

HISTORY 388/395/397: True Crime in Early Modern Europe
Horizon Hall 3008
Fall 2023

Dr. Amanda Madden

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Office hours: Wed 11:00-2:30 Thurs; 1:00-5:00 pm and by appointment

Office: RRCHNM, Research Hall

About the Course

True crime documentaries, podcasts, books, and television shows are a wildly popular modern genre selling in the tens of millions and attracting a large audience. But what you may not know is that it was also a bestselling genre in early modern Europe. Tales of serial killers, werewolves, bandits, and murderous nuns were wildly popular and helped sell chapbooks, broadsheets, and popularize murder ballads, in addition to providing material for moral panics and justification for the criminal justice system. By looking at primary sources, this course will examine true crime and popular culture in early modern Europe as a precursor to the genre today. In groups, you will produce an episode of a true crime podcast as a class as the final outcome of the course.

***Content warning:** This course contains material that may be difficult and disturbing for an audience, including violent crime, murder, sexual assault. Please be sensitive to your mental health when engaging with the material in this class. If you are struggling, please come talk to me.

How to communicate with me: My email is amadden8@gmu.edu—email and the course Slack channel are the best way to reach me. N.B. that anything course related must be conducted via gmU email meaning you and I must both use our GMU address. Note that I don't respond to emails after 8pm on weekdays and may be slow to respond on weekends. I also encourage you to come to my office hours:

Tues 10:00am-1:00pm; Thurs; 2:00-5:00pm and by appointment

Office: RRCHNM, Research Hall

How to be successful in this course: This course is a combination of reading and doing. We'll be reading books and articles but we'll also be playing with online projects and even creating a podcast! I do not expect you to master everything fully but I do expect you to try. For example, if you are struggling to finish the reading, skim it and take notes. If you are struggling to speak up in class, write one question down before you come to class. Take notes. Keep a calendar. We'll go over tips and tricks for how to be successful in a history course and if you feel yourself getting behind or struggling to keep up—reach out! I promise you we can figure out a plan and I can put you in touch with further resources.

Use of electronic devices in class: Smartphones, computers, and tablets can be a distraction in class. Unless we are doing in-class activities or you have spoken to me beforehand about taking notes, the use of cell-phones and computers is prohibited during announcements and class discussions. If you are found to be using your device in class under prohibited conditions, I will politely ask you to put it away.

For students with disabilities: I will support you and make full accommodations in this course but if you have yet to do so, I strongly urge you to register and work with the Office of Disability Services. Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu | Phone: (703) 993-2474

Required Texts

MacMillan, Ken, ed. *Stories of True Crime in Tudor and Stuart England*. Taylor &

Francis, 2022. (at library)

Craig Monson, *Nuns Behaving Badly: Tales of Music, Magic, Art, and Arson in the Convents of Italy*. Chicago University Press, 2010.

*other readings as assigned below

Assignments

1) Podcast Review x 2 (20%)

Twice during the semester you will write reviews of two podcasts of your choice: a contemporary true crime podcast and a true crime in history podcast. In your review you will be asked to consider and evaluate the various elements of the podcast including but not limited to the narrative, framing, audio, and production.

2) Analysis of A Criminal Case (20%)

In this assignment you will evaluate and analyze a true crime primary source: pamphlet, murder ballad, poem, or trial for elements. Elements you will be asked to consider include narrative, voice, and audience. Why has this particular crime been publicized in this way? What does the source say about The perception of the crime? What wider elements does this reflect?

3) News Feature (20%)

Using original research on a criminal case (1400-1700), write a news feature in a genre of your choice: pamphlet, poem, ballad, broadside or other news feature.

4) Group Podcast Episode (30%)

Your groups will pitch, write a script for, and record a 20 min podcast episode based on your collective research on a case.

5) Participation (10%)

Grading and Grading Scale: I'm a holistic grader. You are a whole person with responsibilities outside this class and some weeks it may be harder than others to meet all of your responsibilities. We all have strengths and challenges. Therefore I take into account your performance as whole and not just grades and percentages. The following grading scale reflects the grade as a whole for the course:

When assigning the final grade, I follow GMU's [grading scale](#).

Note that if you are failing the course in week ten of the class, the last day to drop is October 23. Unless there are mitigating circumstances, I do not accept work that has yet to be completed after this date. This does not mean you don't have a grace period on assignments due after this date; what it does mean is that I will not allow students to make up more than 50 percent of the course after this deadline.

Unless there are documented circumstances and a plan to make up work is implemented, students who miss three consecutive weeks of the class will fail the course.

If you are struggling with attendance and participation, please come to me and discuss so we can work things out. I very much want to help you succeed.

Resources

GMU has a variety of [resources](#) to help you succeed. I strongly urge you to take advantage of them. Of particular relevance to this class are

[The Office of Learning Services](#)

[University Writing Center](#)

*If you attend a workshop at the Office of Learning Services or make an appointment at the writing center, I will give you extra credit for this class.

Policies

Academic Conduct: Mason is an Honor Code university; please see the [Office for Academic Integrity](#) for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. The principle of academic integrity is taken very seriously and violations are treated gravely. What does academic integrity mean in this course? Essentially this: when you are responsible for a task, you will perform that task. When you rely on someone else's work in an aspect of the performance of that task, you will give full credit in the proper, accepted form. Another aspect of academic integrity is the free play of ideas. Vigorous discussion and debate are encouraged in this course, with the firm expectation that all aspects of the class will be conducted with civility and respect for differing ideas, perspectives, and traditions. When in doubt (of any kind) please ask for guidance and clarification.

Course Schedule

Week One: What is True Crime?

Monday, August 21: Introduction to the class

Wednesday, August 23: What is True Crime?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_crime

Listen: [Crime Junkie, Episode](#)

Week Two: Why is True crime popular? True Crime in the Media

8/28 G.S. Larke-Walsh. "Introduction" *True Crime in American Media* (1st ed.). Routledge, 2023 ([library](#))

Lindsey A. Sherrill. "Beyond Entertainment: Podcasting and the Criminal Justice Reform "Niche"." In *True Crime in American Media*, pp. 14-31. Routledge, 2023. ([library](#))

8/30 [Genre](#) (Newspapers, Tabloids, Podcasts, Songs (Murder Ballads)
Social media (forums), Documentaries, Netflix Series)

Week Three: History of True Crime as a Genre

9/4 NO CLASS

9/6 Joy Wiltenburg, "True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism." *The American Historical Review* [Vol. 109, No. 5 \(December 2004\)](#), pp. 1377-1404.

Pamela Berger, [The Bloody History of the True Crime Genre](#)

[The Old Bailey Online](#)

[London Medieval Murder Map](#)

Week Four: True Crime in History

9/11 Podcast: [Locusta Rome's Imperial Poisoner](#)

9/13 Ken McMillan, ed. [Stories of True Crime in Tudor and Stuart England](#)

Due: Podcast Review

Week Five: The Popularity of True Crime in Early Modern Europe

9/18 Gaskill, Malcolm. "Reporting Murder: Fiction in the Archives in Early Modern England." *Social History* 23, no. 1 (1998): 1-30.

9/20 Jenner, Mark SR, and Lena Liapi. "Cheap Print, Crime and Information in Early Modern London: The Life and Death of Griffin Flood." *The Seventeenth Century* 38, no. 2 (2023): 185-213.

Source: Martin, Randall, Anne Lake Prescott, and Betty S. Travitsky. *Women and Murder in Early Modern News Pamphlets and Broadside Ballads, 1573-1697*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016. Web.

Due: News Feature

Week Six: Vampires

Vermeir, Koen. "Vampires as Creatures of the Imagination: Theories of Body, Soul, and Imagination in Early Modern Vampire Tracts (1659-1755)." *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers (2012).

9/27 Podcast: [Elizabeth Bathory](#)

Week Seven: Werewolves

10/2 Donecker, Stefan. "The Werewolves of Livonia: Lycanthropy and shape-changing in Scholarly texts, 1550-1720." *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 1, no. 2 (2012): 289-322.

10/4 Duni, Matteo. "What about Some Good Wether?" Witches and Werewolves in Sixteenth-Century Italy." *Werewolf Histories* (2015): 121-141.

Podcast: [The Beast of Gauvadin](#)

Podcast Review #1

Audacity Demonstration

Week Eight: Songs and Ballads

[10/9 McIlvenna, Una, *Singing the News of Death: Execution Ballads in Europe 1500-1900* \(New York, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 18 Aug. 2022](#)

10/11 *Singing the News of Death*

Song: [The Mercy Seat, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds](#)

Due: Analysis of a Criminal Case

Week Nine: How to Write a Podcast

10/16 Ian M Cook. [Scholarly Podcasting: Why, What, How?](#) New York, New York: Routledge, 2023. Print.

10/18 *Scholarly Podcasting: Why, What, How?*

Podcast: [What Happened to the Princes in the Tower?](#)

Week Ten: Crime and Gender

10/23 [Alisha Rankin. "Gender, Poison, and Antidotes in Early Modern Europe." *It All Depends on the Dose*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. United States: Routledge, 2018. 132–149. Web.](#)

10/25 Manon van der Heijden. [Women and Crime in Early Modern Holland. Trans. David McKay. Leiden, Netherlands :: Brill, 2016. Print.](#)

Nuns Behaving Badly

Due: Podcast Proposal

Week Eleven: Crime and Religion

10/30 *Nuns behaving Badly*

11/1 *Nuns Behaving Badly*

Podcast Review #2 Due

Week Twelve: The Criminal Trial

11/6 Cohen, Thomas Vance, and Elizabeth Storr Cohen. [Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome: Trials before the Papal Magistrates](#). University of Toronto Press, 1993. (excerpt)

11/8 Mellyn, Elizabeth W. [Mad Tuscans and their Families: A history of Mental Disorder in Early modern Italy](#). University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. (excerpt)

Podcast: [Forensics in Medieval China](#)

Week Thirteen: Crime and Justice

11/13 Stephen Knight. "'The Original Hoods': Late Medieval English Crime Fiction." *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 10 (2021): n. pag. Web.

11/15 J. Coolen. "Places of Justice and Awe: the Topography of Gibbets and Gallows in Medieval and Early Modern North-western and Central Europe." *World Archaeology*, 45(5), 762-779.

Due: Podcast Script

Week Fourteen: Punishment

11/20 Friedrichs, Christopher R. "House-destruction as a Ritual of Punishment in Early Modern Europe." *European History Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2020): 599-624.

11/22 (No class)

Week Fifteen (last week of class)

11/27 In-class working Day

11/29: In-class Working Day

Podcast Due 12/8