Introduction

In the ninth book of *The Republic*, Plato famously observed that "the virtuous man is content to dream what a wicked man really does." Elaborating on Plato, Sigmund Freud argued that violent lawbreakers make it possible for the rest of us to adapt to the demands of normality by acting out, and being punished for, our own unacknowledged impulses. In the view of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, the criminal contributes to civic well-being not only by promoting a sense of solidarity among law-abiding citizens, united in condemnation of the malefactor, but by providing a cathartic outlet for their primal vengeful impulses.

Such theories imply that criminals can fulfill their social function only if the rest of the world knows exactly what outrages they have committed and how they have been punished. That might be one way of accounting for the genre of writing collected in this book—writing that caters to the public's need to hear the whole disturbing story. The question of how much that need is rooted in a moral imperative rather than the lure of the forbidden has often shadowed accounts of crime.

There is nothing new about this particular craving. That the strangulation of a six-year-old who competed in child pageants, or the disappearance of a vacationing co-ed, or the slaying of a pregnant California housewife can preoccupy the American news media for weeks on end—supplanting events of more obvious global significance—is often taken as a dispiriting sign of the debased sensibilities of our sensation-steeped culture. Yet the appetite for tales of real-life murder, the more horrific the better, has been a perennial feature of human society.

Long before the advent of movable type, accounts of shocking crimes were disseminated orally through Europe in the form of crime ballads, versified narratives of actual stabbings, stranglings, bludgeonings, and dismemberments. Gutenberg's invention then became a means to profit

from the appetite for such narratives. Any particularly notorious killing was likely to be written up in doggerel or prose and printed on broadsheets or in cheaply made pamphlets to be sold by itinerant peddlers. Conveyed in the same tone of breathless wonderment used to report other marvelous occurrences, from the births of two-headed babies to the sightings of sea-serpents, these early crime narratives were, for the most part, crude productions, short on artistic sensibility but full of shocking detail and moralistic fervor.

America was from the beginning fertile ground for true narratives of crime. The first popular form such accounts took was the Puritan execution sermon, a genre with roots in the Old World that flourished so extraordinarily here that it can fairly be claimed as indigenous. Typically delivered right before the hanging, the execution sermon was similar in both structure and intent to other Puritan discourse; the crime itself was merely an "awful occasion" for the preaching of Calvinist doctrine. Following its initial recitation, either at church or on the scaffold itself, such sermons might be printed and sold as pamphlets and sometimes later collected in book form. A number of these, like Cotton Mather's *Pillars of Salt*, became early American best sellers.

Mirroring cultural shifts in the country at large, American true-crime writing in the early republic became increasingly commercialized and divorced from its religious origins. By the 1830s the marketplace was flooded with purely exploitive accounts of real-life horrors. A favorite subject, then as now, was lust-murder, often described in such explicit detail that, according to one contemporary critic, young men could learn more about female anatomy from these tawdry publications than from medical textbooks. Cheap crime pamphlets, trial reports, and the lurid accounts in the "penny press" were the main sources of true-crime thrills in Jacksonian America, along with such widely distributed compendiums as *The Record of Crimes in the United States* (1834).

Some of these early accounts detailed the misspent lives of pirates and frontier desperadoes, but their main focus was on the kinds of homicides

that have always formed the central subject matter of the true-crime genre in its most typical form, and that in consequence make up the bulk of the present collection. The pieces collected here, with a few exceptions, do not deal with the sorts of killings committed by men for whom murder is part of a criminal way of life: bandits, hired assassins, gangsters. (The extensive literatures of outlawry and organized crime deserve volumes of their own.) The focus of this volume is on those peculiarly horrific and unsettling crimes that have from the beginning haunted the American imagination: crimes that have, in the words of pioneering newspaperman James Gordon Bennett, "some of the sublime of horror" about them, those "frightful," "horrid," "extraordinary" and "unheard-of" (to use the favorite adjectives of 19th-century sensation-mongers) acts of violence that can erupt in otherwise ordinary lives.

As the founder of America's first unabashedly sensationalistic newspaper, the New York *Herald*, Bennett was a seminal figure in the history of true-crime journalism. While earlier newspaper publishers, including Benjamin Franklin, recognized the popular appeal of grisly murder stories and offered readers the occasional account of a particularly hideous slaying, no one before Bennett was so attuned to the public's interest in tales of crime and violence. American readers, he declared, "were more ready to seek six columns of the details of a brutal murder . . . than the same amount of words poured forth by the genius of the noblest author of our times." Bennett was happy to give the public what it wanted, providing extensive and extremely graphic coverage of the most shocking crimes of the day, most famously the 1836 hatchet murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett.

Such was the success of Bennett's formula that by the 1850s Ralph Waldo Emerson was complaining in his journal that his countrymen spent their time "reading all day murders & railroad accidents." Among the most devout of these readers was Emerson's Concord neighbor Nathaniel Hawthorne. A self-confessed lover of "all sorts of good and good-for-nothing books," Hawthorne was an avid reader of murder pamphlets and trial reports throughout his life. His craving for such fare was so intense that while serving as the American consul in Liverpool he had a

friend ship him the penny papers so that he could keep up with the grisly goings-on back home.

Herman Melville was likewise fascinated with accounts of real-life murders, particularly the atrocities of the Harpes, two murderous cousins who terrorized the Tennessee and Kentucky frontier during a killing spree in 1798–99. The Harpes' bloody exploits are invoked in the opening scene of *The Confidence-Man*, in which Melville describes a waterfront peddler hawking "the lives of Meason, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel, the pirate of the Mississippi, and the brothers Harpe, the Thugs of the Green River country, in Kentucky." The 1841 ax-murder of New York City printer Samuel Adams by John C. Colt (brother of the gun-maker) also made a lasting impression on Melville, who 12 years later in "Bartleby the Scrivener" accentuated the grim impersonality of the urban office by recalling that it was in "a solitary office . . . entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations" that "the hapless Colt" had been driven to kill "the unfortunate Adams."

Neither Hawthorne nor Melville, however, published any true-crime writing. Hawthorne's interest in the subject is clear in a fascinating journal entry about a visit to a "Hall of Wax Statuary" included in this volume, while Melville limited his comments on true crime to a journal entry from November 1849 in which he describes how, on his first trip to London, he paid half a shilling to watch the hanging of the married murderers George and Marie Manning: "The mob was brutish. All in all, a most wonderful, horrible, & unspeakable scene." Nor, strictly speaking, did a writer even more obsessed with themes of murder, madness, and irresistible impulse, their contemporary Edgar Allan Poe. Like Melville, Poe was gripped by the Colt-Adams affair and used its most ghoulish feature—the victim's salted corpse smuggled aboard a clipper in a packing crate—as the basis for his story "The Oblong Box." Plot elements of his unfinished verse drama *Politian* are drawn from the so-called "Kentucky Tragedy" of 1825 in which a young lawyer named Jereboam Beauchamp, at the behest of his wife, killed her former lover, Colonel Solomon P. Sharp. Some scholars are also inclined to believe that Poe's pioneering mystery story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was at least partly inspired by a bizarre report in 1834 about an orangutan trained to burglarize apartments. In all these works, however, Poe gives free rein to his imagination, using real-life incidents as springboards into the fantastic. The closest Poe came to true-crime writing was in his detective story "The Mystery of Marie Roget," which, although presented as fiction, was in fact closely based on the 1841 slaying of the beautiful New York cigar-store salesgirl Mary Rogers, with the names changed and the setting switched to Paris.

The list of important American writers who have created fictional narratives from the stuff of actual crimes is a long one, going back to Charles Brockden Brown, the originator of American Gothic fiction, whose 1798 novel *Wieland* was modeled on a notorious case of "family annihilation" (described in this book on pages 39–44). Later examples include Frank Norris's *McTeague*, with its echoes of the case of Patrick Collins, an unemployed San Francisco ironworker who stabbed his wife to death in 1893 after she refused him money; Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which draws on the trial of Robert Nixon, an 18-year-old African-American accused of fatally assaulting a white woman with a brick during a burglary; John O'Hara's best-selling *BUtterfield 8*, suggested by the death of Starr Faithfull, a young woman whose corpse washed up on a Long Island beach in 1931; and, more recently, Joyce Carol Oates's 1995 horror novel *Zombie*, whose lobotomy-obsessed protagonist was modeled on the cannibalistic serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. All these works, as well as Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, based on the Chester Gillette–Grace Brown case of 1906, take major imaginative departures from the historical truth of the events that inspired them.

A milestone in American true-crime writing appeared 25 years after Poe's death, when *Atlantic Monthly* published "A Memorable Murder" by the New England writer Celia Thaxter. Like Abraham Lincoln's newspaper account of the Trailor murder mystery, Thaxter's piece was an anomaly in her career—her only foray into the realm of crime writing. It stands, however, as groundbreaking work in the genre: an explicitly nonfiction work that relies on the conventions of sentimental storytelling to build

suspense and generate both horror and pathos. In her skillful manipulation of plot construction, point of view, dialogue, and other narrative devices, Thaxter foreshadows the dramatic techniques that would come to characterize the crime writings of Truman Capote and his fellow "New Journalists" a century later.

American readers were inundated with crime stories during the heyday of yellow journalism when, as A. J. Liebling recounts in his piece on a turn-of-the-century dismemberment-murder, newspapermen not only reported on crimes but conducted their own independent investigations. Though certain murder trials had generated enormous excitement since at least the time of the Jewett case, William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer found new ways of transforming somber life-and-death proceedings into thrilling public spectacles. For example, in 1899 a dapper young New Yorker named Roland Molineux was accused of sending cyanide-laced patent medicine to two fellow members of his exclusive Manhattan athletic club. Immediately dubbed "The Great Poison Mystery" by the yellow press, the Molineux affair became the first great media circus of the 1900s, a precursor of all the other wildly ballyhooed "Trials of the Century" to follow, from that of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb to the O. J. Simpson extravaganza. Among the various techniques employed by Hearst to whip the public into a frenzy over Molineux's trial was the enlisting of well-known writers to cover the story, among them Nathaniel Hawthorne's son, Julian, at that time a highly successful author who had inherited his father's fascination with horror, the supernatural, and crime. In replacing the usual anonymous reporters with journalistic headliners, Hearst—along with his nemesis, Pulitzer, who assigned his own heavy-hitters to the story—planted a seed that would come to full flower during the 1920s and 30s, when celebrity authors such as Damon Runyon, Theodore Dreiser, and Edna Ferber covered high-profile stories like the Hall-Mills double murder, the Robert Edwards "American Tragedy" case, and the trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann for the Lindbergh baby kidnapping.

Other famous writers of the interwar era, among them James Thurber and Alexander Woollcott, found an outlet for their own fascination with murder in the pages of *The New Yorker*, which began its recurrent and still-active "Annals of Crime" feature during this period. At the same time, a host of other, far less prestigious magazines were devoting themselves exclusively to the subject. The progenitor of this pulp genre, which first appeared on the newsstands in 1924, was Bernarr Macfadden's *True Detective*, whose immediate success spawned a host of even more disreputable imitators such as *Shocking Detective*, *Underworld Detective*, *Confidential Detective*, and about six dozen similar titles. Pounded out by underpaid hacks, the stories in these fact-based crime monthlies were almost always formulaic and forgettable, although, on rare occasions, pieces by writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Jim Thompson would appear in their pages.

To judge from the evidence of his novels, one of Hammett's own favorite true-crime publications was Thomas S. Duke's 1910 *Celebrated Criminal Cases of America*, which is referred to in both *The Thin Man* and *The Maltese Falcon*. Duke, a former captain of the San Francisco Police Department, was one of a long line of American law officers who produced true-crime volumes. Most, such as George S. McWatters's *Knots Untied: The Ways and By-Ways of American Detectives* (1871) and Frank Geyer's *The Holmes-Pietzel Case* (1896), were accounts of their own real-life exploits; by contrast, Duke's influential book was a compilation of criminal case histories, covering a wide range of offenders from the Colorado cannibal Alfred Packer to the Victorian serial killers Theo Durrant and H. H. Holmes.

Among true-crime aficionados—"murder fanciers," as he himself called them—the acknowledged American master of the genre in the early 20th century was Edmund Lester Pearson. Our country's answer to the revered Scottish crime historian William Roughead (who numbered Joseph Conrad and Henry James among his admirers), the Harvard-educated Pearson was a professional librarian who wrote widely on various bibliophilic subjects before devoting the last dozen years of his life to the field of true crime. His stylish, often dryly humorous examinations of historical homicides—both celebrated (the Lizzie Borden case was a particular obsession of his) and obscure (the 1897 murder-dismemberment of Willie Guldensuppe, later the subject of an article by A. J. Liebling

included in this volume)—appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Scribner's*, *Liberty*, and *The New Yorker*, and were collected in a half-dozen books, beginning with his 1924 classic *Studies in Murder*.

From Pearson's day to the 1960s, however, even the best American true-crime writers—such as Miriam Allen deFord and William Tibbetts Brannon—were, for the most part, known only to devoted fans of the genre. Despite the genuine literary gifts of authors like Pearson and his contemporary Herbert Asbury, there was still a distinctly disreputable air clinging to the form. The book-length studies published by the Gold Medal imprint of Fawcett from 1951 to 1957 are a case in point. These first-rate accounts of classic American homicides, including Harry Thaw's shooting of Stanford White, the Hall-Mills affair, and the Ruth Snyder–Judd Gray "Double Indemnity" case, were issued as cheap paperbacks whose garish covers and equally suggestive titles (*The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, *The Girl in Lover's Lane*, *The Girl in the Death Cell*) belied their adept, carefully researched contents. Even the crime essays of a writer as accomplished as John Bartlow Martin, an admired journalist who served as speechwriter to President Kennedy and as U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, were quickly consigned to a format that made his *Butcher's Dozen and Other Murders* indistinguishable from any other exercise in sensationalism sold at bus stations and corner drugstores.

All that changed in 1966, with the publication of *In Cold Blood*. Truman Capote's claim that his book represented a radically new literary genre, the "nonfiction novel," was widely dismissed from the moment he made it, with critics quickly pointing to Meyer Levin's 1956 best seller *Compulsion*. Constrained by legal considerations, Levin—who described his book as a "documentary novel"—altered the historical facts of the Leopold-Loeb "thrill killing" only to the extent of changing the names of the principals. (The book was so faithful to the actual facts that Leopold eventually sued the author for violating his "rights of privacy.") But while Capote's blockbuster might not have brought about a revolution in literary form, it had an enormous impact on the marketplace. True crime was instantly elevated to a major publishing category and endowed with a legitimacy it had never previously enjoyed.

To be sure, bookstores are still flooded with instant books about lurid cases whose lineage can be traced back through the anonymous pulp of *True Detective* magazine to the pamphlets and broadsides of pre-industrial times. At the same time, however, serious book-length studies of particular crimes, written by major authors and published by prestigious houses, became a staple of the best-seller lists. Works such as Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, Joseph Wambaugh's *The Onion Field*, and Joe McGinnis's *Fatal Vision* not only appealed to broad mainstream audiences but garnered often dazzling reviews, even as they fueled an increasingly heated controversy over the blurring of fact and fiction. (Because of the decision to focus on self-contained pieces in this collection, none of these lengthy books is excerpted in the present volume.)

The present volume seeks to reveal both continuities and transformations in the ways in which Americans have written about crime. The most important continuity is criminal behavior itself. The forms of transgression described in this book can arise in any place or time, their details modified only by newer weaponry or other technological changes. What differs strikingly from era to era, however, is the way such transgressions are interpreted. Acts otherwise analogous have been seen at different times as arising from sin, or irrational thinking, or mental disease, or inarticulate protest against abuse or oppression. Where a Puritan saw the mysterious workings of divine providence, a writer at the end of the 20th century might discern evidence of an absurd and random universe. The hardboiled cynicism evident in the journalism of the Roaring '20s gave way in time to a psychologically informed approach more inclined to view the criminal as a helpless victim of his own impulses. What remains the same is the sense that the most flagrant and disturbing crimes elicit from society a compulsion to find some meaning in acts that often seem meaningless. The human community, finding itself under assault from within, searches desperately for a framework or context to explain the apparently unexplainable.

For some, the true-crime genre will always retain a disreputable aura. In an essay on *In Cold Blood*, the critic Renata Adler deplored both the

original book and the 1968 film adaptation for playing to the bloodlust of the audience by using "every technique of cheap fiction" to intensify the emotional impact of the killings. It is all too easy simply to turn in disgust from any close examination of the worst human acts, and to brand anyone who does not choose to look away as a voyeur or worse. On some fundamental level it is undoubtedly true that true-crime writing appeals to what William James called the "aboriginal capacity for murderous excitement," a capacity that persists even among the most decent and law-abiding citizens. The worst specimens of the genre may not rise above a quasi-pornographic level.

But blanket dismissal oversimplifies a complex question. People read about true crime for many reasons and on many levels. Some readers identify with the victims and are moved to pity and terror by their plight; some identify with those who pursue the criminal, and are either reassured by the criminal's capture and punishment and the restoration of order, or (when such a resolution is not forthcoming) are forced to confront the limits of human power in the face of unleashed malevolence. Such unsolved crimes generate the eeriest spell of all, as evidenced by the enduring public fascination with Jack the Ripper. It would be naïve to deny that an identification with the evildoer, however covert or repressed, can also be a powerful factor in the genre's hold, although deep curiosity about those who commit evil is hardly synonymous with identification. Beyond all else, true-crime writing acknowledges the disturbing persistence of the most frightening and destructive capacities of the species. Sometimes that acknowledgment results in art of a high order; sometimes merely in news reporting we find impossible to ignore. We attend to what it tells us as we would to an account of a natural disaster or a freakish anomaly—except that the disaster, the anomaly, is all too human.

—Harold Schechter

TRUE CRIME