

[United States](#) | Forensic fandom

## True-crime fans are banding together online to try to solve cases

Yikes



PHOTOGRAPH: THE ECONOMIST/KW

Jun 24th 2024 | NASHVILLE

It is 9am on a Sunday and Liz is trying to figure out who did it. Specifically: who killed this guy splayed across the floor? In her day job Liz is a massage therapist, but today she is a homicide detective—or rather she is cosplaying one. Wearing blue latex gloves she prods a blood-soaked mannequin by her feet, part of a crime-scene simulation at CrimeCon, a convention for true-crime fans. Liz came to learn from the experts. They start with the basics: it is blood *spatter*, not splatter. At CrimeCon there are panels on topics ranging from sextortion to forensic entomology (“beetles feed on dry remains”, “moths are not

predacious”). There are sessions dedicated to famous cold cases and meet-and-greets with authors and podcasters. There is merch for sale: pepper spray, stun guns, cocktail covers to guard against date rape. And there are lots of other enthusiasts to befriend. “It’s not a celebration of crime, it’s a learning of crime,” says Liz’s friend. Except everyone does seem to be having a very good time.

That some 5,000 cheery, normal-seeming people pay \$350 and up to spend their weekend chatting about grisly murders, online predators, what to do when “love goes wrong”, and what *really* happened to Kathleen Peterson illustrates the genre’s popularity. True crime is booming. In 2022 it accounted for a quarter of top-ranked podcasts on Apple and Spotify, according to the Pew Research Centre, a think-tank. That year a third of people surveyed by YouGov, a pollster, said they consume true-crime content at least once a week. Women are the most avid fans.

The genre is evolving. These days more content is devoted to open cases and wrongful convictions rather than solved crimes, notes Haley Gray, a researcher for several podcasts. The shift stems partly from a perception that the criminal-justice system is not functioning fairly, which #MeToo and the death of George Floyd intensified, says David Schmid of the University at Buffalo. The other reason is that such cases present a puzzle to solve. And who doesn’t like a puzzle?

For consumers and creators of the stuff, it is gratifying that a genre long considered prurient and exploitative might instead promise justice. Some podcasts have indeed changed the course of investigations, by identifying victims or bringing pressure to bear on police. “Serial”, which spawned the podcast boom a decade ago, led to the release of Adnan Syed from prison (his conviction, over the murder of his ex-girlfriend in 1999, was reinstated last year and is the subject of an appeal). In 2019 Chris Lambert, a singer-songwriter with no journalism experience, made “Your Own Backyard”, a podcast series about the decades-old murder of Kristin Smart. It renewed attention on the case, and the police arrested her killer.

Yet as Liz in the latex gloves can attest, true crime is not like other fandoms. It invites participation. Fans listen to stories, then they develop theories about what happened. Sometimes they get involved and sleuth around online themselves.

Crowdsourced crime-solving is not new. In medieval England, at the sound of a “hue and cry”, bystanders were expected to help nab criminals. Then came “wanted” posters and tip hotlines. But internet sleuthing is different, since it is networked. The Reddit Bureau of Investigation, a forum on that site, has nearly 750,000 members. Whole communities form with a shared sense of mission. What they lack in the power to issue warrants or subpoenas they make up for in the array and outlandishness of their ideas. This can have nasty consequences.

In 2013 Reddit apologised when its users misidentified suspects behind the Boston Marathon bombing. In 2022 a professor at the University of Idaho sued a TikTokker for alleging that she had orchestrated the murder of four students on campus that year. Victims’ families get harassed too. At CrimeCon, anyone connected to a well-known victim is like a mini-celebrity by association, granted spots on panels and booths in the exhibition hall. But online it is a free-for-all. After Maura Murray disappeared in New Hampshire 20 years ago, armchair detectives insinuated that she was running from her family and that her relatives were obstructing the police investigation. Internet sleuths “felt they had a right not only to all this information about Maura, but also every single person connected to her,” says Julie, her sister.

Tricia Griffith, manager of a site called Websleuths, acknowledges that her forums attract a fair number of conspiracists and that she sometimes feels like a “schoolmarm with a ruler going, ‘behave, behave’”. No one on her site has ever solved a case, she concedes. But that doesn’t mean that law-enforcement agencies don’t check it “constantly” and appreciate her members’ ability to “think outside the box”. Of course the police will never admit it—or, heaven forbid, thank them. ■