

Bright Young Women, Serial Killers, and the 1970s

By Jessica Knoll. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023. 384 pp. \$27.99 hardcover.

Reviewed by Susan Hatters Friedman, MD, MSt and Elise Friedman, BA

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The true crime genre fascinates would-be detectives the world around, and the public is often fascinated with the perpetrators, asking how someone seemingly normal could have come to such extreme ends. Yet films, podcasts, and media attention risk glorifying offenders, further traumatizing families of victims and survivors. *The Stranger Beside Me* catapulted Ann Rule to literary fame as she described herself as the woman who knew and worked next to an undiscovered serial killer at a sexual assault hotline and queried how he had been living another life.¹ Hollywood star Zac Efron has even played a certain notorious serial killer.²

There are potential benefits to true crime's popularity, understanding more about personal safety and how to perhaps prevent one's own victimization, with one popular podcast³ even having a tagline SSDGM, short for "stay sexy, don't get murdered." There are notable concerns, however. Recently, at a professional conference highlighting the intersection of popular culture and academia, *Bright Young Women*⁴ was repeatedly recommended. We were hesitant at first since it was a novel about true crime, but Patton Oswalt's review in the *New York Times* changed our minds about reading it.⁵ If comedian Patton Oswalt seems an unlikely champion for victims' stories, one need only remember his late wife Michelle McNamara, well-known for her quest for the Golden State Killer.

In this mélange of true crime, Jessica Knoll watched a Netflix series about a notorious American serial killer. She came up with an alternative inspiration. Knoll's first novel, *Luckiest Girl Alive*,⁶ was made into a popular film of the same name,⁷ starring Mila Kunis. That story too had a protagonist woman

with a history of traumas (of sexual abuse and a school shooting) hiding beneath her well-coifed exterior. But *Bright Young Women* far surpasses it.

In *Bright Young Women*, Knoll showcases the victims, their lives, and the lives of those who intersect with them, rather than the life of the perpetrator. Focusing on the survivors and the victims in this fictional reimagining provides an entirely different perspective and a correcting of the narrative. Further, the commonly sensationalized and graphic depictions of violence against women are turned on their head, seen through the narrator Pamela's personal, emotional responses.

Knoll reminds us of the reality that, had Bundy's victims lived, they would now be the same age as Michelle Pfeiffer, drawing the story out of the past. In January 1978, Kathy Kleiner was brutally attacked with a log while she slept in her bed at a Florida Chi Omega sorority house.⁸ She would survive, facing years of healing. Knoll met with Ms. Kleiner as part of her research for the novel.⁸ Knoll also pored over hundreds of pages of transcripts and case files for authenticity.

In *Bright Young Women*, we follow Pamela, the fictional sorority house-leader, who witnesses a man fleeing in the middle of the night. Two sorority sisters, including Pamela's best friend, were murdered, and two others viciously attacked. Pamela is the prime eyewitness.

Twin timelines of the present and the 1970s are utilized. In the 1970s, a lay understanding of anorexia was unusual and lesbian relationships were an implied reason why some victims were never reported missing. Knoll weaves in the concept of "impossible grief," described as grief not adhering to the social contract: "a woman [lesbian] whose relationship wasn't recognized as legitimate at the time she lost her partner" (Ref. 4, p 305). But in this telling, Pamela is a real character, with her own aspirations and her own relationships with her own flawed parents and boyfriend.

In the novel, victims speak as whole people, in contrast with the superficially charming defendant. The defendant is referred to as "The Defendant" and never by his name, purposely not aiding any lust for notoriety. In the real world, he had left law school, was not irresistible to women, and needed to use a fake cast to disarm them.⁹ In his real-world sentencing for the murders, the judge had wished him well and called him a "bright young man."⁹ Knoll's title shifts the focus to the bright young women whose lives he cut short and those he shaped through tragedy.

Pamela's character is intertwined with the emotional weight of survivor trauma, further complicated by her need to seek justice despite the misogynistic media environment. Knoll emphasizes the contrast between how the victims and survivors are marginalized by the media whereas the perpetrator is called "charming." Parallel to Pamela's journey is that of Tina, a therapist whose grief for her unacknowledged partner, Ruth, underscores Knoll's "impossible grief." Ruth's disappearance, tied to the same perpetrator, was not recognized with the same urgency because of the societal disregard for their relationship, highlighting how marginalized identities face additional layers of erasure when they become victims of violence.

An almost unbelievable scene occurs when the defendant is allowed to depose witnesses to his horrific crimes, facing his accusers. Despite the immense potential for retraumatization, somehow this was allowed in this case. Yet, far from describing the clever law student defending himself that the media portrays, Pamela describes the scene: "I was one-hour into my testimony, and I had another to go, and he would not be the one to question me. The way his team had to manage him, by calling inconsequential witnesses to the stand just so he had someone to questions without torpedoing his defense, would later remind me of a toddler given one of those play cell phones because that's what all the adults have and he is *not* a baby" (Ref. 4, p 339, emphasis in original).

Forensic psychiatrists must hold onto victim perspectives, including in public health roles. Pamela describes the trial, the defendant's groupies versus the reality: "I was essentially hidden in plain sight among the other young women who had parted their hair down the middle and put on their Sunday best that morning. There was no way to tell which of us was there to ogle the Kennedy of Killers and which to testify against the booger-eating alcoholic" (Ref. 4, p 312). Millions of young women with brown middle-parted hair (like the authors of this review) would have noticed the stark reality when they grew up hearing stories of the charming young man who murdered dozens of us, projecting himself into the spotlight.

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A Forensic Review of *Juror #2*

Directed by Clint Eastwood. Screenplay by Jonathan Abrams. 114 Minutes. Distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures; Released in the USA November 1, 2024

Reviewed by Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD

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By far the best part of this courtroom thriller directed by Clint Eastwood is the cast. There are additional elements in the film that may be of interest to forensic psychiatrists, such as intimate partner violence, confirmation bias, jury selection, and jury deliberation in a murder trial.

In the film, the defendant, James Michael Sythe, played by Gabriel Basso, is on trial for allegedly murdering his girlfriend after a public dispute in a bar on a rainy night. Although there is a big reveal at the outset of the film, there is still an element of suspense throughout because of the ambiguous moral judgment of the protagonist, Justin Kemp (aka *Juror #2*), played by an unassuming Nicholas Hoult. Incidentally, the talented Toni Collette who plays the prosecutor, Faith Killebrew, also played Nicholas Hoult's chaotic mother, Fiona Brewer, when Nicholas Hoult was young Marcus Brewer in the film *About a Boy* in 2002.

The public defender, Eric Resnick, played by Chris Messina, maintains that his client is innocent