

On the West Memphis Three  
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After a long lifetime of paying little attention to true crime, suddenly I'm caught up with it. The latest, the West Memphis Three case. The West Memphis Three, as they came to be called are three men--Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin, and Jessie Misskelley, Jr--who as teenagers were convicted of the gruesome murder of three eight-year-old boys in West Memphis, Arkansas in 1993. A 1996 HMO documentary, "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills," brought national attention to the case and raised doubts about the guilt of the three, portraying their conviction as akin to the Salem witch trials (the prosecution claim was that the killings were part of a satanic ritual).

The case has stayed in the public consciousness in the decades since the documentary. Advocates for the three have shown up from all over (one of whom married Echols). WM3 web sites and discussion boards have sprung up. Celebrities have come front and center, among them, actor Johnny Depp. High-powered outside attorneys and consultants have contributed their expertise. There have been fund-raising campaigns and public relations efforts and large-scale protests ("Free the Memphis Three"). Legal maneuverings have been highly publicized. There's been a feature film with Reese Witherspoon ("Devil's Knot"), and numerous documentaries, books and articles. Truly remarkable.

There was a resolution in the case in 2011. I won't tell you how it came out, I don't want to ruin your engagement with it, but conjecture about who actually killed those boys persists to this day, including, after my week just finished looking into the case, in my mind.

If you want to spend time with the West Memphis Three case, I suggest you start with the 1996 documentary that kicked things off, it's widely available for streaming, and take it from there for as long as it holds your interest and seems worth your time. Check out the

list of films and books on Amazon and google the case. Make sure you see the 2012 documentary, "West of Memphis." And be sure to read this at some point:

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/memphis3/wm3-pam-hobbs-and-john-mark-byers-court-filing.pdf> Don't go to this link now though, do it up the line, after you've become familiar with the case.

The West Memphis Three investigations took me into a number of thought-provoking areas, including fundamentalist Christianity, the reality of white underclass life, satanic cults and rituals, the phenomenon of hidden-away homosexuality, and the way the media can sell their favorite conceptions, including the idea that they are totally valid when in fact they far from it.

What I find particularly fascinating about this case is that after being immersed in it for the last week, I'm still not sure in my own mind who murdered those boys. I've got it down to two possibilities: first choice, that the West Memphis three, despite all the hoopla, did in fact do it; or that Terry Hobbs, the stepfather of one of the boys, along with three others, did it.

What especially hit me looking into this is how it is an illustration of the way people uncritically buy anything that makes them feel in the know and affirmed, included, and safe. And I mean anything--in the '30s in Germany, it was National Socialism. Here, it's the notions propagated by today's elites about scary fundamentalist Christians, villainous cops, menacing rural whites, and the injustice done to innocents in America that's endemic and demanding of eradication job one. Getting on board with the seemingly unimpeachable perceptions and imperatives of our betters is a way to feel good about ourselves for being enlightened and righteous, get the rewards from on the side of the good guys, social approval and so on, and nestled snugly and securely in the group. And we don't have to do any heavy lifting to get all of that. All we have to do is believe what we are told. Don't think, believe.

I write anonymous reviews for books and movies at Amazon and used “Don’t Think, Believe” as the title of one for “West of Memphis” documentary.

This documentary reiterates familiar media narratives: scary-Christians’ persecution of innocents; the redneck committed the foul deed. You can watch this film and take in a simple story effectively told and feel good being in the know along with cool people like Eddie Vedder, Natalie Maines, and Johnny Depp and experience no press from within you to think about anything. Like Echols’ flunking a polygraph, and speculating to the police that someone urinated in the boys’ mouths and it turned out that urine was found in their stomachs. Like why Terry Hobbs did it. There’s sworn testimony pointing to a homosexual angle with him. (Don’t go there.) The messages of this film are guaranteed to play well, which they did, just not with me.

I’ll leave this thought here to start a book by one of the West Memphis Three, the intriguing Damien Echols (born Michael Hutchison) on his life in prison, *Life After Death*. This case has me hooked, and I feel OK about it, I’m getting something positive from it. I hope you do too.