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Modern Murders: The Turn-of-the-Century's Backlash Against Melodramatic and Sensational Representations of Murder, 1880–1914

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Modern Murders: The Turn-of-the-Century's Backlash Against Melodramatic and Sensational Representations of Murder, 1880–1914, by Lee Michael-Berger, London, Routledge, 2023, 184 pp., £108 (hardback), ISBN 9781032120218, £31.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781032120225

We are in the middle of a true crime boom. The plethora of outlets and formats jostling for our attention in the ever-busier digital landscape has led to an almost insatiable thirst for content. The runaway global success of season 1 of the *Serial* investigative journalism podcast a decade ago helped put real-life crimes at the centre of modern media. Now, documentaries and adaptations of sensational crimes regularly fill our video and audio streaming services, television schedules, cinemas, bookshops, and social media feeds. Creators from leading broadcasters to newspaper journalists and amateur would-be influencers have turned to the genre in search of a hit.

Lee Michael-Berger's monograph about representations of murder in turn-of-the-century Britain shows us there is nothing new under the sun, or even *The Sun*. While modern newspapers such as Rupert Murdoch's punchy tabloid seek online reach through articles and podcasts about salacious cases, their Victorian equivalents did much the same. Accounts of executions and murder investigations were a key theme of the explosion of print publications in the mid-nineteenth century onwards, from newspapers to novels and everything in between. Cultural tastemakers were squeamish at the growth in popularity of such gruesome material among the increasingly literate working classes.

Making light of tragedy and overplaying the frequency of murder are critiques regularly made of true crime content. The popular podcast *My Favorite Murder*, in which the co-hosts discuss appalling cases in an easygoing style, even has the catchphrase 'stay sexy and don't get murdered'. Michael-Berger points out that graphic depictions of murder in theatre, journalism, and elsewhere were increasingly lambasted and parodied by the end of the nineteenth century as being too exaggerated. Crime narratives were at once both dramatic and modern, yet already perceived in many elite quarters as uncouth and outdated.

The *fin-de-siècle* representations of murder in Greek and Shakespearean works are discussed in the book's central section. Shakespeare had already reached an iconic status in British popular culture of the era. But performances of his plays – aimed at his increasing working-class fanbase – led to often spectacular and silly depictions of violence that went too far for some elite commentators. Productions of *Macbeth* which emphasised the play's themes of murder and witchcraft were considered old-fashioned and primitive for modern tastes. Meanwhile, Michael-Berger argues that an array of Greek plays, including those portraying the murder of Agamemnon, were at once relatively conservative in their interpretations yet were perceived as potentially more modern due to contemporary notions of heredity.

Michael-Berger moves on to consider the case of Kate Marshall, sentenced to death for the 1898 murder of her sister Eliza in London's East End, although she was spared execution and spent the rest of her life in prison. Newspapers specialising in crime covered the story extensively, drawing frequent parallels to the nearby Jack the Ripper murders of 10 years earlier, including vivid descriptions of the bloody murder scene. Yet other publications cast doubt on the narrative that Kate was the killer, highlighting the possibility that Eliza's abusive,

drunken husband had attacked both women. Representations of those involved as hard-drinking and indolent, living amid desperate poverty, put the culpability of their situation in their allegedly corrupting surroundings, with the grim milieu of Spitalfields itself a character in the story.

Celebrated poet and dramatist of the era, Stephen Phillips, is the subject of the last substantive chapter of the book. Murder was a central motif of his works, specifically murder perpetrated unwittingly or unwillingly within a family with the perpetrator emerging as a tragic protagonist. Michael-Berger argues that Phillips offered an early glimpse of a form of modernism, by innovatively updating conventional melodramatic representations of murder. His killers were not portrayed as evil villains but rather as tormented heroes. This helped to construct a more complex image of murder and murderers, offering a different perspective from earlier, more conventional tragedies seen on the London stage. If Kate Marshall's unhappy story feels ripe for a media retelling, Phillips working today might have been the one to do it, perhaps in the form of a prestige TV box set rather than a play.

Michael-Berger successfully uses a range of contexts to examine the discourse around portrayals of murder in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. She traces how the twin currents of a growing mass media and a newly-literate audience interested in tragic and bloody stories helped drive explicit portrayals of murder to the centre of Victorian culture. Yet the ubiquity and perceived downmarket and vulgar elements of the true crime genre led to a cultural backlash and a desire to present murder in different ways. Alternative perspectives on killers, their crimes and their motivations could increasingly be seen both in print and in theatres. To some extent, bloodshed had arguably gone out of fashion, although none involved in the debates of the time could have predicted the blood-letting that was to come. As Michael-Berger suggests, the cultural era discussed in her book was if anything a threshold period, before the devastating rite of passage of the Great War.

This book will be of interest to scholars and students of crime and its representation in culture and the media. It has much to tell us about the history of crime and how it was perceived in the period in question and demonstrates there is a deep well of otherwise-forgotten case studies and contemporary artistic works that take us far beyond the more familiar ground of Jack the Ripper, helping illuminate the discourses of the era. *Modern Murders* also offers a useful historical counterpoint to our own true crime boom, reminding us debates around the ethics of today's documentaries and podcasts have their antecedents in those played out in the periodicals and plays of a century and a half ago.

Notes on contributor

Dr Richard Jones is Director of Journalism, Politics and Contemporary History at the University of Salford. A former journalist with Sky News and the BBC among others, he is most recently the author of *Reporting the Courts* (2024), part of the Routledge Research in Journalism series. The book examines how court journalism is practiced amid an era of financial pressure and technological change in both media and criminal justice.

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