

Barnes, Charlotte. *Deconstructing True Crime Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 227 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-41044-4

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Charlotte Barnes, in her monograph *Deconstructing True Crime Literature*, delves deep into the relatively new genre of True Crime retellings, providing valuable research. The book explores various themes associated with True Crime narratives, offering an in-depth analysis of them through a series of novels published in the genre in twelve chapters, in a succinct form. Barnes, a crime writer herself, not only does thorough research into the genre, but can also offer her first-hand experiences from her own work. Barnes argues that True Crime literature cannot be defined as one set concept because the boundaries of the genre can shift easily. Thus, she suggests using her parameters to determine whether a work belongs to the genre. Deconstruction, in this instance, refers to breaking down the True Crime genre into smaller subgenres as a means to restructure the genre within the broader context of crime fiction.

True Crime as a whole encompasses much more than just True Crime literature, from journalism to the recent boom in dedicated podcasts, YouTube channels, and blogs. Audiences have been fascinated with crime since the Victorian period, showcased by the popularity of the Newgate novels in the first half of the nineteenth century, which recounted the crimes of the inmates of the infamous Newgate prison in London, and while according to some scholars, even the book generally considered the first crime novel, *Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, was based on a real crime (see Peters). The term was popularized in the twentieth century, and many of the True Crime novels analyzed in Barnes' book are among the most successful and well-known True Crime narratives that explore serial killers such as Ted Bundy, the Golden State Killer, or Charles Manson.

The introductory chapter serves as an outline of what one can expect from the monograph, laying down the important theoretical framework. Firstly, Barnes introduces three subgenre categories in True Crime literature: autobiographical, where an author will have a personal connection to the case they are covering, whether they worked on it to some extent or knew the criminal(s) associated with the case. The second subgenre is reimagined, in which the author will insert themselves into the narrative from a temporal distance. Readers can also expect some embellishments in these narratives. The third and final subgenre is inspired by or fictional storylines. In these novels or short stories, the author will take a considerable measure of creative freedom, in both content and form. Next, she outlines the terms authenticity and accuracy, authorial proximity, and author gap. Authenticity and accuracy refer to

the verifiability of a given narrative, whether it can be supported by other sources. Authorial proximity, as the name suggests, is in connection with an author's literal closeness to the case, while author gap is a mix of the former two.

The second chapter goes through the history of the genre, starting with the earliest narratives that deal with real crimes that happened, including folkloric stories and ballads, and how those evolved into the contemporary genre, which also supersedes written literature. True Crime is a highly popular topic, enjoyed by a large community of people across many social and traditional media consumers. More and more podcasts and YouTube channels are dedicated to covering True Crime cases. Barnes also looks ahead to the possible future of the genre, where she notes that the more critics there are, the better, as these critics can keep authors in check and keep them from being disrespectful to victims and their families.

The third theoretical chapter explores the authorial "I" in True Crime. Barnes presses that while readers of True Crime novels would be inclined to believe everything they read without question, authors often take liberties with the facts, or they only present their version of the truth. She also laments how, depending on which subgenre an author writes in, this "I" can often muddy the waters of accuracy.

In the next seven chapters, Barnes analyses various True Crime novels and poems based on the theory she lays down in the first three chapters. These works are namely: *Helter Skelter* by Vincent Bugliosi (1974), *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule (1980), *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1965), *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara (2018), *The Girls* by Emma Cline (2016), and finally *Jane: A murder* by Maggie Nelson (2005). She analyses the works' authenticity and accuracy, type of narration, and other literary techniques used in creating them, giving detailed descriptions of their background and the personal connections the authors have with the crimes they are writing about.

Barnes' monograph is very enjoyable and easy to read, even for those who are not expertly familiar with the genre, seeing as the most important terms and phrases are introduced early in the work, making it easy to follow the author's train of thought later on when the text gets to the analyses. The True Crime literature analyzed in the monograph, according to Barnes, is still in its infancy, so studies such as Barnes' research are highly valuable for the theoretical standpoint of the genre. Barnes presents her findings and theories in a way that emphasizes that this genre is one where ethics and morality are key, reminding readers that True Crime narratives are about real victims. In her own words, a deconstruction of the genre is necessary to make it more respectful and moral, and I, for one, wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment.

Work Cited

Peters, Fiona. "True Crime Narratives." *Crime Fiction Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2020, pp. 23-40.