

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Making a killing out of a killing

Review of Daniel Sweren-Becker’s ‘Kill Show’ (Harper, 2023)

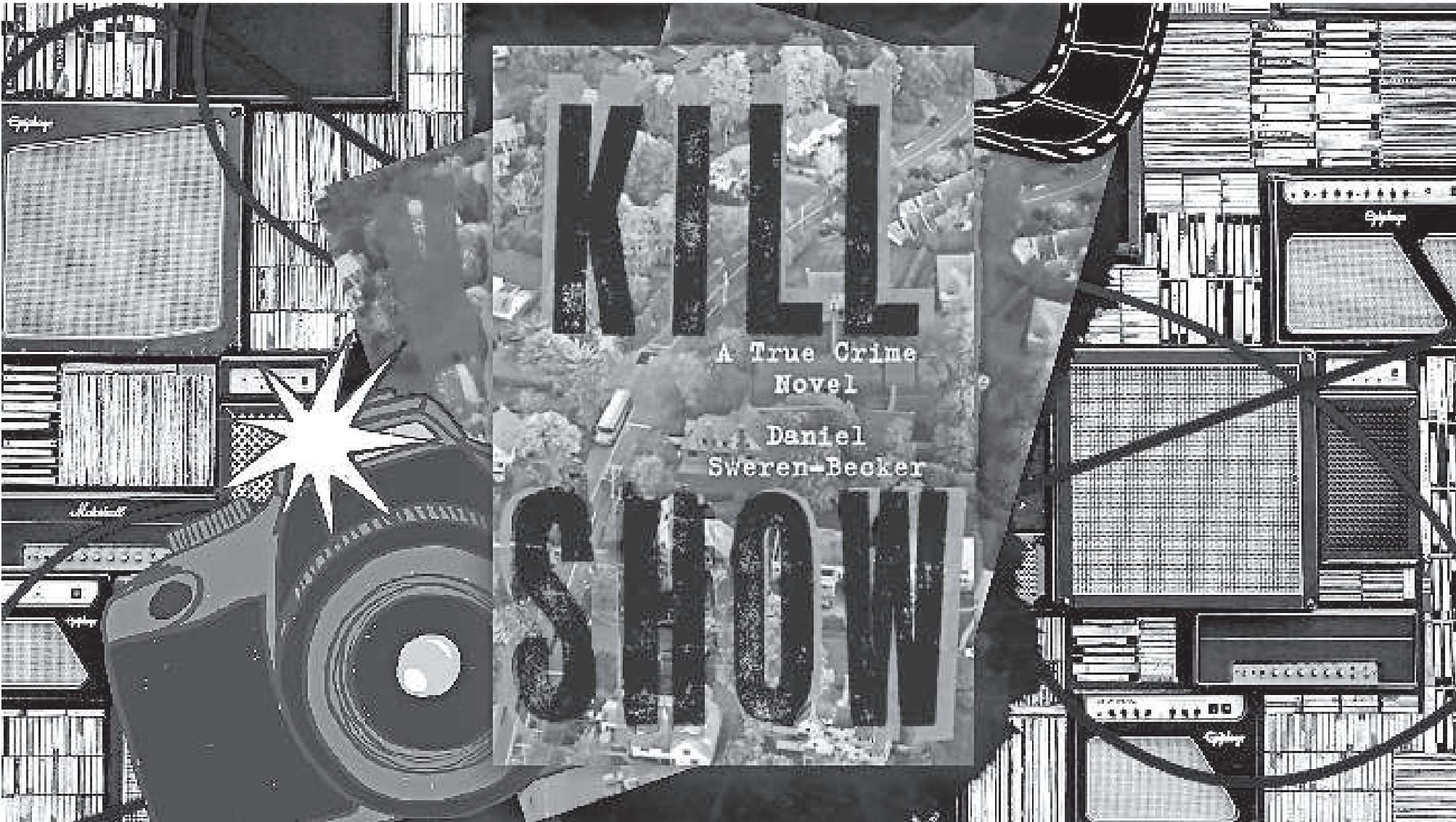


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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FARAH GHUZNAVI

A visit to any bookshop today will attest to the reading public’s fascination with crime (and criminals). While the appeal of a good murder mystery has long been established by the likes of Agatha Christie, it is the increasingly violent crime stories of today—and particularly the popularity of serial killers—that is a newer phenomenon.

I would often tease my father, who was the gentlest soul you could ever hope to meet, about the rows of crime novels—from his beloved Scandinavian noir to the more classic Inspector Maigret books—that lined his shelves. I could never get into them myself.

But what he and I did share was a degree of incomprehension about the preponderance of true crime in the bestseller lists today, because, quite apart from the gruesome nature of many cases, it is the suffering of real

victims that is put on display. And however much of an outlier I may be, I can’t shake the sense that it is not right to use the most traumatic experience in someone’s life as entertainment fodder for others. It also raises serious moral questions when a murderer is allowed to benefit from his misdeeds by selling his story for millions. Yet we live in a world of rapacious media professionals who cash in on the preoccupations of true crime obsessives, making this an acceptable practice.

Why is that? The surviving Beatles have made it a point never to mention John Lennon’s murderer by name—precisely because that is the “celebrity status” that criminals like him crave. And our fascination with the likes of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer enables it. Meanwhile, aside from Lennon, the names of their victims are long forgotten. Shouldn’t at least some profits from the serial killer

cottage industry be used to support victims and their families?

Examining some of the questionable moral aspects of true crime as enjoyment that we have all bought into is one element of the highly entertaining novel *Kill Show* by Daniel Sweren-Becker. When teenager Sara Parcell suddenly vanishes on a fine spring morning in Maryland, her family is understandably desperate to know what has happened. What is less easily understood is how quickly the entire nation becomes obsessed with the case. But then, cynical as it may seem, Sara is a young, pretty, white girl—and in America, that places her in the ideal demographic to receive attention for disappearing.

Amidst the media feeding frenzy, an opportunity to cash in (as it turns out, for all concerned) materialises in the form of a true crime, real-time TV show titled *Searching for Sara*. This is the brainchild of ambitious producer

Casey Hawthorne, who manages to get her audacious idea green-lighted by the network. Meanwhile, the family’s desperation for answers leads them to agree, somewhat unwisely, to take part in a show where their emotions are put under the microscope, and the investigation is filmed as it is ongoing, ostensibly to improve the chances of finding Sara alive.

In the course of filming, new angles begin to emerge, casting suspicion on various characters. And there are plenty of suspects to choose from in this ensemble cast, so we inevitably start questioning who knows what about Sara’s disappearance. The TV show does in fact provide some answers as to Sara’s fate.

Just not the ones anyone expected.

To add a meta aspect to Sweren-Becker’s novel, a documentary is now underway to mark the 10th anniversary of the show that made television history, and had a ripple

effect on the lives of everyone involved—Sara’s family members, who were damaged for life; the producer and cameraman, whose careers were made; the weird neighbour, whose reputation was destroyed by lies; the detective, whose lapses in judgement got him taken off the case; and the residents of the town, whose taste of “fame” did not always bring out the best side of their personalities. Because that is the author’s point with *Kill Show*, that nobody is really innocent in these situations—not the media networks choosing to profit off people’s despair, not the “close friends” and family members who want their faces on camera and their wallets fattened in exchange for their so-called insights into the case; and certainly not the gawking misery tourists (aka travelling true crime aficionados) who want to participate in the story in any way they can.

The filming itself—like the very presence of an anthropologist studying a remote tribe—has an unforeseen effect on the outcome. And in the process, we also learn the meaning behind the ominous title of this book.

The writing style utilises the device of a documentary script, which may not appeal to everyone. But without the distracting descriptive elements that are part of any standard novel, the story moves much faster, making the book a gripping read. There is a killer twist in this novel (pun intended), and even reading it as a writer myself—and one who is always second-guessing what might happen next—I did not see that coming.

While the idea of illuminating a criminal case through a TV show/podcast/documentary is not a novel idea per se, the significance of this book lies in the fact that it holds up a mirror to our often unhealthy interest in true crime, as well as the insidious nature of media influences in our lives. If you are looking for compelling entertainment that will also make you think, this story is worth your time.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled Fragments of Riversong (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the Lifelines anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Blood, rage and love on the verge of 1971

Review of ‘Bengal Hound’ (Gaudy Boy LLC, 2023) by Rahad Abir

While the plot takes time to truly begin, the narrative itself is not the allure of Bengal Hound. This is a Bangla story told through the English language, and it offers a unique experience. It allows more than only Bangla-readers to experience life in Dhaka just before the war. Take a tour of Dhaka University through Shelley’s eyes. Visit Modhur Canteen and listen to his friends talk politics.

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

Reading Rahad Abir’s *Bengal Hound*, despite the novel being written in English, felt a lot like reading in Bangla. While no two languages can ever truly be compared, there is much to be said about seeing Bangla and Bangladesh through an English language lens.

The author is well-versed in this, of course. His work has appeared in multiple international magazines and journals including *The Los Angeles Times*; he has received the Charles Pick Fellowship at the University of East Anglia; has an MFA in Fiction from Boston University; and is a recipient of the Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction. His work has been translated into French and Hindi and he is working on a short story collection which is a finalist for the 2021 Miami Book Fair Emerging Writer Fellowship.

Bengal Hound begins in the late 1960’s Dhaka, East Pakistan, with Shelley, a Dhaka University student who receives a letter from his childhood sweetheart, Roxana. Her father is forcing her to marry, and she and Shelley must elope. Trouble is, the political climate in the country is on the verge of boiling over, a terrible harbinger of the looming war for independence that we know will break out soon. Shelley, a Hindu man, elopes with the young and Muslim Roxana, and the path of grief, destruction and even blood that this single act leaves behind is a terrifying reflection of the breaking point of the country itself.

Shelley’s disintegrating state of mind is a perfect representation of the rapid deterioration of peace in Pakistan, both East and West, as the streets of Dhaka University are flooded with blood and rage is on the mind of every character we encounter. From Maya’s struggle with heartbreak and detachment from reality, King Siraj’s innocent but vicious fervour, to the struggles of refugees fleeing to India, there is not a single character in *Bengal Hound* who does not correspond, in some way or another, to the desperation and fire consuming the country. There is madness and bloodthirst in every heart, and every page of the book is soaked through.

While the plot takes time to truly begin, the narrative itself is not the allure of *Bengal Hound*. This is a Bangla story told through the English language, and it offers a unique experience. It allows more than only Bangla-readers to experience life in Dhaka just before the war. Take a tour of Dhaka University through Shelley’s eyes. Visit Modhur Canteen and listen to his friends talk politics. Push open the creaking iron gate to Shelley’s decrepit little rented room and laugh because he’s proud he has no electricity or running water. Walk down Fuller Road and wonder at the majesty of “the Oxford of the East”. Wonder at the casual cruelty of life in the brothel on English Road. And then wander far from the bleeding, bursting city streets to a tiny, beautiful



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

flood-island in the middle of a singing river where love returns for a single, blissful night. Yet Dhaka, with all its brimming violence awaits, and we must accompany our protagonist back to reality. Revel in the glory of love, and then explore the depths of grief as an entire country falls apart at the seams around you.

Rahad Abir has done a tremendous job of showing us the multi-faceted experience of being a Dhaka University

student in pre-Liberation Bangladesh by penning a story which uses English but keeps a firm hold of the flavour and feel of Bangla. There are times when this misses the mark, and there are times when it is a perfect bullseye, but there is no denying the importance of such a work. The tale ends with no true conclusion because no true story ever really ends, but books must. We close the book with both Shelley and the country on the very precipice of

a bloodbath, and the last page, left chillingly blank, resounds with the music of war despite having no words at all.

A tragic but touching work of literature.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty of Independent University, Bangladesh where she teaches English and marvels at the beauty and complexity of language.