

BLOOD

An International Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature



& INK

Albert
Borowitz



William Probert. This original drawing from life, made before his 1825 execution for stealing a mare, was given to the Reverend Mr. Cotton, the Ordinary, Newgate prison. *Borowitz True Crime Collection, Kent State University Libraries*. See B.29.

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Note by Jacques Barzun

Foreword by Jonathan Goodman

The Kent State University Press

Kent and London



Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Note: The Place and Point of “True Crime”

BY JACQUES BARZUN xiii

Foreword: Some Prescriptions and Proscriptions for “True Crime”

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN xv

Introduction 1

Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature 41

Resources 461

Index 463

NOTE

The Place and Point of “True Crime”

JACQUES BARZUN

The name of the literature superbly inventoried in this book gives a clue to the kind of readers who enjoy it. True crime is the match of crime *fiction*, the detective story, commonly called mystery. It has been said that a seasoned reader of crime fiction graduates to true crime. But such a graduate does not leave the campus and its reading list; he or she only adds a new source of pleasure to the one they have been cultivating.

It should not be supposed that those who read about either sort of crime do so because of a taste for mayhem and gore. To think so is to miss the point. In good crime fiction, the victim is disposed of quickly with a minimum of physical detail. In true crime the detail may indeed form part of the recital, because the body has been found in shocking condition—in a trunk or buried in a cellar. But the evidence is soon left behind in the quest for motive and circumstance. In both genres, the deep interest lies not in whodunit but in how this is ascertained by a close examination of time and means and other probabilities.

I say “the interest,” meaning the suspense that must grace any sort of writing from riddles to theology. The *pleasure* is something else again. In both the crime offerings, true and fictional, the pleasure is literary.

This may surprise the addicts themselves, who often think their taste well beneath that of people who read high-brow novels. The truth is that great novels are often inartistic compared with the great works that retell great crimes. The qualities, besides lucid prose, that distinguish true crime are narrative skill, the right order of topics (equivalent to plot), the writer’s grasp of character and knowledge of life, wit, and judicial detachment coupled with sympathy.

To bring these talents to bear on the details of an actual crime calls for great powers, greater perhaps than are needed when the writer invents his facts; for the crimes worth writing about are those that present a murky tangle in which essential points may remain forever doubtful. Thus the famous Wallace case of the 1930s in Liverpool bewildered all true-crime fanciers for years, until the genius of Jonathan Goodman solved it by a combination of wide research and brilliant analysis. Before then, an aficionado such as the theater critic James Agate would call up a friend and say, “Come over and we’ll talk about the Wallace case.”

The exposition of notable crimes, with or without solutions, has a long history; it begins with the earliest pleadings at the bar. Cicero in 66 B.C. gave a splendid example in his defense of Aulus Cluentius; and before him the Athenians heard Socrates pull apart the

charges of his accusers. In eighteenth-century London there was the Newgate Calendar and street-vendors' broadsides—cheap and crude tales of recent crimes; in the nineteenth it was that fine critic De Quincey, who after a notorious murder wrote a long analysis for the literary public: "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." But it mainly sang the praises of the killers.

The modern genre, more law-abiding, usually begins with excerpts from the transcript of the trial, where each side gives a version of what happened. How these slanted stories are dealt with by the later critic shows the degree of his art and judgment. Henry James took delight in the accounts by William Roughead of cases that others have written up with dissenting conclusions. In our time, Edward Radin showed that Lizzie Borden was very probably innocent of her parents' murder, which contradicts the accepted view put forth by Edmund Pearson, Mrs. Lowndes, and Victoria Lincoln.

There is no end to the speculative opportunities that an interest in true crime bestows on the devotee. Did Crippen kill his wife by accident, mistaking the right dosage of the sedative hyoscine? Was Steinie Morrison innocent after all, like Oscar Slater, who owed his release from prison to the tireless efforts of Conan Doyle? And then, as Mr. Goodman remarks on a later page, there is the perennial question: Who was Jack the Ripper?

A wag suggested Matthew Arnold, the advocate of "sweetness and light." Unfortunately, Arnold had been dead six months when the killings began. Looking up this little fact shows the attention to detail that is characteristic of the . . . the . . . What *shall* we call the connoisseur of true crime, that capacious scholarlike mind, attentive to scientific truth and wedded to legal logic? May I venture to suggest a name? As usual, the ancient Greeks had a word for "the actual murderer"; it was *authentēs*. Why not adopt *philauthentist* as our proud designation, on a par with *philatelist* and indeed with *philosopher*?

FOREWORD

Some Prescriptions and Proscriptions for “True Crime”

JONATHAN GOODMAN

The question “What makes a *classic* murder?” is posed almost as often as that other one—“What makes a *perfect* murder?”

The answer to the latter question is short but comprehensive: a murder is only surely perfect if it is not recognized as murder. Some, perhaps many, murders go quite unnoticed: they are tucked away within what the late, great Professor Sir Leon Radzinowicz called “the dark figure of crime.” They—with oh so many other unnoticed or unreported or reported but uninvestigated crimes—make crime statistics look far less worrying than the reality.

Perhaps the clearest indication that there is less to *murder* statistics than meets the eye is the fact that, according to breakdowns of the figures (I speak of British ones, but no doubt American equivalents are as unreliable), murder by poisoning is a dying, near-dead, art. Nonsense, of course, given that countless bathroom cabinets and medicine chests contain leftover prescription drugs and the like, which are toxic to some people or, overdosed, to all, and which are more complex, more difficult to detect after ingestion than the undoubted and undoubtable poisons used by murderers in the past.

With an insufficiency of forensic experts, meaning that those in practice are overloaded with work, many deaths that are considered only a mite suspicious either aren’t forensically examined or are examined inadequately. There is a maxim of the forensic sciences (though not confined to them) to the effect that if you are not searching for *something*, you don’t stand much chance of finding *anything*. And so—distressingly additional to the too many guilty parties acquitted by peculiar juries, whose peculiarities increase as the selection standards of responsibility, language comprehension, and impartiality are eroded for unsound but politically correct reasons, or who take advantage of quaint constraints on the police to evade the become-even-quainter notion of Justice—too many people are getting away with murder. (In a metaphorical sense, so are too many people who write about crime; I’ll come to some of them in a minute.)

First, however, I must tackle the former question. There is no cut-and-dried answer to that one. Considering the lots of foreign-language entries in Albert Borowitz’s book, I may as well depart from my usual English-only style, albeit briefly, just to say *à chacun son goût*. So far as the classic murder question is concerned, one man’s meat axe is another man’s

poison. I can only tell you what, in my opinion, *may* be *some* of the ingredients of a classic murder and what is perhaps the single factor that definitely makes a murder *un*classic.

I go along to quite an extent—not all the way—with Alfred Hitchcock’s comment that the factual murders that most appealed to him were “like blood on a daisy”: a shocking contrast between a killing and its compass. Yes, that quite often puts a murder into, or somewhere near, the classic category: the Borden case, for instance (of the “murder behind lace curtains” kind), or the Theodore Durrant case (murder in a place of worship).

And, instantly arguing with myself (for Durrant murdered twice), I feel that, aesthetically speaking, murder should be as special an event to the murderer as it is to his victim. Serial killers are not my cup of tea. They bore me, not merely through the repetitiousness and the sameness of their crimes, but because they themselves are so deadly boring. A sweeping statement, I know, but I am not going to water down my conviction that it is their boredom with their own dreary existences that turns them into serial killers, seeking cheap thrills at a terminal cost to others, enjoying some feeling of power that they are incapable of experiencing in any normal way, but still staying stuck in a one-killing-after-another rut. (Is it simplistic to wonder along the following lines: since bored people are usually uncreative, and therefore bored psychopaths turning to crime are inclined to commit copy-cat offenses, might there have been fewer serial killers if the gutter media had spread fewer slobber stories about serial killings?)

When I have to read—or, rather, skip through—some account of serial killings, I tend to recall the ticky-tacky tailor’s sales talk, pleading with the customer not to be critical of a roll of shoddy material: “Never mind the quality. Feel the width.”

The so-called offender-profilers—who get themselves, puffed up like pouter pigeons, onto all the news program when one of their lists of traits proves to be somewhere near the mark, but who are suspiciously tight-lipped when asked about the ratio between their partial successes and their near-complete failures—would surely be well advised to write “boring” at the top of all their lists, ahead of the presently ever-present descriptive item of “loner.”

I don’t know whether the term “serial killer” was originally applied only to repetitious murderers who kill for, among other pleasures, a sexual one, but that is how it seems to be applied nowadays. I certainly draw a clear distinction between those perverts and the persons (“multicides” used to be the catch-all term for them) who murder more than once for quite reasonable reasons. Once again, I spot classic exceptions to the one-murder-per-murderer criterion: Dr. William Palmer of Rugeley, Staffordshire, whose umpteen poisonings were occasioned by financial scrapes; and that man of several brides, and even more aliases (the cheekiest of which was “Love”), who is so wonderfully summed up in the first stanza of Ogden Nash’s altogether perfect “They Don’t Read De Quincey in Philly or Cincinnati”:

Consider, friends, George Joseph Smith,
A Briton not to trifle with;
When wives aroused his greed or wrath,
He led them firmly to the bath.
Instead of guzzling in the pub,
He drowned his troubles in the tub.

It may help to make a case a classic if there is a riddle of some kind: whodunit or, questioning whether it was a *criminal* case, whatwasit. (There are also whydidhedoit riddles, but as these are no help at all toward classic status, and as the suggested solutions to motivational mysteries are armchair-psychiatric as opposed to sensible, are no more than jargon-infested guesswork, they can be ignored.)

Whatwasits—cases (perhaps “perfect murders”) in which there is uncertainty as to whether death was caused by accident, suicide, or murder—are, I think, my favorites. At least a couple of them are classics: the burning of Evelyn Foster on the Northumberland moors on Twelfth Night 1931; and, in the same year (1931 was a red-letter year for classic cases), the passing of Starr Faithfull, whose body was found on the sands of Long Beach, Long Island, giving rise to legal and journalistic ferretings among her antecedents (and giving John O’Hara the idea for his novel *Butterfield 8*).

Speaking of cases in which someone has been found guilty of murder, there are not many *real* whodunits, ones with the verdict being open to question. In recent years, though, they have become vastly outnumbered by *retrospective* whodunits, concocted by persons, usually conspiracy theorists, determined to make readers believe (which is not at all the same as *proving*) that someone found guilty of murder was perfectly innocent, the framed victim of a miscarriage of justice. Most of these “truth-seekers” are quite content to tell whopping great lies in what they consider to be a good cause (the clearing of a name, I mean; not, perish the thought, the improved chance of selling film rights).

Probably the largest portion of the mob of revisionists comprises the Kennedy assassination confidence-tricksters, who were called to account (though none of them seems to have been listening) by Louis Nizer, the brilliant lawyer who, in retirement, wrote the excellent *My Life in Court* and subsequent books that were less good. Having coined the term “analytical syndrome,” he explained its meaning:

It is possible to take the record of any trial and by minute dissection and post-facto reasoning demonstrate that witnesses for either side made egregious errors or lied. Then, by ascribing critical weight to the exposed facts, the conclusion is reached that the verdict was fraudulently obtained. This was the process by which the Warren Commission Report [on the assassination of President Kennedy] was challenged in a spate of books. To cite just one illustration, a constable deputy sheriff described the rifle which had been found on the sixth floor of the Book Depository Building, Dallas, as a Mauser, instead of a Mannlicher-Carcano, which it was. Out of this innocent error, due to ignorance or excitement, sprouted the theory that the real assassin’s rifle had been spirited away and Lee Harvey Oswald’s rifle planted on the scene to involve him. Multiply this incident by many others, such as someone’s testimony that shots were heard coming from the mall, and the “hiding” of the death x-rays of the President (since revealed), and you have a gigantic conspiracy by foreign agents, or government officials, or New Orleans homosexuals, or lord knows what, to fix the blame on an innocent man, Oswald. Of course, all this was nonsense, and subsequent events have confirmed the accuracy of the Report.

The analytical syndrome can be used to discredit any verdict, from the commonest automobile negligence case to the most involved anti-trust or proxy contest.

Much the same chestnut-tree-sprouting-from-an-acorn methods are used by most writers on the Whitechapel murders of 1888, who have turned an interesting story into a sort of parlor game: “Hunt the Ripper”—undoubtedly a Trivial Pursuit.

Some years ago, intending to poke fun at the already excessive number of named Ripper candidates, I included an entry for Peter J. Harpick, complete with a spoof potted biography, in an unserious reference book. I was confident that everyone who saw it would cotton on to the fact that the name was an anagram of Jack the Ripper, especially as I as much as said that it was in the biography, which I was equally confident would be recognized as a spoof, for it was crammed with twaddle. Shortly after the book’s publication, I started to get letters, usually written in green ink, from Ripperologists, asking for further information about Peter J. Harpick. Even now, I still get the occasional letter of that sort from people who have come across the entry belatedly. Which goes to show that as I, not intending to deceive, have done so, any intending deceiver can, if he likes, name the Queen of Romania as Jill the Ripper, in the sure knowledge that too many people will be taken in.

The writers that I have referred to in the past few paragraphs, and others like them, are to *true* true-crime writing what acne is to skin. And they don’t appear (well, hardly at all) in this book; and so, of course, I am as pleased with what *isn’t* in the following pages as with what is.

I had better admit (*boast* is what I really mean) that Albert Borowitz and I are friends; if I don’t, some conspiracy theorist will surely assume that the favorable comments I am about to make about his book are insincere, obvious indications of a furtive Old Pals Act. But if I didn’t know him so well, I should not be able to *state*, rather than voice the opinion, that no one but he could have composed this book. His qualifications, all in all, are unique.

Whereas with a good many bibliographies at the back of books, one is suspicious that an author, aiming to impress with the ostensible depth of his desk research, has included titles that he has never seen, let alone glanced at, I *know* that Albert Borowitz has read (and nine times out of ten, *reread*) every single work that he has chosen to include. The fact that he, being multilingual, has been able to read every single one of the works, also the many that he has decided to leave out, greatly reduces the number of people who could have even considered taking on the task. And that number is reduced still more—to a solitary one: Albert Borowitz—by the necessity of conversance with the practicalities of crime writing. He is, by far, the best of American crime historians.

As if the talents I have mentioned weren’t enough to make him the uniquely qualified composer of this book, he has a fund of knowledge about several arts, particularly the performing ones, and for longer than I have known him has delighted in finding connections between art and crime, artists and criminals.

We—meaning many people as well as true-crime devotees—should be grateful that Albert Borowitz, the only person more than capable of composing this book, was prepared to accept the immense challenge of doing so.