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As a child my parents read to me a lot. My mother would plump for the great fairytales, stories of princes and princesses, of quests and wars and love. My father, on the other hand, chose true crime. I don't remember how this started or why he felt that a seven-year-old would benefit from knowing how Dr Crippen murdered his poor wife, but I was entranced.

He carefully chose cases from many years ago, which allowed me to be intrigued without feeling as though I was in any personal danger. We read about the notorious Dr Palmer, the Prince of Poisoners, who killed several members of his family and friends for money. We delved into the "brides in the bath" murders, where George Joseph Smith bigamously married seven women and killed three of them — all in bathtubs. And I was captivated by the crimes of Burke and Hare, who escalated from grave robbing to murder in order to keep the doctors of Edinburgh stocked up with cadavers.

I was fascinated not so much by the appalling acts of violence but by the psyche of the perpetrators. As a child used to feeling protected and safe, it was oddly thrilling to glimpse darker parts of society. How could these men (and they were nearly all men) think up and have the gall to carry out such schemes? And what made them think they could get away with it?

With the money I got for my ninth birthday I bought myself a subscription to a weekly true crime magazine. There were a few cases from times gone by, but most of the features focused on more modern crimes. They nearly all involved men hurting women in terrifying ways. The acts were seemingly random, often unplanned, and sadistic to an extreme. The coverage didn't seem fussed by motive or clever plotting, and instead delighted in the most depraved elements. This was too much for me so I took refuge in fiction instead, immersing myself in the novels of Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle and Dorothy L Sayers.

My dad is not surprised that I ended up writing a book about bloodshed. *How to Kill Your Family* is my attempt to marry the golden age of English murder with my interest in women who do terrible things. I deliberately steered clear of random, upsetting violence. In my protagonist, Grace, I created a character free to act on the dark thoughts most of us will have at some point in our lives — the ones we quickly push away. She is unencumbered by remorse, unbothered by sentimentality, able to behave in a way that goes against all traditional ideals of womanhood.

Through her I got to explore my worst instincts and throw off the low-lying fear I have always lived with. Grace is a terrible person, but one who has also had terrible things done to her. Writing about a woman who takes her own calculated form of revenge has been a small attempt to counteract the countless stories I have consumed over the years that minimise women's suffering and suppress their frustration and anger.

*How to Kill Your Family* is about grotesque wealth, dreadful people and one increasingly vengeful woman on a murderous mission. Despite everything I've just written, I hope it makes you laugh more than anything else.

Bella Mackie