

Why Do We Watch True Crime Shows?

True crime shows are more popular than ever, as we seek meaning to our lives.

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- True crime tales of real-life horror darkly entertain many of us.
- True crime shows offer a reassuring narrative formula, reinforce a sense of moral clarity, and remind us of our good luck.
- They allow us vicarious participation in the forbidden and educate us on Dark Triad personalities.

Something has clearly reached popular phenomenon levels in our culture when *Saturday Night Live* decides to parody it. In *SNL*'s February 27, 2021 episode, one of the skits featured a catchy musical tribute to "Murder Shows," where several women sang about bingeing true crime shows as a form of "self-care" and escapism during everyday domestic activities, despite the jarringly violent content of the shows. As one character sang, "Severed limbs found on a beach in Chula Vista, but I just kind of stare while I eat a piece of pizza."

Indeed, true crime shows seem to be popular on all the networks, both streaming and conventional, with increasingly glossy production values and sometimes multi-part serials. Yet, as the *SNL* skit savagely highlighted, the shows often feature extremely morbid and disturbing stories, with the worst

behaviors of humankind, rape, murder, dismemberment, you name it. With all the stress many of us have been under in recent years, why do these tales of real-life horror darkly entertain us?

Reassuring Narrative Formula

Many murder mystery shows follow a tried and true narrative formula, which provides a reassuring sense of conflict and resolution for the viewer (and are part of why murder mysteries have remained such a popular genre since time immemorial). A horrible crime happens, clues are left behind, and hopefully, the killer is caught and brought to justice.

The story of the victim is often tragically familiar and human, with situations that all of us could easily fall into. Forensic analysis and detective work provide a fascinating analytical puzzle for the viewer to follow along. And finally, the hope of a terrible person being captured and convicted for their crimes gives a sense of relief and closure when it happens. It is a simple but foolproof formula that never gets old and provides a strange satisfaction to the viewer each time.

Reinforcing a Sense of Moral Clarity

The relatively simple narrative of murder shows also provides a moral structure to the viewer that can be appealingly straightforward and remind us of our own humanity. The fact that we feel revulsion and horror at what happens to the hapless victims jolts us with a sense of empathy for them and what they have gone through and a genuine wish to see the cruel offenders

get in trouble for their crimes. We may even get a rush from the outrage and anger at what the criminal has done. The stakes are clear and give us a strong sense of right and wrong, in the otherwise murky vagueness or even boredom of our more trivial everyday lives. We want the good guys to win and catch the bad guys, as we do in our fictional movies and TV shows too.

Reminders of Our Relative Luck

During periods of recent personal grief and trauma, these shows can go either way for the viewer. They can be more difficult to watch because the mortality is too familiar, or they can be oddly supportive because the circumstances of the crimes are often so terrible in comparison to our own suffering. We can think, *"well, we have it bad...but these sad victims had it the worst, and things can always be worse, and we have some things to be grateful for in comparison."* At least we have people we can trust and love who will not harm us. We try to feel more anchored and appreciative in our lives by seeing how precarious they truly can be.

Vicarious Participation in the Forbidden

These shows can provide thrills not unlike those of horror films: watching the darkest types of violence and trauma from a safe distance. It can be somewhat callous and exploitative to watch these shows in this type of context. The people and their families are clearly suffering and grieving in real life, and not at all for one's entertainment. But unfortunately, humans still have these tendencies to gawk and rubberneck at the disaster happening at arm's length, a twisted way to perhaps remind us of our fragility and existence.

More understandable (and less dehumanizing) is our wish to “play detective” and solve the cases for ourselves without having to attend a police academy. Reddit groups and online chat boards are filled with armchair detectives speculating and pooling clues from these shows, and real-life information gleaned from the internet and social media. Once in a while, this crowdsourcing actually does help catch criminals, adding to the thrill of the chase and a sense of purpose in catching a killer on the loose.

Educating Ourselves on Dark Triad Personalities

True crime shows cater to our all-too-human fears regarding the presence of selfish, dark, and evil impulses lurking in people we sometimes trust and even love. Perhaps by watching any potential warning signs and sociopathic behaviors in the wolves that hide in sheep’s clothing, we feel we can educate and even save ourselves from falling prey to suspicious characters.

Yet sometimes we are also horrified that there may indeed be no warning signs, that some of these killers are strikingly “normal” in how they lived their lives before their inner psychopath emerges. Despite the powers of our armchair psychologizing, this unnerving truth rattles most true crime fans at their core...that the killer could be any one of us under certain circumstances.

Overall, these shows feed into the deepest, most frightening aspects of our lives, that our relative safety and civility can sometimes easily be shattered by predators in plain sight, both strangers and our closest loved ones. It seems a

perverse contradiction that we are drawn like moths to these dark true-life tales instead of avoiding them at all costs.

The reasons are complex. Perhaps it is partly our increasing sense of communal disconnection and numbness in a more isolated, technology-driven world. Perhaps it is our anxiety about seeing unsavory people getting away with crimes and manipulation every day in a cutthroat society. Perhaps it is a strange need to stare at the danger to feel we can master it on some level, even if we also realize that these tragic stories remind us repeatedly that we can never be truly safe and that death is a fact of our existence. In the meantime, the sources for new true crime fodder never seem to stop.

About the Author



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