

West of Memphis

The end of 2012 came up with two major innocents-wronged documentaries in as many months. “The Central Park Five,” made by Ken Burns and family, exhaustively re-told the dispiriting tale of four black teens and one Hispanic kid in New York convicted of mugging the “Central Park jogger” in 1989 though the only evidence against them was police-forced flimsy confessions. All did their time. Similarly, a gory child-murder case in eastern Arkansas in June 1993 (first chronicled in an HBO series entitled “Paradise Lost”) involved three more teens accused and convicted of a crime they probably did not do. That story is told in “West of Memphis,” a new documentary by director Amy Berg, re-capitulating the whole case and making of it compelling true drama.

The case involved the murder of three 8-year-old boys, killed, apparently tortured, and left buried in roadside water by a trio of twisted Goths or “Satan-worshipers,” as they was seen by an outraged community asking for blood. These high school “cultists” were apparently led by Damien Echols, along with his confreres, Jason Baldwin and Jesse Misskelley. The much-publicized trial of 1999 ended with Echols getting the death penalty and the two others a life sentence.

Starting slowly and developing her case methodically, Berg undercuts a crucial Misskelley confession that appears to have been coerced; she underlines the community’s loathing for the strange (if relatively articulate) Echols; and she tracks down experts who suspect that the children could not have been mutilated by human hands but rather were victims of voracious turtles. Berg also carefully assesses other, more likely, suspects, like Terry Hobbs, a raw drifter who was stepfather to one of the three boys.

One real wild card comes in the person of Lorri Davis, a woman who begins to write to Echols in prison, then becomes convinced of his innocence, and—with the help of celebrities like Eddy Vedder, Johnny Depp, and director Peter Jackson (who co-produced “West of Memphis”)--aims to win Echols’ release. In August 2111, the three did get out of prison after a bizarre plea deal which got them off for the prison time they had done while still having to admit their complicity in the grisly crime. It was an agonizing decision for them, but they took it to become semi-free men in their thirties.

This is grim material, to be sure, but it is much better and more convincingly told than the standard TV “true crime” junk. “West of Memphis” certainly propels you along, leaving you wondering what will happen next, but what it doesn’t provide is surcease: the final, positive identification of a true villain.

(The film is rated “R” and runs 147 min.)

February 2013