



Syllabus

Course Title: Historical True Crime Writing: Georgian and Victorian Obsessions

Program and Date: London Signature (May 21st-June 5th 2026)

Academic Department: English Department, Murray State University

Instructor Name: Kari Shemwell

Instructor Email and Phone: Kshemwell@murraystate.edu (270)809-4728

Get to Know Your Professor

I am a writer and professor who loves exploring new places and believes that firsthand experience is one of the most powerful tools for learning. These beliefs have been shaped by a range of global experiences that continue to influence how I approach my work. I studied Holocaust literature and history in Berlin, an experience that deepened my understanding of how narrative and memory intersect. I've held writing fellowships in France and Scotland, and I completed graduate residencies in the Caribbean during my MFA in Creative Writing. These immersive opportunities have taught me that literature and writing come alive when we engage with the cultures, histories, and landscapes that surround it. My own creative work often explores themes of identity, memory, and transformation. I'm especially drawn to place-based storytelling—how setting shapes voice, character, and meaning—and I encourage students to explore these connections in their own work.

Course Description

Long before today's obsession with true crime podcasts and documentaries, the people of Victorian and Georgian England were captivated by chilling tales of violence and mystery. Through studying the literature surrounding notorious cases like Jack the Ripper, the Thames Torso Murders, and Ratcliff Highway murders, students will examine how narratives of true crime reflect the cultural anxieties and moral values of their time. From visits to such sites as the London True Crime Museum and the Metropolitan Police Archives, as well as from crime-oriented walking tours, students will gain the historical context for deeper literary analysis and for examining the ethical implications of engaging with stories of violence and trauma.

Course Level and Credit Hours

Undergraduate
Three credit hours

Syllabus

Prerequisite(s)

None

Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of all coursework with a passing grade and full participation in course activities, students shall be able to:

1. Discuss the historical and cultural impact that major crimes had on the English population
2. Discuss the ways in which true crime writing evolved over the Georgian and Victorian periods
3. Compare the elements of historical true crime writing to those we see in true crime coverage today
4. Deeply consider the ethics and implications of true crime writing and how it can be handled with respect
5. Reflect on what true crime writing says about our collective values, anxieties, and beliefs
6. Examine true crime artifacts and primary sources on-site, engaging with archival materials, court records, newspapers, and historical sites in the UK to gain firsthand insights into how crime was documented and sensationalized.
7. Connect true crime history to place through experiential learning by visiting locations tied to infamous cases. This immersion will allow students to explore how local landscapes, monuments, and public memory continue to frame collective understanding of crime and justice.

Required Readings and Materials

1. *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* by Hallie Rubenhold
2. *The Invention of Murder: How the Victorians Reveled in Death and Detection and Created Modern Crime* by Judith Flanders

Assignments and Grades

LIST OF ASSIGNMENTS	Points
Pre-departure Reading Responses (2 short written responses, 300 words each)	100
Participation and Attendance	100
Reflective Journal of Activities (1 page per day)	200
Written report of a crime from student's home (creative nonfiction, 500-1000 words)	200
Post-trip essay comparing historical crime coverage with that of student's home crime (1000-1500 words)	200



Syllabus

Post-trip essay on a modern true-crime podcast that covers historical British crime (500 -1000 words)	200	
Total Points	1000	

Grading Scale

The following scale will be used to compute your grade.

Scale: 900-1000 = A; 800-899 = B; 700-799 = C; 600-699 = D; <600 = F

Onsite Learning Experiences and Activities

Onsite learning experiences in this class will likely include the following site visits. This is a tentative list which will be replaced with a detailed daily itinerary of class meetings and field trips prior to the departure date.

- Jack the Ripper Historical Tour of White Chapel
 - Jack the Ripper Museum
 - Visit to the Guildhall Library Original Penny Dreadful Collection
 - Visit to the Metropolitan Police Museum Archives/ Bow Street Museum of Crime and Justice
 - Visit to the British Library
- An evening at Murder Trial Tonight (theatre experience with audience playing the role of jury)

Attendance Policy

Attendance is mandatory at all scheduled activities and class meetings as well as field trip excursions. This includes any virtual meetings before and after the onsite experience. Repeated absences, including for ill health, will require documentation to be excused.

Exceptions can be made for illness if the student informs faculty. Any excessive absence without proper documentation/approval will result in failure of the course.

Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism (including use of AI or AI tools to complete writing assignments) will not be tolerated and will result in a failing grade for the course.



Syllabus

Physical Expectations

Program requires walking 3-5 miles per day on uneven pavement in all kinds of weather and long periods of standing. Students must be able to carry their own bags and belongings.

Disability Accommodation

CCSA is committed to providing access to education abroad to the extent possible in a study abroad setting. The earlier CCSA and the faculty know the needs, the more likely we can accommodate them. At a minimum, students seeking accommodations are to contact both the CCSA office and the faculty one month in advance of the program's beginning. Students seeking such accommodation must provide CCSA with a copy of the letter on file with their own Office of Disability Services outlining what services they receive on their home campus.

Title IX Policy

Sexual misconduct (including sexual harassment, sexual assault, and any nonconsensual behavior of a sexual nature) and sexual discrimination violate CCSA policies. Students experiencing such behavior may obtain support from the Onsite Program Director or the CCSA Executive Director. To report sexual misconduct or sex discrimination, contact either of these two officers. Disclosure to faculty instructors or CCSA officers of sexual misconduct, domestic violence, dating violence, or sex discrimination occurring on the program or involving a visitor, student or employee is not confidential under Title IX. Faculty and other CCSA employees are required to forward such reports, including names and circumstances, to the CCSA Executive Director.

Statement about Final Syllabus

Please note that all CCSA syllabi are subject to change, but every effort will be made to ensure participants receive notice of such changes in a timely manner.