

When They See Us: A powerful dramatization of the case of the Central Park Five

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When They See Us, a Netflix original series, directed and co-written by Ava DuVernay.

In 1989, New York City and much of the US was gripped by the story of a group of young men from Harlem who would come to be known as the Central Park Five. The five black and Latino youths—Raymond Santana Jr., 14; Kevin Richardson, 14; Antron McCray, 15; Yusef Salaam, 15; and Korey Wise, 16 (then known as Kharey Wise)—were apprehended, interrogated and eventually indicted and convicted on charges of assault, robbery, riot and the rape and attempted murder of Trisha Meili, a 28-year-old white woman, in Manhattan’s Central Park on April 19, 1989.

1980s New York saw an unprecedented surge of financial wealth accompanied by burgeoning social inequality. Housing and schools for the working class were underfunded and decaying. A rise in crime—driven by poverty and unemployment—was met by escalating police violence, meted out disproportionately in black and Latino neighborhoods.

The city’s media railed against what they described as “wolfpacks,” “animals” and “savages”—young—particularly black—men riding the subways and roving the streets supposedly inflicting violence on a terrified populace. *When They See Us*, directed and co-written by Ava DuVernay (*Selma*, *13th*, *A Wrinkle in Time*), dramatizes in vivid fashion the lives of the Central Park Five as they are caught up by this “law-and-order” frenzy.

The boys would be subject to brutal treatment—by the police who extracted confessions and by prosecutors who tried and convicted them on the basis of these coerced confessions. They were sent to jail for from six to 14 years. The five were exonerated of guilt in all these crimes in 2002 after the real assailant confessed to being the sole attacker of the Central Park Jogger.

The starting-point of DuVernay’s series is the proven innocence of the five youths and there is no question mark placed over this reality.

The interrogations

There are outstanding performances by those playing the roles of the Central Park Five. Depicting them when they are young are Asante Blackk (as Kevin Richardson), Caleel Harris (Antron McCray), Ethan Herisse (Yusef Salaam), Jharrel Jerome (Korey Wise) and Marquis Rodriguez (Raymond Santana, Jr.). Supporting the five is an ensemble cast as the family members of the boys, as well as detectives, prosecutors, lawyers, judges, prison guards and fellow prisoners.

In Part One we see the five teenagers interacting with friends and family in their residential neighborhood in Harlem.

Antron discusses baseball with his father, and Kevin walks down the street with his sister, explaining about his trumpet playing, and how he wants to play first chair. Korey talks with his girlfriend at a local fried

chicken shop.

Eventually Kevin, along with Raymond and Yusef, get caught up with a group of dozens of youth running through Central Park, joking, hassling and assaulting people—dubbed “wilding” by the cops. Antron wanders into the park seemingly by accident.

Some of the youth are shown attacking some cyclists and a homeless person. Trisha Meili is found the next morning, brutally beaten and barely alive. The first head of the sex crimes unit, Linda Fairstein (Felicity Huffman), responds to the discovery of the raped woman by declaring, “Every young black male who was in the park last night is a suspect in the rape of that woman.” Everyone they suspect to have been a part of the group is brought in for questioning.

Fairstein has objected to her portrayal in *When They See Us*, arguing that words are put in her mouth and she is shown as the central villain. DuVernay has admitted to taking artistic license in the dialogue and some of the timeline of events, but stands by her work. After the series aired May 31, Fairstein, a successful crime novelist, was dropped by Dutton, her publisher. She was also obliged to resign from a number of prominent boards, including that of Vassar College, her alma mater. (Elizabeth Lederer, the lead prosecutor in the case, has also resigned as a lecturer at Columbia University.)

In an interview, DuVernay observed, “I think that it would be a tragedy if this story and the telling of it came down to one woman [Fairstein] being punished for what she did because it’s not about her. It’s not *all* about her. She is part of a system that’s not broken, it was built to be this way. It was built to oppress, it was built to control. ... It was built for profit. It was built for political gain and power.”

As Part One continues, the five are eventually rounded up as part of the group of teen suspects in the Central Park events. They remain among a smaller group interrogated at length by detectives. In a cruel twist Korey, who will be tried as an adult and serve the longest prison sentence, merely goes along to the police precinct to watch out for his friend Yusef.

What follows is in some ways the most harrowing part of the series: the interrogations. The five are interviewed for at least seven hours before detectives begin to record their videotaped confessions. Some of them are held longer—without bathroom breaks, food or drink. By the time the videotapes are recorded on April 21, some of them have been kept awake for two days. Only Yusef does not make a recorded confession. His mother Sharonne (Aunjanue Ellis) has intervened to stop his interrogation as a minor.

No parents are present during the lengthy police interrogations of Raymond, Kevin and Antron, although they are present at the “confessions.” The boys’ parents, grandparents and siblings are hindered in their ability to protect them against the police by official intimidation, language barriers or work obligations.

All the boys are told one version of the falsehood told to Antron: “The sooner you tell us what you know, the sooner you will go home.” Utilizing the tried and true—and legal—method of “good cop—bad cop,” one

detective tells a boy that so-and-so has implicated him, and he'd better confess, while another tells him he knows he's a "good kid" and was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lies are told about evidence implicating them. Cops throw chairs and slam bodies against walls in an effort to extract confessions.

Cinematographer Bradford Young, who also worked with DuVernay on *Selma* and *Middle of Nowhere*, shoots blue-tinged, smoky scenes in the interrogation rooms. The boys are shot in close-up and shallow focus, with what appears to be only available light. The effect is both eerie and in-your-face.

At the end of these grueling interrogations, all five are exhausted, confused and terrified. Even at that, while most of the boys, in their taped statements, are finally coerced into "admitting" they were at the scene of the rape, they deny having directly participated.

Police also lead the parents to believe their children will be able to go home. At the beginning, none of the boys had known about the rape, and most were shy about discussing sex. But they do not get to go home. Instead they are led on highly publicized perp walks out of the police station.

The trials

As Part Two begins, in a convenience store Delores Wise (Niecy Nash), Korey's mother, watches real estate mogul Donald Trump on television. "You'd better believe I hate the people who took this girl and raped her brutally," he rants. DuVernay lets the future president's foul words speak for themselves.

Trump took out full-page ads in four local newspapers at the time, including the *New York Times*, carrying the headline, "BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY! BRING BACK OUR POLICE! I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes ... CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!"

Against this vile and frenzied backdrop the five accused are presumed guilty. As they go to trial, the district attorney's office wrestles with the quandary that they have basically zero to go on but the boys' coerced confessions: no physical evidence, no DNA, no witnesses except the boys' "identification" of each other. A sock with semen found near the crime scene is not a match for any of them and belongs to an unknown person.

The five are represented in two separate trials by five different defense attorneys who are generally inexperienced and out of their depth in the New York courtroom. Elizabeth Lederer (Vera Farmiga) takes the lead for the DA's office. Lederer discusses the lack of evidence against the five boys with Fairstein, who comes up with a new theory for the DNA found in the sock. "There must have been another attacker. He must have gotten away," Fairstein says. Lederer asks, "You honestly believe that?" to which Fairstein replies, "I do if it helps the jury believe what we know to be true."

In the first trial, of Yusef, Raymond and Antron, and the second, of Korey and Kevin, the photos of the victim are shown, and Trisha Meili testifies (although she doesn't remember anything about the attack), having made some recovery since her brutal rape and beating. All of this is designed to shock the jury but proves nothing as to the guilt of the accused.

Detective after detective takes the stand to deny under questioning from the defense that they used any coercive methods to extract the boys' confessions. They repeatedly state, "We simply asked them what happened." When a forensic expert testifies that the DNA in the sock does

not match any of the defendants, the courtroom erupts in cheers from their supporters in the courtroom. The three reject a plea deal from the prosecution.

But the coerced taped confessions have their desired effect. As none of the brutality leading up to their coached and orchestrated confessions was recorded, jurors are left to wonder how they could possibly have admitted to something they did not do.

Incarceration

In Part Three, Antron, Yusef, Kevin, Raymond, Korey and their families grapple with their new reality. Their despair and loneliness are combined with the brutality of the prison system.

Kevin's older sister Angie Richardson (Kylie Bunbury) is burdened with guilt for having signed Kevin's confession on his behalf, after he begged her to do so in the vain hope of going home. Raymond Santana, Sr. (John Leguizamo) regrets leaving his son alone for much of his interrogation because he had to go to work and was worried he would lose his job.

Antron, Yusef, Kevin and Raymond, sentenced as juveniles to 5-10 years, all serve time in juvenile facilities. They are given "conditional release" after 6-7 years, which means they have to report regularly to probation officers. The four are now played by a different set of actors as adults: Jovan Adepo as Antron, Chris Chalk as Yusef, Justin Cunningham as Kevin, and Freddy Miyares as Raymond.

As convicted felons and sexual offenders they are hired for only the most menial, low-paid jobs. Raymond turns to dealing crack and is sent back to prison. We hear the addictive beat of Michael Kiwanuka's "Love & Hate" (2016) and its refrain, "You can't take me down," as Raymond in slow motion puts his hands up, lies face down on the street and is handcuffed and taken away by police.

In addition to popular songs, the score by Kris Bowers includes original melodies and themes for each of the Central Park Five, which convey both their innocence and fear. Bowers says he wanted to make the series feel like a horror film. *Esquire* writes: "Bowers had musicians play atonal and jarring sounds on their instruments to create an uncomfortable, ominous mood. He started with a cello, saxophone, trumpet, and violin, funneling the music through filters and effects to create a haunting final product."

Korey Wise

Jharrel Jerome is the only actor to play one of the five, Korey Wise, through both his teen and young adult years. Part Four is mainly dedicated to Korey's time in prison. On arrest he is held without bail at Rikers Island. He is tried as an adult and is held in adult prison for his entire incarceration.

Jerome's performance is outstanding, capturing the carefree nature of Wise's pre-arrest life, his terror during investigation, his incredulity on being convicted and his struggle to survive during incarceration. He enters the prison system in shock and disbelief and is immediately thrust into the minute-by-minute fight for survival against the brutality of prison guards and assault by other inmates.

Wise is called before the parole board several times and each time maintains his innocence and refuses to admit to crimes he did not commit. The final time he chooses to remain in his cell rather than appear before the board. He's bounced around the state—Rikers, the Auburn Correctional

Facility, Attica—making it all but impossible for his mother to visit him with any regularity or to give him money for the dispensary.

After being injured in a fight, and on the advice of a guard, he opts for solitary confinement rather than seek treatment in the infirmary. “The infirmary’s for snitches,” the guard tells him. Some of the most powerful scenes of the series are of Korey in “segregated confinement,” where he loses all track of time.

In solitary, he dreams (hallucinates?) about being back in the fried chicken shop with his girlfriend. She then appears in his cell and they run out through a door in a bright light to Coney Island. They ride the Ferris wheel, bumper cars, win a stuffed animal, kiss.

Exoneration

In 2002, Matias Reyes, who was serving time as a convicted serial rapist, told New York officials that he had raped a woman in Central Park on the night of April 19, 1989. He had never been identified as a suspect in the attack on Meili, although he was later believed to have raped another woman in the same area on April 17. During the summer of 1989 he raped four more women, killing one; he was interrupted after robbing the fifth.

Reyes insisted he acted alone. DA Robert M. Morgenthau appointed a team to investigate Reyes’ claims, including the DNA evidence linking him to the crime. Morgenthau then recommended vacating the convictions of the Central Park Five. A separate panel commissioned by the NYPD in 2003 agreed that Reyes was guilty but disputed the claim he acted alone and never admitted any police misconduct.

The Central Park Five were exonerated of all of their crimes. They would go on to win a settlement of \$41 million for their wrongful convictions and incarceration, the largest award in New York state history.

Since its debut May 31, *When They See Us* has been watched by over 23 million viewers. The wide viewership garnered by the series is well deserved. This dramatization of the Central Park Five—brought to the screen by DuVernay with anger, compassion and truth—is striking a chord with a wide audience not only for the compelling stories of these wrongly convicted young men, but for what it says about the US justice system, the police and government authorities.

It is hard not to draw parallels between the treatment of these five brave individuals and the terror being meted out by the Trump administration against those fleeing violence and poverty in Central America. Immigrants seeking asylum, including young children separated from their parents, are being held in squalid conditions and denied their basic human rights.

Asked recently whether he would apologize for taking out his full-page ads in 1989 calling for the boys’ arrest, conviction and execution, Donald Trump refused, saying, “You have people on both sides of that. They admitted their guilt. If you look at Linda Fairstein and if you look at some of the prosecutors, they think the city should have never settled that case. So, we’ll leave it at that.”

One can’t help but be reminded of the president’s comments following the events in 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. He refused to condemn the demonstration by neo-Nazis and white supremacists whose actions left one young woman dead, saying, “There were very fine people on both sides.”





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