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Dr Charlotte Beyer

Abstract:

This article examines recent true crime writings about the nineteenth-century British practice of baby farming. The primary textual focus for my investigation of the representation of true crime is Allison Vale and Alison Rattle's book, entitled *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*. In the article I draw on a range of recent critical examinations of true crime and femininity, in order to provide an understanding of the context and depiction of baby farming. I also explore the questions raised by these portrayals of true crime, such as linguistic and gender-political dimensions of representation in Allison Vale and Alison Rattle's book, in order to investigate the complexities inherent in contemporary recasting of historical and true crime.

7 key words: True crime, baby farming, Amelia Dyer, serial killer, femininity, Alison Rattle, Allison Vale

### **True Crime and Baby Farming: Representing Amelia Dyer**

Introduction: True Crime and Infanticide

My article explores recent true crime writing about the notorious female murderer Amelia Dyer who was involved in the nineteenth-century British practice of baby farming.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of my discussion in the article is Alison Rattle and Allison Vale's 2011 book on Amelia Dyer, entitled *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*.<sup>2</sup> Contextual references are also made in the article to other recent works on this particular topic.<sup>3</sup> My article investigates the contemporary linguistic and social construction of true crime and its representation in the book. A central aspect of this endeavour is exploring the gendering of criminality and evil in portrayals of baby farming and infanticide.

Critical discussions and historical accounts of baby farming have revealed the practice of sending unwanted and illegitimate babies and children away and paying a baby farmer for

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of my work on this topic was presented as a paper at the 'True Crime: Fact, Fiction, Ideology' conference, organised by Hic Dragones in Manchester, UK, on Saturday 7 June, 2014. The paper was entitled, "'Angel Makers': Recent True Crime Stories of Baby Farming".

<sup>2</sup> The book was first published in Britain in 2007 under the title *Amelia Dyer: Angel Maker*.

<sup>3</sup> The practice of baby farming was also known in Australia and North America; see Cossins, *The Baby Farmers* on Australian conditions, and "The Adoption History Project" on American baby farming practices.

their care.<sup>4</sup> As these critics have also demonstrated, babies and children cared for by baby farmers often suffered neglect and frequently died as a result of their mistreatment. The extent of the practice of baby farming has now become apparent, and with it, critical and popular preoccupation with specific historical figures associated with this practice, typically women<sup>5</sup>. These figures have also become the subject of a number of true crime books, such as those referred to in this article. Presenting a mixture of evidence from historical sources, photographic depictions, and anecdotal material, these true crime books treat the problematic subject of baby farming, but not all do so convincingly or with complexity.

The true crime genre provides a fascinating field of study, though it is not without controversy. Laura Miller calls true crime a “stigmatized genre”, and says such works are: “branded with screaming two-word titles stamped in silver foil, blood dripping luridly from the last letter [...] coated with a thin, greasy film of dubious repute and poor taste.”<sup>6</sup> The association of true crime with bad taste and the lowest denominator of popular culture is one of the assumptions my article challenges. Such questions of authorship, quality, and originality frequently levelled against true crime works highlight the outmoded distinction between literary fiction and genre fiction, a topic Elizabeth Edmondson discusses.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that one cannot find examples of true crime books that do indeed possess that “thin, greasy film” Miller describes. One particularly book that treats female criminals only, among others Amelia Dyer, uses lurid terms to demonise the women it describes, namely William Webb’s *Scary Bitches: 15 of the Scariest Women You’ll Ever Meet!* The vocabulary used in the book’s title is sensationalist in its construction of Dyer and the cultural practices that

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<sup>4</sup> Kilday, Anne-Marie. *A History of Infanticide in Britain, C. 1600 to the Present*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 94. See also Rattle and Vale; Cossins; Homrighaus.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Cossins, Annie. *The Baby Farmers*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Laura. “Sleazy, bloody and surprisingly smart: In defense of true crime”. *Salon*. Thursday, May 29, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Edmondson, Elizabeth. “The genre debate: ‘Literary fiction’ is just clever marketing.” *The Guardian*. Monday 21 April, 2014.

produced her.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, as we shall see, although Rattle and Vale's book echoes some of the discursive traits of true crime, it sets out to present an in-depth and multi-faceted narrative about one particular woman and her crimes.

My essay analyses the discursive and imaginative construction of femininity and criminality in true crime writing. Drawing on crime fiction criticism and literary criticism, the article examines the idiom of true crime as a subgenre of crime fiction and historical biography, and explores the authority and function of true crime and its depiction of female criminals. I argue that true crime books about baby farmers serve the purpose of alleviating the reader's discomfort and unease with this chapter of Britain's history, in which constructions of the maternal and the mother-infant bond were made problematic by class differences that impacted on them. As we shall see, true crime books about baby farming serve the purpose of establishing a conceptual and emotional distance, while at the same time disrupting the reader's sense of equilibrium by positioning the scene of the crime in the most intimate of places, the domestic sphere.

### The Context and Literary Language of True Crime

Alison Rattle and Allison Vale's *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer* constitutes a fascinating and complex example of the discursive construction of femininity and history through the prism of true crime. In their book on Amelia Dyer, Rattle and Vale provide an explanation of Victorian baby farming practices and the reasons baby farming existed. They state that:

single mothers were judged harshly [...] Shame and poverty condemned many of them, and their children, to lives of destitution and starvation. An unmarried mother's only alternative was either to abandon her child or foster it out into the care of a

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Abbott's book *Female Executions: Martyrs, Murderesses and Madwomen* takes a rather lurid approach to the topic.

“nurse” or “baby farmer” for a weekly fee, or to have it adopted permanently for a one-off payment, or “premium”.<sup>9</sup>

Rattle and Vale point out that the system was inadequate in safeguarding child welfare, and that the authorities were ill-equipped to take on this task. Therefore, they state, many babies and children died in baby farms, where the fee for their care was the only thing that mattered, and once that had been received, the babies: “were often starved or drugged to death; some met a speedier end and were murdered outright.”<sup>10</sup> Dyer was finally tried for her crimes and executed in 1896 at Newgate for the murder of 300 babies.<sup>11</sup> Baby farming is to an extent ignored or forgotten today, according to Vale<sup>12</sup>, except in the realm of true crime. In an article in *The Independent*, Allison Vale accounts for the contemporary rise of interest in the topic: “While largely forgotten today, Amelia Dyer’s crimes paved the way for one of the most sensational trials of the Victorian era – and spotlighted the pandemic problem of infanticide in 19th century Britain.”<sup>13</sup> Among true crime authors, interest has grown in Amelia Dyer as an example of a notorious baby farmer, as can be seen from the number of sources referred to in this article as part of my contextual study of Rattle and Vale’s *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*.

The sheer scale of Amelia Dyer’s crimes and the number of victims involved in her case means that critics have compared her to other serial killers in their assessment of her crimes. In his book, *Murderous Women: From Sarah Dazley to Ruth Ellis*, Paul Heslop specifically compares Dyer to other female murderers and serial killers, and situating these geographically and historically. Comparing Dyer to a more contemporary British serial killer figure, the medical doctor Harold Shipman, who took advantage of his position of trust to kill

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<sup>9</sup> Rattle, Allison and Vale, Alison. *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*. (London: André Deutsch, 2011) [2007], 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Vale, Allison. “Amelia Dyer: the woman who murdered 300 babies.” *The Independent*. Friday 22 February, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

patients, Vale notes that the latter: “is generally considered to be Britain’s worst serial killer, with more than 250 murders ascribed to his name.”<sup>14</sup> During the course of researching this material, it became apparent that, while it certainly seems that the practice of baby farming and the crimes committed by Dyer have largely been forgotten or repressed by contemporary society, in the context of true crime research and popular true crime investigations, Amelia Dyer is a well-known, even notorious figure, whose crimes are regularly listed alongside those of other serial killers. While serial killers often attract much attention in contemporary culture as the critic Christiana Gregoriou shows<sup>15</sup>, true crime writers are now also reclaiming figures from the annals of past history, such as the likes of Amelia Dyer. Through the critical evaluation of historical events and figures, true crime participates in the cultural and political project of reassessing the past, and thus has a significant part to play in articulating the terms of that reassessment.

The fact that Dyer was able to carry on her practice over the years pretty much unhindered was due in no small fact to a failure in the legislation, as the critic Chris Payne explains. According to Payne, in 1871, the government set up a Select Committee on the Protection of Infant Life, and their recommendations were later included in the Infant Life Protection Act 1872.<sup>16</sup> However, Payne states, “local authorities were erratic in putting the measures into practice [...] One terrible consequence of this failure was the case of Amelia Dyer whose serial infanticide shocked the nation in 1896.”<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Paxman’s book *The Victorians: Britain Through the Paintings of the Age* accounts for the Victorian era and its traces in today’s world and imagination. Inevitably, when the talk falls on Victorian times, Paxman mentions Amelia Dyer’s wicked deeds, but he also discusses the difficult conditions

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gregoriou, Christiana. *Language, Ideology and Identity in Serial Killer Narratives*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 59.

<sup>16</sup> Payne, Chris. *The Chieftain: Victorian True Crime through the Eyes of a Scotland Yard Detective*. (Stroud: The History Press, 2011), 131.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Victorian women negotiated in relation to sexuality and childbirth, and the stigma of having a child outside marriage, factors that contributed to the practice of baby farming.<sup>18</sup> In their edited book, *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*, Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben examine representations of the family and crime, but employ an academic approach and discourse that minimises the topic's sensationalist and emotive impact. Citing Rattle and Vale in her discussion, Anca Vlasopolos' essay associates the practice of baby farming with economic and political issues:

Dyer, her daughter, and her son-in-law were caught because of the 1872 Children's Act, but she and her accomplices were only the most notorious practitioners of 'angelmaking' [...] what might be termed Victorian family "terrorism" sent desperate young women with unwanted children to disposers of infants like Dyer and her family.<sup>19</sup>

These books provide contextual information and make reference to Dyer, but in contrast to Rattle and Vale, they do not tend to go into as much detail regarding Dyer and her life, nor do they elaborate extensively on the individual murders she committed.

One of the central aspects of true crime narratives is their representation of the punishment apportioned to the criminal(s).<sup>20</sup> This dimension is vital to their construction<sup>21</sup>, and the topic also features prominently in Rattle and Vale's book. Here, the reader does not simply witness depictions of prison regimes, but is also given detailed accounts based on documentary evidence of Dyer's time spent in mental institutions and the treatment she received there. Although an abhorrent crime to the present-day reader, baby farming was not as heavily punished in the Victorian times as other types of crime, Rattle and Vale state. Commenting on the six-month prison sentence Dyer received in 1879 for negligence leading to the deaths of infants in her care, Rattle and Vale argue that: "she had in fact escaped

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<sup>18</sup> Paxman, Jeremy. *The Victorians: Britain Through the Paintings of the Age*. (BBC Books; Reprint edition: 2010) 148.

<sup>19</sup> Vlasopolos, Anca. "Family Trauma and Reconfigured Families: Philip Pullman's Neo-Victorian Detective Series." In Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Gutleben, Christian (Eds.) *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*. (Rodopi, 2011) 301.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Abbott, Geoffrey. *Female Executions*, for extensive discussion of punishment regimes.

<sup>21</sup> Gregoriou also discusses notions of punishment in relation to true crime narratives; see Gregoriou 7; 174.

lightly. The Victorian passion for harsh punishment of any crime against property meant that theft carried with it far tougher sentences than those for many other misdemeanours.”<sup>22</sup> It was not until effective legislative measures were imposed that baby farming began to be adequately addressed by the authorities. One might suspect that the typical lower-class status of the babies and infants involved meant that little value was attributed to their lives. Rattle and Vale’s detailed description of the physical punishment inflicted on prisoners at the Shepton Mallet House of Correction, where Dyer was imprisoned between 1879 and 1880, furthermore adds to the impression of a harsh prison regime, fitting for a rather brutal age: “Whippings were commonplace, the prisoner strapped at the ankles and wrists to an x-shaped frame, and lashed with a cat-o’-nine tails. Restraint, too (leather cuffs for women, irons and straightjackets for men), was standard practice.”<sup>23</sup> The role of such portrayals of punishment and justice in true crime narratives is to underline the extreme nature of the criminal and their crime, to detail society’s response, and to reaffirm the status quo of the social order and its gender roles.

An analysis of the literary language used to embellish and exaggerate the physical and psychological characteristics of Dyer, as representative of the female baby farmer, is key to an examination of the discursive construction of femininity and crime in true crime, and in Rattle and Vale’s *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*. This discussion further investigates these ideologically driven portrayals and the wider problems surrounding the representation of true crime and questions of gender, authenticity and realism. The portrayal of Amelia Dyer is extreme, and it foregrounds these questions perfectly. The use of contrast and references to popular cultural discourses feature strongly in Rattle and Vale’s depiction of Dyer. Her external appearance and looks are described in such a way as to emphasise her symbolic, demonised function:

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<sup>22</sup> Rattle and Vale “Dyer”, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

The middle-aged, slightly coarse-looking woman who answered the door eyed Charles suspiciously, her heavily built figure filling the doorway. Her dirty brown hair, streaked with grey, was dragged back severely from a centre parting into an untidy bun. She had a deeply lined, almost masculine face, a fleshy chin and loosely drooping eyelids. The straight, hard set of her mouth and a glimpse of blackened tooth stumps did nothing to warm her features.<sup>24</sup>

This lengthy description of Dyer's physical appearance and body language draws on literary echoes for impact. Dyer's portrayal echoes the conventional depiction of the fairy tale witch, who is described in the following way: "In popular imagination, which has been influenced in particular by fairy-tale illustrations and animation, the witch has an ugly physical appearance, aligning her in the iconography of the classical fairy-tale with the realm of evil."<sup>25</sup> Further qualities associated with negative femininity, such as ageing, are also characteristic of both the image of a witch and descriptions of Dyer.<sup>26</sup> References to her stature and "flabby" skin serve to underline this impression of ageing femininity and abjection. Importantly, fairy tales also associate the mistreatment of children with witch-like figures: "Folktale witches engage in a range of evil and villainous acts, including [...] cooking and eating children."<sup>27</sup> These descriptions and allusions confirm Cossins' argument that:

the construction of a folk devil [...] was a product of cultural and historical sexing processes of either the male or the female body [...] this sexing process gives rise to symbolism, exaggeration and distortion to produce a culture of fear and a symbolic figure of danger.<sup>28</sup>

In Rattle and Vale's true crime narrative, Amelia Dyer's mental health as well as her physical appearance is portrayed in negative terms, as a means of establishing her notoriety and evil nature, and as an explanatory factor for her serial killings. The book suggests there is uncertainty as to whether Dyer's mental disturbance was genuine, or whether she used her

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 18-19

<sup>25</sup> Haase, Donald. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 1038.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 1033

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 1032

<sup>28</sup> Cossins, Anne. *Female Criminality: Infanticide, Moral Panics and the Female Body*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 258.

asylum stay as a way of shirking responsibility for her actions. Reflecting this ambiguity towards Dyer's mental state, the authors at one point state that: "Whether Mother's suicidal and delusional paranoia was feigned or laudanum-induced is now impossible to tell."<sup>29</sup>

Mental illness is utilised to further demonise Dyer, and to link psychological evil to external revulsion. During one episode of mental illness in 1891, Dyer is described in the following terms by Rattle and Vale:

She was unkempt: her skin filthy; her hair feral; her teeth decaying, blackened or entirely missing; her tongue dirty and thickly coated. She ranted incessantly, spitting in fury, fuelled by terror; and repeating over and over that the voices in her head wouldn't rest until she has brought about her own annihilation.<sup>30</sup>

The description of Dyer's mental illness supports Cossins'<sup>31</sup> and Kilday's<sup>32</sup> discussions of a "moral panic" emerging over baby farming and infanticide in late nineteenth-century Britain. Drawing on such popular cultural and literary imagery of and allusions to a morbid and witch-like being in the depiction of Dyer, Rattle and Vale establish the infamous evil of Dyer, by elevating her figure to a status of notoriety which is beyond that of ordinary humans.

The true crime genre thus exacerbates the association of Dyer with excess and transgression. Descriptions of her appearance are used to reinforce the idea of the monstrosity of female power and authority gained through Dyer's regime of fear and violence against her family and the babies in her care. As Rattle and Vale observe: "The Dyers' was clearly a matriarchal household."<sup>33</sup> The term "matriarchal" is employed to question the validity of female authority running unchecked, and to draw attention to the problematic figure of the mother in Victorian times. *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer* highlights the maternal aspect of Amelia Dyer in several respects – they

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<sup>29</sup> Rattle and Vale "Dyer", 99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 99-100

<sup>31</sup> Cossins, Anne. *Female Criminality: Infanticide, Moral Panics and the Female Body*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Kilday Anne-Marie, *A History of Infanticide in Britain, C. 1600 to the Present*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 95.

<sup>33</sup> Rattle and Vale "Dyer", 95

describe Dyer's relationship to her own daughter, and frequently use the term "Mother" to refer to Dyer. When contrasted with the callous way she treated the infants in her care, these textual strategies highlight the discrepancy between Dyer's conduct and demeanour, and the values and qualities conventionally associated with femininity and the maternal. The figure of the "ideal mother" occupied a prominent position in Victorian society and culture, as the critics Claudia C. Klaver and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman state, in their introduction to the book *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*: "The virtues of the middle-class woman and of the home over which she was to preside emanated from an image of the mother as pure, self-sacrificing, and devoted, a spiritual influence and a moral instructress."<sup>34</sup> Conversely, as Klaver and Rosenman explain, there was a mirroring preoccupation with what they term the figure of the "demonic mother."<sup>35</sup>

Amelia Dyer is presented as one such "demonic mother" - a baby farmer and a serial killer. In his book, *British Serial Killers*, Nigel Wier investigates a number of infamous criminals, including Amelia Dyer. What is interesting about his book is the way he uses the critical vocabulary and lens associated with analyses of serial killers, the majority of whom are men according to his investigation, in order to discuss this intensely female and private sphere focused case. One of the book's stated intentions is to align the various cases with a common denominator of the definition of serial killer and what this term represents. Wier explains that: "A serial killer is typically defined 'as an individual who has murdered three or more people over a period of more than thirty days.'"<sup>36</sup> Wier furthermore distinguishes between a mass killer and serial killer, stating: "Being a mass or spree killer would mean that you kill on one incident or in one day normally at the same place. A serial killer would kill in

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<sup>34</sup> Klaver, Claudia C. and Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk (Eds.) *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Wier, Nigel. *British Serial Killers*. (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011), xi. Quotation unattributed.

clear and separate incidents over a period of time.”<sup>37</sup> Reading Dyer as a serial killer, alongside other criminals of a similar ilk, means reading her killings in a specific, fraught context of horrific transgression. Perhaps this is why the true crime genre resorts to cliché – because the contents are unspeakable, using instead, as Miller states, the clichéd motifs of “tragic maidens; idyllic small towns; smiling devils; winsome, doomed tots.”<sup>38</sup> It is thus evident that, terrifying though the Amelia Dyer case is, baby farming cannot be reduced to one evil demonised individual, but instead needs to be recognised as a social and cultural practice.

### True Crime and Reader Affect

True crime uses literary language specifically to appeal to and involve the reader, and to trigger affective responses such as ambivalence or abjection. John van der Kiste’s chapter on Amelia Dyer’s crimes in his book *Berkshire Murders* is entitled “The Notorious Mrs Dyer”, and uses familiar though somewhat lurid vocabulary and terms to build up a picture of her exceptional evil.<sup>39</sup> Like other works that have emerged in recent years chronicling Amelia Dyer’s crimes, van der Kiste’s book problematises the representation of the female serial killer, emphasising the detachment from her victim’s plight that renders Dyer a pariah. However, some writers attempt to “spice up” the subject of infanticide by using humour, and not always successfully. One recent true crime book that documents historical murder cases rather gory lists the methods used for murder, and also references Amelia Dyer in the section entitled “Murder by Strangulation”. The book in question is *Bloody Versicles: The Rhymes of Crime*, by Jonathan Goodman. Goodman attempts to trivialise this preoccupation with the morbid, by describing himself as “an original”, thereby hoping to pass off its subject matter and the person who wrote the book with disarming (rather than disturbing)

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, “Sleazy”

<sup>39</sup> Kiste, *John van der. Berkshire Murders*. (Stroud: The History Press, 2012).

eccentricity: “Like its author, *Bloody Versicles* is an original. It is an anthology of amusing, informative doggerel about true crimes committed in the United States and Great Britain.”<sup>40</sup>

This method of categorisation and the vocabulary used is problematic, because it appears to confirm the suggestion that preoccupation with true crime is morbid and weird, or at best, “original”.

Anthony Stokes’ book *Pit of Shame: The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol* mentions the Dyer case, and also uses emotive language in order to distance itself from the gruesome nature of its subject matter. Whereas Goodman’s book refers to verse, Stokes’ volume alludes to the ballad in its title. Stokes explains that the intertextual allusion in the title “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” is an echo of Oscar Wilde’s 1896 poem.<sup>41</sup> Wilde’s poem is cited at length in the book itself, as well as in the title, to evoke the hardship endured by those in prison.<sup>42</sup> Both these books suggest that literary language and forms conventionally associated with the evoking of affect, such as poetry and songs or ballads, lend themselves to the depiction of true crime.<sup>43</sup> This suggests that literary language provides the tools to deal with and process the material, making it palatable to the reader and assisting in “managing” the reader’s response. In contrast, Annie Cossins’ 2015 scholarly monograph, *Female Criminality: Infanticide, Moral Panics and the Female Body*, offers an impressive, sophisticated and scholarly rigorous account of infanticide and baby farming. Cossins’ work offers the historical and critical context of this crime and the era which is crucial to further investigations of Victorian motherhood and female crime.

Rattle and Vale use emotive language in a variety of ways, too, including in individual chapter titles, such as Chapter 2, called “Suffer Little Children”. This and

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<sup>40</sup> Goodman, Jonathan. *Bloody Versicles: The Rhymes of Crime*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993.), xi..

<sup>41</sup> Stokes, Anthony. *Pit of Shame: The Real Ballad of Reading Gaol*. (Winchester, Waterside Press, 2007), xi.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> I have also discussed the issue of affect and the reader in relation to true crime, in Beyer “Mediatization” and Beyer “She Decided.”

subsequent chapters towards the book's beginning depict the investigations by the NSPCC into Amelia Dyer in the 1890s. The authors recount the work of Charles Thomas Bennett, an inspector for the recently established NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) as an example of the way in which cruelty against children was depicted and represented, and the struggle against it that he was part of, concluding: "The systematic mistreatment and murder of children was commonplace in Victorian England and the NSPCC was one of a number of organizations leading a vigorous crusade to help prevent it."<sup>44</sup> The work that Bennett undertook is described through the images he used in his shop window to visually depict the process of saving children from mistreatment and death. These images portray: "children and babies in distressing conditions: naked, skeletal, barely human figures with huge, haunted eyes, twisted limbs and swollen bruises; bones protruding from paper-thin skin that in some cases hung off their frail frames like hand-me-down clothes."<sup>45</sup> Rattle and Vale establish the importance and impact of the work done by NSPCC to rescue children from this kind of fate. The book contrasts the terrible images of child cruelty with: "photographs of the same children, the rescued ones, taken months later: plump-cheeked and smiling, dressed in clean, stiff jackets and sitting straight-backed on the photographer's chair. Those found alive, in whatever deplorable condition, were the lucky ones."<sup>46</sup> These painful and grotesque depictions of the effect of child cruelty are extremely disturbing, not merely because of their factual and historical accuracy, but because of the emotional response they elicit, even demand from the reader. Such images recur throughout Rattle and Vale's book, driving home to the reader the realities of baby farming. Across the historical distance of more than a century and immense social and cultural changes, these graphic pictures of child cruelty profoundly affect the modern reader.

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<sup>44</sup> Rattle and Vale, "Dyer." 12

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 12

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 12

*The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer* frequently includes detailed representations of dying and dead infants, in order to render the depiction of Dyer's crimes realistic, but also to shock the reader:

Little May was too weak to express hunger, and so went mostly unfed [...] There was Bessie, too; only a month in the world and already thin and grey and beginning to take on the sunken features of one far beyond her age.<sup>47</sup>

These haunting portrayals of the infants' deterioration, suffering, and eventual death, is central to text's construction of femininity and evil and the specific form of true crime examined in the book. The authors furthermore show that Dyer's later regime was even more brutal. Rather than slowly starving the babies and infants to death, she strangled them soon after they had had been passed on to her care. The book features several tortured and lurid passages of descriptive prose, detailing these strangulations:

The tape was pulled tight, held for a second, and then tied in a knot. Too young to comprehend, to fight back or resist, Doris would have struggled for her last breath until her limbs went limp and she lost all consciousness. For a few short minutes her chest continued to heave in an involuntary attempt to fill her lungs and her mouth opened and closed like a baby bird in a last, silent bid for life.<sup>48</sup>

While not gory in the conventional sense, due to the subject matter and the defencelessness of the babies involved, these detailed descriptions are not only highly disturbing and therefore effective, in their meticulous revelling in the method of killing and the feeble responses of the victim. Overall, Rattle and Vale's use of literary strategies and textual techniques, such as gradual unveiling, building up suspense, circular narrative structures, is reinforced by thematic continuity. Demonstrating this thematic continuity, the book's first chapter is called "What the River Revealed" and final chapter is called "A Brown Parcel" – these could be both referring to the same incident but they do not. Instead, they are intended to illustrate the magnitude and persistent nature of infanticide. Such speculative and linguistically enhanced discourse contributes to creating the atmosphere of true crime narrative. The representation

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 173.

of Dyer as a cold-blooded serial killer is underlined in the book by the way her actions are shown to conflict with conventional conceptions of feminine behaviour.

Discussing the appeal of true crime, Robert Everett-Green states that: “Real murders have been recounted in plays, ballads and epic poems for centuries, but ‘true crime’ is the creation of a modern society equipped with many ways of talking to itself about what it fears most.”<sup>49</sup> This idea of society “talking to itself” about those repressed horrors and haunting echoes of past suffering is also important to the reader’s experience in true crime engagement. Reader response and engagement is central to how true crime texts operate. In the case of Rattle and Vale’s *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*, the discomfort experienced by the reader in engaging with these narratives, reflects the problematic, almost voyeuristic position of the reader in relation to the material being treated, and suggests acceptance of the premises of the narrative. Such responses confirm the critic Jean Murley’s assertion that, true crime allows the reader to: “hide prurience behind a kind of curiosity motivated by moral outrage.”<sup>50</sup> Laura Miller concurs, stating: “The very thing that makes true crime compelling — this really happened — also makes it distasteful: the use of human agony for the purposes of entertainment”<sup>51</sup>

As we have seen, the reader’s affect and emotional identification are central aspects in the complex dynamic of these true crime narratives. They play on and exploit the reader’s inability to “look away”, as shame, guilt, anger, disbelief, and abjection are provoked by their images and narratives. Yet it is important to remember that these true crime stories also examine and re-present documented historical realities. True crime exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian society, and exploits the contemporary reader’s responses of powerlessness and disbelief. Historical true crime narratives support a perhaps problematic version of history as

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<sup>49</sup> Everett-Green, Rupert. “Why we are drawn to the ‘quasi-fantasy genre’ of true crime in film.” *The Globe and Mail*. Friday, 5 September 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Murley, Jean. “Interviewed by David McWilliam.” *Twisted Tales: Promoting the Very Best of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Horror*. 31 May 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, “Sleazy”

progress. In *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*, the insistence on historical distance helps to alienate and detach the reader from what they are observing, by allowing them to hide behind an attitude of enlightenment. But at the same time the question persists. What is it about this figure and her particular crime that remains compelling to a contemporary readership? The curiosity about the hidden side of others and ourselves is suggested by the title of Ruth Paley and Simon Fowler's book that refers to Dyer's baby farming practices<sup>52</sup>: *Family Skeletons: Exploring the Lives of our Disreputable Ancestors* (2005). As Allison Vale states, in her article on Amelia Dyer in *The Independent*:

The world which enabled this wholesale trade in infant life may seem entirely alien today, but its scars are remarkably recent. Our Dickensian vision of Victorian urban filth is missing one grim detail: the bodies of dead infants littered the streets of British cities<sup>53</sup>

This insistence on a degree of detachment and temporal distance between the manifestations of true crime and the modern audience serves the purpose of enhancing the sense of monstrous otherness associated with baby farming and infanticide.

The engendering of abject shock and "moral outrage" is very much part of the reader's response to true crime stories of baby farming. As Robert Everett-Green states, commenting on Murley's analysis of true crime, its appeal and dynamics, that it: "allows us to seize on a particular crime or criminal as symbolic of what's wrong with society or with the human animal."<sup>54</sup> In discussing true crime, Everett-Green further foregrounds the somewhat reductive tendency to pin the blame on one individual who is seen to represent deviance, even evil.<sup>55</sup> The disturbing fact about baby farming exposed in Rattle and Vale's *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer* is the widespread nature of the practice, and that infanticide continued after Dyer's execution. This social

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<sup>52</sup> Paley, Ruth and Fowler, Simon. *Family Skeletons: Exploring the Lives of our Disreputable Ancestors*. (Kew: National Archives, 2005),26.

<sup>53</sup> Vale, "Amelia"

<sup>54</sup> Everett-Green, "Why"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

phenomenon was the result of a structural inequality, and as Laura Miller states, reflecting on the valuable lessons that can be drawn from true crime: “Crime fiction can afford to go on telling us what we want to hear, but at its best true crime insists on telling us what we can’t afford to forget.”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion: The Cruellest Crime

Through the contemporary reconstruction and retelling of true crime in Rattle and Vale’s *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer*, the double standards of the Victorian age and the dominant constructions of femininity are problematised, and their ambiguities and contradictions are exposed. The fascination that Amelia Dyer holds for true crime writers and the possible reasons for this are discussed by the crime fiction writer Martina Cole, in a television programme entirely devoted to Dyer, featuring interviews with Rattle and Vale.<sup>57</sup> Confirming Jean Murley’s assertion that, “the cultural work of true crime is fixated on the presentation of both horror and justice”<sup>58</sup>, the penultimate chapter of Rattle and Vale’s book addresses the second of these two questions; namely justice. In Chapter 59, entitled “Legal Repercussions”, the authors explain that, due to the outrage caused by Amelia Dyer’s case and the magnitude of her baby killings, the authorities were finally forced to intervene. The Home Office introduced new, tighter legislation for the care and welfare of children, and imposed a responsibility for local authorities to regulate and inspect houses and individuals suspected of involvement in baby farming.<sup>59</sup> Detailed description of Dyer’s conviction and execution serves to underline the significance in true crime of seeing justice done, particularly in historical accounts. Rattle

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<sup>56</sup> Miller, “Sleazy”

<sup>57</sup> Cole, Marina. “Amelia Dyer.” Martina Cole’s Lady Killers. Season 1, Episode 2. 20 Oct. 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Murley, “Interview”

<sup>59</sup> Rattle and Vale, “Dyer”, 245.

and Vale observe, in their discussion of Dyer's response to her conviction in the courthouse, how that justice was received by her, thereby eliciting their readers' response of satisfaction:

The colour drained from Amelia Dyer's face as Justice Hawkins donned the black cap and in solemn and measured tones pronounced the death sentence. The muscles of her face twitched and she began to rock backwards and forwards on her feet.<sup>60</sup>

This detailed close-up allows the reader the gratifying sight of Dyer's body language that gives away her anguish, but this process is far from unproblematic for the reader. It is important to note, with regard to justice, that although Amelia Dyer was executed in 1896, that didn't put an end to the now infamous baby farming practices: "Three more baby farmers would hang for infanticide during the ten years that followed the execution of Amelia Dyer."<sup>61</sup> Thus, in this article we have examined the construction of evil and femininity in true crime accounts of baby farming, and discussed the tension between contemporary appropriations and reporting of real historical crime, and the implications of this for our understanding of said crime. As Laura Miller notes: "We believe in evil, but we also want pop psychology to explain it away."<sup>62</sup> Recent true crime texts about baby farmers cannot merely be regarded as "pop psychology". They serve an important function, enabling us to reassess historical accounts of the past and re-evaluate social values. In its examination of baby farming, Rattle and Vale's book *The Woman Who Murdered Babies for Money: The Story of Amelia Dyer* exposes but also exploits the tensions and contradictions within the true crime genre and its construction of femininity.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>61</sup> Rattle and Vale, "Dyer", 246.

<sup>62</sup> Miller, "Sleazy".

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