

In this issue, we present a multigenre review and essay feature, curated by Lisa Ampleman and Lily Meyer, with five writers addressing the ethics and craft of crime writing.

DESTINY O. BIRDSONG

A Different Kind of Violence: Representing Albinism in True Crime

Fatal Attraction. Season 7, episode 15. “Wrong Turn.” Chad Cunningham, dir. Aired April 16, 2018 on TV One.

I’ve always been fascinated with violent stories. As a kid, I satisfied that curiosity with books about historical events: the Holocaust, the death of Bonnie and Clyde, and the assassination of Malcolm X, to name a few. My mother, uncles, and aunts laughed it off as one of the quirks that came with having a “smart kid” in the family. “A regular bighead,” my Uncle Carlos would joke as I read volumes about the Third Reich. But the truth was that as a young Black girl, and one with albinism to boot, I was already aware of my hypervulnerability to violence, and I was deeply interested in finding out what pushed people to it. More importantly, I was beginning what would become a personal literary practice of inquiry into the liberties people take with other people’s bodies when the assailants feel that they outnumber the vulnerable, that the victims are expendable, and that the perpetrators can get away with anything.

Later, as a college student living on my own for the first time with my very own cable box in my very own room, I turned to true-crime docuseries: *American Justice* and *Cold Case Files*, both narrated by the eerily soothing voice of Bill Kurtis, or *City Confidential*, which featured sensational crime stories laced with local lore. I’d fall asleep to the graphic details of homicides and wake from harrowing dreams, but still, I watched.

These days, as a survivor of both racial and sexual violence, I'm a bit more squeamish about digesting a constant loop of murder and loss. In fact, as a writer who most recently revisited my own sexual assault in my debut poetry collection, *Negotiations* (Tin House, 2020), I sometimes need a break from thinking about humans' capacity to commit—and survive—harm, even though I consider such work to be the most important I may ever do. Now, in my off time, I'm much more likely to work out or deep condition my hair during a *Living Single* bloc, or to dress for bed while singing Finally Aaron's gospel remix of "Thank You for Being a Friend" while the original plays on my bedroom TV, promising me another half hour of Blanche, Dorothy, Rose, and Sophia. But I've also discovered a compelling true-crime show on TV One, a cable-access channel whose programming is geared specifically toward African Americans. *Fatal Attraction* is exactly what it sounds like: true stories of relationships that end violently. (A quick note of disambiguation: I was also once a fan of an Animal Planet series called *Fatal Attractions*, which is about people's deadly love affairs with exotic and dangerous pets. I highly recommend the episode "A Tiger Loose in Harlem." The title doesn't do it justice. Just . . . watch it.)

TV One's *Fatal Attraction* is both campy and heartbreaking. Even as a diehard crime TV junkie, I've never heard of most of the cases, which is rare for someone who can recall historical crimes with an efficiency that bemuses my closest friends. (I have trouble remembering their birthdays, but I know the name of the woman who revolutionized medicine packaging when she killed her husband and tried to blame it on a tampered bottle of Tylenol: Stella Nickell.) Arguably, I don't know about these other incidents because of phenomena described by statistics that the show itself shares during commercial breaks: for instance, less than half of homicides involving African American victims are solved, and missing persons are disproportionately Black women, who are hardly ever found. Ongoing conversations about "the missing white woman syndrome" make clear that most news outlets don't give missing Black women nearly as much attention as their Caucasian counterparts. Thus, few places outside Black cable-access channels feature the kinds of cases *Fatal Attraction* presents, despite the fact that the crimes themselves are as horrifying as ones featured on any newsmagazine show.

I am often appalled by the details. There are women like Darice Knowles, who was buried alive by a former lover in 2006, or Tynesha Stewart, whose boyfriend strangled and dismembered her in a bathtub in 2007 because she'd gone off to college and begun a new relationship. The details are graphic, the family members' accounts of their lost loved ones heart-wrenching, and yet I am rarely surprised. Both the little girl I was and the woman I've become have long known what is possible for Black women to experience at the hands of the depraved.

However, my deep appreciation for *Fatal Attraction* and the important work it does to raise awareness about violence in Black communities doesn't mean I don't have my critiques. There are terrible wigs, hammy actors, and kissing scenes that look painful for all parties involved. But one day, while I was lying on the couch, most likely procrastinating on some writing deadline, I saw something much more serious: an episode in which the show's misrepresentation of the victim erased her identity, thus flattening the narrative of a complex and tragically short life. Even more frightening was that this woman looked like me.

Season 7's episode 15, "Wrong Turn," tells the story of Asia Harris, a twenty-year-old Cleveland native who was gunned down in her car during what her husband said was an armed robbery. It turned out to be a murder-for-hire paid for by Harris's husband and committed by his cousin's boyfriend, because Asia wanted a divorce. She'd fallen in love with someone new. As her family points out, Asia was a mother, a caregiver, and someone who often stood up for underdogs, a practice that dated back to her high-school years when she met her future husband, Sam Wilson, a shy, friendless kid whom she dated briefly. She ultimately ended their relationship then because he was possessive and needy. Asia was popular and had a clear sense of what she wanted, with few qualms about being candid. She also had albinism.

Interestingly, however, the actress playing her . . . didn't? She, like Asia, was a beautiful Black woman, but a light-brown-skinned one donning a bright blond wig. I did a double take. Surely, I thought, there must be an actress with albinism who would have loved the opportunity to play Asia and, in so doing, offer visibility and authenticity for the rest of us? Then I wondered if the oversight stemmed from a lack of resources. After all, the running joke among Black folks is that Black television stations have ten-minute-long commercial breaks and reams

of Time Life infomercials so ubiquitous that most of us can sing along with the featured tracks. For years, many large advertising companies did not place ads with Black media outlets, something that has started to shift only in the wake of 2020's civil protests. Fewer ad sales mean that outlets must sell more ad slots, which makes commercial breaks longer.

However, the shortcomings of this episode are about more than a lack of resources; rather, they are a failure of the imagination of the writers and producers, a failure that robs Asia of a full telling of her life and death. The narrator's descriptions of Asia differ drastically from those of her loved ones and from how the show generally characterizes other victims. Asia's family members and former classmates describe her as desirable, a trendsetter, someone who turned heads. "When she walked into the room, it was like, everyone wanted to be around her," recalls Kelly Stockdale, a high-school friend. However, the narrator uses terms that are quite different, unlike the "gorgeous," "stunning," and "exquisite" victims in other episodes. Instead, Asia is "fearless"; she "never let her unique appearance or the teasing it generated define her." I can't recall one instance of the narrator ever calling her "beautiful." This hyperfocus on Asia's strength and savvy creates a false sense of impossibility for people in non-normative bodies, telling us that we can be everything except aesthetically pleasing.

Such slights—both unintentional and otherwise—remind me that Black women with albinism are often lost in the shuffle of representation. Even in spaces designed to champion diversity and highlight beauty, we are overlooked. Sometimes it feels selfish to say that as part of our communal recalibration of what it means to be Black and beautiful, I want more space for women who look like me: pale-skinned, blond, and sometimes even blue-eyed. But I do, because my absence in conversations about Blackness and Black vulnerability reifies the same essentialist notions that support racism and its concomitant violence. Blackness is more than a set of phenotypes, and people with albinism are more than just their condition.

It also feels ludicrous to say that I want to see women like me given our due space in a genre like crime TV, but perhaps what I mean is that I want to see versions of myself portrayed in the messy fullness of life. I want space for real conversations about men who see Black women

as disposable simply because they dared to move on, but also about how women with albinism are tokenized, fetishized in ways that are specific to our difference.

According to the episode, Sam Wilson proposed to Asia because he believed he was doing both her and himself a favor: as a mother of two, Asia benefitted from the financial support that came with being an army wife, and Sam's increased pay and permission to move off base as a married man offered him perks he could not have received otherwise. But Asia had the audacity to change her mind, to seek more, and ultimately to refuse the offer of stability without love. That audacity is a subject I tackled in my novel, *Nobody's Magic* (Grand Central, 2022), a triptych about three women with albinism who must navigate complicated familial, racial, and social histories in the wake of life-changing events. Suzette, Maple, and Agnes are each faced with a choice to live a life someone else designed for them (sometimes with the best of intentions), and in each instance, they say "No." All three set out in search of something for themselves, but more importantly, each finds people who see them as more than charity cases or individuals to be pitied. To treat people with albinism as such is also a kind of violence, one that "Wrong Turn" participates in through its casting and narration that fail to portray Asia in the full reality of her life.

As an artist, I've come to understand that my autonomy is not at risk just because I am Black, or a woman, or queer, or single, or childless (with the intention to be so for at least the next few years), but also because I am different, because I defy expectations. Because I demand what people have determined that I do not deserve. In creating Suzette, Agnes, and Maple, and making them flawed but fearless and strong, just like Asia, I wanted to deepen the conversations I have been having about violence, about vulnerability, and about survival. Sometimes, it feels too overwhelming to tackle those topics in one story, so I understand why people are prone to glossing over them. But to sit in the seeming discomfort of discussing difference is cultural work that benefits us all, that makes room for even more nuanced stories about all kinds of people, not just those with albinism. My hope is that by telling stories like my own, like the characters' of *Nobody's Magic*, similar portrayals will proliferate elsewhere in our culture. I'm confident that one day soon I will be able to turn on the television or walk into

a movie theater and see another Black woman with albinism telling whatever story she chooses and portraying herself in whatever way she sees fit. Or, if she cannot speak for herself, I hope that the powers that be render her in her fullest detail, glossing nothing but keeping everything and, dammit, calling her beautiful.

TOD GOLDBERG

“Never Look Suspicious”: Elmore Leonard’s Rules for Writing Fiction

Out of Sight. Elmore Leonard. Delacorte, 1996. 296 pp. \$22.95 (cloth).

Not long ago, I met up with an ex-con named Joe for coffee. It was the summer, and Northern California was on fire. While I waited for Joe, a friend texted me to say that her parents were refusing to leave Lake Tahoe, even though the fire was creeping closer to their home. They still had one road they could use to get off the mountain, she said, so they felt safe enough. I looked up at the sky. Ash drifted down in fine gray flakes, the breeze spreading them around like mist. I was three hours south of the fires, and my lungs felt pinched. *That sounds like suicide*, I wrote to my friend. *Why would they stay?* She responded with a hands-up emoji.

My crime brain started running through scenarios. *Why would they stay?* Maybe they’re hiding out from the Mob. Maybe they’re master criminals and set the fires knowing that if they’re the last people out, they can rob all the houses surrounding them and get away with it. Maybe they love their house so much that they’re willing to die inside it . . . so as to keep authorities from finding the bodies buried in the yard.

This is how I think.

A Subaru wagon pulled up, and out came Joe. I’d like to describe him in some poetic way, but the fact is, if you saw him, you’d think: *That’s the last guy on the planet I’d want to mess with*. He’s over six feet tall, weighs a good three bills, and wears sunglasses all the time, so you never know if he’s looking at you or through you. He walks with his head cocked slightly to one side, as if he’s about to ask you a question, and you better have the right answer. He looks, frankly, like he wants to fuck you up and like you’ve got it coming. He spent seven years in Lompoc, two in solitary confinement, and part of him is still there. He robbed banks on the outside, fucked people up on the inside. If this were one of my books, I’d call him an OG.

As soon as Joe came loping across the parking lot, the ions in the vicinity got rearranged. Everyone turned and watched his approach, rabbits noticing a coyote in the distance. Quickly, they began to pack their stuff—jamming phones into purses, clutching keys; a few stood up abruptly without a place to go just yet, only to find Joe standing in the one exit off the mountain, so to speak. Too late, I thought; the fire is here, and none of you are master criminals.

But the other people on the Starbucks patio, they don't know what I know. That Joe went straight. That he's spent the last twenty-five years reckoning with his violent nature, writing about it in books and essays, on the screen, even in a podcast. I've never actually met the OG Joe.

I waved him over. We did that awkward hug men do that involves punching each other. Even though I've spent the last two decades murdering people in books, in real life the crime I most look like I've committed is stealing jeans and V-neck polos from Banana Republic. I'm about as threatening as David Schwimmer. I could feel the people around me exhaling. *If this guy isn't scared . . .* They took their phones out. They leaned back in their chairs. They sucked caramel almond-milk Frappuccinos through green straws. Joe disappeared inside the Starbucks, placed his order, and came out with an absurd-looking purple concoction.

"It's my daughter's favorite, so I thought I'd try it," he said, loud enough that the woman in the pink sweatsuit sitting adjacent to him laughed knowingly. "It's horrible."

More laughter. We then spent the next two hours—with the burning world in the distance—talking about how we were expressing our obsessions these days. Murders. Heists. Beatings. The eavesdroppers moved closer. They wanted to know. A joke, a purple drink, and a partner who can talk a big game but wouldn't bust a grape in a fruit fight? I was living a scene from an Elmore Leonard novel.

In fact, it reminded me of a scene right out of Leonard's 1976 novel, *Swag*, which set the tone for the next thirty years or so of his writing career. In *Swag*, Leonard establishes "Ten Golden Rules for Successful Armed Robbery," which is a misnomer. The rules tell you how to have a successful criminal career, not just pull off a single armed robbery—and they're also how to write an Elmore Leonard novel:

1. Always be polite on the job. Say please and thank you.
2. Never say more than is necessary.
3. Never call your partner by name—unless you use a made-up name.
4. Dress well. Never look suspicious or like a bum.
5. Never use your own car. (Details to come.)
6. Never count the take in the car.
7. Never flash money in a bar or with women.
8. Never go back to an old bar or hangout once you have moved up.
9. Never tell anyone your business. Never tell a junkie even your name.
10. Never associate with people known to be in crime.

Shit. I'd already broken half the rules. Which meant, well, I was about to get caught.

You might have heard about Leonard's *other* set of rules—his famous Ten Rules of Writing—which writers and readers alike have taken far too seriously over the years. That list, published in a *New York Times* column in 2001, is mostly tongue-in-cheek, save for the final admonition: “Try to leave out the parts that readers tend to skip,” which is, in fact, all the things Leonard tells you to avoid in the previous nine rules, including adverbs, the weather, and exclamation points. Honestly, Leonard's Ten Rules boil down to one good one: Stop sucking.

It's a shame that Leonard's *Swag* rules aren't as well-known, but the reason is clear: the difference between the two sets of rules is the difference between craft and talent. Anyone can be taught to leave out adverbs in dialogue tags, but not everyone has the talent to write a character who adheres believably to *Swag*'s rules, which are about behavior and consequence. Following the rules in general is much easier than following either set of Leonard's. Leave before the fire closes the only road and all that.

The truth, however, is that Leonard was on my mind long before my friend Joe met me for coffee and scared the living shit out of the Bluetooth-earbuds-and-Lululemon set who hang out at the Starbucks in Lafayette, California. I'd spent the previous month diving back into Leonard's finest novel, *Out of Sight*, to see how he'd done the one thing I've always found most difficult. I've used the rules of *Swag* as loose guidelines for writing since the mid-2000s, when I wrote a series of books based on the television show *Burn Notice* and then, later, my

Gangsterland series, but my biggest challenge is conveying powerful romantic relationships, or at least believable ones, in the context of profound violence and general dark doings. For six decades, Leonard made it safe to combine literary ambition with the more prurient pleasures of writing about people with guns, which is to say he normalized criminals, made it harmless to portray them as funny and weird and thoughtful, as well as violent and distrustful—all of which I’ve tried to do myself. But he also did the unthinkable: He let his characters fall in love. Sure, they often fell in love with the wrong people, but who doesn’t? Misbegotten love is the very height of the human experience, or at least the human literary experience.

Nowhere is this more prevalent than in *Out of Sight*, Leonard’s thirty-fifth novel, adapted faithfully into a film starring George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, when both were, to put a fine point on it, Sex Personified. In *Out of Sight*, Leonard gives us a bank robber, Jack Foley, who needs to escape from prison to make one last score. He asks a loyal friend named Buddy to be his getaway driver (Buddy is a bad man with a gun, but it’s hard to worry too much about a guy named Buddy). It looks like the score’s going to work out, but in comes a US marshal—and instead of some square-jawed “big-city dick,” the marshal is a beautiful woman named Karen Sisco, resplendent in a “thirty-five-hundred-dollar suit” and holding a shotgun. When Buddy sees everything about to go south, he tosses Karen and Jack into the trunk of a sedan: a meet-cute with shotgun and spare tire.

Soon the two are wedged together, speeding away from the penitentiary, talking about their favorite movies (*Network*) and actresses (Faye Dunaway) and revealing their collective hopes and dreams, making the drive either the world’s weirdest first date or simply an excellent hostage negotiation:

Foley let his breath out and she felt it on her neck, almost like a sigh. He said, “I still think if we met under different circumstances, like in a bar . . .”

Karen said, “You have to be kidding.”

After that, for a few miles, neither of them spoke until Foley said, “Another one Faye Dunaway was in I liked, *Three Days of the Condor*.”

“With Robert Redford,” Karen said, “when he was young. I loved it, the lines were so good. Faye Dunaway says—it’s the next morning after

they've slept together, even though she barely knows him, he asks if she'll do him a favor? And she says, 'Have I ever denied you anything?'"

I've read this scene a hundred times. I've watched it an equal number of times in the film. How does Leonard do it? How do these diametrically opposed forces end up falling in love in the trunk of a getaway car? Perhaps it's because the scene starts with Leonard following all his own rules. By the time the scene ends, though, Foley is so smitten with Karen that he tells her his real name, cops to all the crimes he's committed, and even gives her his ex-wife's name, almost as a character reference. Essentially, he stops pretending to be a badass. He becomes, in that trunk, the most human version of himself: vulnerable, willing, open to love. Five minutes later, Karen tries to shoot him—and he's even *more* smitten. She's remained true to the game, in spite of what appears to be attraction. It's a such a subtle piece of writing on Leonard's part . . . and it only took him thirty-five novels to get there.

My phone buzzed, and Joe excused himself to get a drink he actually liked. I was hoping it was my friend saying, *They're leaving. The fire is too close*. But it was an Amber Alert. A child had been taken. A white sedan. I turned and watched the traffic just like everyone else, all of us now in a real crime novel, one where we could do something, one that had none of the charm of an Elmore Leonard novel, nor of anything I've tried to write according to his rules of crime, because he never mentions anything about hurting a child. We all stared for a minute, maybe ninety seconds, but then the vibrating stopped, and the world went back to normal. For us, anyway. And when Joe walked back out, no one even looked up, not even when he said, "Have I told you about the woman I'm in love with?"

Setting the Stage

As a PhD in criminal justice, I do qualitative research focusing on narratives about crime and justice in a variety of sources, including books, movies, television shows, newspaper articles, and trial transcripts. As a senior in college, I did an independent study on “bystander intervention,” reviewing the sociological research on why the witnesses to a crime in progress might fail to take action. My interest in the topic had been inspired by the 1964 Kitty Genovese case in Queens, New York. Ms. Genovese was returning home from work when she was attacked. Thirty-eight of her neighbors were alleged to have heard her screams, looked out, failed to call the police, and left her to be stalked and killed. This story of thirty-eight people who did nothing to help her shocked the nation.

Except it didn't happen quite that way. As journalist David W. Dunlap reported in an April 2016 retrospective in the *New York Times*, the problem with the front-page article about the crime and with a later book by A. M. Rosenthal (*Thirty-Eight Witnesses*) “was that some key facts were wrong, or at least subject to much different interpretation.” Genovese was attacked twice, not three times; at least two witnesses *did* call the crime in, and only about “half a dozen” people could have seen what happened.

This correction came long after I had completed my undergraduate independent study and been encouraged to apply to the graduate program in the School of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York (now the University at Albany). The case still intrigues me because my areas of research are crime history and crime in mass media/popular culture. I'm also a mystery writer. In both real life and fiction, the context of crimes matters. Kitty Genovese was viewed as the victim not only of a vicious killer but of her uncaring neighbors. In the anonymity of a big city, her screams were said to have brought no one to her aid because of the “diffusion of responsibility” among the witnesses who had assumed someone else would do something. Their

reluctance to get involved was attributed to the anonymity of urban life, in contrast to small towns where people still looked out for each other. In fact, the relationship between crime and setting isn't quite as simple as it first appears; nonviolent property offenses, murders, and everything in between reflect the complex intersection of factors such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and age.

Where Crime Happens

As social scientists, criminologists collect and analyze data about the environment or "social location" in which crimes occur. Although murder is the focus of television crime dramas, movies, novels, and podcasts, it is also an atypical crime. In real life, even when the crime rate is increasing, homicides are far fewer in number than other violent offenses. Most aggravated assaults do not end in the death of the victim. Even when the victim is killed, the crime is more likely to be manslaughter than carefully plotted, premeditated murder. But, yes, knowing what readers of crime fiction expect in a good story, I too write books featuring sleuths who match wits with clever killers.

At the same time, I weave as much history into my storytelling as I can. I write looking back at the past, particularly at the parallel evolution of criminal justice and mass media. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as new waves of European immigrants arrived in the United States and settled in overcrowded neighborhoods, reformers attributed their crime rates to poverty or their alleged propensity toward violent behavior, sometimes both. The migrants and immigrants of color who took their place ("ethnic succession") in similar urban neighborhoods found themselves restricted in both their physical mobility and economic opportunities. In the 1970s and after, as factories and mills closed down or moved to Sunbelt cities, people of color found it difficult to escape these "ghettos" (later known as inner cities). The jobs that they had only recently acquired were disappearing, and they were being left behind in declining neighborhoods.

Social scientists now recognize the importance of both race and class in entrenched urban poverty. Urban neighborhoods, with higher concentrations of Black or Latinx residents, tend to have both higher

rates of poverty and higher rates of crime. But these are also neighborhoods with few employment opportunities, inadequate schools, and more police surveillance and arrests. As crime-fiction writer Raymond Chandler had his hard-boiled detective observe in the 1930s and as the real-life Kerner Commission found in the 1960s, news agencies have never considered violent crime in poor neighborhoods worth covering in depth. In contrast, white victims of crime receive routine media coverage. Social scientists even have a name for the headline coverage of attractive young white women who disappear: “the missing white-woman syndrome.” Meanwhile, the disappearances of women of color go unreported and so do their violent deaths.

Media coverage of the deaths of white victims contributes to the fear of crime among white consumers of news and of fictionalized narratives about crime. Since people tend to read or watch only news and entertainment media that reflect their beliefs, their biases receive reinforcement. And when offenders are white—even serial killers and mass murderers—the coverage often includes interviews with psychologists and other experts about the reason for the crimes. This search for explanations, such as trauma from an abusive childhood, is rarely deemed necessary for offenders of color.

As a criminologist I know all this. I have coedited reference books on media coverage of true-crime cases. I have written about the intersections of race/ethnicity, class, and gender, and on related stereotypes about crime. I write crime fiction because I want to engage in discussion with nonacademics about where crime happens and to whom, and I want to deal with social issues. The protagonist in my Lizzie Stuart series is a Southern criminal justice professor/crime historian who is now the director of an institute for the study of Southern crime and culture, and I sometimes take readers into the classroom or the institute. I draw on real-life cases for the novels and short stories featuring Lizzie and my other two protagonists, Albany police detective Hannah McCabe and former World War II army nurse Jo Radcliffe. For example, the second Lizzie Stuart mystery, *A Dead Man's Honor*, was inspired by an atypical lynching that I discovered during my dissertation research on crime and justice in the early twentieth century in my hometown, Danville, Virginia. *Old Murders*, the third book in the Lizzie Stuart se-

ries, was inspired by my research on the execution of a young African American woman who had killed the white woman on whose farm her family sharecropped, during a physical altercation between the two.

Academic research on crime is often neglected as a source by crime-fiction writers. But such research has value because scholars aim to provide factual, rather than sensational, accounts of crime. Journal articles and books by criminologists and crime historians are worth reading both for the quantitative findings on the social location of crimes and for the qualitative narratives based on archival research, oral histories, and field research. Beginning in the 1970s, in the wake of the women's movement and the Civil Rights Movement, more women and people of color entered academic programs in criminology and criminal justice. They have focused on aspects of gender and race/ethnicity often neglected by previous white male scholars, including attention to the social locations of crime and the lived experiences of both victims and offenders. The findings of their research have provided context for the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements.

Setting in Storytelling

In *Fast Fiction* (2014), her guide to writing the first draft of a novel, Denise Jaden suggests writers ask themselves, "Are there ways you can increase the opportunity for conflict in the way you build your world?" Writers want conflict because without it, they have no story to tell. But crime writers are also faced with a dilemma: how should they treat fictional conflict when there is so much of it in the real world?

In fact, settings—in both real life and crime fiction—can limit the presence of some types of characters or otherwise shape the narrative. A Black man in a white neighborhood in the 1940s is as "out of place" as a white man who walks into a bar in a Black neighborhood. Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990) opens this way: "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large

frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes." Easy Rawlins, the speaker, feels "a thrill of fear," but it goes away quickly because it is 1948. He has been overseas, he has fought in a war, and he is "used to white people" now.

What is striking about Easy's response to this man is that Easy is the person who is narrating the story. The white male character has come to the bar to meet *him* because he needs someone to look for a missing white woman in places that he cannot go, where he would not be able to get answers to his questions. A Black man is both the narrator of the story and the one who can solve its mystery. But at the same time, Easy is still, in this first novel in the series, unable to move with ease in the city of Los Angeles. He has bought a home that he treasures in Watts, but he has lost his job in a factory. And even though he no longer fears white people—or says he doesn't—he still lives in a segregated world in which he must be wary of the white men he encounters.

In my first novel, *Death's Favorite Child*, Lizzie joins her best friend, Tess Alvarez, a travel writer, for a vacation in Cornwall. Although there is no evident prejudice among the guests at the bed-and-breakfast where they spend the week, Lizzie notices—as I did when a friend and I spent a week in St. Ives, the "British Riviera" artist colony that inspired my "St. Regis"—there are few vacationers of color. Lizzie's awareness of her own visibility gives her more empathy for the lesbian artist who is a suspect in the murder of the hotel owners' niece.

Crime and Context

In cozies, police procedurals, legal thrillers, or historical novels, the settings writers use are important. Vividly realized settings allow both characters and readers to be anchored in time and place, but writers have to keep in mind that settings are not neutral in their impact. Feminist scholars and scholars of color have been in the forefront in calling attention to the effects of implicit bias, misogyny, and racism in the lives of women and girls, and people of color. No setting is neutral for those who are marginalized. The standpoints of these characters in our crime fiction, how they view the world, are an aspect of storytelling that deserves attention. Although white female writers have made significant publishing strides, it is only in the past decade that a critical

mass of writers of color have begun to tell the stories of those otherwise unacknowledged in books and other crime media. Arguably, some of the best contemporary crime fiction happens when writers locate their characters in settings that are true to life and tackle social issues and the complexities of modern life.

Locating the Heart in True Crime: A Craft Essay

The winding two-lane road rises steadily ahead of me as I drive toward the Adirondack Park. Along the way, the speed limit drops every few miles as I pass through hamlet after hamlet, places that are simply a cluster of houses set closer to the road than usual. I'm on my way to find Cleo Tellstone, or rather her grave. Cleo was fourteen and had just graduated eighth grade when she was murdered in 1934 on a walk home from her sister's house. According to historical newspaper accounts, she wanted to show off her new perm, a gift from her family to celebrate the occasion of her graduation. The day of my journey is the eighty-seventh anniversary of her death; I plan to leave flowers beside her headstone.

When I write Cleo's name, I feel as though I am calling her to life again. Not the flesh-and-blood teenager who ran through the undergrowth of the Adirondack Mountains. Not the girl who slipped on high-heeled shoes to totter her way across several dusty miles to visit her older sister, with her dog, Rover, her only companion for the trek. It's just the barest whisper of her that I can manifest, saying her name after all these years, knowing that you too now know her name. This remembering is what I once hoped for myself, a girl who never thought she'd survive her teen years, let alone make it into her thirties. As a teenager I would have wanted to be remembered as a girl who sketched horses when she was bored or who would lie on her belly for hours trying to coax stray cats in from the rain. But even then, I knew my abuser, my brother, would have a story that would eclipse mine if he finally managed to do what he promised and murdered me. My story would become, finally, his story—and the story you would want to hear.

Historically, true crime (everything from Puritan screeds on executions to the lurid comics of the 1930s to the explosion of contemporary true-crime podcasts and television docuseries) has done little to center the stories of victims, instead reducing them to stock characters existing only to fulfill the wishes of the perpetrator over and over again, the crime replaying every time someone interacts with the text. At best,

that means their presence is there only to add to the body count. And, at the genre's most grotesque, their bodies are laid bare as we become voyeurs, shadow replacements of their killers. In her essay, "Don't Use My Family for Your True Crime Stories," which appeared on the CrimeReads site in 2019, Lilly Dancyger writes of true crime, "I wish that the audiences and creators of these shows would give a little extra thought to how the dead woman (because it's almost always a woman) at the heart of the story is treated in the telling. Is she treated like a human being who had more life left to live, with people who loved her, who will never be the same because of her loss? Or is she reduced to a gory crime-scene photo and a plot point in a story about a man who doesn't deserve anyone's fascination?"

Perhaps it's a question of craft. As Alice Bolin says in her book *Dead Girls: Essays from Surviving an American Obsession*, in crime fiction and thrillers, "it's an understandable temptation for investigators to view criminals as mythic opponents, to create a theory of violence that looks at the gun, not at where it's pointing. Because when you take away the monster, what are you left with?" The same can be said for true crime—if writers reject this approach, how do they tell these stories, ones where the intrigue isn't in the drive to find out if the killer will be caught and justice served?

As a poet and lyric essayist, my presence in this genre feels more peripheral, but the care and attention Dancyger urges is still applicable—even poetry and lyric essays are a part of crime writing's long tradition. With its layered and developing history, crime writing is fraught with unique ethical dilemmas and problematic undercurrents, but it is a genre writers can still shape and mold as they decide how to tell crime stories. Writers can, as Dancyger points out, reject stories about men and their violence by centering the stories of victims, making explicit the investigative process, and avoiding dehumanizing victims through explicit explorations of the violence done to them.

Tell the Story of the Girl Herself

In 2015, as I finished writing my poetry collection *Doe* (University of Akron Press, 2018), which is about missing and unidentified women, I began writing what would be my last poem for the book, a twelve-part

poem about the women who are connected, either by speculation or confession, to a well-known serial killer (whose name I purposefully omit here). Since his arrest and trial, countless books, movies, documentaries, essays, articles, and podcasts have been produced about him, most focusing, at least in some part, on his handsomeness and women's attraction to him. He has become so famous that you may have already guessed who he is. While watching a retrospective on the '70s that included him, I understood the deeper motivation behind my writing *Doe*: to center the women who are missing, to call out their names instead of his.

To remember the victims, we need to place them on the page separate from their status as victims. It is sometimes challenging to do so: Cleo Tellstone, for example, had been alive only for fourteen years, and the landscape of that life—full of heartaches, disappointments, joy, laughter—isn't available for me to know. She left no diaries, and her siblings have long since passed away. What is left are the court proceedings and newspaper articles filled with details of the crime and the trial, all of which necessarily focus on her killer. To find Cleo again, to tell her story, is to make absence become presence. Cleo lived on a farm in the Adirondacks with her parents and half-siblings. There is a grainy photo of her published in local newspapers, an image I linger on in my essay as the only image I have of her. I write, "Cleo Tellstone holds her toddler niece whose round cheeks are framed by a hat, her coat zipped right up to her chin. Cleo is in profile, her hair peeking out of her own hat. Her bare hands hold her niece, one wrapped around the child's back and one clutching the top of the girl's thigh to support her. Cleo's eyes are downturned, not looking at the camera or at her niece, but her mouth is open as though she's just finished speaking." While much of Cleo's life is missing in the historical record (and what is there are graphic details of her murder), lingering on her image allows readers to see her humanness, caught in a moment of action just as she finished speaking, a reminder that she once had a voice with which to tell her own stories.

Become the Detective

Uncovering who Cleo was, in no exaggerated way, like becoming a girl detective, a Nancy Drew of the newspaper and genealogical archives.

One way to tell the true-crime story is to allow the writer's presence in, the sifting through the details. In her essay "Nancy Drewing the Essay: A Guide to the Literary Expedition," Sonja Livingston writes, "One day while staring into my laptop, I found Nancy Drew looking back. What could I do but follow her lead? I'd always used writing to help solve mysteries. Now I began to add more dynamic investigative elements to my work." While Livingston speaks more of the practice of curiosity in writing *any* literary essay, the value of placing yourself on the page in all your Nancy Drew glory is that the lens also shifts away from a perpetrator-centered narrative.

While many true-crime stories use this method in a way that still centers perpetrators, doing so diffuses their presence. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (Harper, 2018) is as much about Michelle McNamara as the Golden State Killer, and Sarah Koenig becomes the center on which the first season of *Serial* spins. In each, McNamara and Koenig become the Nancy Drews of their respective creations, inviting readers along as they search for clues and assemble their findings. While McNamara's narrative enumerates the hours she spent combing through hundreds of police files looking for answers, Koenig's team scanned and shared documents to the *Serial* website, deepening the immersion for listeners and wrapping them in the mystery of the case and her own pathway through the evidence.

Even when readers want more answers, crave the details about the killers and their stories, the writer doesn't have to fulfill that desire. Combining these methods, creating a victim-centered story while Nancy Drewing your way through the piece, leaves little room for a perpetrator-centered narrative to take shape. There's simply not enough air left to breathe them into life on the page.

Avoid Gratuitous Gore

In the summer of 2021 I attended my first CrimeCon, virtually. Many women in the chatbox were eager for upcoming descriptions of killers and the gory details of their crimes. Their knowledge was practically encyclopedic about the cases they followed intently, such as the murder of Rebekah Gould, who was twenty-two when she was killed inside her boyfriend's home. Her case had gone unsolved for sixteen

years before private investigators and podcast creators pushed forward the investigation. As such, the convention featured two panels about her case. From the comfort of my bed I watched the first panel begin with a video featuring a song and pictures of Gould before shifting to a recording of her father speaking about her. The work seemed victim-centered. But, as the panelists spoke afterward, one interrupted their explanation of the investigation's progression to add details of the state of her body and its level of decomposition as it arrived at the morgue, something mentioned only for its sensationalism, evidence of only the passage of time and not necessary in the investigative story about who murdered Gould.

In this reduction, we lost sight of Gould as a person. Dehumanization allows true-crime audiences to catalog wounds instead of mapping the intricacies of a person's life. To treat victims as people rather than bodies, true-crime writers can, and must, resist the urge to display the victim for shock value. It is enough to state matter-of-factly what happened without using those details solely to engage the reader. In *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, Michelle McNamara brings readers into each crime scene, a place where the aftermath of violence could easily reign supreme in gratuitous and graphic detail. Instead, McNamara writes simply and directly. Of Manuela Witthuhn's murder, she writes, "Manuela was in bed lying face down. She was wearing a brown velour robe and was partially wrapped in a sleeping bag, which she sometimes slept in when she was cold. Red marks circled her wrists and ankles, evidence of ligatures that had been removed. A large screwdriver was lying on the concrete patio two feet from the rear sliding glass door. The locking mechanism on the door had been pried open." Here, by using only the bare details of the crime, McNamara is able to include facts about Manuela—her robe, her sleeping bag, the way she was cold at night—that remind readers why this story is being told.

Navigating the true-crime realm is fraught with ethical concerns about the glorification of perpetrators and the revictimization of victims and their families through that process, and the discussions of craft are too sparse. This is thanks, in part, to the dismissiveness with which the genre is treated by literary writers: for example, as Joyce Carol Oates wrote in 1999, "few writers of distinction have been drawn to" crime

writing. But if writers work toward a more ethical practice, one in which they reveal the real heart of the story, as Dancyger implores us to, rather than focusing on titillation or sensationalism, they can begin to form the genre into something more ethical, to tell the story of Cleo Tellstone and others like her rather than of their killers.

JENNY MOLBERG

The Craft of Silence

Hot with the Bad Things. Lucia LoTempio. Alice James Books, 2020. 80 pp. \$16.95 (paper).

“You must see how this could be you,” Naomi Shihab Nye writes in “Kindness,” a poem that champions empathy, particularly for those who have died a public death. It’s one of the poems I cherish most, and the quote’s sentiment reverberates through the pages of Lucia LoTempio’s searing debut collection of poems, *Hot with the Bad Things*. The book juxtaposes a murder-suicide case in Geneseo, New York, LoTempio’s college town, with a more personal account of intimate-partner abuse, deftly shifting perspectives to highlight the larger cultural issue of victim-blaming and silencing. From the start, LoTempio moves beyond personal testimony to confront the layered narrative, the book as something *made*: “Hiding behind the poem is always another poem,” she writes. Later, she acknowledges the complexities of recognizing one’s own story in another’s catastrophic end:

As if I can play this mirror game. As if she could light through me. As if I am at the quiet swirling center. . . .

When I write about the girl, I don’t know a way that isn’t obliteration.

Hot with the Bad Things undertakes risk: if the subject matter is someone else’s story, the writer must interrogate their urge to see themselves in that victim and must avoid appropriating the victim’s experiences. On the other side of the coin, rising out of personal trauma to create art can reopen that trauma—and aggravate the perpetrator, as the work itself boldly severs the intimate pact of secrecy that often accompanies abuse. Fear, that silent ellipsis, fills the blank spaces of *Hot with the Bad Things*. Ultimately, though, LoTempio demonstrates ways to accomplish both of those risky projects, using tools such as typographical erasure, the negative space of caesuras, inclusion of antagonistic voices, and careful choice of pronouns.

LoTempio deftly navigates the difficult territory of writing about victims by capturing the unspeakable through typography. A black circle symbol, or a “blot”—as LoTempio calls it in an online interview with *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*—demarcates the speaker’s abuser, as in this selection from later in the book:

Even now, as I write, I have no direction for the curved line that touches him.

When other poets read this they suggest I take it out. It humanizes ●.
But humans do terrible things, and they do them all the time.

The circle symbol in place of the abuser’s name embodies the silencing nature of intimate-partner violence. Erasure, symbols, or redaction serve to protect the writer and those who also live under the threat of a perpetrator; ironically, these erasures serve to protect the abuser as well. The symbol also concretizes the cyclical nature of abuse, which is “not a line but a loop,” as LoTempio puts it. “Here a circle begins at a weapon,” she writes, “and can be penetrated.” I wonder, noting the opacity of this particular circle: can the silencing abuser be penetrated, understood, through a poem? Through LoTempio’s symbology and lines of questioning, I come to understand that poetry can’t pin down or reveal the intentions and actions of an abuser, but that his power diminishes when the victim’s silence is dismantled. In this way, once her truth lives on the page, the abuser’s most powerful weapon, silencing, can no longer exist.

In addition to the “blot,” several poems manifest silence through caesura, as in “When a girl is killed”:

When iced
with blame When a girl learns When to keep
herself safe When it’s a matter of yelling *Fire*
not *Help me* not *Rape* not *Run*

Caesura in this poem embodies the lessons a “girl” must learn about how the crime committed against her will be muffled: even at the memorial, as LoTempio attests, “they don’t / mention her.” In the wake of a murder, community members must fill in the gaps of a victim’s life—what she learned, what she knew, and the ways she had to protect

herself while keeping quiet. The gaps in LoTempio's poem also demonstrate the holes in the victim's story, the limitations enforced on her through a larger, societal shushing. In other poems, the caesura embodies the pause a woman-identifying person must take before expressing her fear, as this act can expose and infuriate an abuser.

In “[Status Update Upstate],” a series of poems spread through the book, LoTempio moves the point of view from the more personal speaker's “I” to a frightening collective voice, mining social-media posts and comments on the murder-suicide case in Geneseo. Writing in this manner of persona captures a patriarchal silencing of victims, but it also risks further erasure. LoTempio lets the harmful language stand on its own, though, encouraging readers to reflect on the lasting effects of such impulsive, misinformed speech:

Obviously you've never seen Fatal
Attraction. You ladies should protest by not
shaving your armpits. Go screw yourself. I
will protect everyone I can. Idiot feminist.
#awful news. 😞 A place I call home. My
sisterhood is a few houses down. Sheesh. So
sad to see this happen, especially Geneseo.
Actually, there's already a lot of deaths.
Actually, he was a really nice kid. Actually,
I'm surprised they even did a story about this.

Perspective plays a crucial role in *Hot with the Bad Things*; the “Status Update” poems serve as an antifeminist chorus with which the speaker must grapple as she interrogates her own ethical and creative dilemma. “I want her alive,” LoTempio later writes; “point to her, be able to see *this*. I want to find a younger me, tell her *this*. I want to write a poem that says *this*.” That word, “this,” captures the murky erasure of truth and precision in language that occurs with unspeakable violence. When discourse about the victims doesn't mention their lives, just their deaths, we lose a sense of their particularity. When the news media reports only on the murders of young beautiful white women, thousands of women of color who are murdered and/or missing are even further erased. In reckoning with her own failure to properly elegize

the dead, LoTempio holds space for a larger conversation: How do we create an antisogynist system when our culture is obsessed with the lives and minds of killers? How do those who have faced abuse and violence write about their personal experiences without simultaneously endangering their own safety and mental health? By acknowledging the complexity of the issue through these poems, LoTempio bravely opens that dialogue. Her poems extend beyond the felt boundaries of the self, risking a movement past silence. *You must see how this could be you.*

In fact, LoTempio fluctuates between the pronouns “you” and “I” throughout the collection, reflecting on what a present-day self could teach a former self. Poetry opens this possibility for past and future selves to encounter each other in an imaginative space. Late in the book, she addresses the retraumatization of confronting the past:

There are so many things ● did to me and I don't want to just say.

My small small self. . . I see your dead body everywhere. . . It's still coming. It's still happening. Even when I step over you and look at the sky.

Here, not only does the “I” separate itself from the “you,” creating a knowing distance between past and future self, but through the image of the victim’s body, the past self also becomes like the murdered woman in Geneseo, bridging the narrative between the speaker’s personal account and the more publicized murder, which serves to amplify the high stakes the future self recognizes in her past experience with abuse. In a later section in the book, LoTempio addresses epistles to her younger self. Again, she breaks the book’s fourth wall, addressing the book itself as a made thing that asserts its voice, dismantling the silence under which she has lived in the time since, that limbo between the experience of abuse and the silence-breaking the book embodies. At the end of that section she writes, “I’m writing these missals because I want you to look around & recognize the fiery & gorgeous that survived. One day you’ll write a beautiful book; the love you feel for him will be a palimpsest of joy—: the flurry of last notes he keys, then the jump, from the piano bench, onto you.” Through this imaginative leap, LoTempio reclaims the narrative, empowering the speaker’s past self

as well as any reader who can sympathize. It is through the speaker's connection with the past self that the Geneseo victim, too, can join a living conversation from which she has been violently severed.

The imagination is limited in its ability to understand, directly, the suffering of others, but in recognizing this failure, LoTempio validates readers who empathize with the victim of the Geneseo murder, the speaker of the book, and the speaker's former self. It is possible, through poetry, to step through the recesses of time and console the younger self, one less equipped with knowledge and self-empowerment. Rather than victim-blaming, this is a recognition, a forgiveness, a revision. I want to say that writing about personal and societal violence can set us free, but it can't, it doesn't, because "it's still happening" in a society that won't do the work of change. The shushing is relentless. Nevertheless, each poem that sounds its voice into the world in this way (even if, at times, enacting silence) is doing the good work of starting the conversation again.