

## TV Review: Fate of West Memphis Three in 'Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on January 10, 2012 - 11:01am

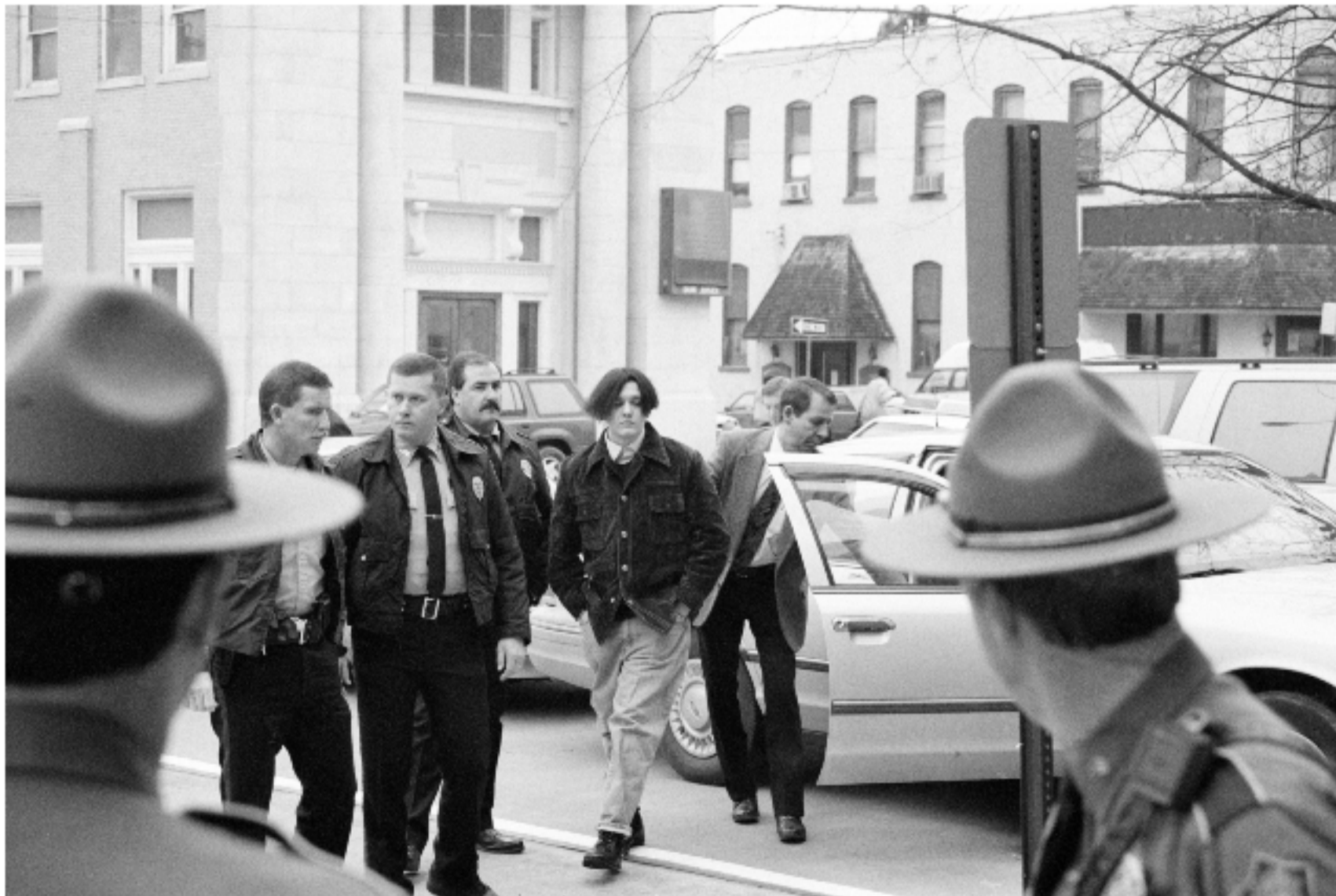
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CHICAGO – If Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky hadn't been in West Memphis, Arkansas to track the case of the young men who would become known as the "West Memphis Three," one of them would almost certainly be dead and the other two would still be in jail. The powerful 1996 HBO doc "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" put the controversial case in a spotlight that burned brightly until the now-not-so-young men were finally released at the end of 2010. No one could have predicted that there would be enough twists and turns to this case that it would take over fifteen years, involve hundreds of people, and support three long feature documentaries, the last of which debuts Thursday, January 12th, 2012 on HBO and has been shortlisted for the Academy Award (and is predicted by most pundits to be a nominee). See one of the best documentaries of 2011 this week on HBO in "Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory."



Television Rating: **5.0/5.0**

In 1993, three young boys — Christopher Byers, Michael Moore, and Stevie Branch — were found brutally murdered in a wooded area near a truck stop in West Memphis. They had been hogtied and reportedly mutilated (although one of the many remarkable revelations in the new film is that the widely-reported knife cuts on the boy's bodies were probably caused by wild animals and not the killer(s)). A witch hunt began and reports of satanic rituals in the woods spread through this relatively-peaceful southern town. Eyes turned to three young men — Jessie Misskelley, Damien Echols, and Jason Baldwin — who listened to Metallica and wore black every day to school. With absolutely no physical evidence and nothing more than the confession of the mentally-challenged Misskelley, who had been interrogated for hours when he finally told the investigators what he thought they wanted to hear, the three men were shockingly convicted.



Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory

Photo credit: HBO

Berlinger and Sinofsky had no idea what they were uncovering when HBO sent them down there to document the case in 1994. In fact, the assumption nationwide was that the boys were guilty. These were just two guys going down to do a simple doc about the death of three children and the rise of Satanism in the south. Of course, the gentlemen found something very different and a series of award-winning documentaries were produced.

The initial conviction was stomach-churning enough given the lack of evidence but years of appeals and refusals by the police or prosecutors to answer key questions about the investigation and case turned the West Memphis Three into international icons of the deeply-flawed justice system. How could something like this happen? And how could it not be corrected for so long?



Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory  
Photo credit: HBO

The second HBO documentary, 2000's "Paradise Lost 2: Revelations" didn't just document the fact that the boys were still in jail at the whim of a ridiculous appeals process but showed the deep flaws in the evidence and even suggested that one of the boy's stepfathers may have been a more likely suspect (although revelations about him in the new film are stunning and indicate that rushes to judgment of anyone in cases like these can only lead to tragedy). A movement built up around the boys, including high-profile support from people like Johnny Depp, Eddie Vedder, and Natalie Maines of The Dixie Chicks (who becomes a major part of the new film when one of the boy's fathers sues her for defamation, opening up his version of events to further scrutiny and casting more light on the innocence of the West Memphis Three).

It's been eleven years since that second film and some might wonder if there's enough material for another documentary. There's more than enough. In fact, given the stunning "ending" (purposefully in quotes since it's never clear that this story is quite over) of "Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory," it's arguably the most dramatically effective of the three documentaries (although the cultural importance of the first film and the way it has literally changed lives will forever mark it as one of the most crucial docs of all time). Berlinger & Sinofsky have become better filmmakers, perfectly offering just enough "recap" for those who haven't seen the first two films before diving deep into the revelations of the last decade, which include new DNA evidence, information about jury tampering that will blow your mind, and even a shocking new suspect. And then there's the final act, in which the young men are finally released but in a way that Hollywood couldn't have even scripted.

The three "Paradise Lost" films are a monumental achievement in so many ways. They not only changed the lives of these three clearly-innocent young men but should stand as the model for all true crime films. Yes, the subject matter here is fascinating but it's not a story that could have told itself. Berlinger & Sinofsky have expertly crafted their films, assembling interviews, archival footage, legal documents, etc. into riveting filmmaking. Don't miss it.

*"Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory" debuts on HBO on January 12th, 2012 at 8pm CST.*



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