

## Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

### Mini-Episode 19: True Crime

(Brief intro music)

Leah: Hello, and welcome to another mini-episode of Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast by the Oak Creek Public Library. It's Leah again, recording you guys another mini here in my living room. My cat is snoozing beside me, so if you hear any kitty snores, either enjoy or ignore them depending on if they bother you or not. This week I wanted to talk about true crime. This is an episode that I have wanted to do for quite a while, but I wasn't entirely sure how to approach it. I know not everyone is a fan of true crime and that some people might not want to hear about it at all. I thought I would pick some of my favorite books that are true accounts of crime and very lightly touch on what the book is about. I won't go into lots of detail; that's what the books themselves are for. All right, the first book that I'd like to talk about is "Devil in the White City" by Erik Larson. The case that is detailed is that of H.H. Holmes and how he built a crazy hotel in Chicago right around the time of the World's Fair in 1893. H.H. Holmes didn't start out as H.H. Holmes; his birth name was Hermann Mudgett. He was married, um, multiple times to different women at the same time. In his early criminal career, he worked with some other guys to commit insurance fraud using cadavers he had access to as a medical student. But he didn't stop there. In 1886, he moved to Chicago, and started going by H.H. Holmes. He started working at a pharmacy and eventually was able to purchase it. After he did, he started work on a building across the street using many different local contractors. He tried to get out of paying for the construction by claiming inferior work or that it wasn't completed, and it sounds like it at least partially worked. What he ended up with: a building that no one else knew the layout of. There were soundproofed rooms, doors that went nowhere, rooms that had chutes to the basement in them. Rooms that could be totally hermetically sealed. Basically, he had a whole bunch of private torture chambers in the building. This is where most of the murders that he committed happened. I'm not going to describe any of them to keep this as potentially family-friendly as possible, but if we circle back around to the book rather than the case, the author does do a very thorough job of describing what the so-called 'murder hotel' and what it probably looked like, and how Holmes committed the crimes. He definitely killed nine people, claims to have killed 27, but he is actually suspected of killing over 200. You see, during the World's Fair, there were so many visitors to Chicago, some of whom were totally alone, and H.H. Holmes was supposedly a very charming gentleman. It's hard to know how many people were lured back to his supposed hotel with him. What Larson does very well in this book is set the stage for what the world was like around the World's Fair. He provides a lot of background for how Chicago was selected and what the city was like at that time. You really get a feel for what life would have been like, which is great because, unless you're a historian, you might not have a clear picture. You also get a really great look at what the World's Fair was like. If you enjoy Larson's writing style, he has written a number of nonfiction books—all very well researched—on a variety of topics. For instance, another of his books I enjoyed is entitled "In the Garden of Beasts," and it takes a look at an American diplomat family in Berlin while Hitler rises to power. All right, let's move on to another true crime book: "The Good Nurse" by Charles Graeber. I'm very fascinated by medical history as well as true crime, so this book really appealed to me. This book features the case of Charlie Cullen, not to be confused with Edward Cullen from "Twilight." Charlie Cullen was a nurse, and he was implicated in the death of as many as 300

patients. Which really does make him possibly the most prolific serial killer in America. And it's a really scary concept, right? Medical professionals are people we place a lot of trust in, and usually, that trust is not misplaced. But in Charlie Cullen's case, boy, was it misplaced. I do want to mention that a lot of policies and procedures in hospitals were changed after he was caught. The case resulted in a lot of change, which was probably a really good thing. Patient safety laws were passed after the arrest, state nursing boards revised their processes, and internal process changes were made at hospitals. So, don't be terrified to visit your local doctor or hospital, especially given our current pandemic situation. Anyway, I don't want to get too far into the crimes that Charlie committed. He worked at various hospitals around New Jersey and Pennsylvania for a 16-year period. He was dismissed by various hospitals over that period but always found another job someplace. He really slipped through the cracks in the medical system at the time and, in my opinion, got really lucky a number of times that he wasn't reported to state review boards, but instead he was quietly let go from positions. Basically, his crimes were committed using medicines that patients didn't need. A big part of medical crimes that I've noticed is that the perpetrator also gets to be the hero for a while by figuring out a 'miracle' cure or knowing just when to take massive action to try and save a life. He could just use patient-charting software to keep track of his experiments on people. He was finally caught by two really dedicated Somerset County, New Jersey detectives, Detective Sargent Tim Braun and Detective Danny Baldwin. They enlisted the help of one of Charlie's friends, a fellow nurse by the name of Amy Loughren. She started monitoring some of his activity at work and would report it back to the detectives. What was astounding to me was how much that hospital he was employed at—Somerset Medical Center—tried to dodge, deny, and ignore that there were suspicious patient deaths there. It shook me that they'd rather cover up murder than admit an error. The book itself is very, very well researched. There is a thorough notes section in the book, organized by chapter. I will admit, I enjoyed the second half of the book a bit more than the first half of it. The first half is written more from Charlie's perspective, which the author got through interviews with Charlie Cullen himself. And though it was sort of interesting to hear what was going on in his life when he was killing...I felt that a lot of the blame that should have been on Cullen's shoulders wasn't there. Because the crimes were written from his perspective, they have this feeling of being inconsequential or minor things, which they're absolutely not. They're murders! The second half focused more on the dogged investigation by the Somerset County detectives along with Amy, their confidential informant. That part zipped right along for me, and I very much appreciated being able to read about his arrest and the interrogations. Everything was all wrapped up, you know? Interestingly enough, this book came to be because of a request for a kidney donation. Charlie Cullen could donate—he was a match—but there was a giant uproar about whether he should be allowed to. It resulted in catching Charles Graeber's—the author's—attention. He wrote a piece for New York Magazine entitled "The Tainted Kidney." From there, he fleshed it out for this book. And I think that brings me to the end of this mini-episode. I hope I gave you guys enough details about the cases you're still interested in checking out the books. I will have them listed, of course, in our show notes. Both titles are available on OverDrive. "Devil in the White City" has both an audiobook and eBook format, but "The Good Nurse" only has the audio format. There are plenty of true crime books out there; if neither of these cases piqued your interest, then look under subjects on [wplc.overdrive.com](http://wplc.overdrive.com) and scroll to nonfiction. 'True Crime' is its very own category. If you've enjoyed listening, please take a minute to subscribe and, until next time y'all, stay safe and happy reading. Bye!

(Brief outro music)