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Introduction

What do we talk about when we talk about crime? We talk about harm, hurt, sometimes pain; we talk about it with outrage, anger and even humour. Often though, we talk about crime through personal stories, and, increasingly, we seem to tell them in public.

We all know that the law formally defines what can be treated as a crime. But to *make something* a crime – to invoke the processes and procedures that recognise something as ‘crime’ – we usually tell a story about it. When my laptop was stolen, I told the hotel receptionist what happened, and he advised me what to do. I spoke to the police and then took my officially approved story to my insurance company, which sent me money to buy a new computer.

If once talking about an experience of crime was confined to private or professional settings – the police station, the courtroom, a helpline or counsellor’s office – today, they seem to be everywhere. Bookshop shelves heave with autobiographies by prisoners, victims, police and barristers; streaming platforms like Netflix and YouTube host hours of interviews with serial killers, death-row residents, vigilantes and gang members; podcasts host a cacophony of personal anecdotes, and crimes are even live-streamed on social media. The past few decades have seen a remarkable rise in

people speaking about crime publicly, as victims, witnesses, as people accused of, or convicted of breaking the law.

When we hear people talking about crime, we tend to pay attention to what is told about: the gory details, the emotional drama, the aftermath. Content is important, but when people talk about crime, there's a lot more going on. As described above, stories also make things happen. This book takes seven examples of people speaking about their experience of crime and examines the kinds of stories told, what they can do, and who for. The book responds to two common assumptions: firstly, that people's stories offer an unvarnished version of the truth, and secondly, that talking about crime is inherently good and is a way to address harms and do justice.

Social researchers have long been interested in narratives and stories, but criminology is late to the party perhaps because we have the least reliable narrators, as leading narrative criminologist Professor Lois Presser observes. Criminologists interested in stories ask questions like: How do stories motivate people to harm others? What kinds of personal narratives can help people make sense of an experience of crime? How can stories resist harmful phenomenon? The book draws gratefully on the insights of these scholars and their work, listed in the acknowledgements. A note on terminology: I use 'personal story' and 'narrative' interchangeably, reflecting the complex relationship between experience and story. Some stories have a beginning, middle and end, but they may be partial, or hinted at. There are many ways to interpret narratives; my approach is broadly sociological and constructionist. Narrative theorist Catherine Kohler Riess-

man prompted me to ask: ‘Why was the story told that way?’ and Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein pointed me to consider the profound role of context in shaping personal stories. Ken Plummer’s work directed me to consider the social and historical context of personal narratives.

This book examines a snapshot of contemporary crime narratives and chapters include different kinds of media, including books, podcasts, television documentaries and even unpublished autobiography in the form of letters. Taken together, they reflect the way that speaking publicly about crime has become quotidian. I tried to include speakers from different genders, ages, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but most have some connection to the UK, where I live and work. Of course, there are omissions: not everyone is empowered to speak about crime in public. Personal narratives about crime are often treated as low-brow or suspect (criminals lie, don’t they?) but I take them seriously as phenomena in their own right because they are, to my mind, at least as important as print journalism, fiction or films in shaping how we know about crime today. This book explores what telling stories about crime can do, and who for. It challenges the idea that personal stories offer an exact insight into experience and considers whether talking about crime is even a good thing.

Criminal Autobiography and a Criminal Career: Howard Marks's *Mr Nice*

I n the 1980s 'Donald Nice' was an infamous cannabis smuggler, MI6 informant, most wanted man in Britain, and the alias of Howard Marks, a proud Welshman and graduate of Balliol College, Oxford University. After serving seven years of a twenty-five-year sentence for 'racketeering' in the US, Marks's autobiography *Mr Nice* was published in 1996. Self-styled outlaw, stoner and intellectual, he caught the 1990s 'cool Britannia' wave, or rather 'cool Cymru'. Although broadsheet reviews were indifferent, *Mr Nice* had massive popular appeal and for a time, Marks had the status of a folk hero. Even the *Daily Mail* said he 'looked like a Rolling Stone'. Marks turned his criminal notoriety into celebrity, regularly appearing on TV and at music and book festivals and he even stood for election to the UK Parliament (unsuccessfully) and appeared in several films. He wrote and edited several more books, including a travel guide to Wales. The film of *Mr Nice*, starring Welsh actor Rhys Ifans, and cool-girl Chloë Sevigny as his wife, Judy, was an international success.

Mr Nice intrigues me because Marks was unrepentant, unlike most post-war criminal autobiographies which tended to be about their authors' reform. For example, Glasgow gangster Jimmy Boyle's *A Sense of Freedom* (1977) stated in

the introduction the author's intention to: 'warn young people that there is nothing glamorous about getting involved in crime and violence' and that proceeds from the book would go to kids from socially deprived areas of Scotland. Convicted armed robber John McVicar's *McVicar by Himself* (1974) described his escape from HMP Durham, reflecting on his criminal life with regret (the manuscript was allegedly smuggled out of prison). McVicar was prompted to write about his life after attending classes with Sociologists Stan Cohen and Laurie Taylor while in HMP Durham. It was a popular success and was made into a film starring Roger Daltrey from the rock band The Who. Both McVicar and Boyle had successful careers in journalism and sculpting, respectively, and I'd argue that their autobiographies didn't just describe their experiences of going straight but were an integral part of it. Autobiography allows people to distinguish between past self (the 'criminal') and present self (enlightened, reformed), and so claim the moral high ground. Criminologist Shadd Maruna calls these 'redemption narratives'. And, of course, having one's story published further validates that identity and establishes a reputation beyond a criminal career. Nonetheless, the redemption narrative was not for Marks.

In the 1990s, the rise of true crime melded with prison autobiography producing a bad-meaning-good kind of criminal celebrity exemplified by the Kray twins' autobiographies. Former social worker and criminologist Mike Nellis noted that this novel genre capitalised on 'geezer chic', an 'aggressive, hedonistic working-class masculinity – although not all exponents are working class'. 'Geezer chic' dominated 1990s men's magazines such as *GQ*, *FHM* and *Loaded* and it's in

that context that Marks's unrepentant autobiography could emerge. Although *Mr Nice* describes when Marks decided to stop smuggling cannabis (of which more below), it's not really the point of the book, which celebrates Marks's life of hedonism and pleasure. It's a bit like a boy's own adventure, but in the sixties and seventies with a lot of drugs, some promiscuity and a sprinkling of casual racism and sexism that is very much of its time.

Mr Nice is a picaresque account of a loveable rogue. It's told in the first person in a realistic style through an episodic, chronological structure. Each chapter is named for Marks's many aliases. Chapter 1 begins at the end of his criminal career in April 1995, as he awaits deportation following his imprisonment in the United States. After that, it's a straightforward description of his childhood, his acceptance into Oxford University, his early drug-smuggling career and his first arrest and criminal trial, in which he beats the charge by claiming to be working for MI6. Then more smuggling but bigger, and with an increasing list of legal-ish side businesses, before being arrested in Spain in 1988 and extradited to the US where he is eventually convicted. Marks entered a plea bargain in 1990 and served seven years in Terre Haute Federal prison, where around half the inmates were serving life sentences. Despite the sheer amount of travelling and dealing that Marks did, *Mr Nice* is surprisingly light on plot. At some point he promises his wife Judy that he won't smuggle drugs any more, but then he does. Along the way he gets married twice and has four children. Later, he gets bored of smuggling and stops, but is nonetheless arrested, extradited and imprisoned. Marks is a stylish writer, and the book is