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Book Review

Simon Hobbs, Megan Hoffman (eds.): #TrueCrime: Digital Culture, Ethics and True Crime Audiences

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Simon Hobbs, Megan Hoffman (eds.): #TrueCrime: Digital Culture, Ethics and True Crime Audiences

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“True crime is a mercurial genre. It shifts, adapts, and transforms with and to the popular mediums, motivations, and social concerns of the day” (1). Simon Hobbs and Megan Hoffman begin their collection with this observation—and it is hard to think of a better way to frame what follows. If the genre is mercurial, constantly reshaped by platform logics and cultural anxieties, then its audiences are no less dynamic. As Bethan Jones later notes, “As the market for true crime has grown so too has its audience, and where you find an audience you will also find fans” (97). Taken together, these statements make clear what this volume sets out to do: take true crime fandom seriously.

The introduction appears as one of the clearest and most up-to-date overviews of true crime scholarship. It moves confidently through genre conventions, media histories, and digital transformations, without losing sight of the present moment. Most importantly for a fan studies readership, it insists that participation is not incidental but built into the genre itself. “True crime audiences are, in the most part, constructed from the outset as part of the narrative—potential sleuths who can crack the case or act as members of an extrajudicial jury” (5). The editors state their aim explicitly: “It is therefore our intention to explicitly frame the true crime community as a fandom defined by its predisposition to create as well as consume” (7). The chapters that follow take up this claim in different ways, but they all return to the central premise that true crime is participatory culture.

The collection opens, fittingly, with an audiovisual contribution. Nina Jones’ short documentary looks at people whose lives have been shaped by true crime productions. Rather than focusing on entertainment value, it foregrounds impact, responsibility, and what has come to be called the ‘ethical true crime movement.’ In a similar register, Megan Kate Lupton’s conversation with podcaster and former criminologist MaryAnne McCullough reflects on social media, influencers, surveillance, clickbait, and legal boundaries. Both suggest that true crime fandom can raise awareness and draw attention to cases and victims, but that direct interference in active investigations risks doing more harm than good. The tension between engagement and overreach and the call for ethical production run throughout the volume.

Amy Gainford addresses this tension head-on in her chapter on web sleuthing: “Driven by a mix of passion for true crime and the limitless access to information provided by social media, websleuths now find themselves at the forefront of contemporary true crime content” (46). Their analysis remains grounded in media structures, arguing that a “sense of communal responsibility moved online in the early days of the Internet” (48). Gainford is careful not to idealize. She highlights the potential for websleuthing to counter phenomena such as “missing white woman syndrome” (52), while also noting that participants may “seemingly forget that their game of Cluedo involves real people” (57). For fan studies, this chapter is especially compelling because it shows investigative fandom as both civic impulse and potentially fraught practice.

Kayley DeLong's chapter closes the first section by addressing a dimension that true crime scholarship has often sidelined: disability. Using sites such as the Puente Murder House as a point of departure, she examines how spaces of violence are turned into consumable attractions. DeLong is less interested in spectacle as such than in the narrative work it performs. Through a lens informed by disability and mad studies, she interrogates how true crime links death, madness, and victimhood, and how these associations rely on familiar tropes about deviance and instability. Crucially, her critique does not stop with media producers or audiences. She also turns the lens on researchers, pointing out how scholarship has frequently reproduced these frameworks or treated them as neutral. In doing so, the chapter sharpens the volume's broader ethical concerns by asking not only how stories are told but how we, as scholars, participate in shaping the terms through which they are understood.

With this, the first part of the anthology on "The Ethics of Watching and Doing" closes and makes way for the second part "Participatory Culture." Throughout the collection, the distinction between true crime fandom and serial killer fandom is carefully maintained. Yet many of the case studies inevitably touch on what might broadly be called dark fandom. Rather than sensationalizing this proximity, the contributors approach it with nuance and methodological care. Bethan Jones' chapter on Columbine fan fiction is a good example. Fan fiction about mass shootings can easily be read as idolization. Jones shows, however, that these texts are neither simple imitation nor straightforward Real Person Fiction. Instead, they attempt to "recode the narrative of events and cultural discourses surrounding them to offer an understanding of the killers' actions and the events that took place" (111). The chapter is generous without romanticizing, and its argumentation is analytically precise without collapsing into moral panic.

Tia Tudor Price turns to influencer unboxing videos and the commercialization of 'murderabilia.' She traces how humor softens darkness, how persona shifts across videos, and how influencers differently acknowledge—or sidestep—questions of victimhood and ethics. Rebecca Wynne-Walsh, meanwhile, examines the TikTok ARG @youshouldntbelooking, "a uniquely twenty-first-century, transmedia, interactive text which straddles traditional Gothic storytelling techniques, faux snuff filmmaking aesthetics and the classic structure of found footage horror" (140). Her discussion of forensic fandom around the account and of users' uncertainty about its potential 'realness' (cf. 144f.) brings together platform culture, affect, and genre in productive ways.

In their own chapter, the editors Hobbs and Hoffman analyze true crime anti-fandom as cultural critique (cf. 163f.). After outlining anti-fandom and hate-watching, they connect these practices to digital feminism (166f.). Focusing on video commentary by six female influencers with a combined audience of more than three million subscribers (as well as their comment sections), they trace a meta-discourse within true crime fandom itself where questions of gender, race, taste, and responsibility are negotiated not outside but inside the fandom.

Nicole Basaraba provides a concise review of scholarship on true crime podcasts before comparing Casefile, True Crime and Cocktails, and Rotten Mango (cf. 191). By looking at storytelling styles, trigger warnings, case selection, and host persona, she shows that "while the podcast hosts take on some responsibility [...], there are also wider ethical or moral concerns with who is listening to true crime podcasts and how it may affect their perceptions of reporting, committing, or solving crimes" (206). The chapter situates responsibility as distributed between hosts, platforms, and audiences.

The third section, "True Crime Communities," turns more explicitly to community formations. Kristina Downs connects online true crime discussions to folk narratives and legends, describing them



as “proposed solution narratives” (214f.). Platforms such as Reddit and Websleuths.com enable long, intertextual posts that build on previous comments, fostering cooperative storytelling. These discussions rely on speculation grounded in “facts” (223), use “validating formulas” (224) and claims to expert status, and recycle recurring motifs. The parallels to legend formation are persuasive.

Isabel Imhorst studies the r/KristinSmart subreddit alongside the *Your Own Backyard* podcast community. Drawing on reparative reading, they show how fans ‘feel together’ (cf. 245ff.), extending care and hope towards the victim and, in some cases, translating affect into activism. Here, fandom becomes a space of collective feeling rather than mere consumption.

The volume does not shy away from darker terrains. Dayana Calle examines gore websites and death videos, tracing their circulation across media eras before focusing on TheYNC. She analyzes platform features such as leaderboards (cf. 263f.), the visual othering of victims (cf. 264f.), and comment sections that dehumanize victims while defending users’ own consumption (cf. 267f.). Simon McFadden addresses explicit serial killer fandom. Observing that contemporary true crime “adopt[s] transmedia storytelling to expand avenues of engagement and diversify modes of consumption” (280), he takes a survey of True Crime Communities, mapping demographics, motivations, and engagement levels. Identifying ‘the researcher’ as a dominant persona (cf. 289f.), he notes how this figure constructs a legitimate, intellectualized interest in contrast to the pathologized “bad fan” (290, quoting Judith Fathallah’s “‘BEING A FANGIRL OF A SERIAL KILLER IS NOT OK:’ Gatekeeping Reddit’s True Crime Community.” In: *New Media & Society* 26 [10], 2022, 5638-5657). He also traces the emergence of “the dark fan” (296) and practices such as dark tourism.

The collection closes with Azi Lev-On’s study of moderation practices in the controversial OGC Facebook group. By defining graphic images, accusatory posts, and supernatural claims as problematic content and examining them through the Zadorov case, which ultimately resulted in retrial and acquittal, Lev-On shows how platform governance intersects with activism and speculation.

If true crime is mercurial, then this volume demonstrates that its fandom is equally fluid, contested, and generative. At a moment when enthusiasm for the genre’s massive success coexists with mounting ethical concerns, *#TrueCrime* offers fan studies a rich set of case studies and careful analyses. It takes fans seriously—not only as consumers but as creators, critics, activists, moderators, and, at times, dark participants in a culture that remains as compelling as it is troubling.