

The Sunday Long Read's True Crime Newsletter - May 16, 2025

**The best true crime stories, carefully curated monthly by
author Kim Cross and The Sunday Long Read staff.**

Kim Cross

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Last spring, before I joined the Sunday Long Read team, I was reading the weekly curation when I ran across a story called *A Death in Alabama*. I reflexively braced. I'd heard this news: A Southern Baptist pastor and small-town mayor had ended his life when a website published an expose about things he did in private. And here it was in *Esquire*, by some hoity-toity writer from New York City.

Having spent my richest childhood years in a podunk Alabama town, I bristle when journalists who ain't from around here parachute in to cover some sensationally unsavory news. I'm tired of outsiders approaching the South with self-fulfilling assumptions. Most find what they're looking for—Southern gothic themes are not pure myth—but miss the subtler nuances of a tremendously complex culture.

Expecting to hate it, I gave the story an honest read. It moved me—emotionally and intellectually—to a level few stories ever have. It made me think deeply and differently about a place I thought I knew. It was also a masterpiece of narrative reporting and writing.

Wanting to learn everything about how Warren approached such a sensitive story—asking people still in the throes of grief to recount confusing and painful events—I reached out and asked if he would work with me on a Nieman Storyboard “Annotation.” (For those new to the franchise, it's kind of like a Director's Cut, where a writer asks the author questions about a piece, a Q&A embedded in the text.)

He agreed. We talked for two hours over coffee in New York City in what felt like a Masterclass on trauma reporting. The chat upset my assumptions about Mark's New York hoity-toitiness. Turns out he grew up in a podunk town, too—in Texas. That upbringing was the root of his empathy for people in Phenix City, Alabama.

“Last fall, when I heard about what happened to Bubba Copeland, I felt his death like a shot to the solar plexus,” Warren told me. “I felt some kind of innate kinship to the people in those towns. I was struck by the initial public bellow of grief and love that they had expressed for Bubba — unafraid, unabashed and beautiful — and wondered if the same thing would have happened in my hometown if, God forbid, the same thing had happened there. It struck me as different, and remarkable, and I wanted to understand it.”

Last week, “*A Death in Alabama*” won the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing—the first Pulitzer in the magazine's 92-year history. I've never felt such vicarious joy for another writer's award. It felt like validation for the complicated state that shaped me, for an oft-maligned culture that's easy to judge and hard to understand. Not only did Mark Warren “get it”—the Pulitzer meant the hoity-toities did, too.

“The people in these towns who spoke to me amid their grief feel that they have been able to correct the record about their friend, and reclaim the narrative from the news site that set these terrible events in motion. Stories can heal. And their ownership and pride in this story means so much to me. The Pulitzer is their prize, too.”

This month's curation leans heavily on nuance and factors that complicate the narrative. I hope you enjoy the mix. As always, please send me stories for consideration (and yes, writers, you can and should promote your own work!)

Don't forget to lock the door.

Kim

The Unabomber's Brother Turned Him In. Then Spent 27 Years Trying to Win Him Back.

By Serge F. Kovalski for *The New York Times Magazine*

Non-paywalled link created for Sunday Long Read subscribers

After a 17-year series of anonymous bombings that targeted universities and airlines, Ted Kaczynski was caught and arrested by the FBI thanks to a tipster: The Unabomber's younger brother, David. For years, I have wondered many times about David, the moral dilemma he must have faced, and what became of his relationship with his brother.

David, now 75, answered all of my questions and more in this poignant story by investigative reporter Serge F. Kovalski. The story includes excerpts of poignant letters David wrote to his brother in prison for nearly three decades. I won't tell you how Ted responded; you'll have to read the piece for yourself. But I will say that this is the stuff of literary novels and nightmares.

SLR guest editor Shazna Nessa described it as "a beautiful account of sibling love and loss, and the painful tradeoff that one brother makes for following his moral compass."

Bonus: Some of the letters are archived at the University of Michigan. The Unabomber cabin was disassembled and rebuilt at the FBI Headquarters. Watch a time-lapse film of its reconstruction and the Inside the FBI podcast about the case code-named UNABOM.

A Florida Nurse Was Stalked, Then Killed. Why Didn't Police Arrest Her Ex?

By Lauren Peace for the *Tampa Bay Times*

Paywall after reading one article

Substance abuse. The presence of firearms. Stalking. Threats. These are some of the red flags that often foreshadow domestic violence and murder. Audrey Petersen tried to protect herself from her ex with pepper spray, a home security system, three reports with the police, and an attempt to obtain a restraining order. It wasn't enough.

In this arresting narrative, enterprise reporter Lauren Peace unpacks the ways in which the system failed to protect a woman even as she was actively taking measures to protect herself. Stories about domestic violence can be particularly challenging to report and tell because of the personal nature of the crimes and the victim's relationship with the offender.

“Survivors live with very real fears that often bar them from speaking, so many of the stories that are written are done so in the aftermath of a tragedy, as was the case with this one,” Peace said. “And even when survivors are willing to talk, these stories are often complicated because interpersonal relationships are complicated. Evidence isn’t always clearcut and harm isn’t always immediately obvious. It takes a critical eye.”

Bonus: For more on this story, watch a 2-minute video of reporter Lauren Pearce talking about the story, with photos, texts, and audio of Audrey Petersen.

Is There Really a Serial Killer Stalking New England?

By Brenna Ehrlich for *Rolling Stone*

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Rolling Stone’s Chief Research Editor Brenna Ehrlich wrote a 2022 YA thriller, *Killing Time*, about a true-crime-obsessed girl in Connecticut who investigates the murder of her teacher in response to the rumor mill’s lies. Three years later, she stumbled upon this story idea about—and through—the true crime rumor mill.

“I was coincidentally visiting Amityville, NY, when my sister texted asking if I heard that there was a serial killer in New England (I’m from CT),” Ehrlich said. “I told her I’d look into it. In doing so, I met some incredible people who lost loved ones — and were sick of their deaths being sensationalized.”

Her story shows how social media sleuths complicate the already complicated nature of investigations. Armchair detectives occasionally help solve crimes. More often, they proliferate rumors that obligate investigators to spend time and resources on theories unsupported by evidence. These rumors can also prolong and exacerbate the trauma victims’ families are already experiencing. “The rumors going around do nothing but torture us all over again,” one said. “We can’t even grieve.”

Bonus: Is True Crime Keeping Me in Prison? That’s the question at the heart of this first person story—written by an incarcerated man practicing journalism in prison—reflecting on his choice to appear on *Inside Evil*, a show produced by Chris Cuomo. This essay offers an unusual perspective on the ethical quandaries of true crime.

The Underground Hunt for Mexico’s Most Wanted Drug Kingpin [\$]

By Steve Fisher and José de Córdoba for *The Wall Street Journal*

This story is about the hunt for the son of El Chapo. But before you can appreciate how challenging that might be, consider the prison escape of El Chapo:

El Chapo escaped from his maximum-security prison cell in 2015 through a mile-long tunnel equipped with a motorcycle mounted on rails and disappeared by helicopter into the mountains of Sinaloa. The following year, when Mexican and U.S. law enforcement traced him to the Sinaloa city of Los Mochis, he fled through a tunnel hidden behind a

dressling-room mirror and emerged from a sewer drain. He was captured by a Mexican police officer after stealing a car.

El Chapo—Joaquín Guzmán, founder of the Sinaloa cartel—was captured in 2016, extradited to the US and sentenced to life in 2019 for drug trafficking. That’s when his son, Iván Archivaldo Guzmán, began running the family business.

Bonus: Here’s a video of El Chapo’s escape:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUVrOjZmgBA>

Nearly Forgotten, a 1969 Double Murder in Austin Still Haunts Some

By Stephen Harrigan for *Texas Monthly*

Nearly six decades ago, author Stephen Harrigan was a 20-year-old college student at the University of Texas at Austin, hanging out in his college living room, when a handsome 21-year-old fellow student named John White strolled in with mutual friends. A week later, John White’s body was found, shot, in a shallow stream west of Austin. The day after that, White’s girlfriend, UT student Keitha Morris, was found floating in a lake.

More than 50 years later, one of John White’s sisters reached out to Harrigan to ask if he’d write about the murders. Harrigan, author of *The Gates of the Alamo* and other books, agreed, and learned “how a tragedy I had come close to forgetting had stamped the lives of multiple families for generations.”

Workshop: The Reconstructed Narrative

Join me in Larry McMurtry’s one-stoplight hometown in Texas to learn how to report cinematic scenes and craft stories with a narrative arc. From May 28 to June 1, I’ll be teaching alongside Hampton Sides (author of *Ghost Soldiers*, *Blood and Thunder*, and *The Wide, Wide Sea*) and Glenn Stout (author of *Young Woman and the Sea* and series editor of *Best American Sports Writing*). A couple of hours outside of Dallas, Archer City is a living story lab filled with cowboys, ranchers, oilfield workers, and characters that filled the pages of *Lonesome Dove* and *The Last Picture Show*. We’ll visit Booked Up, McMurtry’s famous bookshop, and read Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen that inspired Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen. We’re limiting spots to around 12 and offering one-on-one coaching. Spots will go fast; reserve one here.

What Happened to Nash Quinn?

By David Howard for *Bicycling*

Former *Bicycling* executive editor and true-crime author David Howard explores the unsolved missing persons case of a University of Wyoming professor who rode

his singlespeed bike into the Laramie Wilderness and disappeared. I appreciate the reporting it takes to bring someone you can't meet to vivid life on the page.

"Writing a detailed profile of a missing person can be tricky," David told me. "You obviously can't interview them and size them up. With Nash, I was lucky; because of his vocation as a metalsmithing professor, he posted a number of YouTube videos. It's a rare treat to be able to sit back and have a subject like this tell you about his life and work in such a richly textured way."

Bonus: If you like rollicking crime capers, stop right now and order Dave's book, *Chasing Phil: The Adventures of Two Undercover Agents with the World's Most Charming Con Man*.

They Stole a Quarter-Billion in Crypto and Got Caught Within a Month

By Mitch Moxley for *The New York Times Magazine*

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One of Don's favorites, this story has it all—Minecraft fraud, moronic criminals, and a glimpse at the terrifying potential of an organized online mob.

The Cross Examination

Each edition, I'll include a little treat here as an antidote to the darkness of true crime stories. A playlist, podcast, product, app, film—some random thing that brings me joy.

This is the spot where I get to share some crime-unrelated thing that makes me happy. This month, it's Bo Jackson on a bicycle. Not just any bike: A Trek Madone Project One imprinted with the names of 252 Alabamians who died in the worst tornado outbreak on record.

This bike—one Bo rode in the first year of the ride—is up for auction as part of the final Bo Bikes Bama charity ride, which has raised more than \$2.5 million for disaster relief in Alabama. It's authenticated and autographed by the GOAT of all GOATS. You can also bid on a 2-night deep-sea fishing trip with Bo, a baseball signed by Bo and Ken Griffey, Jr., a boxing glove autographed by Mike Tyson, and more.

—Kim

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The Ted K Archive

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