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Opinion and ideas.

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September 24, 2012 by Thomas Doherty and Mikita Brottman ([http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/author/t\\_doherty/](http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/author/t_doherty/))

# True Crime and Academe

*The publication of Mikita Brottman's Thirteen Girls, (<http://www.ninebandedbooks.com/thirteen-girls/>) fictionalized narratives based on what transpired with real victims of serial killers, prompted The Conversation to wonder about true crime's relationship to academe and how it might be evolving. We asked Thomas Doherty, (<http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/american-studies/faculty/doherty.html>) a professor of American studies at Brandeis University, to discuss his experiences with the true-crime genre and a course he teaches on it. And we asked Brottman, a cultural critic, writer, and psychoanalyst who is a professor ([http://www.mica.edu/About\\_MICA/People/Faculty/Faculty\\_List\\_by\\_Last\\_Name/Mikita\\_Brottman\\_DPhil\\_PhD.html](http://www.mica.edu/About_MICA/People/Faculty/Faculty_List_by_Last_Name/Mikita_Brottman_DPhil_PhD.html)) in the humanistic-studies department at the Maryland Institute College of Art, to talk about the origins of her book.*

## 'Maybe He's Just Evil'

*By Thomas Doherty*

I've been addicted to true-crime literature since I was a teenager, starting with the obvious gateway drug, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), and then mainlining the hard stuff from the High Renaissance of the genre, works such as Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter* (1974), Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), and Joe McGinniss's *Fatal Vision* (1983). Today, the true-crime genre probably has more hits on Web sites and more programming on basic cable channels than either Westerns or gangster tales.

It has also become a fit topic for the university classroom. A couple of years ago, I did what American-studies professors typically do and turned my recreational diversion into an item on the curriculum in a course at Brandeis University dubbed “True Crime and American Culture.” The class looks at true crime as the cultural site where Americans have chosen to work out their dueling impulses about human nature—a tension that dates to the conflict between the Puritan notion of inbred evil (“In Adam’s fall/we sinn’d all”) and the Enlightened-aged faith in the perfectibility of man (“There’s no such thing as a bad boy”).

A nation founded in criminal rebellion against lawful authority has always had a soft spot for outlaws and gangsters, but true crime casts no romantic filter over its perpetrators. The key figure in the genre—the specter haunting our highways, suburbs, subconscious, and the pages of Mikita Brottman’s chilling fictional meditation, *Thirteen Girls*—is the serial killer, whose profile has long since replaced the likes of Jesse James and John Dillinger on our pop-cult wanted posters.

I have a theory about this changeover. To wit: The rise of the serial killer in the pantheon of America’s Most Wanted reflects a culturewide loss of faith in psychological or sociological explanations for criminal deviance and a return to the old Puritan explanation for human evil. It is a grimly Calvinist-Hobbesian view, but one that seems to have beaten out both Marx and Freud in our books, movies, and television shows. The killer can’t be explained, or cured; he just needs to be put down.

In blunt pedagogical terms, the genre is rich in candidates for book lists and class screenings. The texts I’ve had the most success with include Eric Larson’s *The Devil in the White City*, a fascinating work of cultural history structured around the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the emergence of the urban serial killer; Bugliosi and Gentry’s *Helter Skelter*, the definitive Manson-family chronicle, which, according to its book jacket, is the single best-selling work of true crime ever; and Rule’s *The Stranger Beside Me* (a riveting and slightly twisted account of her relationship with the most infamous serial killer of them all, Ted Bundy, with a narrative hook no Hollywood screenwriter would dare pitch (Rule, an aspiring true-crime writer, met Bundy, an aspiring law student, when they worked together on a suicide hotline).

By undergraduate consensus, *Stranger* is the single biggest creep-out on the syllabus.

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The must-read in any true-crime lineup remains Capote's *In Cold Blood*, the only real literary masterpiece of the genre. When I put the class together, I hadn't read it in 40 years and I was astonished at how vividly I remembered passages and how quickly the old goose bumps returned. Is there another work of American literature whose very act of creation has inspired two Hollywood feature films (*Capote*, (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0379725/>) in 2005, and *Infamous*, (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0420609/>) in 2006)?

During discussion of *In Cold Blood*, I divide the class into juries who have to pass judgment on Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, ([http://criminalminds.wikia.com/wiki/Dick\\_Hickock\\_and\\_Perry\\_Smith](http://criminalminds.wikia.com/wiki/Dick_Hickock_and_Perry_Smith)) the killers of the salt-of-the-earth Clutter family. Invariably, a cohort of idealistic undergraduates turns into hanging judges.

Two other observations on true-crime classroom dynamics come to mind. First, true crime is the only nonfiction genre that skews female in its readership, and my enrollments reflect the gender imbalance. Second, students actually do the reading, even though many of these books are hefty tomes with long passages of non-action (true crime is a genre that emphatically does not cut to the chase).

True-crime films are an essential component in any course in the genre. No less than the books, they tend to abide by a True Crime Contract that mandates a scrupulous fidelity to the known facts of a case. Richard Brooks's *In Cold Blood* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061809/>) (1967) is a perfect companion piece to the Capote book, its harsh on-location cinematography lending the proceedings the spooky luster of a hidden-camera documentary.

Although hobbled by its inability to use the Beatles' *White Album* on the soundtrack, the TV movie *Helter Skelter* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074621/>) (1976) eerily evokes the creepy-crawly hysteria of the Manson cult, especially in the vacant, blissed-out eyes of Nancy Wolfe, (<http://img1.bdbphotos.com/images/orig/6/o/6o1cpw5y1hef5w11.jpg>) the actress who plays Susan (Sexy Sadie) Atkins. *The Deliberate Stranger* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090925/>) (1986) showcases a chilling performance by Mark Harmon as Ted Bundy, a charmer who draws on his psych-major background to explain to viewers the meaning of a then-new term: sociopath.

Lastly, "The Mind of a Murderer" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/programs>

 [/info/206.html](#)) (1984) a two-part *Frontline* documentary by way of the BBC, about Kenneth Bianci and Angelo Buono, the Hillside Stranglers, ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillside\\_Strangler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillside_Strangler)) examines in clinical detail how a wily killer can outsmart a prison shrink. At the end of the film, a psychiatrist mulls various explanations for Bianci's bloodlust before helplessly concluding, "Or maybe he's just evil."

A final thought: True crime has always struck me as a deeply moral genre. The material is close to the bone, ethically wrenching, and altogether heartbreaking. For all the fascination with the killer and the wallowing in forensic detail, the books and films never lose sight of the victims behind the yellow police tape and the ripples of anguish any single crime scene sends out. Neither, I hope, do we who study it.

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## **The Afterlife of Murder**

*By Mikita Brottman*

*Thirteen Girls* developed out of my fascination and frustration with the limits of true crime, which, as a genre, seems increasingly formulaic and genre-bound. The book isn't about homicide as much as its fallout: the afterlife of murder through the eyes of the people it has affected, to a lesser or greater degree.

I'm much more interested in victims (and their friends and families) than in serial killers. The book has multiple points of entry, and the "big questions" aren't even asked, and certainly not resolved. In *Thirteen Girls*, I'm trying to keep a third-person narrative voice at bay, letting individuals speak through trial transcripts and recorded witness interviews, which allow the case to be examined and re-examined from various perspectives. I'm interested in what crime reveals about the ordinariness of people's everyday lives, how it takes everyday events and magnifies them until they become unrecognizable (and vice versa).

Publishers balked at the book because it really falls between many different markets—it's neither true crime, nor fiction, nor a novel, nor a collection of short stories. But in the context of my teaching in the humanities, the book makes perfect sense. *Thirteen Girls* arises from the kind of thinking that's encouraged by the interdisciplinary humanities, and it helps that I teach in an art school, where students are accustomed to

## using their imaginations to think outside the traditional frame.

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Last semester, for example, a colleague of mine taught a course on the HBO series *The Wire* as a way of thinking about narrative, crime, and the history of the American novel. When describing *Thirteen Girls*, I often refer to Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus," ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landscape\\_with\\_the\\_Fall\\_of\\_Icarus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landscape_with_the_Fall_of_Icarus)) in which ordinary people go about their daily routines, barely noticing the tragedy taking place in the background. My students get the analogy immediately, but in the narrow world of publishing and the marketplace, the concept of an unobserved tragedy is definitely not a selling point.

The book's hybrid form reflects the interdisciplinary nature of my teaching. So while I don't teach a course on true crime, I often touch on related themes and motifs in courses like "Horror Movies," "The Uncanny," and "Psychopathology." In *Thirteen Girls*, I include a series of images of death scenes from which the body has been removed. As a result, the background scenery—a trash bin, a parked car—becomes unusually freighted and resonant, provoking the imagination in ways that are particularly uncanny. The same is true of trial transcripts or accounts of a victim's last days, where subsequent events give ordinary details a terrible weight.

In a way, these stories are performing a kind of autopsy on the traditional narrative, helping us to understand how empathy works, and how and why we can get so involved in the lives of unknown others.

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Or even something about the various murderous PhDs and Doctors.

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"Compulsion" by Meyer Levin. Maybe more fictional than you'd like/

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**Katikam** • 4 years ago

Mikita Brottman, thank you for writing the book you did.

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**Ken\_Pidcock** • 4 years ago

True crime enthusiasts shouldn't miss Stephen Singular's *Unholy Messenger: The Life and Crimes of the BTK Serial Killer*. A truly strange story, which suffers from a major flaw of the genre: You can always tell who proved most useful to the author by who is otherwise damned. If I remember correctly in that instance, it is the investigators who are the heroes and the prosecutor who is the villain. Or maybe the other way around.

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