

Featured in The Nerd League
by Katie Knecht

[no spoilers]

I've been prone lately to giving sidelong glances to strangers, keeping one earbud out at all times, and looking over my shoulder as I walk down the street in broad daylight. Nothing has happened to me personally to prompt this paranoia, except that my interest in true crime has gone from "quite interested" to "OBSESSED".

I have always enjoyed true crime shows. Even as a kid, I was into the *Dateline* and *20/20* specials of seemingly-perfect husbands who killed their families (not sure why my parents thought that was okay). This followed me into college, when my roommate and I binged episodes of *Snapped* and *Cops*, and continued to the age of true crime documentaries like HBO's *The Jinx*, Netflix's *Making A Murderer*, and the recently-released *Amanda Knox* docu also on Netflix.

You'll be happy to know there's another medium through which to take in these real-life dramas and traumas:podcasts. Thanks to them I've become fully immersed in the world of true crime during any moment my mind isn't otherwise occupied—while I'm in the shower, while I'm fixing my hair in the mornings, and while I'm on the train.

I've listened to some incredible pieces of journalism, and I've also heard some crap attempts at copying the successful podcasts out there. Luckily for you, I've sorted out the outstanding from the rest so you know what to listen to when the true crime obsession comes knocking (Wait, someone knocked? Who is it? Is the door locked?!).

5. "[Someone Knows Something](#)" – CBC Radio, 11 episodes

What it is

Hosted by award-winning Canadian filmmaker David Ridgen, the series looks at the disappearance of Adrien McNoughton, a five-year-old boy who vanished in 1972 on what seemed to be a very normal day. Ridgen grew up in Arnprior, Ontario where the disappearance took place, so his hosting is more than simple narration—he is connected to these people and this place. The McNoughton family tells David everything they know, bringing up painful memories. David explores leads not followed up on at the time, including one from a psychic. An artist creates a rendition of what Adrien might look like were he still alive. rained search dogs even try their shot at finding Adrien.

Who it's for

All you docu-series lovers out there.

Its best attribute

David Ridgen is a gifted filmmaker, and he carries the ambient sounds and conversations you would get onscreen into the podcast. While this slows down the pace of the show, most podcasts are not willing to stretch moments out like “Someone Knows Something” is, which makes it stand out.

4. “[Undisclosed: The State v. Joey Watkins](#)” – Self produced, 12 episodes + 12 addenda so far

What it is

A procedural podcast by lawyer and Adnan Syed-advocate Rabia Chaudry, Sherlock-style lawyer Susan Simpson, and lawyer and professor Colin Miller, the show found its groove in season two: “The State v. Joey Watkins”. Watkins’ was convicted of murdering his ex girlfriend’s new boyfriend in 2001 and is still in prison, but there are many uncertainties about the crime itself and how the investigation was handled.

The victim was killed while driving down the highway in a small town in Georgia. Could Joey have pulled off such a feat? Every episode, the trio meticulously presents the facts of the crime, investigation, and court proceedings. They also discuss relevant case law and eventually give your brain a break with an Addenda hour between each episode. This is where the team and special guests further discuss the last episode’s findings and answer listener questions.

Who it’s for

All my “Law & Order” and “Criminal Minds” peeps.

Its best attribute

The team leaves no stone unturned. That means getting into the nittiest of grittiest details—comparing cell phone records with alibis down to the minute, scouring old police notes, examining crime scene photographs over and over, and more—all in a digestible fashion.

3. “[Accused](#)” – Cincinnati Enquirer, 8 episodes so far

What it is

Two award-winning journalists, Amber Hunt and Amanda Rossman, thought Elizabeth Andes’ 1978 murder case was strange. Elizabeth’s then-boyfriend was arrested for the murder, but was found innocent by criminal and civil courts—and no one kept looking for Elizabeth’s murderer. The police were convinced that they had found their guy, but the justice system had failed them. What about justice for Elizabeth? Hunt and Rossman delve deep into this case’s past (with maybe a few too many disclaimers), interviewing Elizabeth’s friends and acquaintances, examining potential suspects, and looking critically at the police investigation.

Who it’s for

Anyone interested in the personalities involved in crimes and investigations, possible motives behind murder, and the reality of our investigative system.

Its best attribute

Hunt states upfront that the goal of the podcast is to find out who murdered Elizabeth Andes, so you know what you're aiming for throughout each episode. Whether they reach a conclusion or not is TBD.

2. "[In the Dark](#)" – APM Reports, 6 episodes so far

What it is

This critical look into the 1989 kidnapping of Jacob Wetterling in rural Minnesota has a bold goal: to present to listeners with how police botched the search for Jacob, as well as the investigation that followed. The show, expertly hosted by Madeleine Baran, also examines how Jacob's case led to national anxiety around kids and strangers and eventually the sex-offender registries still in use today. Jacob's kidnapper and murderer came forward just as the podcast was about to launch, nearly 27 years later. While it's important that Jacob's killer has been arrested, this podcast aims to reveal more about an investigation gone wrong and its consequences.

Who it's for

If you've ever second guessed our policing system and its investigative habits, this is a goldmine for you.

Its best attribute

This is some of the best storytelling I have ever heard. It's clean, organized, compelling, and beautifully produced.

1. "[Serial, Season One](#)" – This American Life, 12 episodes

What it is

Centered on the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee and the eventual arrest and conviction of her then-boyfriend Adnan Syed, host Sarah Koenig investigates this case with passion and vulnerability. Koenig's podcast is fact-based, though she is upfront about her biases and opinions when she asserts them. This gives her an endearing, almost-friendly quality. It's like chatting on the phone to your friend (if you and your friend regularly investigate 15-year-old murder cases). The presentation of Syed's alibi, his relationship with Hae, the development of other players in the case, possible suspects, and Koenig's eventual conclusion is done through beautiful, layered investigation and interviews.

Who it's for

Pretty much anyone, TBH.

Its best attribute

This might seem obvious or like an easy out for my number one spot, but it's true. It was the first podcast of its kind and arguably revolutionized radio as we know it. Sarah Koenig's journalistic yet personal approach is so darn likable. That and Adnan is a fascinating study in the effects of our criminal justice system. There's a bit of magic to this show that I'll never find anywhere else.

Many of the cases looked at in these true crime podcasts are pretty old, so I get it if you're suspicious on why they might matter today or even be interesting after so long. After spending many hours (I'm afraid to total them) learning the ins and outs of these cases, their victims, their investigators, and their trials, I've come away with a key theme whether the podcasts intended me to or not: our policing and criminal justice systems are flawed, and the better we understand that, the more equipped we are to arm ourselves with opinions and truths in the world.

All while looking over our shoulders, of course.