

Title: True Crime
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Full Text:

Byline: Walter Mosley; Mosley is the author, most recently, of *The Long Fall*.

The roots of an American obsession.

Everybody is guilty of something. This is a truism of the West. It goes all the way back to Cain and original sin and has been a central topic of discourse among members of society from the construction of the laws of ancient Rome, through the Inquisition, into the Jim Crow system of the South (and North), stopping to wallow in the culture of the Soviet Union, and going right to the rotted heart of the race laws of Nazi Germany.

In 2,000 years of Western civilization we have been guilty of heresy, perversion, theft, and murder; of fighting and refusing to fight; of loving, lusty after, and sometimes just looking. We have been guilty of speaking out and keeping silent, of walking, marching, and running away. We have been found culpable for following orders and for refusing to follow them, for adultery, child endangerment, sexual harassment, and elder abuse. We have also been guilty of our religion, national origin, skin color, sexual preference, gender, and, now and then, of the blood in our veins.

[Guilt](#) is the mainstay of who we are and how we are organized, and is, seemingly, our undeniable destiny, along with Death and Taxes.

Our relationship with guilt is as old as the DNA that defines our species. But the nature of culpability changes with technology and technique. These changes affect the way we see the world and the way we seek to understand our predicament. True-[crime](#) stories, murder mysteries, up-to-the-minute online news reports, and (as always) rumor and innuendo grab our attention faster than any call for justice, human rights, or ceasefires.

This is because most of us see ourselves as powerless cogs in a greater machine; as potential victims of a society so large and insensitive that we, innocent bystanders in the crowd, might be caught at any time in the crossfire between the forces of so-called good and evil.

Because of this vulnerability we have questions that need to be answered to ensure our safety. One such question is, what would happen if --? What if you saw a man shoot somebody? Should you tell the police? Would they protect you from murky vengeance? You saw a true-crime TV show once that profiled a man who identified a murderer and was himself murdered for giving evidence. Would you be guilty of being stupid for doing what you were taught was right?

Another question is, is it safe? Is it safe for you to walk the streets, drink the water, fly on commercial airliners, speak to an attractive stranger, to believe the words of political, religious, corporate, and social leaders?

In smaller societies we worked side by side with leaders, wealthy property owners, and local ministers. Face-to-face meetings and friendly gossip gave us at least the illusion of understanding where we stood and what was right. But today the working urban dweller gets all this information from TV and computer screens -- and so often, we know, the media misinform.

The feeling of being lied to brings about a hunger for truth. We want to know if the man on death row was really guilty. Were there actually WMDs in the hills of Iraq? Are people being tortured, and am I morally responsible for my government's actions?

In order to answer these questions we first turn, with a mistrustful eye, to objective opinion sources. Editorials in newspapers and magazines, talk shows and news programs, public radio, blogs, and (because there's just too much for one person to read, listen to, and view) friends who have gleaned information from other impartial venues.

But even as we take in the information shoveled out at a stupendous rate from dozens of different sources, we begin to worry. Who owns the news? How do bloggers pay their rent? Why, in spite of what I'm being told, is the economy, and the world in general, getting worse?

This dissatisfaction brings us to fictional accounts. Crime shows, mysteries, and films speak to the bystander in a dangerous world. These forms of entertainment corroborate our feelings of distrust and allow us to think about how we might fit into a world that wouldn't even be aware of us getting crushed under its collective weight.

Fiction, better than reality, gives us heroes who can't let us down, who cannot be arrested, convicted, or vilified. Maybe these stories won't be able to resolve our dilemmas in the real world, but they can offer escape through a fantasy where even a common everyday Joe (or Jane) can be saved.

This salvation has always been our goal. Forgiveness for our sinful desires and secret trysts, for our failures and broken commandments, for our weakness beside the machine that covers the world with its cold, gray shadow.

This is why we have TV psychologists and mother substitutes, confessionals and paparazzi. On the one hand we're looking for deliverance, and on the other we seek to show how even the rich and famous are flawed.

We need forgiveness and someone to blame. So the story of crime fills our TVs, theaters, cinemas, computer files, and bookshelves. We are fascinated with stories of crime, real or imagined, because we need them to cleanse the modern world from our souls.

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