
THE BOROWITZ COLLECTION: CENTURIES OF TRUE CRIME

Over the last few years, the appetite for true crime stories has seemed insatiable. Podcasts and documentaries devoted to dissecting cases—the more chilling the better—are among the most “binge-worthy” programming being created.

However, since 1989 visitors to the Department of Special Collections and Archives (on the 12th floor of the Kent State University Library) have had ample opportunity to obsess over some of history’s most fascinating and disturbing criminal cases.

The Borowitz Collection’s books, artifacts and ephemera (things meant for short-term use such as pamphlets and postcards) document the history of crime from ancient times to the present day, mostly in the United States, England, France and Germany. Donated by Albert Borowitz and Helen Osterman Borowitz, the collection features materials related to some of the most notorious criminals and their crimes, including the Lindbergh baby kidnapping and murder, outlaws of the American West and Jack the Ripper.

“One of the highlights (of the collection) is a ‘penny dreadful’ publication called *The Whitechapel Murders or The Mysteries of the East End*, which was published in 1888 while the Ripper murders were still occurring,” says Cara Gilgenbach, head of Special Collections and Archives, acting university archivist and associate professor. “It’s described in the collection’s inaugural catalog as a ‘mixture of fact and fantasy.’ But I find it fascinating to see something that was printed and sold during the time of what would become one of the most infamous unsolved serial murder cases in history.”

Albert Borowitz and Helen Osterman Borowitz, of Cleveland, spent decades accumulating their collection. He had started it at age 12 when he asked his father, a business executive and book collector, to buy him an edition of the complete Sherlock Holmes stories. Albert Borowitz went on to Harvard University, where he earned a BA in classics, an MA in Chinese regional studies and a JD. Although he practiced corporate (not criminal) law as a partner in an international firm, in his personal time Borowitz studied true crime incidents and their influence on the arts, literature, culture and society.

By the time he retired, he and his wife, a Radcliffe-educated art historian with literary interests, had amassed a library of more than 12,000 primary and secondary sources on crime as well as works of literature based on true crime incidents. Albert Borowitz also has written a number of true crime essays, articles and books (both fiction and nonfiction), some with his wife (who died in 2012). He received the 1981 Cleveland Arts Prize for Literature.

In 1988, the Borowitzes were looking for a permanent home for their collection when Albert Borowitz met Dean



The Whitechapel Murders or the Mysteries of the East End (London. G. Purkess, 286 Strand. W.C., 1888). engraved title page inside double frame, 149 x 215 mm. The Jack the Ripper murders were still occurring when this publication, a mixture of fact and fantasy, appeared.

Keller at a dinner hosted by a mutual friend. At the time, Keller was associate director of Kent State University Libraries and founding curator of the Department of Special Collections. He invited Albert Borowitz to the Kent Campus, and the following year, the Borowitzes began donating their true crime and sheet music collections to the Kent State University Library.

Since then, the collections have continued to grow through acquisition and donation. Today, the Borowitz Collection is an international source for crime historians, film documentarians, museum curators, novelists, antiquarian book dealers and producers of some of those “binge-worthy” programs.

“I am fond of saying that even if you think you aren’t interested in true crime, the Borowitz Collection will make you a convert,” Gilgenbach wrote in the collection’s 25th anniversary exhibition catalog. “There’s truly something for everyone in this collection, and I know it will offer countless researchers material to discover and explore for generations to come.” ⚡

—Candace Goforth DeSantis, BS '94

See selections from the Borowitz Collection at www.kent.edu/magazine/borowitz-collection-centuries-true-crime.

Special Collections and Archives is creating a digital archive of some of the material from the Borowitz Collection. In-person research with the collection is available by appointment.

To schedule a visit, call 330-672-2270 or email specialcollections@kent.edu.