

“WEST OF MEMPHIS” (TIFF Movie Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

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Rarely do we chart true crime in the pages, virtual or otherwise, of FANGORIA, but in the case of Amy Berg’s new documentary (a world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival) on an ongoing, painful and often detailed subject, it makes perfect sense. 18 years ago, in West Memphis, Arkansas, three little boys were found submerged in a ravine, bound, dead, their genitals apparently skinned, their bodies cut, torn, broken. In the small Bible belt community, human agony at the unspeakable crime was matched only by murmurs of Satanic worship spreading like wildfire.

Enter Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin, teenage pals who happened to adore black clothes, horror movies, weird fiction and heavy metal—intentional outsiders and, by all accounts, sweet, thoughtful and loving young men. After a forced confession from a third young man, the slow Jessie Misskelley Jr., fingers pointed and suspicion started to swirl around Echols and Baldwin. They were arrested, and in the following months were tried and convicted of first-degree murder, Baldwin and Misskelley getting life and the articulate Echols sentenced to death.



After PARADISE LOST, an astonishing HBO movie by documentarians Joe Berlinger (who would, oddly, would go on to direct the undervalued killer-teen film BLAIR WITCH 2) and Bruce Sinofsky, was unveiled in 1996, audiences both average and celebrity picked their collective jaws up off the floor after witnessing one of the most astonishing documented miscarriages of justice ever observed. These three boys were clearly railroaded to their fates, innocent and in a state of shock themselves over what initially seemed like a glitch—a false arrest that would eventually dissolve as quickly as it came to be. It did not, and over the next 18 years (and two

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even more upsetting sequels by Berlinger and Sinofsky), DNA evidence proved them innocent—and, more alarmingly, implicated a man who as of this writing still walks free, despite glaring arrows indicating otherwise.

As the years progressed and the trio rotted in prison, they became known as The West Memphis Three, a cause championed by the likes of Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder, The Dixie Chicks’ Natalie Maines and actor Johnny Depp. Finally, employing a bizarre legal loophole, and due to the efforts of all involved, including Echols’ crusading wife Lori Davis and curiously, and most importantly, filmmaker Peter Jackson, the now grown men were released, free men after losing almost two decades to nightmarish skullduggery and incompetence.

While the preceding chronicle barely touches on the depths of this serpentine case, and most of the intricacies have been well-documented in the PARADISE LOST trilogy as well as numerous news reports, Berg’s film admirably and comprehensively condenses the story, and goes much further into explicit angles that the more meditative Berlinger/Sinofsky pictures did not. Jackson and Fran Walsh co-produced the picture (with Davis and Echols), and thus their crucial involvement in the case is considerably detailed (Jackson actually commissioned private investigations that uncovered essential evidence and debunked much myth), and dramatic visuals are employed to illustrate just how the physical damage was inflicted on the young victims. Satanic rituals and serrated knives be damned; it’s highly likely that snapping turtles and other water life feasted on the corpses, and in a disturbing sequence, Berg documents a turtle-on-pig-carcass feeding frenzy that essentially proves it.

Though not a horror film, WEST OF MEMPHIS is infinitely more horrifying than any fiction. What these three young men endured is unthinkable, and to see the handsome, highly intelligent, literate and articulate Echols behind bars, never seeing the sun for 18 years and enduring abuse from bored prison guards, is as upsetting as the miasma of corruption circling him. Even eerier is to watch the smug showboating of the dead-eyed individual who likely committed the crimes. For now, that man walks free. Hopefully, the legacy of the West Memphis Three does not simply end with their own freedom; and if nothing else, this film hammers home the point that the real tragedy of the case is not exclusively the fate of Echols, Baldwin and Misskelley. Rather, it is the souls of the three children whose fates were relegated to an afterthought, and the fact that their actual murderer has yet to be brought to justice.

During TIFF, we learned that Echols—who attended the festival along with Depp and Maines—is a great fan of FANGORIA. In prison, his wife/savior Lori would bring him a diverse array of books to read, on subjects ranging from Buddhism, philosophy and history to Stephen King thrillers. In that mix were copies of our magazine, which served as a companion to the

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falsely accused young man during an ordeal that devoured half his life. And that's the most relevant reason why we are discussing WEST OF MEMPHIS here: Echols' fate could have, under the right/wrong circumstances, befallen any one of us, we fans of the macabre and bizarre who march slightly out of step with the mainstream, enough that many unimaginative minds fear us.

WEST OF MEMPHIS tries to comprehensively condense the many dark narratives weaving in and out of this case, and succeeds. And at its heart is a story of survival and optimism in the face of hopelessness.

