

The True Story of How a City in Fear Brutalized the Central Park Five

“When They See Us” revisits the case of the wrongfully convicted teenage boys. A writer who covered the original trial looks back on a warped time, and the warping of truth.

By Jim Dwyer

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This is a story of the biggest story of its day, a crime that set a high-water mark for depravity, an urban atrocity that caused existential hand-wringing for America’s biggest city.

It was a story that — over 30 years — changed from solid to liquid to gas, all but vanishing.

“When They See Us,” a four-part series premiering May 31 on Netflix directed by Ava DuVernay, is based on the lives of five men who were wrongfully convicted and sent to prison as teenagers for gang-raping and nearly killing Trisha Meili, a woman who was jogging in Central Park in 1989. Their convictions were vacated in 2002, and the city paid \$41 million in 2014 to settle their civil rights lawsuit. Hated by one generation as brutalizers, they were hailed by the next as the brutalized.

[The Central Park Five discussed “When They See Us” with their onscreen counterparts.]

In the series, these events are fictionalized, lightly but not trivially. With the license of imagination, it follows the boys as they turn to men, and opens interior spaces — personal torments, family turmoils, prison torture, the sustenance of odd friendships — to which daily journalism has little access, and in which it has scant interest.

Few crimes leave permanent marks on anyone other than the people involved. From its first moments, the Central Park case had been a global cultural phenomenon, its meaning debated and anguished over by urban scholars, politicians, ordinary citizens. A real estate developer, not widely known outside New York in 1989, used it for one of his earliest forays into civic affairs, placing full-page ads to proclaim his fury. “You better believe that I hate the people who took this girl and raped her brutally,” that developer, Donald J. Trump, said at a standing room-only news conference. “You better believe it.”

These boys were terror incarnate, a *casus belli* for the city, just as Iraq’s purported weapons of mass destruction would be years later for the nation. Both stories were wrong.

Fallibility runs in the human bloodline, and people from many quarters of public life had not done their jobs well, including journalists like me.

The attack had not been a gang rape, but almost certainly an assault carried out by a serial criminal acting on his own while the five boys were elsewhere in the park, an investigation by the Manhattan district attorney’s office concluded in 2002. It is a profound distinction. Bungling by the authorities had left the real author of the crime against Ms. Meili, a truly dangerous predator, on the street for months as he carried out a binge of raping, maiming and murdering across the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Ms. Meili was the second woman he raped and beat in the park that week.



The crime scene in Central Park in 1989 where a female jogger was raped and beaten.
John Sotomayor/The New York Times

Locking up those boys for a gang rape that had not happened but that most of society believed in was the same as planting a bomb in their lives that never stopped exploding. That story is told without blinking in “When They See Us,” and will enlighten even people who have followed these events.

I covered parts of the trials in 1990 for New York Newsday, and wish that I had been more skeptical and that I had shouted, rather than mumbled, the doubts I did express.

The enormity of what went wrong was first revealed to a broad audience in a 2012 documentary, “Central Park Five,” by Ken Burns, David McMahon and Sarah Burns. It also mapped the raw edges of the era and captured the textures of 1989 New York, a jolting sight. The city has molted and remade itself many times since.

The New York psyche — if there is such a thing — no longer dwells in that age of relentless crime. Fear cannot so easily crowd out evidence. The rapid evolution of DNA technology has demonstrated, time and again, how the righteous pursuit of truth can become warped. And the works of filmmakers like Ms. DuVernay, Mr. Burns and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have shown that the racial tropes of our past were not abandoned in ancient boneyards, but were poured into the concrete that modern America was built on.

“It’s more than anger,” Mr. Trump had said. “It’s hatred, and I want society to hate them.”

For a long while, he got his wish.

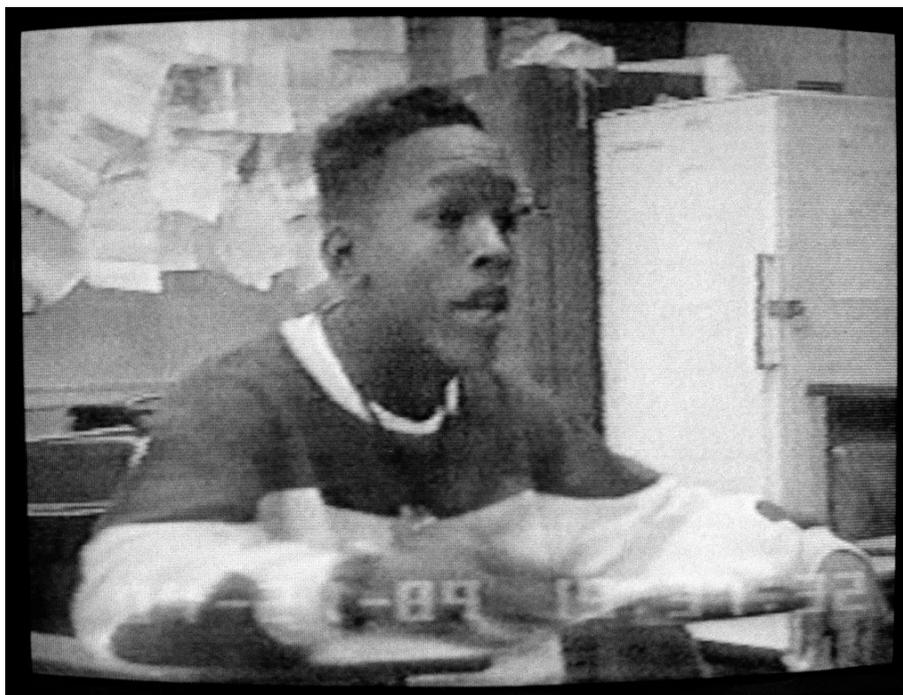
One spring day in 1989, the world awoke to news of a crime so soul-witheringly awful that it shocked even those who knew the New York City of that often ghastly era.

In the middle of the night, Ms. Meili, 28, had been found near death in a wooded ravine off a road used by joggers in Central Park. She had been raped and her skull had been fractured in two places. Most of her blood had seeped into the mud from lacerations in her head.

Weeks later, when Ms. Meili was able to communicate, she had no memory of what happened, but the five boys, ages 14 through 16, had already seemingly provided a narrative to detectives. Their names were Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, Antron McCray and Kevin Richardson. They had been in the park with a makeshift group of 30 other young people, some of them making trouble — hassling a homeless man for his food, forcing bike riders to run a gauntlet, badly hurting a man at the reservoir — while others watched.



Five teenagers (from left, Steven Lopez, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Michael Briscoe) with their lawyers in court for the Central Park jogger case in 1990. Lopez and Briscoe, who were initially arrested in connection with the case, pled guilty to crimes against other people in the park that night. James Estrin/The New York Times



Korey Wise in his videotaped confession, which he would later recant.
Jack Manning/The New York Times

Unlike the accurate accounts they gave to police of those events, their confessions to the assault on the jogger were wrong about where, when and how it happened. In the series, the police and prosecutors are portrayed as immediately aware of these discrepancies. That is false. Chaos does not get its due. Ms. Meili was not identified for nearly a day, and her movements not established until much later. The tunnel vision that took over the investigators is rendered solely as amoral ambition, but the reality of error in the Central Park case, as in most everything, is more interesting and nuanced than cartoon villainy.

Still, it is a fact that in 1989, there was little interest in the weakness of the confessions.

This story — of pitiless teenagers taking turns with a woman, then caving in her skull — was big enough, terrible enough, to electrify a city grown numb to its own badness.

[A critic weighs in on “When They See Us.”]

In those years, the daily pulse of New York life included a murder, on average, every five hours, every day; rapes nearly twice as often; and robberies just five or six minutes apart.

Yet the attack in Central Park stood out because, as Mayor Edward I. Koch said, the confessions by the five teens could have been a chapter of “A Clockwork Orange” come to life.

After all, it had not been the act of a single, deranged individual, but a “social and premeditated” crime by a group, The New York Post wrote.

That was most staggering of all.

“How could apparently well-adjusted youngsters turn into so savage a wolf pack?” The New York Times asked in an editorial. “The question reverberates.”

The victim was white. The accused were black and brown. If “the eldest of that wolf pack were tried, convicted and hanged in Central Park, by June 1, and the 13- and 14-year-olds were stripped, horsewhipped, and sent to prison,” the columnist Patrick Buchanan wrote, “the park might soon be safe again for women.” Note for note, without mention of race, Mr. Buchanan and others echoed the historic calls for the public punishment of dark-skinned men thought to have defiled white women.

Just two weeks after the attack, Mr. Trump published his ads, headlined, “Bring Back the Death Penalty.”

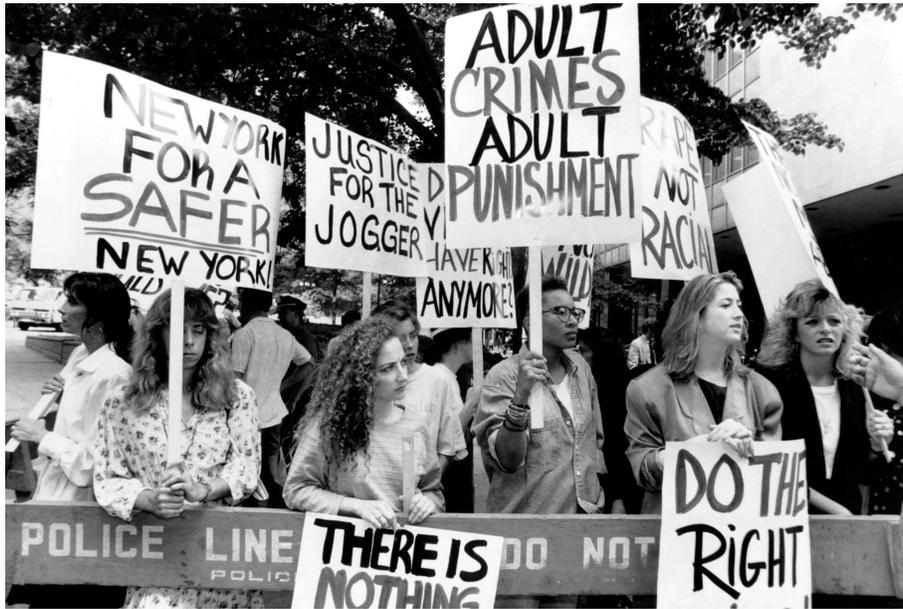
The boys recanted the confessions and said they had been coerced. This, their lawyers argued, made the statements inadmissible. Prosecutors replied that parents of three of them had been present as their sons admitted to the crime on videotape. How could that be coercive? Not so well understood was that the parents were only sporadically present for interrogations that spread over a day *before* the camera was turned on. It was during those unrecorded sessions, unseen by anyone outside the room, that the damning statements were first extracted.

In the series, the interrogation scenes are presented as a whirlpool of badgering, menace and cajoling. They bear a strong resemblance to real life. Not long ago, confessions were seen as trophies of detective work because they are so hard to overcome in a trial. But the DNA era has revealed that false confessions are behind many wrongful convictions. Especially with minors, they most often are the invention of cornered minds. Bad and wrong confessions are routinely waved into court behind true ones.

The judge — specially picked for the case — ruled that the confessions met the legal requirements for voluntariness.



The scene outside the courthouse during the Central Park jogger trial in 1990 included crowds of reporters, and demonstrators in support and in protest of the teenagers.
John Sotomayor/The New York Times



Louis Liotta/New York Post Archives, via Getty Images





James Estrin/The New York Times

During the trials, the courthouse was ringed with competing demonstrators, some claiming that the rape story was a hoax, others demanding castration. Al Sharpton called for a psychiatrist to examine the jogger's amnesia. "We are not endorsing the damage to the girl," he said. "If there was this damage." The red-bereted "Guardian Angels" group chanted for the five boys to be tried as adults. It was an unedifying barrage, kazoos from all corners. Mr. McCray, then a skinny 16 year old, walked into court holding his mother's hand. "Demonstrators, you know people just shouting, you know, 'Rapist!' 'You animal!' 'You don't deserve to be alive,'" he said several years ago. "It just felt like the whole world hated us."

Ms. Meili emerged to testify about her return from the doorway of death, without pieces of her life — a sense of smell, clear vision, effortless speech. She still had no memory of the crime.

Breathtaking as her appearance was, it added nothing to the proofs. Later that day, I watched other witnesses say that for all the intimate violence, not one iota of scientific evidence linked any of the five to the attack. A forensic pathologist, the prosecution's own expert, could not testify that Ms. Meili had been attacked by more than one person. In closing arguments, the prosecutor incorrectly said that hairs matching the jogger's were found on the clothing of the boys.

They spent six to 13 years in prison. Before parole boards, when a show of unqualified remorse would have given them a better shot at leaving prison earlier, they acknowledged witnessing or participating in other wrongdoing in the park but refused to concede having had anything to do with the jogger. They stuck with their stories. So did the system.

Years later, the hair "match" claimed by the prosecutor was discredited through DNA testing. It was part of an exhaustive revisiting of evidence that took place in 2002, when Matias Reyes, a murderer and serial rapist serving 33 years to life for other crimes, got word to the district attorney's office that he — and he alone — had struck the jogger as she ran, and dragged her off the road to rape and bludgeon. His was the only DNA recovered.



Raymond Santana, second from left, Yusef Salaam, center, and Kevin Richardson, second from right, at a press conference in 2014 following the news that they, along with McCray and Wise, would share in a \$41 million settlement from the city of New York.
Bebeto Matthews/Associated Press

After months of investigation, Manhattan district attorney Robert M. Morgenthau concluded Mr. Reyes knew what he was talking about, and that the five boys had not. Their confessions were a mash of error. Mr. Morgenthau moved to vacate the verdicts his office had won. The original story dissolved in a meticulous 58-page report, written by two senior assistants, Nancy Ryan and Peter Casolaro.

It documented how Mr. Reyes hunted and hurt women on his own. Investigators found no connections between him and the five, or to other teens in the park that night. Two days before the attack on Ms. Meili, he had raped another woman in the park. In the three months after, he raped four others, murdering one. He always acted alone. His admissions in 2002 about the 1989 park rapes came while he was serving time for the other crimes.

In rebuttal, the Police Department commissioned a report to exonerate itself and muddy the new narrative. It edged away from any certainty about the involvement of the five in a sexual assault, but maintained that they nevertheless somehow had a part in the attack, before or after Mr. Reyes, enough to make them guilty of something, and the police innocent of everything.

In a recent round table discussion about their shifting roles in the culture, Mr. McCray reflected that until the “Central Park Five” documentary was released a decade later, in 2012, “The train wasn’t moving at all.”

One image has been part of the saga in all its iterations, from the trial to the new series.

The grass had been wet the night of the attack, so a record of the first moments of the assault was written in the damp ground. Crime scene photographs showed the trail where Ms. Meili was dragged off the road. It was only about 18 inches wide, less than a newspaper spread open.

In that trail, there is neither room for, nor trace of, five people.

No matter how hard or long you look.

More on the Central Park Five

The Central Park Five: ‘We Were Just Baby Boys’ May 30, 2019

