

# Why are audiences obsessed with stories about liars, grifters and cheats?

October 5 2022

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True crime documentaries and dramatized versions of stories ripped from the headlines, like Netflix's *Inventing Anna*, have increasingly started to focus on stories about liars, grifters and cons. Northeastern experts say the trend is born out of a post-postmodern moment. Credit: Netflix

Lately it seems like people can't get enough of a good lie. From true

crime documentaries about the fraudulent Fyre Festival or dating app con man the Tinder Swindler to "Inventing Anna," Shondaland's dramatization of grifter Anna Sorokin, these stories of liars, grifters and cheats are nearly ubiquitous.

But stories about deception have been around since people first started telling tales around the campfire, so why have these films and TV shows become so popular recently?

To some extent these stories are an extension of the [true crime wave](#), says Laurel Ahnert, an assistant teaching professor of media and screen studies at Northeastern. What is successful will continue to be successful, as producers capitalize on what people are consuming. But that doesn't exactly explain why people are so fond of fraudulent fiction in the first place.

Ahnert says these stories are likely hitting a nerve with audiences because they speak to a "post-postmodern" concern: What is the truth in a world filled with lies?

"Lies can be just as impactful as the truth, and I think it's registering a broader common anxiety about what happens after postmodernism," Ahnert says. "It's still an attachment to truth and a strong desire for truth, and I think what these shows and films register is a desire for 'There must be truth in there somewhere. Expose the liar and get to the truth, to some degree.'"

At a time when [many Republican politicians](#) still believe former President Donald Trump's "[Big Lie](#)" and disinformation spreads like wildfire [online](#), there's a perverse appeal in stories that put the liar front and center. Similar to the broader true crime genre, Ahnert says, there is a "weird doubleness" to what these films and TV shows give viewers, especially women, who make up the [majority of true crime consumers](#).

"We're in a world where everything is mediated and people want their fears affirmed and acknowledged back to them: that the world is much less trustworthy than it seems to be or that someone could be catfishing them," Ahnert says. "It's both acknowledging but amplifying those anxieties."

William Sharp, an associate teaching professor of psychology at Northeastern, argues that these stories might also be a form of wish fulfillment for viewers, some of which is by design. Netflix's "Inventing Anna" makes its central character, a Russian-born grifter who tricks New York City's elite into thinking she is a rich German heiress, into a kind of Robin Hood figure. Despite Anna's nationality, it's a very American [story](#) about a self-made striver and underdog that is, as with many of these stories, easy to buy into, Sharp says.

"Television ... or movies help us get a little bit of a release," Sharp says. "We identify with the characters on the screen, so when characters on the screen get away with stuff, it's almost like we did."

By watching characters lie, cheat and steal, Sharp says we as the viewer can distance ourselves from the behavior while also acknowledging that—maybe, just maybe—we'd like to do it too. It's a feat of psychological gymnastics.

"What is it that we're disavowing of our own nature by labeling and calling the problem out over there?" Sharp says. "... Really what [we] want to say is, 'I wish I was that person,' but it comes out as, 'I'm not that person. That's not me.' That's a psychological flip."

But the appeal of these stories might go even deeper than that. It turns out lying might be in our genes, says Don Fallis, a professor of philosophy and computer science.

Fallis points to the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis, a still-debated concept in primatology, that posits the reason humans evolved the way they did was through [social engagement](#) and primitive forms of Machiavellian scheming. Early humans developed into [social groups](#), which required more sophisticated social cognition to navigate. Those who worked their way up the social ladder had a higher chance of reproductive success, which is where lying comes into play.

"In that sort of situation, you start to develop motivations to keep other members of your group in the dark about what you have done or haven't done," Fallis says. "Then, as a result, you develop means to detect when other people in the group are not being what they appear to be. The Machiavellian Hypothesis is essentially that this situation fosters this arms race of getting better at deception and getting better at detecting deception."

The hypothesis is far from a "settled story," Fallis admits. But whether we're watching the complex deceptive duels in Game of Thrones or the real-world cons pulled by the Tinder Swindler, Fallis says it's hard to deny how naturally appealing these stories are for audiences.

"It's not just that we're liars and deceivers so we're interested in reading fiction about liars and deceivers," Fallis says. "It's that lying and deception may be core to why we're humans in the first place, and it's certainly an important part of what makes us adult human beings."

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: Why are audiences obsessed with stories about liars, grifters and cheats? (2022, October 5) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-audiences-obsessed-stories-liars-grifters.html>

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