Women’s Obsession with True Crime: Taking the Power Back

At some point in a woman’s life, she has almost certainly heard some kind of cautionary tale regarding the dangers of walking alone at night, being home alone, or even the dangers of living on the first floor of an apartment by themselves. It has been ingrained into daily thoughts to act with caution, and always strategically act in a way that will ensure our safety from potential predators. From the time a woman gets her driver’s license, she is told to park in well-lit areas only, carry mace, put her keys between her fingers, and never sit in her car unlocked after entering, as sitting there distracted by a phone or the radio makes a woman a vulnerable target for a potential attacker. Women are often the victim of crimes enacted by men, and they are reminded of that in their daily lives, but noticeably in recent time, women have become some of the largest consumers of true crime media, especially podcasts. A large number of women consume this material, as well as produce and distribute it to other women. As a large victim of true crime cases that are described in media, it’s alarming that women would be so interested and invested in true crime, except consuming and producing modes of true crime is used to educate women, empower them, and allow them to take the power back from the perpetrators; through recognizing and arming themselves with knowledge of true crime, women are gaining their power back from those who may have intentions to harm them.

According to The National Organization for Women, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner in 2005, which comes to an average of three women per day. In addition to that alarming statistic, the same source reports that 232,960 women in The United States were raped or sexually assaulted in 2006, which includes the crimes that were not reported to police. (National Organization for Women) On a global level, it is reported that gender based violence against women and girls affects one in three women in their lifetime. (The World Bank) Just looking at these statistics proves that there is an actual pandemic happening, as nearly thirty-three percent of women end up as a victim of this violence. However, in wake of these numbers (which are not decreasing) there is very little being done to provide resources to women that put these statistics into perspective.

In addition to the explosion of violence against women, there has also been an explosion of crime media. This includes podcasts, which has become a recent form of entertainment for many people, including women. A large number of these podcasts consumed by women are true crime based, and nearly seventy-five percent of true crime listeners are women. (Fouriezos and Colin) Although these women are often the victims of the crime being described, they are the main consumer of this particular type of podcast. Some popular true crime based podcasts that are produced by women includes *Crime Junkie*, *Serial*, *My Favorite Murder*, and many more. These women research and investigate the cases, and then produce them to be listened to by women. This large number of female listeners can be contributed to basic psychology. According to Michael Mantell, the chief psychologist for the San Diego Police Department says, “women fear being crime victims more than men do. For some, it’s a method to ‘feel like’ they have control over a given situation, though they often don’t.” (Fouriezos and Colin)

A more broad explanation of the high following of crime podcasts is that the brutal cases serve as spectacles, like natural disasters or car crashes. Viewing something that is out of the realm of daily life provides added drama and a distraction from routine. (Cassibry) This same source reports that listening to the often-gruesome details of the cases gives listeners a burst of adrenaline. Tuning into true crime podcasts can then become an addicting routine, as this burst of adrenaline is misinterpreted as a reward. Those who enjoy adrenaline will continue to listen in order to obtain that same exciting feeling, and continue listening to true crime. A large number of true crime cases are scary as well, so that helps to fuel adrenaline as well, but that fear is also what drives the demand as well. Being able to experience these scary cases and the fear they induce in a controlled environment provides draw to true crime as well. (Cassibry)

Insight from a professional psychologist provides some explanation for these huge viewer rates, but in addition to that statistic, it is found that women are more likely to be drawn to stories that include a female protagonist. (Fouriezos and Colin) A female protagonist is just more relevant to a woman, as she can relate back to the women in these stories. A relatable protagonist is even more so intriguing when it comes to storytelling, as women are more likely to be intrigued by stories that are being told by another woman. (McHugh) True crime cases are often just relatable to women, as they can identify with the women who fall victim to their attacker. Being able to identify with the women who are the victims of the crime makes the situation much more relatable and closer to home, which would be suspected to cause fear or a negative reaction to these podcasts. However, it doesn’t strike fear in these women as it would be expected to, or make them want to turn away and ignore it. In fact, podcasting helps to put the statistics into real world perspective, and makes each number stand out as an individual person through projecting their story as what it is; a true story of a real woman who fell victim to another person.

Listening to these crimes and what happened to these women provides information on how to be better prepared against a potential attacker as well. Women who listen can actively watch for warning signs of a potential attacker, and arm themselves with knowledge and skills on how to avoid becoming another statistic. Knowing how to deflect a potential attacker, who is often a man, provides women with a sense of security they may have otherwise not had. By being able to deflect this kind of attack, women are able to gain a sense of power and strength that could otherwise be stripped from them by a potential rapist, murderer, or kidnapper. Arming themselves with the information necessary to keep their autonomy out of the hands of a man gives these viewers a sense of security in themselves, as they have the means necessary to reduce their risk of becoming a victim, or another story told through a true crime podcast.

The fact that women even have to arm themselves with knowledge against potential attackers is sad, but it is necessary, especially when listening to how quickly other women fell into harm’s way. The listeners choose not to turn a blind eye to these crimes against women in order to bring a voice and power to those who have become victims. When it comes to popular true crime podcasts like *Crime Junkie,* the host Ashley Flowers, draws attention to cold cases as well as solved cases. Along with entertainment, these podcasts are made in order to spread awareness about different cold cases in order to bring justice to the victims. One of the most highly requested episodes on the podcast happened to cover the disappearance of Lauren Spierer, which took place at Indiana University Bloomington. This case was especially important to the host Ashley and her co-star Britt, as they are both residents of the Indianapolis area, and were around the same age as Lauren when her disappearance took place. The two hosts worked to provide evidence and different theories regarding what happened to Lauren, and this sparked listeners to theorize and discuss different possible storylines regarding Lauren’s situation on the Crime Junkie fan page, which is another place where the listeners can band together and discuss different possible theories (Flowers).

The case has remained cold since, but this is just one example of how the female hosts bring attention to another woman in need or in distress. This case in particular is relatable to both hosts, as they can both relate to the story leading up to Lauren’s disappearance. Lauren’s case stands out so much to many women, including the hosts, because it reflects a lifestyle that a large number of women have experienced. Both hosts discuss how they were in college, and repeatedly talk about how they experienced drunken nights on college campuses as well, and how relatable Lauren’s story is. The feeling of empathy they have toward Lauren, her relatability as a college student, and how close this happened to the hosts hometown, makes the hosts draw attention to the fact that Lauren was an actual living woman and not just a name, with hopes of finding answers about Lauren’s whereabouts. At the end of every episode, including the Lauren Spierer case, Ashley and Britt provide some kind of line of outreach, whether that be a sheriff’s department or hotline, that gives the viewer a chance to contribute in helping bring justice to victims like Lauren. (Flowers) As women reporting on women, these hosts are banding together to help bring awareness and justice to cases that may otherwise never have a solution or a concrete conclusion, and it helps spark a sense of community amongst those who listen and can empathize with Lauren’s life. After listening to the podcast, viewers are reminded to visit the *Crime Junkie* website to view any additional information about each case. Each case has pictures of potential evidence, a list of sources, pictures of possible suspects, and a small description of the case. (Flowers)

In addition to the podcasts like *Crime Junkie* that bring attention to fellow women in distress, there are podcasts that make comedic light of the alarming statistics that represent violence against women. An example of this is seen on the podcast, *My Favorite Murder,* which is made by stand-up comedian Karen Kilgraff and Cooking Channel host Georgia Hardstark. The podcast is posted weekly, and discusses true crime in a less somber tone. This podcast has picked up a fan base that is so dedicated to their weekly uploads that they began referring to themselves as “murderinos”. The hosts help to make light of each crime, and even have a catch phrase that shows the lightheartedness behind the show; “Stay Sexy, Don’t Get Murdered.” (Fouriezos and Colin)

In essence, the podcast somewhat mocks the crimes through mocking the criminals, yet still brings awareness to them and refers to victims in a respectful way. In this situation, the two female hosts almost poke fun at the perpetrators, and this in turn helps to prevent the criminals from being glorified for their actions. A lot of the stigma surrounding true crime is that if there is too much serious interest in it, then it’s going to encourage the different crimes to be committed in attempt to receive recognition. Kilgraff and Hardstark prevent this from happening by not taking the genre too seriously, and they provide a comedic twist to the otherwise serious topics. (Fouriezos and Colin) Although this approach may be considered taboo by some listeners of traditional true crime podcasts, the massive fandom proves the hosts are doing something right when discussing true crime cases.

Even the catchphrase itself ties back into the general idea behind women listening to true crime; it’s great to be a woman and embrace femininity, while also educating themselves in a way that prevents them from falling victim like those described in the cases they cover in each episode. Their motto and catchphrase is humorous, but still poses an important message in maintaining the feminine identity through education and recognition of the danger that exists in the world. This motto contradicts the standardized norm that women need to cover up and hide their body, or dull down their presence in order to protect themselves from harassment. This motto, and the podcast itself, works to defend women in saying that it’s important to recognize individuality, sexuality, and femininity in order to stand up to the unfair standard that states it is necessary for women to dull themselves down in order to fit into the world and not draw any kind of attention, especially negative attention, to themselves. *My Favorite Murder* may be considered crude in the approach it takes toward true crime reporting, but the different approach poses an important message when it comes to standing up for women’s empowerment, and the message is clearly received well, as *My Favorite Murder* was pushed to the number one spot on iTunes within the first six months of its premiere. (Cassibry)

Women arming themselves with knowledge to prevent attacks begins with knowing the attacker and how they operate, but doing it in a way that doesn’t require women to come into contact with criminals. Women are generally more interested in the mind of criminals, and this all stems back to the idea that people are fearful of being harmed by someone else, and the most efficient and practical way about going after this fear is approaching it in a safe way through different media outlets. This means tuning into podcasts and informational material that exposes women to the deep-rooted fear that another person has a power to take away life as they know it. Getting to know the crimes and minds of killers, rapists, kidnappers, and other criminals through podcasts provides women with a safe way of overcoming this fear. Listening to true crime cases in controlled environments provides women with a kind of exposure therapy, as it gives women a safe space to come into contact with things that may otherwise incite extreme fear. Listening to podcasts allows for women to exercise their anxieties without putting themselves in harm’s way. (Backtracks) It has the power to create a world that triggers women to respond to this fear through fight or flight, and by continuing to listen to these cases and educate themselves, women are fighting instead of running away. They are confronting this fear, learning about the different tactics used by attackers, and utilizing that information in order to protect themselves from having to confront this fear in real life. In keeping themselves safe and not cowering away from the different instances where women have become victims at the hands of men, women are retrieving their power from real or potential attackers.

Whether women are attracted to true crime podcasting out of fear, curiosity, or basic psychology, it is obvious that the draw to the genre is not disappearing any time soon. Whether it is intentional or not, women are collectively working to bring attention to the crimes that are being committed against them, using the knowledge of these crimes to bring justice to those directly affected, while also strengthening their power against potential attackers. The presence of podcast such as *Crime Junkie* or *My Favorite Murder* reinforces the fact that women are not willing to cower in fear in the light of a world where one in three women will be affected by gender based violence. (The World Bank) These women instead choose to recognize the dangers of being a woman today and bring it to attention, without glorifying the attackers. These women are actively working to bring the number of those affected down, and make it known that these female listeners are willing to stand up against their fears if it means helping themselves and other women keep their power out of the hands of male attackers.

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