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“A SELF-OBSERVING WORLD OF OBSERVERS”  
THE AMERICAN SERIAL KILLER IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S *CHILD OF GOD*  
AND CONTEMPORARY TRUE CRIME NARRATIVES

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

Particularly unique in true and fictionalized crime narratives is the serial killer; a criminal overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly white, and understood by cultural scholars like Mark Seltzer and David Schmid as distinctly American. This thesis offers a concerted look at one such figure: Lester Ballard, the problematic “protagonist” of Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*. My study is organized into four sections which take up the language of criminal classification in order to more fully determine how Lester functions. “Who Is(n’t) Lester Ballard?” troubles the existing scholarship which sees fictional Lester as a descendant of real-life murderer Ed Gein. “What is Lester Ballard?: Federal Definitions of Serial Killers,” argues that McCarthy actively subverts the narrative of the knowable, captured killer that the FBI and the public seek from stories of repetitive, violent crime. “Why Is Lester Ballard?: Inquiries into Motive” suggests that McCarthy purposefully denies psychological motivation and instead focuses on Lester’s corporeality as a means of complicating his mythicization by the residents of Sevierville. Finally, “Where is Lester Ballard?: The Liminal Space of Crime Fact and Fiction” posits that McCarthy ultimately creates a microcosm of true crime writing in Lester’s fictional community.

That McCarthy’s novel mimics the real world communities of true crime creators and consumers connects a traditional literary study to the cultural/rhetorical study of true crime podcasting I offer in part two. In crime narratives of either kind, there is a constant implication of the other – true crime is narrativized along the lines of crime fiction, and crime fiction constantly strives to be so potent as to be mistaken for crime fact. For this reason, I take up one specific branch of the current explosion of true crime treatments, the true crime comedy podcast *My Favorite Murder*, as a complex and unique iteration of the genre and the figure of the investigator which begins with Nancy Drew and develops through televisual girl detectives like the *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars*.

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I would like to dedicate this project to my family. My parents, to whom I owe everything I have and everything that I am. My wide open heart and love of knowledge are yours. Mom, you gave me the gift of words and Dad, the gift of guts. This took a lot of both. To Danny, Katie, Laura, and Matt, who, just by being themselves, show me every day what is important and what is possible. I will never stop wanting to be you. To Sara, I remind you of what you already know: I'd have quit without your brain to comfort mine.

Finally, I dedicate this to my husband and partner, the love of my life and the safest place to land. Rob, you made this possible. You make it all possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

Crime, both fictionalized and factual, occupies a huge place in the American entertainment landscape. Crime narratives span form and function, from the classic detective literature of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Allen Poe to salacious tabloid coverage and self-serious televisual treatments. Though stories of crime and criminals in their many iterations have “frequently been dismissed as sleazy ... the cheap shockers [have always] sold on bookstalls. Even now,” Mark Lawson points out, “true crime magazines tend to be displayed by newsagents closer to porn titles than the Economist” despite their huge popularity. That popularity is particularly palpable in the contemporary landscape, and perhaps crystallized by the sheer variety that crime narratives take – including lauded literary iterations, a group of course including Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* but also, I believe, Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*.

Earlier this year alongside massive success of recent podcasts like *Serial*, *Dirty John*, and *My Favorite Murder*, and television docu-series like HBO’s *The Jinx* and Netflix’s *Making a Murderer* and *The Keepers*, the Oxygen network rebranded as one solely dedicated to crime programming. Executive vice president at Oxygen, Rod Aissa, explains, “I’m no sociologist, but I do think in times of unrest or uncertainty, the conversation around justice [that comes with true crime documentaries] and what it means is often very comforting and also a very important conversation to have” (Owen). Brad Simpson, *American Crime Story* executive producer, echoes this sentiment in an interview with *Variety*’s Rob Owen: “People feel like something is broken in America and watching true crime speaks to that ... Really good true crime isn’t just about the



crime itself; it's the crime that's indicative of something in society." This project endeavors to explore two iterations of the crime narrative which are distinct but ultimately, I think, significantly related: the literary serial killer and the woman-hosted true crime podcast.

Particularly unique in true and fictionalized crime narratives is the figure of the serial killer—a criminal overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly white, and understood by cultural scholars like Mark Seltzer and David Schmid as a distinctly American phenomenon. Seltzer explains that “Serial killing is ... represented as at once an horrific departure from normalcy and as abnormally normal: wounds to an idealized and intact American culture that is at the same time seen as a wound culture,” and it is this duality which renders the serial killer perennially fascinating (*Serial Killers* 6).

To discuss real and invented serial killers is to discuss classifications, the term itself born of the FBI's desire to order and organize a kind of criminal that pre-dated the nomenclature by hundreds of years. The “official” definitions attempt to wrangle the threat of the compulsive murderer by specifying the number of victims, the scale of the threat, and the mobility of the offender, and to pass that state-sanctioned understanding to the public (Schmid 81). Even these FBI-endorsed traits are further typified, exemplified by Schmid's assertion that characteristics like mobility can be further broken down (81). It is for this reason that my reading of one literary serial killer is organized around the idea of classification. It is imperative to understand the ways in which the real-life serial killer is understood, assimilated and rejected by the American society which creates him in order to broach how imagined versions of this figure either adhere to or depart from the reality.

The first part of this project offers a concerted look at one such figure, both literally imagined and simultaneously read by scholars as being indebted to a real-life murderer: Lester Ballard, the deeply problematic protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*. *Child of God* follows Lester, a social and eventually physical outcast of Sevierville, Tennessee, as he is displaced from his childhood home and descends on a journey from voyeur to necrophile to serial murderer. After he is falsely accused of sexual assault, Lester stumbles upon the bodies of two teenagers dead from carbon monoxide poisoning, steals the body of the young woman, and eventually devolves into a cave-dwelling creator and collector of corpses.

My study of *Child of God* is organized into four sections which attempt to take up the language of classification in order to most fully determine how Lester functions. The first section, "Who Is(n't) Lester Ballard?: Questioning Connections to Ed Gein," troubles the existing scholarship which sees fictional Lester as a descendant of real-life murderer Ed Gein. The second, "What is Lester Ballard?: Federal Definitions of Serial Killers," argues that McCarthy actively subverts the narrative of the knowable, captured killer that both the FBI and the public seek from stories of violent, repetitive crime. Section three, "Why Is Lester Ballard?: Inquiries into Motive" suggests that McCarthy purposefully denies psychological motivation and instead focuses on Lester's corporeality as a means of complicating his mythicization by the other residents of Sevierville. Finally, "Where is Lester Ballard?: The Liminal Space of Crime Fact and Fiction" posits that – even though I maintain that Lester ought to be read as divorced from real-world Gein – McCarthy ultimately creates a microcosm of true crime writing in Lester's fictional community. Seltzer describes "the world of true crime [as] a self-

observing world of observers,” and it is this same impulse which I believe informs much of McCarthy’s audience-implicating, sympathy-garnering, serial-killing leading man (*True Crime* 6).

It is my contention that McCarthy’s novel subtly mimics the real world communities of true crime creators and consumers, which connects a traditional literary study to the cultural study of true crime podcasting I present in part two. In considering crime narratives of either kind, there is a constant implication of the other – true crime is narrativized, as frequently as is possible, along the lines of crime fiction (and it is this closure-seeking which, as I present following Schmid, has been institutionalized by law enforcement agencies) and crime fiction is constantly seeking to be so potent as to be mistaken as crime fact. In other words: it is not that “there is no distinction between [crime fiction and true crime] but [that] the distinction between them is everywhere in play within them” (Seltzer, *True Crime* 17). For this reason, I take up one specific branch of the current explosion of true crime treatments as a complex and unique iteration of the genre and the figure of the literary investigator: the woman-led true crime comedy podcast *My Favorite Murder with Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark*.

In order to contextualize the podcast and its women hosts, as well as to bridge McCarthy’s fictive literary killer and the strictly true crime podcast, I first turn to another medium which capitalizes on female-led crime narratives: television. I argue that televisual teen girl detectives like the *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars* – direct descendants of the most famous literary teen sleuth, Nancy Drew – stand as emblematic of a significant evolution in the girl detective which is yet to be critically attended and which should influence the way these podcasters are read. Invoking fictional accounts as

a means of relating to real-world phenomena, as in part one, further demonstrates the inextricability of fact from fiction in crime narratives of either stripe. Understanding this evolution then allows us to understand the way the same concept manifests in podcasters as in fictional teen detectives. Further, it allows for the exploration of the most notable turn from the literary and televisual dramatic treatments: the way that comedy is achieved and functions in *My Favorite Murder*.

These closely-read examinations of specific instances (*Child of God*, *My Favorite Murder*, and to a lesser extent *Pretty Little Liars* and *Veronica Mars*) of three different kinds of crime media (literature, television, podcast) attempt to further the critical attention and potential framework for these oft-ignored narratives, as well as the important departures and complications they present.

*See him. You could say that he's sustained by his fellow men, like you.*

— Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*

## PART 1

### “A Part-Time Ghoul”: *Child of God*'s Manipulation of the Serial Killer

Lester Ballard, the problematic “protagonist” of Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God*, provides a tricky interpretive subject. Though literary scholars join the Sevier County residents in “talkin about Lester,” attempts to understand and explicate him are complex and contested (McCarthy 81). Despite half-hearted attempts by members of his eastern Tennessee community to interpret Lester in the first part of the novel, and despite the omniscient narrator’s occasional direct addresses to the audience which implicate voyeurism in our interpretive relationship with Lester, McCarthy scholars grapple with the “practitioner of ghastriness, [the] part-time ghoul” at the center of the novel (McCarthy 174). *Child of God* follows Lester, a social and eventually physical outcast of Sevierville, Tennessee, as he is displaced from his childhood home and descends on a journey from voyeur to necrophile to serial murderer. After he is falsely accused of the sexual assault of a living woman, Lester stumbles upon the bodies of two teenagers already dead from carbon monoxide poisoning. He rapes, steals, and dresses up the body of the young woman, and eventually devolves into a cave-dwelling collector and creator of corpses.

Michael Madsen claims “the definitive truth of *Child of God* is that Lester Ballard is us,” while Gary M. Ciuba argues that the audience is locked in a Girardian mimetic relationship with Lester and the titular phrase, and John Lang sees the novel as “test[ing]

both our willingness to confront the darker reaches of human nature and our capacity to extend compassion” (18; 82; 94). Lester is thus rendered as an avatar for communal violence, semi-godly, and deeply human; but he is always a serial killer. What remains unexamined by scholars is how the designation “serial killer” informs *Child of God*.

While Christopher Coughlin reads *Child of God* alongside Bret Easton Ellis’ well-known literary serial killer – Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* – Coughlin fails to extend his analysis to include the way that these fictional characters act as embodiments of (or challenges to) American understandings of those characters’ murderous, real-life counterparts. Instead, Coughlin focuses only on Bateman and Ballard as fictional and individual, arguing that Lester’s perversity and criminality are evidence of his uniqueness and should be read as “an affront to all cultural norms that exist in [his] community” – without any gesture toward the way that actual serial killers and serial killer narratives are constructed by and function within those communities (132). Ultimately, Coughlin only confirms the many extant readings which treat Lester as a kind of gothic monster.

The examination of Lester in terms of the gothic is a popular, fruitful one; Coughlin categorizes Lester as “a monster in a society that is defined by violence” and Ciuba claims that Lester’s monstrosity “marks him as a fitting victim for collective hostility” (136; 81). For Steven Frye, in *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, “Lester Ballard emerg[es] as an extreme contemporary rendering of the gothic villain, a presentation of character shorn free of any lingering sense of artistic decorum that may have preceded McCarthy in the southern tradition” (44). Even Lang’s compelling argument that “the first part of the novel succeeds ... in creating a measure of sympathy for Lester and in demonstrating that he is, in many respects, not unlike his fellows,” relies

on constructions of Lester as simultaneously compelling/repulsive and ostracized/central that echo understandings of the gothic monster (95). However, while Nicola Nixon explores “how extensively contemporary true-crime narratives draw upon the language of gothic monstrosity” in narratives of serial killers, such readings of *Child of God* fail to account for the particular Americanness of the serial killer both in actuality and in fictionalized portrayals, by concentrating on the ways in which gothic monstrosity functions across media and throughout history rather than specifically in America (qtd. in Schmid 7). The location of Lester in the gothic tradition is fitting in many ways, and fitting for the Southern Gothic scholars who work on McCarthy, but such analyses eventually privilege orientations of Lester as he relates to the mythic and monstrous in universal – or at least, geographically broad – terms, rather than on more specifically American ones. To subordinate *Americanness*, though, is to run the risk of fundamentally misreading McCarthy’s efforts in *Child of God*. John Cant, in *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, reads for Lester’s Americanness, but his efforts locate the mythicization of Lester in the frontier rather than in his criminality. For Cant, Lester is “presented as an American archetype in the typical McCarthy manner. He is informed by American mythology and values and compelled by his culture to seek a way of life that his American circumstances deny him,” which, while true, views Lester’s invocation of American exceptionalism outside the tradition of serial murderers he so clearly joins (89).

In *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, David Schmid writes, “The serial killer is as quintessentially American a figure as the cowboy, and we should acknowledge this fact not least because the intrinsic Americanness of the serial

killer has been a feature of writing about serial murder since at least the time of Jack the Ripper” (24). It is crucial, then, that Lester is engaged in serial murder rather than solely necrophilia, situational violence, or other petty crime, precisely because of the ways in which a serial killing character (particularly one who makes no overt challenges to the majority demographics of that group as a young, white man) can, and in fact must, be read as a shorthand for a particular and incontrovertibly American cultural phenomenon. Such a reading does not negate the ways in which scholars have argued Lester functions as a gothic monster, but rather it accounts for the otherwise unexamined aspects of Lester’s metonymic American murderousness with the understanding that “the serial killer is [merely] the most recent incarnation of this singular and monstrous [gothic] other” (Schmid 8).

The opposite impulse to this too-broad understanding of Lester exists, too, and should be considered carefully. Dianne C. Luce first took the “rumor ... that *Child of God* was based on an actual murder case” and argued that it was in fact most likely that McCarthy based Lester off two well-publicized criminal cases: James Blevins and Ed Gein (136). Using Schmid’s studied analysis of real serial murderers in American culture as a kind of cultural framework, I will detail the problematic nature of reading Lester as too-closely descended from Ed Gein, considering Gein’s far-reaching influence in the American media and his failure to fulfill the most basic tenet of the American serial killer, and suggest that McCarthy’s departures from Gein are of as much significance to understanding Lester as the similarities.

As a serial killer, Lester is part of a real-world tradition which is specifically and inextricably American, attended by a particular set of characteristics in American culture



– multiple victims killed over multiple days, sexual sadism, mobility, the representation of an omnipresent threat, and a complex relationship with law enforcement and the community which is threatened by him (Schmid 81). Schmid identifies these characteristics, explaining that they have evolved from the way the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) classifies serial killers to enter mainstream culture as the way that Americans understand the serial killers within their own communities. As I will demonstrate, McCarthy engages each of these serial killer characteristics in Lester, confirming as well as complicating them.

McCarthy's subversion of the typical serial killer on these terms adds important dimension to what critics have read as *Child of God's* implication of the real and fictional audiences in Lester's decline and death. In such a reading, the significance of Lester's character is even further nuanced; it is not merely that he transgresses the norms of the fictionalized Sevier County, as Coughlin argues, or its real-world analog as Woods Nash suggests. It is not even only that McCarthy manages, as Lang says, to create a sense of compassion for and identification with the repugnant Lester, but instead that McCarthy consistently denies the narrativization of Lester's actions as they are understood in terms of American serial killing, perhaps most significantly in his treatment of Lester's demise. By resigning Lester to a fate that is ultimately anonymous and fameless, McCarthy denies full legibility of Lester in the American serial killer tradition either as mythic presence or notorious monster. Lester thus both exposes and critiques the serial killer of American history and popular culture.

## WHO IS(N'T) LESTER BALLARD? QUESTIONING CONNECTIONS TO ED GEIN

In attempting to evaluate the fictional Lester in terms of the cultural treatment of real world serial killers, it is important to note two major scholars who establish significant real world connections in *Child of God*: Nash and Luce. Nash argues that the asylum to which Lester is relegated, though referred to in the text only as “the state hospital at Knoxville” is intended to be a specific institution, Eastern State Hospital in Knoxville, and is in fact modeled after a single news story about conditions there (McCarthy 193). Woods argues, “A state mental hospital that, at first glance, would appear to be little more than a background setting can be understood as fulfilling a more important role,” ultimately arguing that the asylum, as a result of its relationship with the real Eastern State, serves as “reconsideration of the alleged differences between a society’s mainstream and persons subsisting at its margins” (84). Nash’s analysis of the similarities between Lester’s institution and the newspaper article “Conditions At Eastern State Appalling” sets a convincing precedent for the reading of McCarthy’s work alongside its potential sources of inspiration (72). Further, accepting Nash’s analysis means that the connections between *Child of God* and the real world of 1970s Tennessee actually originate with McCarthy himself. It is Nash’s recognition of McCarthy’s impulse toward verisimilitude that validates further exploration into my proposed framework of using Schmid’s analysis of criminals as a means of a more complex and nuanced reading of Lester. As Vince Brewton suggests in his article, “Perhaps all cultural artifacts are a product of their times, but the novels of McCarthy’s first phase are recognizably so in ways worth exploring” (64).

Similarly, Luce offers what is perhaps the definitive correlation between Lester

and reality, arguing that McCarthy deliberately and explicitly draws on not only the news coverage of Wisconsin's famed murderer and necrophiliac Ed Gein but also on Alfred Hitchcock's representation of Gein in *Psycho*. Luce acknowledges that the crimes of James Blevins, a "lookout mountain voyeur," likely influenced McCarthy's formation of Lester as well, but in a much less consequential way than does the Gein case (138). Luce identifies myriad connections between both the real and fictionalized Gein in Lester, which she argues allow McCarthy to "ground [Lester's] bizarre behavior in realism" (135). The parallels between Gein and Lester are convincing enough in Luce's reading; the necrophilia, the attempted preservation of bodies, the ostracization from society and even, perhaps, the macabre crossdressing (151). Luce's article, which expands on Richard Woodward's claim in an interview with McCarthy that Lester is "based on newspaper reports of such a figure" has led the majority of McCarthy scholars (at least those who are interested in the real life inspiration for Lester) to likewise conclude that Lester serves as another incarnation of Gein. Luce also points to minister Kenneth Engelman's assessment of Gein, whom he visited while incarcerated, as "a *child of god*. ... God may be nearer to Mr. Gein than the rest of us" (qtd. in Luce 146, emphasis hers). Cant echoes Luce's location of Blevins/Gein as the source for Lester, arguing "[*Child of God's* narrative] format also provides McCarthy with an opportunity to explore the relationship between history, narrative and myth ... the relation between history and myth is given further significance by the knowledge that the story is based on actual events" (Cant 90).

However apt such comparisons are in terms of theme and content, drawing parallels primarily to Gein neglects an important aspect of Lester's behavior: his number

of victims. Gein, while compelling and infamous in the American imagination, is not actually a serial killer by definition, having only two confirmed murders on his record, when he would need three or more with time in between to be considered a serial killer proper (“Gein Also Admits He Killed Mary Hogan”). While there is some doubt surrounding Gein’s assertion that the many bodies and parts found in his residence were the product of grave-robbing, no conclusive evidence or argument suggests that he was responsible for more than the two murders to which he confessed and with which he was charged (Luce 145).

The impulse, then, to view Lester as neatly descended from Gein, or as a reiteration of him in literature, plays into the fascination with killers that Luce and Schmid agree implicates the viewing public (in whatever form they take), but stands the risk of erasing the depth of Lester’s Americanness as a serial murderer. Tethering Lester’s characterization to Gein, a well-known deviant and killer but decidedly not serial murderer, overlooks one of McCarthy’s most subtle reversals of expectation and fails to capitalize on McCarthy’s choice to render Lester as a serial killer, a villain which is “the most genuine representative of American life” (Sharrett qtd. in Schmid 25). If Gein is treated as Lester’s predecessor and a serial killer, then Lester is merely joining a tradition, embodying one of the most morbid figures of that group. But if Gein is understood (more accurately) as a murderer who is in fact remembered for his compulsion to rob graves and create artifacts from human skin and skeletons, rather than for creating a high body count, Gein stands in interesting opposition to Lester despite their shared pathology. The particularities of Gein’s compulsions resulted in his influencing the films and novels of both *Psycho* and *Silence of the Lambs* as well as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, ensuring the

kind of post-mortem fame Schmid elucidates. Luce's tracing of Gein to Lester allows her, I would argue detrimentally, to subconsciously affirm the monster mythicization of American murderers by prioritizing Gein's grisly hobbies rather than his actual killer classification.

It is worth noting that Luce is clear that Gein is only a multiple-murderer rather than a serial killer in her own article; yet she under-emphasizes this aspect of Lester's behavior in favor of centering her interpretation of his necrophilia, referring to him as "a lonely necrophile," who "later turn[s] to murder" (134-135). In prioritizing Lester's necrophilia rather than his crimes as a whole, Luce in fact echoes one member of Lester's mob of interrogators, who asks Lester, "what did you want with them dead ladies? ... Was you fuckin em?," to which another responds, "you know he was" (McCarthy 182).

Travis Franks cites this same exchange in his article, "Talkin about Lester: Community, Culpability, and Narrative Suppression" as evidence of the self-imposed limitations that McCarthy's "choric narrators" put on their telling of Lester's story in Part I. Franks' article points out the moments in Part I which prove that the residents of Sevierville are well-acquainted with the gritty details of Lester's actions but refuse to "mention Ballard's serious crimes" in their "community-sanctioned biography of Lester Ballard" (85). In much the same way, Luce assumes the same focus as *Child of God's* residents and foregrounds necrophilia over serial murder, which problematically reads Lester on terms that ignore his serial killing.

This is a significant omission not only because Lester's multiple kills compound his wickedness which serves as "a direct affront to [the Sevierville residents'] sense of

righteousness,” but because from its murky beginnings, the number of victims has been of particular interest to the way the term “serial killer” is defined by American law enforcement (Franks 85). As the FBI worked to create a classification of murderous criminals that would be most expedient, multiple terms and definitions were circulated, but the number was consistently a central focus, emerging as early as 1958, when Grierson Dickson “acknowledge[d] terminological difficulties” and “proposed an alternative form of communication ... ‘a simple rule of thumb division which *must obviously be primarily based on quantity*, so as to cover murderers who were successful for at least a time”” (qtd. in Schmid 70; emphasis mine).

Gein’s two kills and immediate cultural notoriety stand in interesting opposition to Lester’s journey, in which true serial killing is tempered by McCarthy’s utter denial of closure. Though Lester is in a sense *more* Gein-like than the real Ed Gein, engaging in more murders, in similarly titillating depravity toward corpses, and witnessed by at least one narrator wearing a victim’s clothes and scalp (something the gawkers at Gein’s post-confession home could only imagine), he is patently excluded from the influence Gein’s figure has experienced (Franks 86). In Gein’s notoriety and in the scholarly willingness to overlook his status as a two-time rather than serial killer, there seems to be a conflation of deviance and number. Gein’s depravity in corpse mutilation puts him in cultural conversation with killers who terrorized many more victims. Seltzer claims that “Letters and bodies, word counts and body counts, go together from the inception of serial murder” (*Serial Killers* 9). While the correlation that Seltzer describes references the increased media coverage of multiple crimes, as well as many serial killers’ self-described relationships with verbal communication, it seems to describe this Gein

phenomenon too – the more shocking his behavior, the more words devoted to it, giving the impression of a much higher body count than actually exists. It is important to separate Lester from Gein, and simultaneously to properly understand the actuality of Gein’s crimes, so that McCarthy’s particular manipulation of the American murderer can be fully realized.

For Schmid, the genesis of the American serial killer and the celebrity culture which accompanies him can be appropriately traced to two early figures: Jack the Ripper and H.H. Holmes. While Schmid primarily explores the notoriety of serial killers alongside evolving understandings of fame in American popular culture, the dichotomy of Holmes and Jack the Ripper serves as a useful basis for evaluating Lester’s fate, since McCarthy purposefully denies the closure American culture has always sought from its killers. Schmid categorizes Holmes and Jack the Ripper as distinct in terms of closure and legacy, explaining that “Unlike the open-endedness that characterized the Ripper case with the perpetrator remaining at large, the Holmes case had a very definite conclusion” (52). Further, and particularly important to evaluating Lester’s capture and death, “Holmes’s passage through the judicial system imposed an easily comprehensible narrative upon the meaning of his actions, culminating with the decisive concluding paragraph of his execution” (52). These figures, according to Schmid, “required their fellow citizens to look unflinchingly at how violence and national identity are interconnected” (51).

Lester, though, fits neither characterization. Cant argues that “McCarthy seems to be acknowledging that America seeks to destroy the physical actuality of the monstrous killers that it has spawned, but, at the same time, preserve them in mythic form,” which

follows the American treatment of serial killers who adhere to either of these paths of closure, but is insufficient in accounting for the way that McCarthy's serial killer actively complicates these paths to public closure (99). Unlike the Ripper, Lester is specifically and relentlessly identified by his community as the perpetrator, particularly near the end of his life. An unnamed "heavysset man" is clear that neither he nor any of the men who "fill" Lester's hospital room believe in anything less than Lester's total guilt as he presses Lester to reveal the actual number of victims (McCarthy 177). "How many people did you kill," the man demands, rhetorically highlighting Lester's immutable (at least in the eyes of the community) identity as killer and reinforcing the significance of the number of deaths which has always been central to law enforcement's classification of serial murderers (177). In this demand, the stranger – merely the initial mouthpiece of the mob intending to lynch Lester – crystallizes the elements of Lester's character which are most interesting to the Sevier County society of which these men serve as emblems; they are there because he is a serial killer and this is a categorization which Lester cannot escape.

However, Lester also defies legibility in the Holmes tradition as he does not enjoy a "passage through the judicial system" and definitive, public end to his terror (Schmid 52). McCarthy's denial of this kind of closure is explicit, beginning the penultimate section of the novel with the spare declaration: "he [Lester] was never indicted for any crime" (193). In the Holmes construction, fame is able to be achieved because the threat has been definitively closed, with only questions of motivation remaining to "spu[r] a public interest in the case that lasted well after Holmes's death;" but in Lester's case, that closure is never granted (53). McCarthy actively denies legal closure as well as the vigilante justice sought by the mob, and the revelation that Lester is never indicted is



followed by the description of his death and the anonymous, clinical use of his body as a medical cadaver (193-194).

According to Schmid,

Although the community attempts to cast the gothic monster (in whatever form) outside its bounds, such attempts are doomed to fail because these monsters exert equal parts repulsion and attraction, a fact that ensures their simultaneous abjection from and ingestion into the social in a process that is potentially infinite (8).

While Lester certainly embodies this gothic cocktail of “repulsion and attraction,” his potential infinity is undercut by McCarthy’s refusal to allow Lester and his readers, both real and fictional, either kind of closure serial killers can offer their communities. Lester’s anticlimactic death and dissection, in which a completely unknown person merely “take[s] his place with other deceased persons newly arrived,” precludes him from becoming a known evil quantity over whom years of speculation can safely occur, like Holmes. Simultaneously, the acknowledgement of both the choric narrators and the lynch mob as to Lester’s guilt makes it impossible for him to fully embody a Ripper-esque mythic monster whose crimes are known but whose identity is elusive, made even less legible by McCarthy’s elision of the exact amount of murders.

The man in the mob seeks the number of Lester’s victims and fails to get it, and McCarthy withholds this information until after the final exhumation scene, which describes Lester’s final cave as “a chamber in which the bodies of *a number of people*,” but not the specific amount, were found (195, emphasis added). Where Lester’s refusal to

engage the man in his hospital room by admitting any murders can be read as a logical one for Lester himself, the withholding of the number following Lester's demise is a purposeful denial by McCarthy. In her book, *No More Heroes*, Lydia Cooper explains, "In McCarthy's literary worlds, death is the single known absolute. But death, while absolute, is not the final answer to the deeper mysteries that haunt these texts" (27). This is undoubtedly the case for Sevierville in regards to Lester: his death is inevitable, but it offers no answers to the questions the unnamed mob or the anonymous narrators ask, and certainly no closure.

This denial is underscored by the specifics of the rest of this section, in which "two neighbor boys" find the bodies and *one* "sheriff ... with *two* deputies and *two* other men" carry lanterns into the "mausoleum" (195-196, emphasis mine). It is not as though "the bodies," still undefined in number, escape all detail – the section includes not only their positioning ("repose") and smell ("a sour smell, a faint reek of ammonia") but a scientific description of "adipocere, a pale gray cheesy mold common to corpses in damp places" (196). McCarthy is not interested in denying gore or detail, but specifically in withholding the number of bodies which comprise the scene even after Lester is removed from the narrative. Finally, in the novel's final paragraph, McCarthy's omniscient narrator offers a tableau of "a jeep descend[ing] the log road towing a trailer in the bed of which lay seven bodies bound in muslin like enormous hams" (196-197). This detail, though, does not match either the number of murders that occur within the narrative or those accounted for by the men in the mob (McCarthy 178). As a result, McCarthy not only subverts the expectations of the neutralized serial killer, but mimics the FBI who created the figure in the first place by citing a high number of victims which the narrative

offers no analogous explanation for. The dehumanization of this final – and in fact only – attempt at a body count reinforces the way in which McCarthy undercuts the expected information and refuses to resolve Lester’s narrative even in giving the expected information.

#### WHAT IS LESTER BALLARD? FEDERAL DEFINITIONS OF SERIAL KILLERS

*Child of God* was published in 1973, and Luce posits that McCarthy may have begun the novel “as early as December 1957,” meaning that Lester Ballard was developed in the formative years of the FBI’s classification and mythicization of the serial killer (136). Schmid cites an inflation of “the scale of the crime” as integral to the way the FBI would come to “galvanize public feeling about serial murder” in the 1970s and 80s, and although the (wildly-overblown) estimate that 28 percent of the nation’s unsolved murders were the work of serial killers was not disseminated until 1983, the inflation of the imminent threat of the serial killer was already at work in the time that McCarthy would have been finishing *Child of God* (82). In addition to subverting the expectation that after a killer’s death, the depth of his crimes will be revealed – as was the case with killers like Holmes (active ~1885-1894) and Gein (active 1954-1957) – McCarthy’s casual inclusion of seven as the number of bodies pulled from the cave, while refusing to reveal the total number of victims, serves as an enactment of the same idea which underlies the FBI’s inflation of the scale of the threat: the evocation of fear.

For the FBI, the creation of (exaggerated) fear allowed the Bureau to “position itself as the logical answer to serial murder” (Schmid 80). For McCarthy, though, this fear seems less like a device to reassure the reader of the necessity of law enforcement

like Sheriff Fate Turner and more an attempt to create a lasting discomfort which compounds what Madsen sees as the central question of both *Child of God* and scholarship on it: “How do we ... explain a kinship with a man who is a brute, a murderer, and a necrophile?” (18). Frye echoes this notion of kinship, suggesting that “McCarthy complicates these questions by blending Lester’s depravity with an unmistakable sympathy for his alienation and loss of the land, colored by the brutality and ignorance of all those he encounters” (45). This kinship and sympathy, much like the empathy Lang establishes, becomes even more fraught if Lester’s crimes cannot be fully counted or reconciled by the murders described in the text. By resisting this expectation of the captured-serial-killer narrative, McCarthy ensures that the defining feature of Lester’s life remains unresolved, and as a result, any sympathy readers or Sevierville residents feel for Lester must be able to extend to an unknowable depth of criminality. When Lester refuses to acknowledge that he has murdered anyone, the man in the mob recounts Lester’s kills: “that Lane girl ... and that baby down in the house and you killed them people in them parked cars on the Frog Mountain” (McCarthy 178). This accusation accounts for the murders detailed in the narration but not the seven bodies at the novel’s end, especially since at least two of the frog mountain bodies never made it Lester’s cave. Lester’s refusal to comment on this list of victims—and McCarthy’s refusal to confirm or deny the relationship of these bodies to those found in the caves in the narration of the exhumation—underscores societal desire for the quantifiable narrative and McCarthy’s refusal to provide it. If, as Cooper argues, “A society that rejects ‘the maimed and the crazed,’ ... is a society that sustains the savagery enacted by those very deranged souls,” then that society is responsible for a (purposefully) unknowable amount of human lives

lost (43). McCarthy ensures that the expectations of the American community in the wake of a serial killer have not been met, and as a result the threat cannot be properly compartmentalized or accounted for – instead, it is allowed to fester in the cultural imagination. This lack of resolution retroactively explains why the narrators of Part I “find [Lester] essentially unfathomable” even after they have had ample time to attempt an understanding of his actions (Cooper 41).

This refusal of posthumous closure for Lester’s crimes is further illuminated by McCarthy’s inclusion of a criminal narrative which does give the expected closure: the way in which the community has managed to process the crimes of the White Caps and Lester’s grandfather. Though Lester’s grandfather Leland is not a serial killer, he is “a by god White Cap,” and the two mentions of the organization figure significantly in an examination of McCarthy’s invocation of law enforcement and the narrativization of crime (81). Cant suggests that “the lack of authoritative historical record [of the White Caps] is probably due to the fact that the locals preferred that it be forgotten,” but as with Lester, the community cannot help returning to descriptions of these men and their crimes (91). While also the perpetrators of multiple, systematic murders, the White Caps (and The Ku Klux Klan which followed) are treated as distinct from serial killers, mythicized in their own right and “an[other] aspect of [McCarthy’s] desire to write into American discourse forgotten, ignored or suppressed aspects of American history” (Cant 92). The significant departure from Lester, though, comes again in McCarthy’s adherence to closure and in the efficacy of law enforcement in the story of the White Caps.

Franks suggests that the choric assertion in Part I that “He’d [Leland] of been hanged no matter where he lived” allows the narrator who says it to “[establish] this

dichotomous relationship between Sevier County and the Ballards [which] is meant to prevent an outsider's associating one with the other solely because they originate from the same place" (81; 89). However, this assertion also speaks to the confidence of that specific narrator in the law – whether it be established like Sheriff Turner, or vigilante like the mob – to solve the problem of a whole family of Ballards that “wasn't none of em any account” (80). This narrator's confidence and his freedom to comment on the elder Ballard's evils seem tied to his recounting of the “known fact [Leland] was hanged in Hattiesburg Mississippi” (81). This narrator can comment on Leland in a way that none of them comment on Lester. Franks ties the suppression of specificity in terms of Lester's crimes to self-preservation and an interest in further ostracizing Lester, but it seems that these stories are also voiced because of the narrative neatness accompanying the knowledge that the elder criminal Ballard is defined by his crimes and executed, no matter how far he tries to get from Sevierville.

The same confidence can be found in Part III, in which an old man relays the history of the White Caps in Sevierville to Cotton and Sheriff Turner. The old man rejects Cotton's suggestion that the White Caps served any positive purpose, offering the correction: “they was a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers” (McCarthy 165). After the old man explains that rival vigilantes the Bluebills were “just as cowardly,” Cotton asks “what finally happened?” (165). “What finally happened,” according to the old man, “was that one man with a little guts stood up to em and that was Tom Davis” (165). The repeated phrase here underscores the active narrativization that the old man is engaged in; the word “finally” placing (retroactive) proper faith and confidence in the lawman who appeared in order to neutralize the threat of men who

“murder[ed] people in their beds at night” (165). Having tagged the arrival of Tom Davis with “finally,” the old man signals the ultimate victor before the story’s end, allowing him to highlight Davis’s perseverance and honor. The old man effectively mythologizes Davis, employing diction which treats Davis as nearly immortal – “they tried ever way in the world to kill him,” but were never successful (166). In the old man’s myth-making, Davis’ goodness meets no obstacle it cannot beat, including the sociopolitical: “there had not been a Democrat elected in Sevier County since the Civil War, but when Tom Davis run for sheriff they elected him” (166).

Setting up Tom Davis as “the damnedest man [he] ever heard of” and the immutable hero of the story allows the old man to detail the hangings of two White Caps under Tom Davis as the fitting, though not “quick and merciful,” end to their public terrorizing (166). This anecdote actively invokes all of that which McCarthy denies in Lester’s story: the heroic and necessary law enforcer, the criminal who is defined by his crimes and, once those crimes are acknowledged and enumerated, can be fully processed by the community after the finality of a public execution has come to pass. In this contrast, McCarthy acknowledges exactly what people – readers and residents of Sevierville alike – require from their criminals in order to fold them into existing narratives and move on, but refuses to provide it. In doing so, he compounds the discomfort felt by all those aware of Lester’s crimes but unable to determine their role in them. Franks notes the subtle cohesion of the choric narrators’ inability or unwillingness to discuss the reality of Lester’s crimes, but understanding McCarthy’s withholding of these necessary moments of definition and closure (as well as his demonstration of how these elements have previously functioned in Sevierville) gives new shades of motivation

to that narrative suppression.

That being said, the FBI's understanding of serial killers is not solely based on the number of victims or the murderer's necessitation of law enforcement specifically equipped to catch and contain him. Serial killers, as the FBI views them and certainly as the Bureau communicated to the American public, are always seen as three things: sexually sadistic, highly mobile, and relentlessly threatening (Schmid 80-83). These markers, though not necessarily rooted in the truth of the majority of serial killers that had been apprehended by law enforcement at the time of this definition-making, were immediately adopted into the public imagination of what the threat of serial killers entailed. In order to create a threat great enough to necessitate increased FBI funding and allow intrusion into local jurisdictions, "consumers of mass media representations of serial murder were meant to see the serial killer as a ravaging sexual sadist, roaming across America in an endless quest for blood" (Schmid 83). Schmid notes that "the popular culture industries embraced and disseminated the FBI's definition of serial murder ... quickly and comprehensively" (83). Though this triumvirate of qualities manifests less prominently in Lester than do his number of victims, the anonymity of his death, and his relationship to law enforcement, it is still fruitful to consider the ways in which McCarthy confirms some of these qualities the American public has internalized about serial killers from the FBI and rejects others.

In terms of sexual sadism, McCarthy reinforces the cultural imagining of the serial killer. While "McCarthy's novel foregrounds manifest sexual necrophilia [where] it was apparently only latent in Gein's murders," Lester's necrophilia and sexual sadism serve as an important basis for Luce's connection between the two (Luce 147). Luce



argues that McCarthy “conflates” the “true necrophile” and necro-sadist in Lester, a move which can be read as further underscoring the importance of sexual deviance and sadism to Lester’s characterization, precisely as it would be for a real-world killer (134). Indeed, scholars’ focus on Lester’s necrophilic impulses rather than his criminality as a whole seems particularly apt as a commentary on the way McCarthy has invoked this facet of the serial killer. Luce claims that “McCarthy unflinchingly holds Lester’s sexual perversion before us,” and Madsen employs a concerted study of the corpse-defiling to arrive at the conclusion that “Lester’s actions ... are equally strange and understandable, familiar and unfamiliar” (147; 18). In this way, McCarthy manages to lead scholars themselves to prioritize the sexual deviance above all else (as Luce does) or as the potential key difference between Lester and his community which can be unlocked (as Madsen does). Both impulses reinscribe the threat put forth by the FBI that sexual sadism is part and parcel of the serial killer. McCarthy scholars who prioritize Lester’s actions as a necrophiliac seem to echo Lester’s own interrogator, who is chiefly concerned with confirming a body count and determining the perverse reason Lester would have wanted those bodies in the first place (182). That this latter query is met with another mob member’s insistence that they all “know he was” having sex with the bodies highlights the effect of McCarthy’s treatment of Lester’s sexual transgressions, prompting both his peers and scholars to seek confirmation of what they already know (McCarthy 182).

Lester’s mobility and the threat he poses to the community are intimately linked, since it is the serial killer’s mobility which ultimately determines how threatening he may be found by the community in which he kills. It is then more fruitful to focus on mobility alongside the threat which results, rather than the two factors as somehow discrete.

McCarthy engages some of the facets of mobility in order to deny others. These parts of the serial killer image “[were] seemingly intended to instill the maximum amount of fear in the American public,” but they do not necessarily function in this same way within *Child of God* (Schmid 83). Schmid clarifies that the idea of a roving, untethered serial killer “does not tell the whole story” because there are three more specific types of mobility that serial killers always embody: “there are those who travel, those who never leave the local area or state in which they start killing, and those who kill exclusively in their home” (81). Since Lester’s displacement from his ancestral home sparks the events of *Child of God*, he can safely be excluded from the latter type of mobility. Even if one treats Lester’s cave as his ultimate “home,” the murders take place in too many locations for him to rely on the relative comfort of home as part of his mobility. The other two kinds of mobility, though, are somewhat conflated in Lester. Since Lester does not leave Sevier County to terrorize surrounding communities, it would be tempting to consider him the second kind of mobile: tethered to his “local area.” However, his command of the caves creates a heightened mobility for Lester that the community lacks, which lends him a kind of hyper-mobility within the bounds of the place he does not leave.

The mob is “somewhat in wonder” watching Lester traverse the caves which are part of the local landscape, and one member states “we used [to mess around in these caves] but I never knowed about thisn here” (McCarthy 184). These allowances from the mob underscore that the local knowledge of the labyrinth is insufficient in understanding how/where Lester has been subsisting since his eviction. Their failing to fully understand the caves is compounded when, moments later, Lester uses “a awful small hole” in one cave wall to escape his would-be executioners (McCarthy 184). The mob fails to fully

account for Lester's specific hyper-mobility within the caves, which instantly re-establishes Lester – even short an arm – as a threat well within the American serial killer tradition. It is particularly notable, then, that the immediate reaction of one of the mob members is that he “cain't wait to tell these boys outside what's happened” (McCarthy 186). Though the response “maybe we better odd man out to see who gets the fun of tellin em” reveals the sarcasm of the first comment, the shared knowledge that Lester's escape must immediately enter into community discourse is a clear enactment of mobility and threat as integral to the fear instilled in American culture by a serial killer (McCarthy 186).

Lester's ability to navigate the caves without the community's knowledge, and to create within them a repository for the evidence of his crimes and compulsions, makes his cave mobility all the more threatening. It is clear that Lester's containment and the (perceived) blow to his mobility in the loss of one arm, effectively neutralize Lester as a threat in the minds of the mob. Yet, as soon as his mobility is demonstrated, the threat is restored and even amplified: the mob is immediately cognizant of their actions, claiming that they “turned him loose where he can murder folks again” and making explicit the potential effect of Lester's mobility (McCarthy 186). When one member tries to reorient the group to the prevailing narrative of ultimate capture and containment, saying decisively “We'll get him,” the response is not one of confirmation and confidence but instead the spare and defeated “He may of got us” (McCarthy 186). McCarthy imbues Lester with a mobility that is at once extraordinary and specifically rooted within his community, in the depths of the shared landscape which have not been plumbed by those who are not cast out. In doing so, McCarthy employs the cultural understanding of what

makes serial killers specifically menacing in order to unseat the narrative of immutable capture and vigilante justice in which the mob members have invested.

#### WHY IS LESTER BALLARD? INQUIRIES INTO MOTIVE

It would seem remiss to discuss serial killers in American culture without addressing the question of motive, and how quickly some events in a killer's life are identified as potential explanations for their violence as adults. Perhaps surprisingly, Schmid explains that "the law enforcement perspective on serial murder clearly locates psychological speculation at the bottom end of a hierarchy whose pinnacle is occupied by verifiable [data]" and (seemingly) objective factors like scale, mobility, and sexual sadism (83). By dismissing attempts to determine a serial killer's psychological motives from their official typology, the FBI puts its focus on increasing punishment rather than preventing violent crime or championing treatment (Schmid 84). The emphasis on punishment over prevention certainly seems to echo the feelings of Sevierville's residents who, despite attempting to paint Lester as a descendant of evil who was destined to disgrace himself and their community, make no attempt to prevent his violence through understanding or intervention – instead, they ostracize him further and relish in the opportunity to execute him and "casually apply hindsight to his life, futilely attempting to account for his behavior" (Luce 150).

However, McCarthy's adherence to the FBI's hierarchy in this regard is not without complication. Though law enforcement claims to abjure psychological motivation for Lester, such a clinical approach is atypical in serial killer fiction. In "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," Seltzer explains that "It has

become routine in serial-killer fiction ... repeatedly to flashback to the traumatic event that is taken, retroactively, to motivate addictive killing,” but McCarthy denies such an origin story (6). At the same time, McCarthy does include enough detail of Lester’s traumatic childhood, such as the abandonment by his mother and the hanging of his father, that critics often cite these instances as contributing factors to Lester’s eventual murderousness. Luce acknowledges McCarthy’s “reject[ion of] the psychoanalytic explanations appended to each version of the Gein/Bates story” but still cites his “damaged child[hood]” and posits that Lester’s “murders have been ... directed against the faithless mother who, like his victims, seems to Lester of questionable virtue” (151-152). Franks argues Lester’s “mental collapse [is] precipitated in part by the loss of a father,” and Cooper asserts Lester’s “father’s hanging and the loss of his ancestral property may have further unhinged his already disordered mind” (80; 41). Additionally, Coughlin claims that the respective losses of his mother and father “define” Lester, and Madsen identifies Lester’s “strongest motivation [for murder]: the dominating loss of community” (131; 24). Cant sees the novel’s “relat[ion] to actuality,” that is, as derivative of Blevins/Gein, as “pos[ing] the question of motivation, a question to which McCarthy responds by couching this aspect of his tale in naturalistic terms” (91). For him, “Lester Ballard is driven by the irresistible appetite of sexuality; this is a staple of the Naturalism of Zola and Norris, as is his propensity to violence” (Cant 91). Regardless of McCarthy’s attempts to stave off psychological speculation by refusing to engage in Seltzer’s explanation of the traumatic origin point of serial killers, his inclusion of Lester’s myriad interpersonal traumas manages to serve as motivation enough for scholars to probe Lester’s descent into villainy.

McCarthy resists giving Lester an explicit, inarguable psychological motive like the ones Seltzer identifies in serial killer fiction, but he does not depart from Seltzer's understanding of motivation entirely. Seltzer claims that in America's "wound culture," of which serial killer fiction and fascination is emblematic, "the notion of sociality is bound to the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle" ("Wound Culture" 4). McCarthy's treatment of Lester's body is a significant iteration of this spectacle. Where the narration remains spare in terms of Lester's psychology, there is concerted focus on his body in both life and death. In addition to cataloging his roving through the county and his attempts to keep fed and warm, narration often focuses intently on Lester as he "squat[s] and sh[i]ts," masturbates in public, or "use[s] the bedpan or the chamberpot" (13; 20; 177). In these pedestrian moments of bodily function, McCarthy highlights the significance of Lester's body which comes to fruition in two more significant moments. The first is the moment at which McCarthy's narrator abruptly "deviates ... from an objective, third-person descriptive style to the imperative mood" and demands that the reader "see him [Lester]" (Cooper 12; McCarthy 156). This moment is well-studied by critics, who have largely located it as a significant moment of implication for the reading audience (Cooper 12; Luce 150; Madsen 22; Kirk 53). The second moment, though, comes posthumously for Lester, when his body is dissected by science students who "flay" and "eviscerate" him (McCarthy 194). Though, as previously discussed, Lester is completely anonymous to the students in this moment, McCarthy's prior insistence on Lester's physical body and the literal revelation of Lester's bones, the inclusion that "his heart was taken out" and "his head was sawed open and the brains removed" speak powerfully to Seltzer's formulation of

the wound culture. Lester's body is literally "torn and exposed," and while it is done in the clinical setting of a lab in terms of the novel, the detail in the narration makes it "public," at least to the reading audience ("Wound Culture" 4). Further, McCarthy seems to marry his denial of satisfactory psychological motivation to his focus on the physical body and its enactment of wound culture as "the young students" study Lester's "entrails [which] were hauled forth and delineated" (194). In this moment, McCarthy describes the students' study as something more than strictly medical; they are seeking, in Lester's literal insides, some motivation for his actions. Lester's body, subverting the serial killer narrative in its anonymity and lack of closure, is interrogated as the last hope for answers by students who "perhaps saw monsters worse to come in [the] configurations" of Lester's entrails.

Of course, no answers are to be gleaned from Lester's guts – "at the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table ... and interred" (McCarthy 194). Frye reads this moment as being heightened by "obscure and archaic vocabulary" in McCarthy's use of the word "haruspices," who were "ancient Roman soothsayers and diviners of Etruscan origin, who read the mystic secrets in the entrails of the dead" (49; 194). In focusing on this word, Lester "is a configuration of flesh, flayed and systematized, and at the same time he is a sacred text, who when read aloud speaks forth whispers of an impenetrable mystery" (Frye 49). Frye's reading offers welcome nuance to scene of Lester's demise, but it does not account for the whole purpose of the episode. The attempts and failures to make sense of Lester – by the students, the readers and the residents of Sevierville, which last occur over Lester's dissected body – are a significant encapsulation of McCarthy's continued complications of the serial killer in his

natural environment: the wound culture of America. Further, in his complex denial of given serial killer treatments, McCarthy may actually compound Lester's Americanness. Cant, too, understands Lester as an emblem of American exceptionalism, though he locates this impulse as having the opposite relationship to violence than the one I am suggesting. "He [Lester] is the mythic individualistic American hero in his resourcefulness and power of endurance," Cant argues, and "It is his own violence that consumes him in the end" (97). If, as Schmid and Sharrett posit, there is no symbol as deeply American as the serial killer, then creating a serial killer who challenges given understandings of the figure can be seen as a gesture toward American exceptionalism that is not, as Cant suggests, destroyed by his hyper-violence but is instead defined by it.

#### WHERE IS LESTER BALLARD?: THE LIMINAL SPACE OF CRIME FACT AND FICTION

While I have argued it is important to separate Lester as a character from the non-fictional killers who have been (mis)read as his direct influences, it would be insufficient to address McCarthy's manipulation of the real-world serial killer without exploring the place of true crime storytelling in *Child of God*. In fact, in both form and content the novel seems to engage with and emulate some of the most steadfast facets of true crime narratives. Lester is at once fictive and purposefully evocative of real American murderers. This means that Lester – and indeed all the residents of Sevierville – occupies a geographical space which is simultaneously imagined and tethered to the reality of Eastern Tennessee, as Nash and Cant delineate. This dual occupation mirrors the liminal space of a fiction novel which so masterfully invokes some of the basic tenets of true crime writing and reading.



Seltzer posits that “A sort of *hyperidentification* with place, or context, or situation [is] typical in [actual] cases of serial violence,” which clearly underlies the aforementioned significance of Lester’s cave mobility (*Serial Killers* 33, original emphasis). Further, this increased identification with place is found in the repeated rooting of the narrative in Sevierville and its attendant geography, such as “the Little Pigeon river [which] floods the town” and the significance of “Tennessee [as] a border state split by the Civil War, a hill country half-settled by Celtic and Saxon rejects, runaways, outlaws, and derelicts of Puritan New England” (Lincoln 56). In his study of the genre, *True Crime*, Seltzer explains that the perceived normality of the serial killer is always central, so that it may be reversed in the telling the narrative of his crimes. The choric narrators of *Child of God* seem set on other-ing Lester from the start – ostracizing him at church or implying that there are plenty of stories in Lester’s past worth examining in light of his crimes (“I’ll tell ye another thing he done one time”) – but these narrative “points of view [are] based on an evident knowledge of Lester’s story as a whole” (31; 35; Cant 93). It is this retroactive analysis, performed by a chorus of unnamed narrators in vignette, that represents a community who is deeply invested in the story of the crime as well as the criminal, just as in true crime narratives. If “the world of true crime is a self-observing world of observers,” then these attempts to appear aware of Lester’s perverse/violent potential speak to their self-observation and render the narrators a reflection of the very real-world true crime readers who would be interested in the novelization of a killer like Lester (Seltzer *True Crime* 6).

Further, Seltzer explains “the serial killer is always ‘the stranger beside me’ or ‘everyone’s next door neighbor’: ‘average looking’ and ‘just like yourself,’” the latter

example being precisely the phrase McCarthy's omniscient narrator uses both to introduce Lester and to implicate the reading audience in the novel's first pages: "He is small, unclean, unshaven. . . . A child of god much like yourself perhaps" (*True Crime* 46; McCarthy 4). Lester may be "just/much like yourself," but his individuality stands in contrast to the "they" of the introductory scene, the crowd of "carnival folk" who will become the observed/observing narrators (McCarthy 3). Even the fact that one of Seltzer's cliché descriptions of a serial killer is the nearly the exact one McCarthy invokes underscores the novel's adherence to true crime generic conventions. Clichés are the scaffolding on which true crime narratives are built, "The convention of innocence yields quickly and conventionally to a gothicized horror, and true crime is a modern variant of that cliché machine called the gothic" (Seltzer *True Crime* 41-42). The sense that the novel is playing with the tropes of true crime, then, is not merely about the way the reading audience feels implicated in their voyeurism of a deviant, murderous subject – it is equally about our voyeurism of the community which created him and watched him first. In this way, it is simultaneously possible to hold the reasons that Lester is not merely a literary version of Blevins or Gein and still argue that the narrative as a whole is participating, even subconsciously, in the creation of its own kind of true crime story.

Witnesses to and audiences for true crime also adhere to conventions. Seltzer asserts that as frequently as the witnesses attempt to espouse belonging to a community that is overly-normal, in order to highlight deviations from that normalcy, they just as frequently fail to live up to the standards of American normalcy. Following scholar Elayne Rapping, Seltzer says, "the West Memphis native informants [of HBO's *Paradise Lost*] resemble the wound culture underclass of reality TV crime shows such as *Cops*, a

population on exhibition that has slipped through the cracks of American normalcy” (41). Such is the community of Sevierville. While his essay, “Child of Whose God?” is disdainful of *Child of God* as a whole, Kenneth Lincoln’s description of some of the more fully-realized community members encapsulates the phenomenon to which Seltzer points. Lincoln first defines the novel as “a mountain valley tale in the voices of the common people, realistic audience to foul residue among good folks,” but goes on to clarify that those “good folks” are not as far from Lester as they clearly hope (50-51). “Cut to the dumpkeeper Ruebel with nine feral daughters named from an abandoned medical dictionary, Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue,” Lincoln writes, “They fuck any[one] and spawn litters of half-wit children, only to be incested by their ursine father” (50). “Normal Americans” in true crime, “are driven by the desire to be as normal as everyone else,” so the inclusion of characters who are socially or morally repugnant but are *not* Lester is revelatory of the community’s own attempts to – through their narration – establish the level of their own normality, even if it falls short of the wider cultural ideal, and relegate Lester’s actions outside those bounds (Seltzer *True Crime* 43). One of the narrators blatantly gestures toward this attempt to both level and exclude: “I’ll say one thing about Lester though. You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn’t outstrip em all” (McCarthy 81). Rhetorically, this narrator is able to justify any failing of the greater community by placing himself, Sevierville, and the whole of humanity on one side of the scale, and Lester’s depravity squarely on the other. The response is predictably affirmative: “That’s the god’s truth” (McCarthy 81).

Of course, these inclusions simultaneously reveal to the reading audience that these “conversation pieces among the citizens themselves, ‘overheard’ for us by

McCarthy” are another of Seltzer’s self-exposures, in this case exposing the hypocrisy of attempting to both reject Lester from the community and maintain him as that community’s own myth (Cant 93). In these ways, McCarthy manages to create a unique, fictional killer whose relationship to his community blurs the line between crime fact and crime fiction by invoking the former in its telling of the latter. “No doubt true crime puts in doubt from the start the line between fact and fiction,” Seltzer writes, and the inability of the community to stop talkin’ bout Lester, or of scholars to read him against real-world influences, crystallizes the imbrication of the two genres in *Child of God* (*True Crime* 38).

*Karen: This is terrible.*

*Georgia: Keep going.*

– “Abject Failure”

## PART 2

### Investigations and Inside Jokes: Tracing Nancy Drew to True Crime Podcasters

In his introduction to *Nancy Drew and Her Sister Sleuths*, Michael G. Cornelius claims “few other figures have dominated their genre so effectively as Nancy Drew” (5). The figure of Nancy Drew, teen girl detective, is one that has persisted both in terms of publication and her place in the public imagination. In *Sisters, Schoolgirls, and Sleuths*, Carolyn Carpan deems Nancy Drew “the most popular and enduring girls’ series ever published” (46). The first Nancy Drew novel, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, was published in 1929, and has “been put out at the rate of [a] book a year since then, regardless of Crash, Depression, [or] War” (Hall, 256). However, the figure of the teen girl detective has not ceased to develop beyond Nancy Drew – she has quickly established a presence on television and, as I will further argue, can be found in the non-fiction women who helm true crime podcasts. Televisual texts like *Veronica Mars* and *Pretty Little Liars* enjoy rabid fan bases and offer complex portrayals of the teen sleuth in the contemporary settings of (fictional) small towns of Neptune, CA and Rosewood, PA, respectively. These two programs depict five teen girl detectives, the existence and popularity of whom requires that the genre, made famous by Nancy Drew, expand to include them and

other contemporary detectives. This proposed expansion can then be further invoked in attempting to fully understand the influence of the teen detective on the true crime podcaster.

Ultimately, the extant failure to expand and explore the contemporary teen detective as she relates to and departs from her foremothers is an insufficiency which requires critical attention. To this end, I suggest that the most significant evolution from classic teen detectives like Nancy Drew to contemporary teen detectives is the circumstances under which they turn to investigation and how their detection efforts function in relation to their communities.

Carpan explains that girls' series scholars are particularly eager to investigate the texts which they remember with "such affection," and the affinity Carpan recognizes in scholars discussing Nancy Drew is uniquely clear from the criticism they produce. Melissa Favara and Allison Schuette-Hoffman acknowledge it explicitly in their essay "Teen Sleuth Manifesto," which purports to "explore the impact of Nancy and her friends on the girls who grew up loving her," a group of which they proudly call themselves a part (179). Bobbie Ann Mason's *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide* is a similarly passion-based project. As Joan Joffe Hall explains, "like most nostalgia, *The Girl Sleuth* [...] is profoundly ambivalent about its subject [...] because Mason's own childhood was deeply influenced by her reading of this type of fiction" (256). This nostalgic ambivalence is important to note. Though love of Nancy Drew and girls' series is a major, acknowledged motivation of many of the critics who choose to study her, scholarship also understands and interrogates the ways in which the teen girl detective can be problematic, and this impulse facilitates my proposed extensions of the genre to

the newer iterations of the girl detective. Even as she is scrutinized, Nancy Drew looms large in the imaginations of scholars who study series fiction, and is inextricably present in discussions of all girl detectives. This means that considerations of the girl detective are deeply rooted in the studies of series' fiction, and critics have largely neglected to expand their considerations of the girl detective outside these texts.

In order to better understand why contemporary teen detectives cannot be neatly added to the list of Nancy Drew successors, the prevailing understanding of the teen girl detective Nancy Drew exemplifies must be noted. Carpan explains the longevity of the teen detective this way: "Since the mid-nineteenth century, girls' series books have introduced readers to wealthy sisters, schoolgirls, and sleuths who have exciting adventures time and again" (xii). Nancy Drew is certainly the best remembered, but she is not the only girls' series detective of the era Carpan details: Nancy Drew grew out of Elsie Dinsmore, "one of the earliest series heroines to come from an affluent, single-parent family and enjoy a close relationship with her father" (Johnson qtd. in Carpan, 8). Elsie Dinsmore helped to cement the "series tradition of supergirls: multitalented females who have everything, do everything, and outshine everyone," a figure Nancy Drew has represented for decades (Carpan 9).

The Nancy Drew series, conceived and published by The Stratemeyer Syndicate, was the product of concerted efforts by Edward Stratemeyer, who "had to perfect the girl detective formula before Nancy Drew could be created" (Carpan 45). To this end, the Stratemeyer Syndicate experimented with three girl detectives before Nancy Drew was penned: Ruth Fielding, Billie Bradley, and Betty Gordon. These detective girls helped Stratemeyer refine what Nancy Drew would ultimately come to represent; the

perpetually-teenaged, “somewhat distanced from the real world” young sleuth, a responsible, clever, “outgoing, no-nonsense” girl, equal parts alluring and chaste (Carpan 46; 53). Cherry Ames, Judy Bolton, Ginny Gordon, and Trixie Belden followed the success of Nancy Drew, with each girl getting her own mystery series and putting a small twist on the teen detective formula – where Ruth, Nancy, Billie and Betty were older teens, Ginny and Trixie skewed younger, “having so much fun [solving mysteries that Trixie] is determined to run her own detective agency when she grows up” (Carpan 107).

As a result of these series, the character of the girl detective is a steadfast and specific one. Cornelius summarizes the basic anatomy of the teen detective, explaining that “the girl sleuth is fearless but cautious; she is intelligent but undereducated; she is bold but decorous; she is physical yet cerebral; she is unbound yet always contained” (2). Though a somewhat vague accounting of the classic teen detective, myriad categorizations of these characters follow suit, as Mason, Carpan, and Harris suggest their own versions, which all hinge on the fiercely capable but utterly unobjectionable figure the teen detective must embody (Mason qtd. in Carpan 53; Carpan 52; Harris 155).

Notably, even when teen detectives actively depart from the patterns established by classic girls’ series detectives, they are evaluated by scholars and authors in direct contrast to their foremothers, Nancy Drew in particular. Julie Tatham, the original author of Trixie Belden, says she specifically designed Trixie “to be different from Nancy Drew” (80). Yet, in assessments of the genre’s history, Trixie is treated merely as a younger, more tomboyish Nancy, a natural progression but not a significant enough departure to merit a new frame of reference (Carpan 80).



The same occurs in what little scholarship exists on contemporary teen detectives like Veronica Mars, who creator Rob Thomas “[never] intended to [be] a modern-day Nancy Drew” (Martaus 74). Lulu Dark, a contemporary teen detective examined by Marla Harris in her article, “Not Nancy Drew but Not Clueless: Embodying the Teen Girl Sleuth in the Twenty-first Century,” specifically and vehemently rejects comparison to Nancy, claiming “[classic girl detectives] have no personality” and she does not wish to be considered one (qtd. in Harris 41). Harris suggests that the fissure between the contemporary and classic teen detective is based solely on that perception of Nancy Drew as “a particular kind of sanitized, asexual, goody-goody heroine” with which the contemporary teen detective does not identify (40). While this is perhaps true for Lulu Dark specifically, the insufficiency of Nancy Drew to serve as a basis for evaluating the contemporary detective is much more significant than a mere difference in attitude. This difference, in fact, is the most significant evolution of the character of the teen detective, and it is rooted not in the way the detective appears to the world but in her most basic motive for sleuthing. I have deemed this motive “the investigative impetus.”

#### UNCOVERING THE INVESTIGATIVE IMPETUS

The motivation of the teen detective is not examined by scholars, and it is perhaps the most significant separation between the classic and contemporary figure of the girl sleuth. The investigative impetus, the teen detective’s reason for solving mysteries, creates fundamentally different kinds of investigator, and highlights the insufficiency of evaluating contemporary teen detectives solely on the scale of their classic teen detective counterparts. There exist two kinds of investigative impetus for the girl detective, the internal and the external.

### *The Internal Impetus*

Classic detectives like Nancy Drew and Ruth Fielding exemplify the internal investigative impetus. An internal investigative impetus applies to a detective whose motivation for investigation is not the product of outside forces, but the product of personal desire. While the specifics of that desire may vary slightly between detectives – Judy Bolton solves cases as an incidental part of her personality, where Nancy Drew investigates as a hobby and as a means of proving herself capable and desirable – the internal investigative impetus can, theoretically, be ignored at any time. When a detective is under an internal investigative impetus, they are in control of their sleuthing; it is a choice more than an obligation. This is markedly different from teen detectives under an external investigative impetus, who are made investigators by threatening forces outside their control.

Cornelius explains that in “fine-tuning” the character of the teen detective, Stratemeyer “present[ed] readers with a spunky, well-to-do girl who could *focus on other people’s problems* because her own physical, emotional, and financial well-being was already established” (46; emphasis mine). This nuance is crucial to understanding the classic detective and the internal investigative impetus under which she operates; Nancy Drew, Ruth Fielding, Trixie Belden, Betty Gordon, and the other classic teen detectives all solve crimes as a means of helping others. They choose to involve themselves in these mysteries, and are not themselves the focus of the investigation. The classic teen detective is always operating under an internal investigative impetus, and it is this unspoken impetus which assures readers of her unimpeachable prowess and continued safety regardless of the caper at hand. The author of the first Nancy Drew books, Mildred

Wirt, “envisioned” Nancy as “rock-firm, untouched by war, the Depression, economic or moral problems – a trustworthy symbol for parents and children,” rooting Nancy’s characterization in a security that is only sustainable for a teen detective operating under an internal investigative impetus (qtd. in Carpan 51).

Nancy Drew takes her first case to be charitable to the Turner family. Ruth Fielding witnesses a petty theft and decides to insert herself into the investigation. Trixie Belden takes her first case as a result of sheer curiosity over a rundown mansion near her home. While the classic teen detective’s motives are admirable, and she constantly uses her sleuthing skills to benefit others, she is, by definition, personally unaffected by the cases she attempts to solve. The opposite is true of the contemporary teen detective, operating under an inescapable external investigative impetus.

### *The External Impetus*

Where the classic teen detective, under her internal investigative impetus, is a sleuth by virtue of her “freedom” to choose adventure, the contemporary teen detective has no choice (Carpan, 56). An external investigative impetus forces teen girls to become teen detectives in order to maintain their autonomy, gain closure, and find personal safety. *Veronica Mars* and *Pretty Little Liars* are perfect iterations of the external investigative impetus in the trend of televisual girl detectives. The pilot of each series introduces a season-long mystery which the girls are forced into solving: the murder of their respective best friends. For Veronica, the murder of her best friend Lilly Kane – and her sheriff-father’s handling of that investigation – have ruined her life. She loses her social status, her mother abandons her, her financial situation worsens, and she is alone.

For the Liars, the Pilot episode establishes the disappearance of clique leader Alison “Ali” DiLaurentis and the discovery of her body a year later, as the Liars are set to begin their junior year at Rosewood High. In both cases, the murder of these teenagers is the catalyst for investigation, as Veronica attempts to locate Lilly’s killer and the Liars seek to understand who killed Ali – believing that the murderer is the person tormenting them via text message. This tormentor calls themselves “A,” and constantly threatens to reveal all of their secrets if the Liars do not pursue Ali’s disappearance.

Veronica and the Liars are not perfect parallels; the Liars are consumed by the series-long questions of who killed Ali and A’s identity, whereas Veronica juggles the mystery of Lilly’s murder with individual, episodic mysteries she solves for her peers (for a price). While their reaction to the investigative impetus may be situationally different, the general reaction is identical; Veronica and the Liars are made to investigate an extremely high-stakes crime due to forces outside themselves. This is an extreme departure from the romps which the classic teen detective is “free” to pursue, and equally free to discontinue at any time. For the contemporary girl detective, her motivation for investigation is paramount, and this exploration of the critically unattended difference between the two kinds of impetus reveals why the classic model fails to encapsulate the current sleuth. Emily Fields, one of the Liars, even alludes to the power of the external forces on the Liars in the season one episode “The Jenna Thing,” explaining that “[they] were friends *because* of Ali” in the first place, and it is because of her that they will reunite to investigate her murder and protect themselves.

Finally, it is worth noting that teen detectives under an external investigative impetus are operating in a markedly different environment than the internally-motivated

teen detective, which affects not only the contemporary detective's willingness to investigate on her own terms, but highlights the seriousness of her investigations. Though classic teen detectives like Nancy Drew are independent operatives, they enjoy the support of their communities. Cornelius points out that "police chiefs flock to [the classic teen detective's] aid, and criminals are generally subdued with a minimum of muss and fuss" (2). This relationship with law enforcement is particularly telling; Nancy Drew both assists and is assisted by police officers, Judy Bolton helps the FBI, and Cherry Ames' assistance is sought no matter the exotic location to which she travels.

Conversely, contemporary teen detectives live in a world in which they will not be trusted or validated by the authorities – and they know it. Officer Darren Wilden makes it immediately clear that he thinks the Liars have "rehearsed" their stories about the night Ali went missing, and is certain of their involvement in her death for multiple seasons, frequently surveilling them and questioning them without legal or parental permission. Wilden's mistrust of the Liars is unfounded – while they do have secrets to keep, they were not involved in Ali's disappearance – and the injustice of his methods is compounded by the fact that Wilden is himself a criminal, introduced in the Pilot episode as a bribe-taking crooked cop. The same is true for Veronica, who is constantly battling the Neptune Sheriff's Department, even as she frequently solves cases they cannot. Sheriff Don Lamb is her primary adversary, and he has no interest in believing in Veronica's sleuthing skills or any of her testimony. In the Pilot episode, Veronica goes to Sheriff Lamb in order to file a report that she has been raped, and Lamb remarks, "Look at this! She cries! I'll tell you what, Veronica Mars – why don't you go see the Wizard? Ask him for a little backbone," before dismissing her entirely and refusing to file her rape

allegation. As a result, and as an additional season-long mystery, Veronica spends the entirety of the first season independently investigating her own sexual assault.

These teen detectives are at odds with police throughout the series, but it is particularly significant that both series establish the corruption of the police as early as possible. An inability to resort to typical protective powers like police officers, principals, and parents further isolates the contemporary teen detective and intensifies the force of the external investigative impetus. The shift from classic to contemporary detective – from an impetus which comes with freedom and support to one which is inscribed by external forces – serves as commentary on the contemporary communal tension between individuals and law enforcement, and the increased acknowledgement of the intersections of oppressions women face. This inherent commentary seems to manifest, too, in the focus of women-led true crime on remembering victims, creating communities, and seeking justice. Once the starkness of the contrast between the two kinds of investigative impetus is understood, it is possible to examine other iterations of the girl detective that have become popular in the contemporary crime narrative landscape, such as the true crime podcaster.

*Serial* – an offshoot of NPR’s *This American Life* and (at the time of its first season finale) the fastest podcast to reach five million downloads and streams – is a natural place to begin (Dredge). As an evolution of Nancy Drew and the televisual teen detectives which inspire my delineation of the investigative impetus *Serial*, written, researched, and hosted by investigative journalist Sarah Koenig, offers a surprisingly straightforward classification.

Koenig on *Serial*, though decades removed from the original Nancy Drew and capitalizing on a newer medium, clearly operates under an internal impetus. She is the picture of an intrepid reporter as much as a benevolently-motivated girl sleuth. Intrigued by the (potentially) wrongful conviction of Adnan Syed in the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee, she elects to conduct a deep dive into the case and into conversation with Adnan himself, eventually bringing to light witness statements which would be used to garner Syed an appeal. While Koenig's investigation has real-world implications for Syed, she herself is strictly removed from those consequences and thus under an internal impetus. What's more, Koenig is clear that despite the technologically-recent form of a podcast, "[The story of season one] is not an original idea. Maybe in podcast form it is ... But trying to do it as a serial, this is as old as Dickens" (Dredge). This acknowledgment of invoking a classic form on a newer medium complements the idea that Koenig is, in capitalizing on her internal investigative impetus, doubling back on the newer teen detective and more readily identifying with Nancy Drew. Koenig is not alone in her endeavors here – in fact, the investigative woman-led true crime podcasts which followed *Serial* in tone and style are easily read as being the product of an internal impetus too; Madeleine Baran's *In the Dark*, Portland Helmich's *Stranglers*, and the anonymously-hosted *The Fall Line* serving as some of the best examples. However, the evolution of the girl detective to the crime-focused podcast host does not always consist of a neat return to the Nancy Drew-era girl. One of the most complex iterations of the girl detective in the world of podcasts is the host of the episodic (rather than season or series-long case arcs) true crime podcast – specifically the true crime comedy podcast. Though the true crime comedy podcaster operates under an internal impetus, just as classic detectives and the

non-comedic investigative podcasters do, the difference in genre creates an important distinction between these women and both their literary foremothers and their podcasting peers, and the way this generic departure functions has yet to be closely examined.

As Roz Kaveney details in her creation of the term “anthropology shot,” a set of archetypal characterizations lie at the heart of understanding girls’ series and teen media that are not bound by genre, and which are certainly applicable in typifying figures like Koenig (3). The most relevant of these archetypes in considering internal-impetus detectives is the “all-around girl.” Sherrie Inness, in *Intimate Communities*, claims “the all-around girl is the Progressive Era superwoman,” and Carpan describes the all-around girl as “good at everything” she tries (97, 20). Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby refer to the televisual all-around girl as a specific kind of smart girl; one who “has it all, including a bright future, dates with boys, and a ‘can-do’ attitude” (287). While the focus on social lives or plucky spirit is not always available in the podcaster-iteration of the girl detective, the security at the center of her classification is always there. Where detectives like Veronica Mars or *Pretty Little Liars*’ Hanna Marin and Emily Fields have to worry about losing everything – personal safety, financial security, and the safe expression of sexual identity – investigators like Nancy Drew and Sarah Koenig are never under the same personal stakes. It is this characterization which attends the investigative podcasters like Koenig, whose remove from the fray but embeddedness in the story affects real-world change and widespread popularity. Like many sleuths operating under an internal impetus, she is not bound to continue but chooses to, fulfilling her further definition as an all-around girl whose safety and competence are never in question.

However, as Pomerantz, Raby, Carpan, and Inness all suggest: the all-around girl



is as popular an archetype as she is a difficult one to sustain. The ease with which the all-around girl, also known as the superwoman, the smart girl, or golden girl, navigates her challenges has been criticized as “problematic, apolitical, and individualized,” and it is thus no surprise that not all true crime podcasters can be typified in this way (Pomerantz and Raby, 294). Where the all-around girl under an internal impetus has confidence and competence built into her persona, the comedy true crime podcaster actively eschews such suggestions of natural ability, frequently pointing out their own flaws and inadequacies.

The impetus under which comedy true crime podcasters operate may be internal, but they are characterized in a markedly different fashion than the all-around girls and investigative journalists which precede them, I will argue, by virtue of the genre in which they work. In order to demonstrate that it is the comedic treatment which lies at the heart of these differences within the same general impetus, I will examine the way that comedy functions in one such podcast: *My Favorite Murder with Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark*.

#### THE COMEDIC CLASSIFICATION OF *MY FAVORITE MURDER*

*My Favorite Murder* is a popular podcast which covers two true crime murder stories per episode. The largely unscripted episodes consist of meandering conversations between hosts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, as each recounts a true crime story to the other, who may or may not have any familiarity with the case. There are many standout elements of *My Favorite Murder* – from Kilgariff and Hardstark’s focus on the lives of the victims (often lost in mass media coverage), to their candor about their own

mental health struggles, to the community of fans (self-dubbed “Murderinos”) who congregate at live shows across the world and in a Facebook group numbering 205,301 as of May 7, 2018 – but perhaps most notable is the podcast’s commitment to comedy. While its title and subject matter might suggest otherwise, *My Favorite Murder* is clear that it is first and foremost a comedy program, rather than a self-serious attempt to put grisly details on display or strike fear into listeners. The podcast regularly features in the Top 10 iTunes comedy podcast chart, and the hosts just as regularly call out their own factual errors as integral to a setup which favors improvisation and human emotion over stringent research, and evidences their inability to be categorized in the same all-around girl way as other internally-motivated hosts like Koenig (“About”).

The question of why comedy can be effective in (re)telling stories that are ostensibly tragic, frightening, and/or hurtful is a popular one, addressed both by cultural commentators and the hosts themselves. I argue that *My Favorite Murder*’s tonal departure from typical true crime narratives allows it to be typified not as the comedic re-branding of an existing genre and detective figure, but rather as a classically Hegelian enactment of the basic difference between comic and tragic performance. I will further demonstrate that this comedic classification is quickly complicated by an acknowledgement of the way in which Alenka Zupančič uses the same Hegelian thinking to reconcile the paradoxical formulation of comedic indestructibility. Ultimately, I contend that Zupančič’s use of Hegel is one correct frame for understanding *My Favorite Murder*, but the podcast’s insistence on the destructibility of its hosts and subjects denies use of the all-around girl frame and of Zupančič’s theorization of the “reversal” – perhaps re-opening some of the paradoxical space she attempts, with Hegel’s help, to cinch

closed.

Some critics claim that “These comedy podcasts help listeners process the true crime genre itself,” which seems to echo Kilgariff’s own belief “that true-crime fans find power in facing their fears” (Hess; Fitzpatrick). Molly Fitzpatrick, cultural critic for *Rolling Stone*, describes the tone of the podcast this way: “Even its darkest moments are lightened by Karen and Georgia’s effortlessly funny banter and genuine empathy for those affected by these crimes. [Listening is] not unlike the audio equivalent of squinting through your fingers at a slasher film.” Talia McPherson’s article, “Why True Crime Captivates,” takes a psychological tack in attempting to explain the draw of true crime, arguing that indulgence in the genre revolves around the human impulse toward curiosity, fear, empathy, and morality. Each of these explanations though, including Kilgariff’s, is focused on the true crime element rather than the comedy – these evaluations could as easily explain comic true crime treatments as tragic ones. What remains unaccounted for in otherwise valid descriptions like these is the specific way in which *My Favorite Murder*, and other comedy podcasts which center on true crime, are a departure from the genre rather than merely an extension of it. What Hess calls the “self-serious narrators” of typical true crime are in fact definitive of the genre, and it is the host’s approach which separates treatments of gruesome murders into comic and tragic camps.

Some argue that the popularity of podcasts like *My Favorite Murder* – which is far from the only program claiming to offer a humorous approach to the macabre – is due to the adaptation of an already successful cache of subject matter (true crime stories) for a new medium (podcasting), boiling the podcasters’ popularity down to a re-imagining of “TV’s time-tested approach: a focus on gruesome and mysterious killings,

disproportionately involving white female victims and sensationalized by self-serious narrators” (Hess). However, such an understanding of true crime comedy podcasts is, at best, a hasty one. In some ways, the true crime podcast does act as an extension of what long-running true crime television like *Dateline*, *20/20*, and *Forensic Files* have proven captivating: the narrativization of real-life cases which are particularly effective in attracting a female audience (SAGE Publications). However, the location of similar (and sometimes the exact same) narratives in the comedy genre is a significant departure from the serious tone of true crime mainstays like *America’s Most Wanted’s* John Walsh and *Forensic Files’* Peter Thomas. While *My Favorite Murder* certainly participates in and capitalizes on the tradition of fascination with true crime narratives, it is insufficient to read the program as merely a typical true crime podcast which manages to incorporate atypical levity.

Kilgariff and Hardstark, themselves major consumers of true crime television, acknowledge the potential disconnect in programming which simultaneously attempts to disturb and surprise while being patently routine and predictable. On the source for her favorite murder in Episode 109, Kilgariff says she turned to true crime TV: “The ID Channel, at this point now, they have [a show dedicated to] every water feature-style murder. It’s like, ‘swamp murders,’ ‘pool murders,’ ‘and fuckin’ shallow puddle [murders]’” (“Project Artichoke”). Painting with too broad a generic brush, then, lumps comedy podcasters in with the formulaic and overly-serious televisual narratives they attempt – at times like this actively, explicitly – to eschew. Such generalizations attempt to relegate all internal-impetus girl investigators to the all-around girl category, when it is one they could never convincingly occupy.

In *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič explains that in the Hegelian understanding, a primary difference between comic and tragic is the distance between the actual performer and the character they represent. Hegel's treatment is particularly useful in parsing the difference between traditional true crime narrators and comedic ones. According to Zupančič, the Hegelian tragedy requires that "When the actor puts on the mask, he is no longer himself: in the mask, he brings life to the (universal) essence he represents" (25). In comedy, however, Hegel says "the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates ... just as the spectator is completely at home in the drama performed before him and sees himself playing in it" (qtd. in Zupančič 26). A tragic masking, rather than comic merging of person and performance, easily describes the tone of traditional, true crime television narrators and is equally present in podcasts which opt to emulate the self-serious tone that *My Favorite Murder* rejects.

One such traditionally-tragic podcast is *Casefile*, a program hosted by a single, unnamed Australian, wearing the tagline "Fact is scarier than fiction." In contrast to the comedy true crime podcast, *Casefile* features no banter, denies the listener any active identification with the host as an individual, and warns listeners at the top of every episode about the disturbing content to come. In this way, *Casefile* – and other straight true crime podcasts like it – actively balances the truth of their material with the obvious artificiality of their performance. The erasure of the host's identity in *Casefile* is a construct, one which effectively removes the performer/actor from "himself," or his real identity outside the podcast, and thus allow him to "bring life to" the universal tragedy and fear of human mortality. Even true crime podcasters who do not choose to obscure their identities enact the Hegelian tragic, particularly investigative reporters-turned-hosts

like *Serial*'s Koenig or *Someone Knows Something*'s David Ridgen. Like Koenig, Ridgen identifies himself and the victims he works with, but his program seeks to effect tangible change in cold cases by assuming the mask of the heroic, intrepid investigator. As a result, even though he appears in the podcast as himself, the performance component is inescapable and offers a less than fully authentic version of himself – the heroic motivation and the tone that manifests mean that Ridgen is essentially donning a mask of himself as an investigator, enacting the universal curiosity and need for closure which drives audiences to true crime in the first place. *Someone Knows Something* and other investigative efforts cover true crime stories just as *My Favorite Murder* does (often the same cases), but they are generically different precisely because they remain firmly as tragic retellings. These hosts are separated from themselves, assuming the mask either of anonymity or benevolent heroism in order to properly reflect and relay real life tragedies. These hosts are of course “actual human beings,” but their solemn approaches to the material render their efforts “impersonat[ions of] the heroes ... portray[ing] them not in the form of narrative but in the actual speech and action of the actors themselves” (Zupančič 25). These tragic hosts go further than narrating heroic actions within the stories they choose to tell, instead becoming a part of the narrative as impersonators of that heroism, attempting either to shed light on the evils of the world or to find solutions. The same masking does not occur in comedic treatments of true crime.

Hegel's coincidence of impersonation and actual self manifests in hosts like Kilgariff and Hardstark. While they are consciously performing for the podcast, their rejection of identities or masks that differ from their actual identities lands them as much – or perhaps more – in the comic camp as the fact that they tell jokes and make each

other laugh. Rather than adopting a performative mask as reporter, hero, or expose-r of worldly evil as the all-around girl detective does or is perhaps forced to, Kilgariff and Hardstark reject the tragic requisite of a mask that precludes them from performing as themselves. Following Hegel, Zupančič argues “a performance is [always] still a performance,” but it is the (perceived) authenticity of these women performing their own identities that divorce their endeavor from a tragic performance, even before the often-grisly subject matter is considered. Rather than reinscribing the fear engendered by the very existence of violent crime, or offering heroic solutions to decade-old mysteries, the motivation of *My Favorite Murder* seems to be the indulgence in, as Hardstark puts it, “a community of shit that you’re not supposed to talk about in polite society, which everyone fuckin’ thinks about constantly” (Fitzpatrick). In both goal and tone, *My Favorite Murder* cements itself as a classically Hegelian-defined comedy, revolving around two hosts who “simply appear as themselves” (Zupančič 26).

This rejection of the tragic mask runs throughout *My Favorite Murder*, but is perhaps most potent in the hosts’ insistence on exploring their own personal histories (alcoholism, anxiety, eating disorders, and addiction) as they detail the crimes of others, which is (not coincidentally) the same factor which renders them distinct from host like Koenig. This focus on the authenticity of the host’s impromptu disclosures is evidenced by the fact that “episodes have been getting longer over the series’ run ... [which] itself functions as a kind of sly commentary — that these sensationalized crimes aren’t actually as important as the relatively mundane everyday concerns of the women” (Fitzpatrick). This shifting importance, from the gory details of the crimes to the relationship between the hosts, and the inextricability of their identities from their performed selves highlights

the very elements of the format which serve to separate comedy true crime from the rest of the genre, without needing to make any mention of the actual jokes told on the podcast.

As an especially relevant example: In one live recording of the podcast, Kilgariff suggests that when “super-monster” Ted Bundy’s girlfriend “tells him, upon breaking up with him, that he is immature and lacks ambition,” she’s “sure [it] went over well with Ted” (“Live at the Neptune”). This joke culminates in a hypothetical impersonation of Bundy: “He’s like, ‘thank you, Stephanie...I...appreciate your candor’ – here Kilgariff sing-speaks as Ted Bundy – “and I’ll take it into consideration” (“Live at the Neptune”). On one level, moments like these are an enactment of what Seltzer describe as the function of talk radio in relaying traditional true crime narratives: “The boundaries between public and private come down, in the collective gathering around private ordeals” (*True Crime* 49). This would seem particularly apt, since the coverage of Bundy, one of America’s most infamous killers, is presented not only as a recorded episode of the podcast but as the subject of a live show – but nowhere do Seltzer, or scholars of girl detectives, account for treatments which are comedic in form or, more specifically, base at least some of their humor in mocking the serial killer rather than reinforcing his power for terror. The *moment* is funny – the crowd’s response recorded in Seattle confirms as much – but it is not these kinds of treatments necessarily (or perhaps singularly) which render the podcast comic rather than tragic. It is not merely the presence of laughter and levity; it is the meshing of the host’s actual identity with their performed one; the removal of the mask that functions so specifically in traditional, tragic true crime peopled by investigators who strive to appear like all-around girls.



That being said, the classification of *My Favorite Murder* as Hegelian comedy is not without its own complications. Zupančič employs Hegel in order to reconcile what she perceives as a paradox in comedy: the genre's emphasis on the reality of human life with its "limitations and deficiencies" in combination with the fact that comedy, "as a rule," is predicated on a sense of indestructibility (28). "Regardless of all accidents and catastrophes (physical as well as psychic or emotional) that befall comic characters," Zupančič explains, "they always arise from the chaos perfectly intact, and relentlessly go on pursuing their goals" (28-29). Zupančič asserts that Hegel's definition of comedy actually helps resolve the inherent conflict of a comic universe which is simultaneously based on the assumptions that actors are fallible humans and that catastrophe is impermanent; "comedy is not the story of the alienation of the subject, it is the story of the alienation of the substance, which has become the subject" (28). For Zupančič, the paradox of fallibility/indestructibility only remains paradoxical when the observer fails to acknowledge the requisite reversal of the abstract and the concrete (29). Zupančič employs the example of an indestructible comic character who falls in a puddle but is ultimately unscathed to demonstrate her position, explaining that "The puddle itself is thus not the site of concrete reality ... but one of the props or devices through which the very concreteness or humanity of the concept itself ... is processed, crystallized, and concretized" (30). So, it is not that the comic audience understands the character to be immune to lasting consequences while he simultaneously ought to be demonstrating human fallibility – which is paradoxical – it is that the observer has located the abstract in the wrong place, and thus understood a paradox in the given picture of humanity where none rightfully exists. The paradox is a tempting one, but Zupančič insists that it can be

reconciled with the proper reframing. Zupančič also allows for “false, conservative” comedies in which “the abstract-universal and the concrete do not change places” at all, and thus do not require any understanding or acknowledgement of reversal (30). But this construction also fails to fully encapsulate the comic categorization of a podcast which relies on the concreteness of death but actively does not feature the indestructibility that would facilitate a reversal. It is not, then, that the reversal does not need to occur (rendering the comedy conservative), but that it *cannot* occur because the indestructible as Zupančič explains and expects it does not come to fruition.

*My Favorite Murder* has a complex relationship with the notion of the comic indestructible that I do not believe is necessarily accounted for by Zupančič’s theorization of reversal, and it is this relationship which precludes Kilgariff and Hardstark from being comedic iterations of the all-around girl, who is herself seen as indestructible. While the podcast is rightfully considered comic in both mainstream and Hegelian terms, it is fundamentally at odds with the universe of indestructibility Zupančič assumes. The content of true crime stories – especially murders – is specifically and relentlessly focused on destruction. The subjects of the stories who serve as the weekly “Favorite” murders are by definition not indestructible, their mortality being the basic qualifier for inclusion in the episode. The mere existence of destructible subjects in comedy might not seem to defy the Zupančič model of misunderstanding where the abstract and concrete lie. Since certainly not all jokes are predicated on assumptions of (in)destructibility, it is possible for a comic treatment to be removed from the paradox entirely. However, *My Favorite Murder* actively pushes back against the idea of comic indestructibility by being so firmly rooted both in Hegelian comedy and active acknowledgement of destruction. A

proper “reversal” would require that either the hosts or the audience of *My Favorite Murder* have their own sense of comic indestructibility reinforced by destructible subject; that the *fact* of the murder would then serve as the puddle which concretizes the concept of our own comic vitality. Yet, this is not what manifests.

Kilgariff and Hardstark repeatedly cite their own mortality as a contributing factor to their fascination with true crime in the first place. The pair reference the potential that the podcast would lead to their own murders in multiple episodes, and discuss attempting to suss out whether Hardstark’s husband is in fact a murderous sociopath on at least one occasion – just in case should she ever go missing (“Let’s Hear Your Podcast”). Hess claims that women are drawn to podcasts which employ comedy alongside horror as “an easy coping mechanism for relentlessly being told by pop culture that they’re probably going to be raped and murdered by a stranger,” but that their mortality is something to be coped with in the first place makes locating the point of abstract/concrete reversal more difficult. In this way, the “very *movement* of concrete universality” which Zupančič seeks in order to account for the paradoxical featuring of (in)destructibility in comedy, never comes – host, subject, and audience are destructed/destructible, yet firmly comic, blurring the categorizations Zupančič has built on Hegel’s foundation. Further, this insistence on their own destructibility and identification with the victims of the crimes they retell, leaves comedic true crime podcasters under an internal impetus but without the assumed competence of the all-around girl Koenig’s podcasting persona has inherited from figures like Nancy Drew. As a result, true crime podcasts, though reverting to the investigative impetus televisual teen detectives have eschewed, contribute to the continuing evolution of the girl sleuth in their divergence.

Zupančič and Hegel's classifications of comedy are, of course, only two of many, so locating a complication in their application does not render *My Favorite Murder* beyond theoretical accounting. Instead, it is notable that *My Favorite Murder* manages to adhere so closely to Hegel's basic categorization and simultaneously defy its more specific application in terms of the indestructible. The complication the podcast offers of Zupančič's convincing unknotting of comedy's paradox is well worth the consideration, particularly when the comic artefact in question is one which, too, seems contradictory at first. In examining media which attempts to be both honest and funny, it is our duty, as Georgia and Karen implore each other in one of the podcast's unofficial taglines, to "Look. Listen. Look and listen" at what this confluence of humor and horror might have to teach us, both about the continuing iterations of true crime narratives and the evolution of the women who investigate them.

## CONCLUSION

By treating these disparate types of narrative, from Pulitzer Prize-winning Cormac McCarthy to Nancy Drew to comedy podcasters, as contributing to the same cultural phenomenon, it is my hope that we will be better able to understand the way that different treatments color perceptions of killers, victims, and their communities. It is paramount to understand that true and fictional crime narratives are always indebted to each other – constantly shaped by the facts of the real-world and the constructs of the imagined one. "If murder is where bodies and history cross," Seltzer writes, "'senseless' murder is where our most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy, are secured, or brought to crisis" (*Serial Killers 2*). This potential securing and unseating is everywhere in crime narratives, often simultaneously. The

security we hope to find in the narrative distance between ourselves and Lester is the same as Karen and Georgia's hopes to assuage their anxiety by facing their real-world fears twice a week in private conversations recorded for the public. In both cases, that security is undermined by the ever-present knowledge that crimes continue to be committed, that American communities continue to ignore monsters and be implicated in their creation.

*My Favorite Murder's* departure from the competence and heroism of both Nancy Drew and *Serial* suggests that tragic true crime narratives may need the help of comedic ones in actually facing the kind of destruction McCarthy writes in Lester's dehumanization and degradation of women. Women in true crime narratives are overwhelmingly the victims, but they are also overwhelmingly the primary audience of true crime narratives. It is these contemporary renderings of such stories that attempt, like *My Favorite Murder* does, to afford agency to living listeners and voices to victims. It is fitting then, that while the girl detective is always "equal parts alluring and chaste," and Lester seeks (perversely, wrongly, problematically) to preserve the allure of his captive corpses, *My Favorite Murder* features the tagline "Stay Sexy & Don't Get Murdered" (Carpan 53). This refrain, steeped in comedy, evidences both the expectation of the woman featured in the crime narrative and women's attempt to reclaim some of these narratives. With the current boom of crime narratives across media, and the steadfast figure of the serial killer as a distinctly American threat, it is more important than ever to figure how American society mythologizes violent men, how we honor murdered women, and how we become careful readers of the texts which broach these topics.

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