

WHAT HAPPENED TO PAULA

Katherine Dykstra

READING GROUP GUIDE

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN KATHERINE DYKSTRA
AND LACY CRAWFORD, AUTHOR OF *NOTES ON A
SILENCING: A MEMOIR*

Lacy Crawford: Often crimes that fail to find remedy from the criminal justice system develop into legends we can't put to rest. But in Paula's case, it's as though she had never existed at all. I keep thinking about the cold leads and dead ends you found in Cedar Rapids and wondering how Paula's story could have failed to make its way into local lore.

Katherine Dykstra: Not long after *What Happened to Paula's* publication, a woman from Cedar Rapids reached out to me to tell me how excited she was to discover it. She had been gripped by Paula's case since she learned of it when she was a teenager in the early 1980s. The primary reason for her interest was that her name *also* happened to be Paula Oberbroeckling. The thing that struck her was that she had lived her entire life in Cedar Rapids, a town of less than 130,000 people, and not once had anyone remarked on her name. Not once had anyone recognized it as familiar. By which I mean to say that aside from those who knew the Paula of my book—namely her friends and family—Paula Oberbroeckling had been forgotten by the time Susan, my mother-in-law, began to look into the case in the late 1990s.

I'm confident that a main reason Paula's death found no purchase in the community was because people quite literally didn't know about it. How could you? Her case had been ignored by the local media and then allowed by police to go cold. And I'm referring to the exposure *at the time*, so of course she'd be forgotten twenty years on.

Susan's interest was critical to the airing of Paula's story. She vividly remembered hearing it during her own coming of age, and she was baffled over its lack of attention. When Susan told me about Paula, I became incensed. To allow stories like Paula's to be lost to time is to risk, or even invite, the repetition of those same injustices. Injustices that seem uniquely leveled at women. If we as women don't remember each other, I'm not sure who will.

For the reader: *Is there a homicide that has made it into local lore in your community? Why do you think that is?*

LC: In some ways, it seems the community came to the same conclusions you have in your book, which is that Paula's life was lost due to certain unchangeable (if regrettable) conditions of women in our society. But precisely what those conditions are is very different for you than it is for the people who knew Paula. They, like you, consider issues of gender, race, and shame—but their mythmaking seems to assume some primary culpability that Paula had, even if that is never identified. How did you see race, shame, gender, and fear operating in the myths about Paula that you heard and received?

KD: Myth is an excellent word for what I saw present in the stories told about Paula. After hearing a number of interpretations of what might have happened on the night she died, I began to believe that a person's perception of what happened to Paula said more about who that person was and what they wanted (or needed) to be true than it did about Paula.

However, there were things that surprised me. One was the general perception that Robert was not a suspect. Because Cedar Rapids is such a small community and was mostly segregated when Paula was alive, I would have expected police and others to point to Robert as a culprit; blaming the Black man would have made for an easy scapegoat during such an era. But this suggestion never evolved into a narrative, despite the rather shaky ground on which his alibi was built. Instead, everyone seemed to agree how much Robert cared for Paula and what a stand-up guy he was.

At the same time, Paula's involvement with Robert *did* affect

the way she was perceived by her community, both when she was alive (in the way she was isolated) and after her death (in the way she was judged expendable). That said, I don't think Robert's race weighed any more heavily than the other factors that were levied against her—her potential pregnancy, that she had two men in her life in the months leading up to her homicide, and on and on.

I'll add that one undercurrent that ran beneath many of the comments I heard about Paula was a strong sense that having an abortion sets up a woman for punishment of some kind—in Paula's case, if she did in fact try to have an abortion, it was death. But I was also told stories of women who had abortions and then were never able to conceive again. There is a sense of divine punishment, which of course is ridiculous, but is illustrative of how ingrained the idea of a woman's culpability and responsibility over her own welfare is. Which of course was another way to blame her for whatever befell her.

For the reader: *Are there other myths that operate more generally within our criminal justice system, specifically when it has to do with violence against women, or within popular true crime narratives? What are they and how do they operate? Have they changed over the years?*

LC: There has been recent reporting on the astonishing backlog of untested rape kits, which are specially gathered collections of evidence taken at great intrusive expense of a newly victimized person, most frequently a woman, and which, we've learned, are either thrown away or left to mold on warehouse shelves. (Michelle Bowdler's *Is Rape a Crime?* [2020] offers an excellent overview of this problem.) I wonder if, in your investigations, you came to understand better the nature of police complacency—what forces, either neutral or malevolent, contribute to the failure to solve so many crimes against women?

KD: Honestly, I think it's both—neutral and malevolent. As a society we have been taught that women are unreliable. I think of the *ProPublica* piece “An Unbelievable Story of Rape” in

which police were able to convince a victim of a violent assault to retract her accusation and then they followed up by *charging her* for making a false claim, all the while she HAD been raped AND her attacker was out raping other women.

Further, most people, investigating police officers among them, are predisposed to believing men *over* women. This is just one way that men have been privileged. They are forever being given the benefit of the doubt. Told by police, for example, to take a walk during domestic disputes, rather than taken to task for their violence. I also think that police aren't motivated to work on these types of crimes because they are notoriously difficult to prosecute. Any event becomes a "he said, she said." And as we've just established, usually the *he* is believed.

But there are procedural challenges as well. One of the big things that came up in the *ProPublica* story was the failure of adjacent precincts to share information. Had they been in better communication they might have put together that there were commonalities between multiple assaults long before they eventually did, saving a number of women from this trauma. So that failure to communicate, I would say, is neutral. And that first failure, of not believing women, while maybe not malevolent, is certainly misogynistic.

For the reader: *Do you agree with the author that what underlies police complacency is a more general failure to believe women? What are some recent examples that either support or complicate that theory?*

LC: Just after the publication of *What Happened to Paula*, the nation's media were gripped by the disappearance and, later, confirmed murder of another beautiful young white woman, Gabby Petito. The fascination with her disappearance seemed to emerge largely from the fact that her public persona—she was highly photogenic, and she had posted smiling pictures from her trip across the country with her fiancé—seemed to mark her as special, as someone murder "shouldn't" happen to. Meanwhile, advocates across society pointed out that women of color and women who are otherwise marginalized, particularly transgender or transsexual women, disappear routinely, and the media doesn't bother to mention their names. This is particularly the

case for Indigenous women. I wonder if you see Paula as having occupied some of those marginalized categories in the 1970s that today have shifted; in other words, I suspect the problem is the same (or worse), but the image of femininity the American public is given to value has shifted. Or perhaps it hasn't?

KD: It's interesting because of course Paula was blonde and beautiful and white, all attributes that seem to elevate the profiles of victims today, and yet no one paid attention to her case. For a long time, I assumed that this oversight was a reflection of the era—pre-twenty-four-hour news cycle, when media consumption wasn't as ravenous as it is today. But I was wrong, because there were murders of other white women that *did* make national news.

The differences between Paula and those women were class and reputation. Paula came from a working-class family. Her father sold insurance and later shoes at the mall. Her mother stayed at home with their five children. And Paula's parents were divorced. I don't think we can underestimate how much judgment was thrown at couples who divorced, and, by extension, at their children. Nor can we underestimate the importance of class in a smallish city. Had Paula been the daughter of a lawyer or a business owner, had her family belonged to the country club, I think her homicide would have been treated very differently. Take this to its logical extreme and it means that a woman's value is determined by her father's worth as perceived by his community, and often his net worth point blank. I can't think of anything more archaic.

Unfortunately, I don't think these biases have shifted as much as we might assume. Beautiful white women who also happen to be sex workers are often ignored in the same ways as other marginalized women (Black, brown, Indigenous, trans). Same with white women who are pregnant. White women who are single mothers. White women who are poor. And in that way, I don't think our image of valuable femininity has changed.

But as you point out, the reaction to Gabby Petito's murder and the near-immediate backlash about our failures to care for other marginalized women is a giant step in the right direction. That we're even talking about this inequity is so important. It's

not that there should be less coverage of violence against women like Gabby; instead, there should be more coverage of everyone else. The problem then becomes, frankly, about airtime and print space. As someone who has paid close attention to violent crime against women for the last seven years, there is so shockingly much of it that to pay attention to all of it would take up all of our time. I guess my argument then is that it should.

***For the reader:** Has the twenty-four-hour news cycle helped or hurt the effort to get justice for these victims (or certain victims)? How does the popular fascination with true crime help or hurt? Is it healthy?*

LC: You've written and spoken in interviews about how, when you first wrote the known facts of Paula's case, people were "not interested" (I would have been!), because it is unsolved—there is no answer, and therefore no ending. I'm fascinated and horrified in equal measure by the fantasy that catching the bad guy delivers satisfaction because, of course, the woman remains dead. Perhaps he won't do it to anyone else, but we have not remedied our problem, which is that men commit violence against women at alarmingly high rates. We are writers, not detectives. Using the tools we have, I wonder how we can think about this problem as one of narrative. What does it mean that "catching the bad guy" gives us an ending? What fantasy of storytelling is getting in the way of telling a truer story here, which has not yet been brought to its end?

KD: Yes, so many people couldn't understand why they should care about a fifty-year-old unsolved homicide. For them, if it had no ending in the form of a culprit, it held no relevance. This perspective assumes that the story of a crime is supposed to be entertaining, that what it offers is the satisfaction of seeing the last puzzle piece slot into place and the killer held accountable. But, as you say, Paula is still dead.

I think crime narratives should be held to higher standards. Ultimately a crime is a rip in the fabric of society; it's a violation of the civil code of conduct that we've all agreed is essential to living side by side. But that tear can't be repaired without examining what allowed for it in the first place. And the fact of

the matter is, what allows for a crime is not only some unhinged individual, but also the societal forces that created that individual, and all the ways our systems failed to recognize and respond to him before he became violent, not to mention all the ways we fail to support women, to provide safety nets and social structures to protect them. What makes this complicated is that this might mean that we as a society have to hold ourselves accountable at some level, which can be an awful idea to entertain. But I think it's so important to move past that resistance, because until we do, until we see these acts of violence as related, as systemic, rather than aberrant, they are going to continue, and the safety of women remains at risk.

***For the reader:** What type of true crime narratives are most intriguing to you? Are they often unsolved or solved cases? What else about them draws you in? Do you think enough true crime media examine larger societal issues?*

LC: You've said that you reoriented yourself to the written project by including what you found interesting, even bringing in experiences from your own life as your social womanhood took shape. I wonder how this might have kindled for other readers their ability to see a way into this story—and what that might reveal about how we live in a protective denial, how fretting about a missing girl can be a way of not seeing what is being taken all the time.

KD: I had early readers remark that if they better understood what drew me to Paula's case, they might be more interested. These readers needed a cypher through which to understand the reasons the death of a girl in 1970 is relevant to a woman alive today. Of course, when I looked at Paula's case, all I could see was relevance. I saw so many parallels between her experiences and those of the women in her family, and my own experiences and those of the women in my family and of women I knew. This in spite of our demographic differences, which hinted at some commonality of the experience of womanhood.

This sense only solidified as I did my reporting; there was hardly a person I spoke with, of any gender, who didn't latch

onto one of the themes from Paula's story and tell me that they themselves, or a woman in their family, had experienced something similar. This continued long after I finished the book. Since it was published, so many of the letters and emails I receive from readers are to tell me how they recognized elements of their own stories in Paula's. Elements they maybe had never considered critically, assuming they were inherent to life as a woman rather than infractions to question or even be angry about. I think in that way, because this book isn't focused on a culprit, but many culprits, it has allowed some people to see their experiences anew and then to position those experiences within the greater framework of injustices against women.

For the reader: Which element of Paula's story did you connect with the most? Did you feel a kinship with her?

LC: Can you describe some of these elements of female readers' lives that have emerged in conversation following the book's publication? What are the dangers women share with you?

KD: The stories I hear the most are of unwed pregnancy—women who were sent away in the 1950s and '60s to have babies in secret, or women who had had illegal and dangerous abortions. Interestingly, I think these topics felt safe for raising because mostly they happened in the past. We don't, right now, tend to send unwed girls away to homes because single motherhood is no longer the taboo it once was and because women have the option of abortion. Legal abortion also means women don't have to go for *illegal* abortions—though this right hangs in the balance. What *hasn't* come up are stories of domestic abuse. I think this is perhaps because women still feel the need to keep this secret in order to protect their physical and/or economic well-being.

For the reader: How has the judgment or stigma around sex before wedlock, abortion, or pregnancy changed since the time your parents faced these issues? Has it changed much at all? Did they confront any judgment around these issues? Have you?

LC: My last question is personal. You have a daughter. I wonder how you will talk with her about this book? That's a premature question, and maybe unfair—parenting unfolds in the immediate, and is always highly specific and relational. But do you have a sense of things you might want to offer to her, beginning at a young age, to help her learn earlier and better some of the things you've learned?

KD: Before I published this book, I hadn't thought of it as one for teenage girls. I never even considered it. But many women reached out and said that, having read it, they were now going to pass it on to their teenage daughters. They wanted them to be aware of these lessons of the past. And I realized, of course! Teenage girls are in fact this book's most important readers. They need to understand the ways in which we've progressed in order to carry this mantle forward as well as to not unwittingly go backwards, to not revisit more difficult, dangerous times. So will I share it with my daughter? Absolutely. I'll also share it with my son.

***For the reader:** What is your hope for how the next generation will confront violence against women? Do you think things will change within the next fifty years, and if so, how?*