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WGLT Radio

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WGLT/Sound Opinions Interview with Amanda Vicary, September 16, 2016

Introduction (compilation audio from uncredited news sources)

Announcer 1: The Disappearance of Teresa Halbach Remains A Mystery.

Announcer 2: Mr. Avery's blood is on the inside of Teresa Halbach's vehicle

Announcer 3: Everybody is listening what do you want to say today?

Announcer 4: I'm Innocent.

Laura Kennedy: Making A Murderer, Forensic Files, Cold Case Files, The Jinx, Serial, True Murder, City Confidential, the list goes on and on. TV Shows, books, movies, true crime looms large in our culture. But can it be more than just, entertainment for women, who are drawn to true crime. The answer is yes. Amanda Vicary is a professor of psychology at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. At her research into the attraction women have to true crime turned up, a number of intriguing angles. Vicary says, her fascination with true crime started early on, thanks to a gift from her mother.

Amanda Vicary: When I was young, probably only 10 or 11, my mother gave me a true crime book to read, I do not know what prompted her to do that. It was about--I don't remember the title. But it was a woman who was murdered by her husband and he disposed of her body by putting it through a wood chipper. And I do not what my mother was thinking—

[Kennedy laughs]

Vicary: But maybe, maybe she saw something in me. But she was right. I loved it. I thought it was fascinating. So since I have been young, I have loved reading about crime, true crime specifically. And when I got to graduate school, I was studying romantic relationships, primarily, that was my area of interest and when one time I was talking to my advisor I casually mentioned that I liked crime stuff. And he said "Oh you know my wife does too!" And I said "Oh that's funny so does my mom". It just kinda hit me, and I thought, why is it all women that I know who are into reading or watching crime because when you think about it a lot of this crime stuff is very bloody, it's gory, it can be disgusting, it can be disturbing, it can give you nightmares, everything that goes against the traditional stereotype of a woman, and so that's what started my interest in trying to figure out, what's going on.

Kennedy: Well are men as drawn to true crime just as much as women?

Vicary: No my research, shown, that they are not. So if you give people a choice between...you know you are going to read a book. Do you want to read a true crime book, or do you want to read a book about some other kind of violence like war, or gang violence, or something like that? Even if the characters are women in all the books, men in all the books, it doesn't matter. Men are less interested in reading the true crime book than women are, whereas women quite a bit more prefer to read the true crime.

Kennedy: So let's talk about why women like true crime, and what you found in your research, was they're learning something from it.

Vicary: That's what I think very strongly is going on. So I found that by manipulating different parts of...true crime stories, and asking people what do you want to read about, people seem to be drawn specifically to certain components of the story, women especially, and what they were... was the psychological component. So, if they think they are going to read about a profiler talking about why the criminal committed the crime, or why did the husband snap and murder his wife, women really want to read about that more than men do. Another thing was, defense tactics. So say a woman is kidnapped, but she escapes somehow, women are much more interested in that than men. And finally, I found that, the sex of the victims matter as well. True crime books cover both men and women victims, but when you think about the stereotypical true crime book you probably think about a serial killer like Ted Bundy murdering a lot of young adult women, women prefer to read about women getting killed, whereas men don't care either way. If they are going to read about a true crime book, its fine if men get killed, its fine if women get killed. Women want to read about the women getting killed.

Kennedy: So they're projecting themselves, perhaps?

Vicary: I think so. I think that they're imagining, what if this were me? How could I escape from this? What is going to set the killer off? How does this apply, to my life?

Kennedy: But does something like that even help? Every individual, every situation, is unique by reading about, Jack the Ripper or Ted Bundy, are we actually learning anything useful there?

Vicary: I think we could be. My guess is that society's behavior has changed a lot since shows like Criminal Minds and C.S.I and things like that in ways we may not be consciously aware of. Things, I've heard friends say that they make sure that the tracker on their iPhone is on, because if they go missing, they could be tracked. I think it is absolutely changing people's behaviors. I'm incredibly paranoid after ... (Vicary and Kennedy laughs)...years of reading this stuff and I imagine people are too for better or for worse.

Kennedy: Is this perhaps a vest age of evolution?

Vicary: That's what...I--I think could be driving it. So, research suggests that people, humans have evolved a propensity to murder. It's a survival mechanism. If we take out... the weaker people, the people who could hunt us, we're going to be more likely to survive, and this interesting crime could be something that has evolved to help us perpetuate our own life by knowing what could potentially kill us or hurt us, it's going to increase the chance that we're going to survive.

Kennedy: Do you feel, Amanda, that women are driving the true crime genre now since we're so fascinated with it? Do you suppose publishers and producers are really interested in what we want?

Vicary: I think so or if not I think they should be. I have read statistics, articles talking about shows like CSI and Criminal Minds and popular crime shows of the day really appealing to a female audience and I don't know the exact percentage, what percentage of viewers are women versus men for these true crime books my studies for sure that it's women reading them and my guess is the same would be for these TV shows and that may be something that marketers are aware of and what commercials they're showing I don't know, but I think they should be because I really think there is something going on there.

Kennedy: Well it's great to think that women are learning how to protect themselves or be careful, through true crime, but is there perhaps a negative side to it as well that lets us focus too much on the violence, and create sort of a constant cycle that heightens our fear as we go about our lives?

Vicary: Absolutely, speaking from personal experience, from someone who reads this stuff all the time or watches this stuff, people are convinced they are going to be kidnapped at any moment. The odds of being the victim of a crime like what you see on one of these TV shows or in these books are very, very slim. And what's ironic is men are actually much more likely to be the victim of a crime, much much more likely. And so the fact that we're reading these books, learning these techniques we're probably scaring ourselves more than, we should be.

Kennedy: Are women tapping into a darker side of themselves by delving into true crime reading?

Vicary: It's possible. Research shows that women on average are less violent than men. They're the less aggressive sex for sure. So--Which makes it even more interesting that they're reading about these violent crimes. Is it somehow... to kinda live out some sort of violent side of them. For some women it...could be.

Kennedy: Do you see this as a continuing trend?

Vicary: Oh I think so. If you look at the recent crime documentaries: Making a Murderer, Amanda Knox Documentary, coming out it seems there is a new CSI spin off every week I can't even keep track of them. This shows no sign of slowing down. We have got a whole television ID discovery, television stations devoted to this, CNN, everything discovering crime and I don't think there is any, any slowing down if anything it seems to be increasing.

Kennedy: I think my favorite true crime book is Devil in the White City.

Vicary: Oh yes. Ah huh. That's a good one

Kennedy: Do you have a favorite one?

Vicary: Ahh... Probably one of my favorites would be the Night Stalker the book on Richard Ramirez a famous serial killer out in California many years ago. I thought it was incredibly disturbing, but well written, interesting, I really wanted to get in the killer's head after reading and the author did a really good job of doing that.

Kennedy: Well your mother is the one who...(Vicary Laughs)...basically started it all by giving you that true crime book when you were about 10 years old. What does she think ...(Vicary Laughs)...of all your research?

Vicary: (Laughs) I think she's glad that I was able to turn it into a job somehow. (Kennedy laughs)

Vicary: Uhm... she doesn't like that I blame her... (Kennedy laughs) ...for my interest in this crime. But we still share true crime books. She still sends me news articles every day you know if a serial killer is caught somewhere or something like that. So she still is very involved in it and supportive of it.

Kennedy: Are you going to continue your research in other...avenues?

Vicary: Yes absolutely I actually just had an article accepted for publication today, looking at if, criminals could be learning something from watching these shows. So I read a few reports in the news of...men who had committed a crime and then they had gone back to the scene to try clean up their DNA.

Kennedy: With the Clorox.

Vicary: Exactly, exactly and they have actually said I learned this from Television. And so what I did in a recent study is I asked a bunch of student participants what TV shows they watched, and then I asked them to write about how they would commit a burglary and how they would best try to get away with it and we read all these responses and coded, answers for did if they mention forensics were they worried about their fingerprints. And I found that people who

were watching shows like CSI and were really involved in them were smarter about what could identify them at a crime. And so, I think that it's really interesting that these shows may be teaching criminals how to better kill someone and get away with it. Which is scary to think about it?

Kennedy: But we will think about it won't we?

Vicary: We will, certainly, every day. I encourage people to check out true crime books or crime TV shows. I prefer the nonfiction ones over the fiction ones, but I know people enjoy both, and I think we can learn real techniques to help you not be the victim of a crime. The odds of us, any of us being killed by a serial killer are very, very low. But I think the potential to learn these things outweighs the risk of increasing your fear and paranoia.

Kennedy: That's Illinois Wesleyan University Psychology Professor Amanda Vicary. Fans of true crime and Making a Murderer can continue their fascination. The producers of the Emmy award winning series have new episodes in the works. I'm Laura Kennedy.