

True Crime: The Quick & Dirty

What is it?

- Pretty much what it sounds like writing of crimes of all sorts that have actually happened or in some cases are in the process of happening.
- It's popular in a variety of media, from tabloids to TMZ.com, from *Dateline* to *Law and Order* ripped from the headlines plots.
- It's nothing new: Think Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle had a real-life inspiration for Professor Moriarty and Dickens clearly wove much from real life, including crime, into his novels.
- Relatively small portion of the NF market but lots of potential for crossover and titles can flare in popularity with news cycles.

Why do people read it? (a.k.a. the appeal factors)

- Curiosity
- For the (vicarious) thrill
- To solve the mystery alongside the writer
- The plotting and pace, the tension that drives the story
- Learning about the details of criminal investigations, forensics, or profiling
- To see justice done
- Learning about the lives of criminals as well as those of the people who pursue them
- To understand why people do such terrible things or why such terrible things happen and the catharsis of closure (Wyatt)

Who reads it?

- Fiction readers who like mysteries, thrillers, horror, police procedurals, crime capers, and even historicals
- Other nonfiction readers who enjoy true adventure, memoirs, or history
- NF readers with an interest that overlaps with a crime: Victorian England, sports

Genre & Sub-Genre Overview

People break it down in several different ways. Neal Wyatt breaks it down into 4 main sub-genres:

Historical and Literary: Not too many published each year and often written by non-true crime writers such as historians whose interests overlap with the topic. Usually the focus is on a well-written narrative rather than gore; the pace may be more contemplative than much true crime.

- *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt
- *The Devil in the White City* by Eric Larson
- *The Story of Chicago May* by Nuala O'Faolain
- *Death at the Priory: Love, Sex, and Murder in Victorian England* by James Ruddick

Reporting: These constitute the bulk of true crime books not surprisingly, whether they're cranked out to meet heat of the moment demand or whether they're looking back over a case more objectively. Mass murder, serial killers, mobsters, and life in prison all find their place here. Ann Rule and Robert Grayson are classic examples and Rule is the gold standard.

- *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule (Also *Green River*, *Running Red*)
- *Zodiac* by Robert Graysmith
- *The Restless Sleep: Inside New York City's Cold Case Squad* by Stacy Horn
- *Pointing From the Grave: A True Story of Murder and DNA* by Samantha Weinberg
- *Best American Crime Writing* (ongoing anthology series, various editors)

Heists and Capers: These titles are a smaller section of the true crime market, usually exhibit a sense of humor, and tend to focus on thieves and scams thus being far less violent than much true crime fare. Would make good cross-recs for fiction readers who enjoy Carl Hiaasen, Donald Westlake, and Tim Dorsey.

- *Catch Me If You Can* by Frank W. Abagnale
- *A Fool's Gold: A Story of an Ancient Spanish Treasure, Two Pounds of Pot, and the Young Lawyer Almost Left Holding the Bag* by Bill Merritt
- *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber: A True Story of Bank Heists, Ice Hockey, Transylvanian Pelt Smuggling, Moonlighting Detectives, and Broken Homes* by Julian Rubinstein

Biography, Memoir, and Personal Accounts: This covers everything from personal takes on famous cases and cop memoirs to books by forensic scientists and criminal profilers.

- *Death's Acre: Inside the Legenday Forensic Lab—The Body Farm—Where the Dead Do Tell Tales* by Willam M. Bass and Jon Jefferson
- *Blue Blood* by Edward Conlon
- *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* by John Douglas (and his others)
- *The Murder Room: The Heirs of Sherlock Holmes Gather to Solve the World's Most Perplexing Cases* by Michael Capuzzo (About the Vidocq Society)

Other themes/categories from NovelList: Classic, Cold Cases/Unsolved, Domestic Crime, Drugs, Forensics, General True Crime, Heists and Robberies, Historical, Investigations and Trials, Kids Who Kill

Overlap: for example, Jack the Ripper would hit classic, historical, and unsolved.

Some other authors you should know

Dominic Dunne • Kurt Eichenwald • Aphrodite Jones • Joe McGinness • Peter Maas • Jack Olsen • Joseph Wambaugh

Awards:

Edgar Allan Poe, Crime Writer's Association (U.K.), Anthony, and the Macavity (Nominations for true crime on some of these are infrequent but important.)

Other Resources:

The Readers' Advisory Guide to Nonfiction by Neal Wyatt

The Real Story: The Guide to Nonfiction Reading Interests by Sarah Statz Cords