

Ethics for True Crime Producers

by

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To Larksong

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Preface

The Producer as Gatekeeper of Reality

True crime is not merely a genre: it is a well-oiled machine for manufacturing public reality. Every choice a producer makes, from what to include, what to omit, to what to dramatize, reshapes how audiences understand crime, danger, and justice. That power carries an obligation most productions ignore.

When I launched KlueIQ in 2025, I brought years of true crime work with me: journalism, television research, an award-winning book, and textbooks. Across all of it, one flaw kept resurfacing: the genre's addiction to tropes and clichés that flatten real people into crude narrative devices that drove a well-worn plot. Calling a victim's smile “one that lit up a room” isn't a tribute; it erases the victim's identity and turns a person into a mere plot function. On the other end, killers are inflated into pure evil, a switch flipped on, with no examination of the institutional failures that enabled them to become killers in the first place.

Those kinds of systemic failures are rarely accidental. Elliot Rodger posted a 137-page manifesto before murdering six people in 2014; his own parents warned police after seeing his disturbing videos. The police did not act. We remember the “incel” label. We forget the apathetic system that had every signal it needed to intervene and it still did nothing. The same blind spot recurs everywhere: the family that tells a battered wife to stay with an abusive mate who will eventually kill her, the city hall that funds executive raises instead of streetlights, the neighbor who hears violence and

doesn't call it in. True crime rarely tells these stories, because doing so would mean indicting the system instead of the “serpent” who slithered into it.

This is the trap I built KlueIQ to avoid. *True Crime, Wrong Story*, our podcast and interactive documentary series, exists to dismantle the tropes that distort how audiences understand crime and justice. The idea crystallized while watching coverage of Steven and Cary Stayner. Steven was abducted as a child, held for years, and escaped. He was celebrated: interviews, a book, a film. Cary, his older brother, festered in his shadow and years later murdered four women. At his arrest, Cary revealed that his family had kept psychologists away while abusing their own children, and that he himself had been abused by an uncle. None of this made the story. Instead, we got a hero and a monster, as if they hadn't grown up in the same house, and were shaped by the same secretive, abusive ecosystem.

That's what narrative selection does: it deliberately severs causality and replaces systems with archetypes for the sake of a convenient story. The wrong kind of story gives audiences a static and predictable hero and a villain instead of the harder truth: two boys failed by family, press, and social safety nets alike. What Cary did was unforgivable and appallingly gratuitous. However, his actions were also not inexplicable, and a genre that refuses to hold both truths at once is a genre that is lying to its audience.

Getting to that level of honesty requires more than research; it requires ethics as a method, not a decoration. Ethics is the lens that isolates the kernel of truth inside institutional sophistry. The people running those institutions meant to protect the public resist

that lens because it threatens their place in a hierarchy built on being seen as infallible, heroic, and *deific*. When real people suffer real harm, tolerating that performance becomes its own ethical failure.

This is also the reason why so many producers stop digging once they get body-cam footage: it feels as if they have real proof, and pushing further risks alienating the police sources who approve future FOIA requests. That trade-off, access for silence, is rarely named, but it is the quiet transaction at the center of most true crime production. Truth does not live only in a banker's box or a cloud server; it lives in whatever a producer is willing to look for once the easy footage runs out. The real mandate is simple to state and hard to execute: how and why did this happen? The honest answer is usually layered: a person who trusted a fictional script instead of reality, or a victim caught in a system built to fail them. Neither answer blames the victim. Both demand we look past the archetype to see reality as it is.

This book is your practical guide to that kind of lateral, divergent, and critical thinking: it is empirical, empathetic, and instinctive all at once. We will take real cases, examine the story the genre chose to tell, and then dismantle the ethical shortcuts that made that story possible, chapter by chapter, overlooked issue by overlooked issue.

A producer cannot realistically include every fact or player in any given case. The producer must carefully decide what goes in, and what gets cut, and that decision shapes not just how audiences see one case, but how they see crime itself: that only certain victims get hunted, that locked windows guarantee safety. Reality resists that

simplicity. Deifying the victim and demonizing the killer feels as if were a form of justice, but it isn't, especially not if the facts underneath are hidden or bent to fit the shape of the story.

Producers are not packaging stories. They are deciding what becomes reality in public memory. That is not a suggestion to take seriously when convenient; it is the obligation this book is built around. An unsolved murder can stay unsolved when the information stream is corrupted, or when a grieving family silences itself just to survive the noise.

The first obligation of the true crime producer is to carefully define the mission before a single case is chosen. This book is your guide in finding the right elements to use to craft a viable mandate that has reliability, validity, utility, yet does not confuse or bore your audience.

One more point: this book is best read as a practical manual for creating true crime podcasts and documentaries. This text is meant to be a real-world companion to the day-to-day operations of the genre. As news deserts reduce the number of journalists covering the beat, it is imperative that those who are covering the cases remember the stakes and consequences of alienating families and contaminating the information stream.

Chapter 1

Define the Mission Before the Pitch

Before a single fact is gathered, before a single interview is booked, before anyone says the words “true crime series,” a producer must answer a harder question: what is the purpose of this program? Not what reward will it get, what audience it will attract, what numbers it can boast to advertisers, what platform algorithm will favor, but what is the mandate of the program and each episode? Most productions never ask this question because it requires extra work. They will start with a case that's trending, or a killer whose name is already a hashtag, and then build their episode backward from there. That is not what information is about: that is a knee-jerk reaction made of desperation and looking for a built-in audience looking for a quick fix. Hard questions are ignored for easy answers and cheap commentary.

For instance, there are no shortage of homicide cases, and yet true crime shows cycle through the same small set of them: the murders of Laci Peterson, Dru Sjodin, Natalee Holloway and, Gabby Petito have been staples of most true crime podcasts and programs. However, cases of older victims are all but ignored: Elsie Steppa and Clarence Thornton, Leo Corriveau, Vera Campbell, and the Muskoka Care Home Disappearances have scant attention. The latter cases have every element of narrative interest: for instance, in the Steppa/Thornton double homicide, Thornton was discovered to have used an alias as he had an outstanding warrant against him, and the killer hid the time of death by disguising himself as Thornton for days, yet the case has barely registered in

true crime circles. As the August 18, 2017 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press* noted, the singular victims were colorful, but too unusual for the legacy true crime genre:

Steppa and Thornton had moved from Ontario around 1994 and settled in the Polish-Ukrainian community, where neighbors told police they essentially kept to themselves. Both had previously worked in the food and hospitality industry, court was told.

Steppa was viewed as an eccentric who was nicknamed the “Cat Woman” by locals for all the strays she harboured, with as many as 20 at a time.

Thornton suffered from mental-health issues and was described by police as a “nuisance” in town, including several issues of causing a disturbance in which he would tell people he was Jesus. As well, Thornton had legally changed his name to “Harry Jones” upon arriving in Manitoba — apparently because he was wanted on an arrest warrant in Hamilton which remained on file, gathering dust, until the day he died.

Moreover, in the Muskoka Care Home Disappearances case, missing seniors did not seem to be noteworthy enough to pursue journalistically, yet that vulnerable people could vanish with no leads goes against our collective ideas that authorities have genuine control. The last mention in the press of the case occurred in a November 2, 2019 CBC.ca piece:

After two decades, the Ontario Provincial Police have received substantial tips that are helping them advance their investigation into what happened to four seniors who disappeared

from the province's Muskoka region in the late 1990s, The Fifth Estate has learned.

Joan Lawrence, John Crofts, Ralph Grant and John Semple vanished from retirement homes owned by a local family under what police say are suspicious circumstances. Their disappearances were initially treated as missing persons investigations, but are now considered by police to be homicides.

Yet the article made it sound as if the solution was imminent:

“It’s amazing,” said Matthews, who has been working on the case since the beginning. “Many people, in historic investigations, don’t come forward in the beginning because they’re scared, and as time goes on, often times, they believe that the police must have the information...”

As of this writing, there has been no solution or progress in the case. There has been no reporter asking, “*Where has this “amazing” progress gone?*” We have unknown variables and occasional promises, nothing more, and yet these voids are not the story told by the press because most true crime programs do not account for it in their mission statements or production bibles.

The One-Page Mission

Every series needs a document that exists before the pitch deck, before the case list, and before the talent is even attached. The first step is to create one page without jargon or sensational language. The mission statement should be clear, concise, concrete, correct and complete. It should answer four questions in plain language:

What is this series? We are not referring to the genre, but the *purpose*. Is the series built to expose a systemic failure, restore a silenced voice, or interrogate a trope the audience has been fed for decades?

Who is the story for? It is not sufficient to say “true crime fans.” It is a meaningless and nebulous metric. Real audiences come to this genre for reasons that are rarely idle curiosity, and a mission statement that can't name its audience's actual need will drift toward whoever clicks the fastest. This question needs to be answered precisely and specifically.

What will this series never do? This question is the harder half, and the half most productions will skip. Will the series dramatize a scene that wasn't documented? Will it use a survivor's trauma as a cliffhanger? Naming the boundary before the pressure arrives is the only way it holds once the pressure does arrive.

How will you know if you succeeded? This question's answer is not “in downloads.” In the most basic terms: what will the audience understand that they didn't understand before?

For example, a workable example of a one-page mission statement:

What is this series? This series documents *provable system failures* in specific cases, using verifiable records (court files, forensic reports, timelines). Every episode must demonstrate at least one failure mode with evidence and logic, not narration.

Who is the story for? This series is for viewers who use criminal cases to build real-world pattern recognition: identifying institutional blind spots, investigative errors, and risk signals. The

audience is treated as participants in an inquiry, not spectators of a story.

What will this series never do? This series will not invent, compress, or speculate: no composite characters, no scripted dialogue, no reenactments presented as fact, no narrative arcs that override the record, and no depiction of victims as plot devices.

How will you know if you succeeded? Success is measured by investigative outputs: new records surfaced, inconsistencies clarified, expert re-evaluations prompted, or credible leads generated. Public attention is only counted if it produces verifiable progress on the case.

We can add a fifth question:

What must be shown in every episode? Each episode must explicitly identify the system under examination (policing, forensics, courts, media), the failure mode, and what the audience would have mislearned without that correction.

The point of a mission statement is to create a viable and consistent blueprint for a pitch, series bible, sizzle reel, and pilot. The mission statement creates realistic boundaries and is your checklist for shaping your work and providing clarity for you and your production crew, from researchers to directors to reduce friction, siloes, misunderstandings, and provide a clear workflow.

The Content vs. Investigation Test

Somewhere in development, every producer faces a fork: do they keep digging, or start cutting. Content wants you to cut for the sake

of a simple episode with mass appeal. Investigation wants you to keep digging even when the story you'll end up with is messier, slower, and harder to sell.

If your goal is content, the case is a vehicle: a shape you already know how to build (the vanished bride, the too-charming killer, the podcast-friendly small town), and the facts just get slotted into it. If your goal is investigation, the case is a question to which you do not yet know the answer, and the shape only emerges once the reporting is done.

For instance, the OJ Simpson trial has been covered in countless books, shows, podcasts and documentaries, but always framed as a question of race; however, less scrutinized was the role of jury consultants in the case: both the defence and prosecution used jury consultants and psychologists; the difference between the defence listened to their consultant while the prosecution chose to ignore it. This fact is one of the most significant aspects of a trial that has been covered by a confined set of lenses which seems to always exclude the role of consultants whose job it is to cherry-pick juries to rig outcomes, turning jurors into useful idiots rather than weighers and analyzers of facts.

For instance, the November 14, 1994 edition of *Time* chose to start with flowery color rather than explain the function of the jury psychologists on both sides of the Simpson trial:

The past five weeks have been a voyage of culinary discovery for Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, the O.J. Simpson defense team's jury consultant. One day she would join Simpson's lawyers for burritos at La Golondrina, another day it would be angel hair pasta at Epicentre or sushi at Horikawa. The cuisine was rarely

the same, but the luncheon agenda never varied: how to pick a jury likely to find Simpson not guilty of first-degree murder. Life during jury selection was quite different for Don Vinson, jury consultant for the prosecution. Vinson tirelessly fed the responses of potential jurors to Judge Lance Ito's 80-page questionnaire into computers at the offices of DecisionQuest, handing out sophisticated analyses to the D.A. But after two court appearances early in the process, Vinson disappeared.

However, the writing was on the wall that how each side treated their expert would determine the outcome of the trial:

When cold computer analysis clashed with the gut instincts of prosecutors Bill Hodgman and Marcia Clark, Vinson was banished from the strategizing. Simpson's defense team, on the other hand, soaked up the services of its jury consultant every step of the way. As late as last week Dimitrius joined defense lawyers at Robert Shapiro's office for a strategy session in which O.J. participated for 45 minutes by telephone. "He's got a real good sense of who he appeals to," said a source close to the defense.

The wisdom of those judgments will not be clear till the verdict is reached, but the conventional wisdom was overwhelming: the jury impaneled last week seemed highly favorable to the defense.

When Simpson was acquitted, Vinson made it clear that he was not to blame for the outcome, according to an October 4 1995 article in the *San Francisco Gate*:

"I'm trying to be very diplomatic," Vinson told The Examiner. "I saw this coming. It's frustrating, and it's disappointing. I

gave the prosecution my best advice, and they evaluated it for what they thought it was worth and relied upon their own judgment.”

Vinson, a pioneer in the field of jury consulting, said he had worked closely with the Simpson prosecutors for two days in late September 1994, when the jury was being picked.

While the role of jury consultants played a heavy role in the trial, true crime documentaries focus on more salient factors, such as race, even though it was more than clear that there was far more to the case than skin color. When hidden factors are not explored, the genre spreads deceptions and distorts the record.

Diagnostic Checklist

Before greenlighting a case or a story, a producer should be able to answer these questions honestly, out loud, to someone who isn't afraid to call out a bad answer:

- Would this case still be worth telling if it got zero views or downloads?
- Am I drawn to this case because of what happened, or because of how well it will perform?
- Can I name the systemic failure this case reveals, before a single scene is written?
- If the victim's family watched this pitch, would they see their loved one, or a trope?
- Would the victim's family continue to cooperate with media outlets if this episode aired?
- Is there a version of this story that's already been told a dozen times, and if so, why am I telling it again?

- What would I have to leave out to make this story fit a familiar shape, and am I willing to leave that out?

Any hesitation on these questions is not a disqualifier. It is data. A producer who can sit with the discomfort of an unclear answer is already doing more ethical work than one who has a slick, confident answer for everything.

The First Act of Gatekeeping

The mission statement is not paperwork, nor is it ornamental. It is the first decision about what kind of reality this production is capable of presenting honestly, made before the case, the casting, or the marketing plan exists to pressure that decision later. Every subsequent chapter in this book assumes that the decision was made in good faith. If it wasn't, no checklist, evidence board, or ethics framework downstream will save the work from itself.

Often, when we have an idea, we may fall into a confirmation bias: we look for evidence that what we are doing is just, while ignoring the evidence which refutes it. It is not enough to say, "I want to honor victims and expose the bad guys": you must ensure your scaffolding can see the emotional, analytical, and primal elements at play. The better defined your mission statement, the easier it is to know which facts are absolutely required to tell the story, and which can be hinted at or excluded. The point is not to hide unflattering information about police or victims; it is about giving an accurate and truthful account of a case. We don't need to blame a victim just because they are flawed: we need to look at the events which lead to harm.

Once you have determined what your mandate is as a true crime producer, the next step is to understand the psychology of your audience, and how to navigate through their fears, biases, and complexities as the following chapter discusses.

Chapter 2

Know Your Audience's Survival Agenda

Before you cut a single frame, it is imperative to understand who is actually on the other side of the screen watching your program. True crime is not a gender-neutral genre with a slight female skew: it is a genre women have colonized for reasons that have almost nothing to do with morbid curiosity and everything to do with risk management. If you do not understand this important element of the audience, then you will misjudge what is the purpose of your episode, and you will likely feed your audience “junk intel” that is dressed up as a story. To the audience, true crime is more than just “stories”: it is case files with lessons embedded in each one, from how to keep safe to how to navigate during a criminal trial to ensure the optimal outcome.

The Numbers Are Not Subtle

Across nearly every platform and format, the audience gap is wide and consistent. Pew Research Center data found that 34 percent of U.S. podcast listeners regularly consume true crime content, with women disproportionately represented. YouGov survey data found 58 percent of women say they enjoy true crime compared to 42 percent of men, and 73 percent of true crime podcast listeners are female. At CrimeCon, the genre's flagship live event, roughly 75 percent of attendees are women. Some analysts put the female share of the true crime audience as high as 80 percent. Pew's 2023 data found women are almost twice as likely as men to regularly listen to true crime podcasts. This is not a niche preference: it is the

center of gravity for the entire genre, and it should shape every editorial decision you make.

These numbers hold up for viewers in the UK, US, and Canada, for instance. Women are drawn to the genre for specific reasons, as Perchtold-Stefan et al noted in 2026: “Defensive vigilance motivation (higher in women) was linked to more adaptive self-regulation.” It is important to not only understand the demographics of a true crime audience, but also the psycho-graphics, without exploiting the motives. As Vicary and Fraley noted in 2010:

While divorcing her husband, Sheila Bellush, a mother of quadruplets, told her sister that if anything were to happen to her, to find true crime writer Ann Rule to tell her story. Shortly thereafter, Sheila was gunned down by a hit man hired by her husband. The resulting Ann Rule book, *Every Breath You Take*, was bought by nearly one million readers. What kinds of people read such tales? Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that women, more so than men, are drawn to books in the true crime genre. (Indeed, 86% of the Amazon reviews for *Every Breath You Take* were written by women.)

The choice of stories in the genre also skews toward those the primary audience can relate to and understand; however, this bias can also prevent other people from different demographics from feeling included, and hence, will not engage. Knowing the motives of who watches and who turns away can expand your audience and open new subgenres that are more nuanced and inclusive.

The Science: Defensive Vigilance, Not Morbid Curiosity

The most rigorous explanation comes from psychologist Amanda Vicary's aforementioned landmark 2010 study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Vicary gave men and women a choice between two true crime books, one containing details of how a female victim escaped, one without, and found women consistently chose the book with escape and survival information. Her conclusion was direct: women are drawn to true crime because of the survival information embedded in these stories, and this preference intensifies when the victim is female, since women "have something to gain" that male readers largely do not.

A newer and larger study, published in the *British Journal of Psychology* and drawing on more than 570 participants, gives this phenomenon a name: defensive vigilance, the drive to understand and prepare for potential threats in the world. The researchers found women reported a significantly stronger defensive-vigilance motive than men, and this held across nearly every true crime format, most prominently podcasts. As Perchtold-Stefen et al noted in their 2026 study:

Fear of crime, comprising a higher perceived likelihood of victimization, lower safety, and higher preparedness to avoid victimization, explained unique variance in true crime consumption, especially true crime news and for the motives of defensive vigilance and emotion regulation. This may indicate that true crime consumption is part of anxious people's strategies to avoid victimization and to feel better prepared for danger.

Critically, the study found this consumption pattern was not explained by general media habits (men consume more podcasts and news overall) and was not correlated with anxiety, negative affect, or poor mental health. Instead, the difference was linked to *adaptive* self-regulation and higher “affective creativity”; i.e., the ability to think flexibly under stress. In plain terms: women are not damaging themselves by watching your show. They are training for something specific based on primal (i.e., survival) literacy. Your job is to determine whether you are giving them something worth training on or are merely exploiting the instinct.

Three Functions Your Audience Is Actually Using Your Show For

Moreover, producers must stop thinking of “audience engagement” as a monolith and start recognizing three distinct psychological jobs true crime content performs for women viewers:

- **Survival drills:** Rehearsing threat scenarios in a safe environment. BYU psychology professor Brock Kirwan describes this as “putting yourself in a situation where you can trick your brain into thinking this is dangerous... some people enjoy the response you get from that”. This is threat simulation, not entertainment consumption.
- **System-scanning:** Building a mental map of how predators, institutions, and warning signs actually operate. One popular online true-crime community discussion described this directly as wanting to be “fully educated about all the weirdos out there” and to “identify invisible

threats,” calling it “preparation for potential future danger”.

- **Emotional processing:** Using true crime as a controlled space to work through fear, past trauma, or lived experience of gendered violence. University of Nebraska researcher Kelli Boling’s research on domestic violence survivors found many listeners are “putting themselves in the same situation, but this time they have complete control, and it becomes healing instead of traumatizing”.

These three functions are not interchangeable, and a well-designed episode should be conscious of which one it is primarily serving, because each demands a different kind of factual rigor.

Why the Female Victim Bias Sharpens This Effect

Vicary’s research found the effect was strongest when the victim in the story was a woman, “especially when the story features female victims”. This fact is not incidental: it is the psychological hook the entire industry runs on, and it is also its greatest ethical exposure. BYU communications professor Kevin John frames it as relatability: “there is a level of relatability for women to the victims in these stories and we often project ourselves onto the media we consume”. Journalist coverage of the research reinforces this aspect: “The most popular and commonly accepted explanation for why women love true crime is because they feel, consciously or subconsciously, that they might learn something from it... women often see themselves (quite literally) in true crime stories.” The moment your audience projects themselves onto your victim, your obligation to that portrayal changes, you are not just telling a story

about someone, you are constructing a rehearsal script millions of women will mentally run against their own lives.

For instance, the murder of Sarah Everard, brought this very relatability to the forefront as recounted in a March 11, 2021 article on *BBC.com*:

"I learned from a very young age that I would have to change my behaviour in order to keep myself safe," Grace Jessup tells Radio 1 Newsbeat.

"We're seeing a lot of women coming out and saying, 'we're tired of this, we're sick of this'.

"We're also kind of sick of the fact that this is a shock to men.

"This has been my reality, since I was about 14 years old, walking down the road in a school uniform and being harassed by passers-by."

There will be times when you are drawn to a case because you see yourself in the victim. Such was the case with the death of journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad had sparked, as a June 11, 2011 Op-Ed piece bluntly recounted in the *New York Times*:

We have buried another journalist. Syed Saleem Shahzad, an investigative reporter for Asia Times Online, has paid the ultimate price for telling truths that the authorities didn't want people to hear. He disappeared a few days after writing an article alleging that Al Qaeda elements had penetrated Pakistan's navy and that a military crackdown on them had precipitated the May 22 terrorist attack on a Karachi naval base.

His death has left Pakistani journalists shaken and filled with despair.

I couldn't sleep the night that Saleem's death was confirmed. The fact that he was tortured sent me back to a chilly night last September, when I was abducted by government agents. During Saleem's funeral service, a thought kept haunting me: "It could have been me."

It is not sympathy which compels viewers into the genre so much as it is empathy. This primal drive should not be manipulated or exploited. It is important to humanize victims of crime, but the focus should not solely be on creating a portrait: there have been system breakdowns and failures and those elements need to be addressed for a story to have true utility to the audience.

The Uncomfortable Gap: Fear-Based Consumption vs. Genre Failure

It cannot be overstated that true crime stories are interpreted more as a lesson in survival than a morality tale, though the latter brings comfort to viewers. But where does the industry most often betray its own audience? Essayist Kate Anthony argues that women "aren't obsessed with death... we're searching for survival lessons the genre refuses to teach," noting that most true crime coverage "fixates on the crime, the shocking, bloody moment of rupture, while skipping over the years of coercive control that came before it". This is the single most important production insight in this chapter: the audience is showing up for pattern education, and the genre routinely gives them plot instead. Anthony's critique lands specifically on the omission of "the isolation from friends and family... the slow erosion of confidence... the constant, careful

calibration of behavior just to stay safe”, precisely the pre-crime warning signs that would make an episode genuinely protective rather than merely dramatic. A psyche.co analysis of podcast listeners reached a similar conclusion: the stories “validated both past experiences and future fears of gender-based violence” for listeners, meaning the content is being used as confirmation and calibration, not spectacle.

However, there is a fine line between being constructive and helpful and blaming a victim for their misfortune, especially as finer details can never truly be known. There are many times when nothing could have prevented a tragedy, and it must be stated explicitly. It is imperative to understand the situation before deciding wrongdoing. Present the facts of the case without speculation or conjecture, and let the data tell the story as it actually occurred.

The Producer's Diagnostic Question

Every episode that you greenlight should be run through a single filter before it goes into the edit: What are women who watch, listen, or read this case trying to learn from this episode, and am I feeding them junk intel or real patterns with reliability, validity, and utility?

It is helpful to use this as a working checklist during outlining and rough-cut review:

- Does the episode show *how* the danger built over time, or only the moment it exploded; i.e., does it teach the pre-crime pattern or only replay the after-the-fact spectacle?

- Does the episode give the audience an actual behavioral or systemic pattern to recognize (grooming tactics, institutional failure points, coercive-control escalation), or does it substitute mood and music for information?
- If a victim escaped the danger or survived, are the specific mechanisms of that survival shown clearly, given that this is the exact information research shows the audience is seeking out?
- Is the episode reinforcing accurate risk calibration, or is it inflating rare-but-cinematic threats (stranger abductions, exotic killers) at the expense of the statistically dominant patterns (intimate-partner violence, institutional negligence) your audience is actually at risk from?
- Would a viewer who is using this episode as an emotional-processing tool for their own experience come away validated and informed, or exploited and re-traumatized?

If an episode cannot pass this basic filter, it is not serving the audience that it claims to serve, it is harvesting their fear for engagement metrics while giving them nothing they can actually use. That is the line between a true crime producer and a true crime exploiter, and this chapter's diagnostic question should sit on a sticky note on every editor's monitor for the rest of this book. The following chapter shows how to create the scaffolding to keep your work focused and ethically balanced.

Chapter 3

The Non-Fiction Constraint: How to Stay Honest

If you are producing true crime for a mass or niche audience, you are not just telling a story: you are actively shaping how people think about the most important primal elements, such as danger, systems, relationships with others and the interplay among these elements. The non-fiction constraint is simply the set of questions that keep your work anchored in reality, rather than sliding into dramatic invention. However, the most important element to the genre is not suspense or even empathy, but truth and honesty. Without either element, a story becomes propaganda.

This chapter lays out those questions, considerations, and some practical habits, so you can check yourself without turning every decision into a philosophical crisis.

People and Events: Who Really Was There?

The simplest starting point of any true crime is to establish every actor in the chain of events and understand their place in this ecosystem. Each individual should not be reduced to a stereotype or trope. Your journey begins by asking the following questions of each actor you encounter:

“Who was actually in this story?”

Victims: Who were the people directly harmed by the act or series of acts?

Suspects: Who were the people most likely to have caused the harm? Who are possibilities, probabilities, or confirmed actors?

Witnesses: Who saw critical actions within the event?

Investigators: Who was responsible for solving the case, including forensic evidence?

Lawyers: Who was responsible for prosecuting the crime and who is responsible for defending the accused?

Journalists, editors, and other institutional actors: Who is responsible for chronicling the events?

It is important to identify each actor and present them accurately and truthfully without resorting to using composites or inserting fake people for the sake of narrative consistency. If you feel the temptation to merge people, such as merging three neighbors into one, several detectives into one symbolic “cop”, pause and ask why accuracy has taken a back seat to convenience. Inserting fictional characters or shading or enhancing actual people is equally dishonest. Is your story about clarity, or merely about squeezing a complex reality into a more familiar narrative shape?

Similarly for events in a true crime case, it is important for you and your production team to map out what actually happened, based on records, footage, and testimony. If you find yourself wishing