genre (82% vs. 18%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 1,263) = 520.76, p < .001$ . One potential limitation regarding these findings concerns possible differences in the base rates of the sex of reviewers. For instance, it may be the case that 70% of the reviewers are women for most genres, making the findings concerning true crime less meaningful. To address this concern, we also coded the user names of the reviewers of all 18 books that were listed in a "New In Paperback" category. Results indicated that females contributed 52% of the reviews and men 48%.

We also verified that it was not the case that authors of true crime books are more likely to be female, ruling out the possibility that women are simply drawn to female authors. In addition, a chi-square test showed that women were equally likely to contribute reviews to a true crime book by a male versus a female author (48% vs. 52%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 82) = 0.20, ns$ . Finally, we determined that more than 95% of the reviews in both the true crime and war categories were positive, ensuring that it was not the case that women were contributing negative, versus positive, reviews of true crime. In summary, our results indicate that women are drawn to true crime books more so than are men. However, it is not the case that they are simply more interested in books containing violent content, given that men were more likely than women to submit reviews of books on war.

### Study 2

**Method.** Data were collected from 1,866 people through a study posted on the second author's Web site, which contains a variety of Web studies regarding topics in personality and social psychology. Research has demonstrated that studies conducted online are of "at least as good quality as traditional paper-pencil methods" (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004, p. 102). The description of the study that was posted did not include words related to crime to ensure that people who had an interest in true crime prior to the study were not more likely to participate. Of the participants, 68% were from the United States; 6% were from Canada. The remaining participants were from other countries. The median age was 30 years ( $M = 32.27, SD = 11.71$ ). Of the participants, 73% were female.

Participants were presented with instructions to imagine they were browsing in a bookstore and were given the opportunity to take home a free book. They were given summaries of two books and asked to indicate which one they would select. Some participants were asked to choose between *Violence in Paradise: A True Account of the Murders That Shocked Hawaii*, which was described as the true story of two murdered women, and *Dangers of War: A True Story of an Army Unit Serving in the Gulf War*, which was described as a true account

of two female soldiers' missions in the Gulf War. Other participants chose between the true crime story above and *Dangerous: The True Story of L.A. Gang Members*, which was described as a true account of two young women's experiences in a gang.

It is important to note that we are not implying that all women necessarily prefer true crime books more than books of other genres but rather that, when considering stories with violent content, women are drawn to true crime stories more so than are men. As such, the purpose of including the non-true crime options was to offer participants an option that did not adhere to the prototypical true crime narrative yet also contained true accounts of violence and murder. The plot summaries for each of the three stories included information that the main characters were two women who were killed. Participants viewed the title of the book and several sentences summarizing its plot. In addition to selecting a book, participants were also asked to indicate how much they thought they would enjoy the book by clicking on a continuous scale ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 7 (*very much*).

**Results.** A chi-square test revealed that women and men were not equally likely to chose the true crime versus the war book,  $\chi^2(1, N = 938) = 63.76, p < .001, \phi = .26$ . Of the female participants, 77% chose the true crime book, whereas only 23% chose the war book,  $\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 202.71, p < .001$ . The male participants were evenly split, with 51% choosing the true crime book and 49% choosing the war book,  $\chi^2(1, N = 259) = 0.04, ns$ .

A chi-square test also revealed that women and men were not equally likely to chose the true crime versus the gang book,  $\chi^2(1, N = 928) = 21.77, p < .001, \phi = .15$ . Of the female participants, 73% chose the true crime book, whereas only 27% chose the gang book,  $\chi^2(1, N = 679) = 144.28, p < .001$ . Although the male participants were slightly more likely to choose the true crime book (57%) over the gang book as well (43%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 249) = 4.92, p = .03$ , this difference was not as large as it was for women. In summary, women were much more likely than men to select the true crime book over the alternatives.

A comparison of the men and women who selected the war or gang book over the true crime book showed that men expected to enjoy this book ( $M = 3.69, SD = 1.68$ ) more than did women ( $M = 3.30, SD = 1.76$ ),  $t(469) = 2.38, p = .02, d = .23$ . In other words, even if a woman selected the war or gang book over the true crime book, she did not expect to enjoy it as much as did the men who selected this book. In addition, women who chose the true crime book expected to enjoy it more ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.83$ ) than did the men who selected it ( $M = 3.71, SD = 1.61$ ),  $t(1027) = 2.12, p = .03, d = .17$ .

In summary, women, compared to men, preferred true crime books over other books based on violent topics. In addition, women expected to enjoy these books more than did men (even when men selected to read them), whereas men expected to enjoy books on war or gang violence more so than did women who selected those books.<sup>1</sup>

## Studies 3 to 5: Why Are Women Drawn to True Crime Stories?

In the next set of studies we examined the hypothesis that women may be drawn to true crime stories more so than are men because those stories may confer valuable information about avoiding or surviving violent crime. The following studies were conducted using the same Web site described in Study 2.

### Study 3: Do Women Enjoy Reading True Crime Because They Learn Defense Tactics?

Consider the following passage from *The Stranger Beside Me* concerning the only victim to successfully escape from serial killer Ted Bundy:

She reached for the door handle on her side and started to jump out, but the man was too quick for her. In an instant, he had clapped a handcuff on her right wrist. . . . She fell backward out of the car. . . . Now he had a crowbar of some kind in his hand, and he threw her up against the car. . . . She kicked at his genitals, and broke free. (Rule, 1980, p. 116)

As previously stated, people's fascination with murder may stem from a desire to avoid becoming the victim of a deadly crime (Buss, 2005). As true crime books sometimes contain successful defense tactics and escape tricks used by surviving victims, these books can offer insight into how one can achieve this goal. To test this possibility, we modified one of the plot descriptions to include the information that the victim used a clever trick to escape from her attacker.

**Method.** Data were collected from 13,535 participants. Of the participants, 61% were from the United States; 8% were from the United Kingdom. The remaining participants were from other countries. The median age was 25 years ( $M = 29.60, SD = 11.65$ ). Of the participants, 74% were female.

Participants were asked to choose between *Danger in Denver: The True Story of an Escape from a Killer*, a story about a young woman kidnapped while jogging and taken to an abandoned farmhouse, and *Turmoil on Thunder Trail: The True Story of a Confrontation with a Killer*, a story of a young woman attacked while hiking on a mountain trail. One of the book summaries contained information that the potential victim used a trick she learned from the Internet to escape from her attacker, that is, removing a pin from her watch and using it to unlock her handcuffs. The summary of the other book also contained information that the victim escaped but did not mention the use of a clever trick. For each participant, the information regarding the escape trick appeared in one description, whereas in the other description this detail was omitted. The pairing of this manipulation with the two stories was counterbalanced across participants such that the escape trick appeared in *Danger in Denver* half of the time and in *Turmoil on Thunder Trail* the other half of the time.

In addition to selecting which book they wanted to read, participants also were asked to indicate how much they expected to “learn anything helpful” from the book by clicking on a scale with anchors ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 7 (*very much*).

**Results.** When asked to indicate the extent to which they expected to learn something from the chosen book, those individuals who selected the book description that contained the clever trick indicated they expected to learn more ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) than did those who selected the other book ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ),  $t(13,461) = 29.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .56$ . This finding indicates that our manipulation was valid.

A chi-square test revealed that women and men were not equally likely to chose books with the manipulation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 13,535) = 32.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .05$ . Of the female participants, 71% chose the book that mentioned the use of an escape trick, whereas only 29% chose the book that did not mention this information,  $\chi^2(1, N = 9,965) = 1,832.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . The male participants were more evenly split, with 66% choosing the book with the manipulation and 34% choosing the book without the manipulation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 3,570) = 380.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although men were more likely to select the book that contained the manipulation, this difference was not as large as it was for women. In summary, women, more so than men, were drawn to the book that contained tips on how to defend oneself from an attacker. It appears that the potential to learn defense tactics from these stories is one factor that draws women, more so than men, to true crime books.

#### Study 4: Do Women Enjoy Reading True Crime Because of the Psychological Content?

Consider the following excerpt from the true crime book *Mind Hunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, concerning how to determine when a potential killer will go beyond murderous fantasies to actually commit a crime:

So when is this dangerous behavior likely to occur? This guy is an inadequate loser. In his mind, everyone's out to get him and no one recognizes his talents. If the stressors of his life become unbearable, that's when he'll go one step further with his fantasy. (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995, p. 358)

Many true crime books include speculation as to why an individual decides to commit a murder and whether the motivating factor lies, for example, in a stressful life event or rejection by a significant other. Such understanding might increase a woman's chances of detecting the signs that a jealous ex-lover or stranger may turn violent. To test this possibility, we modified one of the plot descriptions to include the information that the killer was interviewed by an FBI profiler in an attempt to determine the motivations behind his murders.

**Method.** Data were collected from 3,237 participants. Of the participants, 83% were from the United States; 4% were from Canada. The remaining participants were from other countries.

The median age was 33 years ( $M = 35.12$ ,  $SD = 11.60$ ). Of the participants, 76% were female.

Participants were asked to choose between two true crime books. For each participant, the information that the killer had been interviewed in an attempt to understand his motives appeared in one description, whereas in the other description this detail was omitted.

**Results.** A chi-square test revealed that women and men were not equally likely to chose books with the manipulation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 3,237) = 8.26$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\phi = .05$ . Of the female participants, 65% chose the book that contained information on the killer's motives, whereas only 35% chose the book that did not mention this information,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,460) = 210.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Of the male participants, 59% chose the book that contained the information on the killer's motives and 41% chose the book without this information,  $\chi^2(1, N = 777) = 24.87$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although significant, this difference was not as large as it was for women. In other words, women were drawn to the book that contained information on the killer's motives more so than were men. It appears that the psychological content of true crime stories is one factor that draws women, more so than men, to these books.

#### Study 5: Do Women Enjoy Reading True Crime Because the Victims Are Often Female?

Consider an excerpt from *Green River, Running Red*:

It was another Thursday, August 12, 1982, four weeks after Wendy's body was found, when what had appeared to be an isolated tragedy began to take on a horrific pattern. Another woman's body floated in the Green River about a quarter of a mile south of where Wendy had been discovered. (Rule, 2004, p. 16)

In addition to the victims mentioned above, the Green River Killer confessed to killing 46 other young women. Because the victims in true crime books are often women, it may be the case that women simply have more to gain from reading these books in terms of understanding survival strategies and defense tactics. We tested this hypothesis by manipulating the gender of the victims described in the plot summaries.

**Method.** Data were collected from 7,435 participants. Of the participants, 61% were from the United States; 10% were from Canada. The remaining participants were from other countries. The median age was 24 years ( $M = 28.8$ ,  $SD = 11.29$ ). Of the participants, 72% were female.

Participants were again asked to choose between two true crime books. The pairing of the victims' sex with the two stories was counterbalanced across participants.

**Results.** A chi-square test revealed that women and men were not equally likely to chose books with female versus male victims,  $\chi^2(1, N = 7,435) = 25.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .06$ . Of the female participants, 59% chose the book with female

victims, whereas only 41% chose the book with male victims,  $\chi^2(1, N = 5,355) = 155.66, p < .001$ . The male participants were evenly split, with 52% choosing the book with female victims and 48% choosing the book with male victims,  $\chi^2(1, N = 2,080) = 3.72, ns$ .

Overall, women were more likely than men to select the true crime book that featured female victims. If women are drawn to true crime books because of the survival information contained therein (as the above studies demonstrate), it makes sense that women would be more attracted to a book with female victims. Essentially, women, more so than men, would have something to gain from reading these books, especially when the story features female victims.

## General Discussion

While divorcing her husband, Sheila Bellush, a mother of quadruplets, told her sister that if anything were to happen to her, to find true crime writer Ann Rule to tell her story. Shortly thereafter, Sheila was gunned down by a hit man hired by her husband. The resulting Ann Rule book, *Every Breath You Take* (Rule, 2001), was bought by nearly one million readers. What kinds of people read such tales? Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that women, more so than men, are drawn to books in the true crime genre. (Indeed, 86% of the Amazon reviews for *Every Breath You Take* were written by women.)

Why are people fascinated by accounts of kidnappings, rape, torture, and murder? It is likely that, for as long as humans have lived, humans have murdered. In 1991, two men found a frozen skeleton in a glacier near the border between Austria and Italy. Scientific testing showed the skeleton, nicknamed the Iceman, to be approximately 5,300 years old. The cause of death? Murder by arrowhead (see Buss, 2005, for more details). It seems plausible not only that murder has ancient roots in human history but also that fascination with murder does as well (Buss, 2005).

Why would women, more than men, find this information compelling? Our findings that women were drawn to stories that contained fitness-relevant information make sense in light of research that shows that women fear becoming the victim of a crime more so than do men (Allen, 2006; Mirrlees-Black et al., 1996). This sex difference in fear is intriguing because, in actuality, men are more likely than women to be the victim of a crime (Chilton & Jarvis, 1999). Many reasons have been suggested for why women experience more fear, including the fact that certain crimes, such as rape, do occur more frequently for women (Riger, Gordon, & LeBailly, 1978). Other researchers have suggested that the media are to blame in that unusual and rare crimes (which usually focus on female victims) are reported more often than other crimes (Ditton & Duffy, 1983).

Regardless of the reasons behind women's heightened fear of crime, the characteristics that make these books appealing to women are all highly relevant in terms of preventing or surviving a crime. For example, by understanding why an individual decides to kill, a woman can learn the warning signs to watch for in a jealous lover or stranger. By learning escape tips,

women learn survival strategies they can use if actually kidnapped or held captive. In addition, the finding that women consider true crime books more appealing when the victims are female supports the notion that women may be attracted to these books because of the potential life-saving knowledge gained from reading them. If a woman, rather than a man, is killed, the motives and tactics are simply more relevant to women reading the story.

Despite the fact that women may enjoy reading these books because they learn survival tips and strategies, it is possible that reading these books may actually increase the very fear that drives women toward them in the first place. In other words, a vicious cycle may be occurring: A woman fears becoming the victim of a crime, so, consciously or unconsciously, she turns to true crime books in a possible effort to learn strategies and techniques to prevent becoming murdered. However, with each true crime book she reads, this woman learns about another murderer and his victims, thereby increasing her awareness and fear of crime. It is not possible to state with certainty from these studies whether or not this vicious cycle occurs, but we do know that women, compared to men, have a heightened fear of crime despite the fact that they are less likely to become a victim (Allen, 2006; Chilton & Jarvis, 1999) and that women are drawn to true crime books that contain information on how to prevent themselves from becoming the victim of such a crime.

## Limitations of the Present Studies and Future Directions

Although we manipulated three different features of true crime books in an attempt to understand the appeal of the genre, there may still be other important factors that we have yet to investigate. It may also be of interest to determine whether men find certain characteristics of war or gang violence books more appealing than others. We would also like to note that although our findings from Study 5 demonstrate that women were especially drawn to stories portraying female as opposed to male victims, there may be reasons in addition to the relevance of survival strategies for this finding, such as the desire to read about someone similar to oneself—a possibility we plan to investigate more thoroughly in future studies. In addition, we realize that some of the effect sizes reported in these studies may appear, at first glance, to be small. We would like to remind readers that these effect sizes are in the range of effects that are commonly observed in social-personality psychological research (median  $r$ s of .21; see Fraley & Marks, 2007). Indeed, given the large number of factors that potentially contribute to the variation in people's preferences for books, it could be argued that it is surprising that we see any of the effects reported here.

Even though our studies solely focused on the characteristics of the true crime book genre, it is possible that sex differences concerning interest in crime would appear for other mediums as well. A recent article in *Entertainment Weekly* noted the popularity of these types of shows among women

(who account for two thirds of *CSI* viewers between the ages of 18 and 49) and questioned why women would find such gruesome topics fascinating (Armstrong & Katz, 2005). It may be the case that the characteristics we found to be of interest to women readers are also of interest to women watching these shows.

In conclusion, despite the fact that true crime books are often gruesome, shocking, and frightening, they have garnered a considerable audience. As long as serial killers, rapists, and jealous lovers continue to commit their horrific crimes, it is likely that accounts of their dreadful deeds will continue to be written. Fortunately, as women continue to read these stories, they may very well be learning important skills that will prevent them from one day becoming the victim of a killer and, in turn, the unwilling star of their own true crime book.

### Note

1. We conducted two additional studies with more than 35,000 participants using the same method. In one study, however, the victims were described as male instead of female to investigate whether men may have been reluctant to select the true crime book because they thought it would imply they enjoy reading about women being killed. In another study, we modified the stories to be more prototypical of books in each of these genres (i.e., the true crime story featured female victims, whereas the war and gang violence stories featured males who were not murdered). In both studies, women were more likely than men to choose the true crime book and also expected to enjoy it more. (These data are available from the authors on request.)

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