

Drawing Back the Darkness

A SundanceTV docuseries explores the other Central Park tragedy.

In late summer 1986, New Yorkers became fixated on a crime that took place in Central Park. Not the Central Park jogger case in which five young men were convicted of rape and later exonerated, but one just as notorious: nineteen-year-old Robert Chambers inexplicably killed eighteen-year-old Jennifer Levin, an acquaintance he'd hooked up with at an Upper East Side Manhattan bar.

Evidence pointed to him intentionally strangling her, but Chambers claimed it was an accident during a sexual encounter and was ultimately convicted of manslaughter. Because of his model looks and seemingly privileged upbringing, the media dubbed him the "preppy killer." Levin, meanwhile, was posthumously dragged through the mud. The tabloids, steered by the defense, ran headlines like "How Jennifer Courted Death" and "Sex Play 'Got Rough,'" which seared into the public's consciousness.

Now Levin is getting her due. A five-part docuseries, *The Preppy Murder: Death in Central Park*, airing November 13–15 on SundanceTV and AMC, excavates the muddle. It offers a deeper study of Levin and Chambers through exclusive interviews and footage, while contrasting the defense's blame-the-victim strategy with the legal impediments that hampered the prosecution. And it unearths the wounds, still raw thirty-three years later, of those who knew and loved Levin.

"It was our number-one concern that we do justice for Jennifer in telling her story, in portraying her as a fully-rounded person," says Ricki Stern, who codirected with Annie Sundberg. "The rough sex narrative is a false narrative," Stern insists. "It implies that somehow she was asking for this."

Peeling back the layers of Levin seems the easier part. Her family and friends describe a warm, spirited, college-bound teen. The prosecutor Linda Fairstein and the recently deceased lead detective Mike Sheehan also cooperated. "We had unprecedented access to all of the research and all of the notes," says executive producer Robert Friedman, CEO of Bungalow Media + Entertainment, noting that they additionally benefited from the directors' personal connections to the crowd that Chambers and Levin hung with.

More challenging was to pry apart Chambers's poker face.

Currently serving prison time for drug offenses, he didn't respond to interview requests. But the series brings him into sharper relief, along with the criminal acts he previously committed, which were deemed inadmissible by the judge.

The production team also secured a richly detailed interview with actress Alex Kapp, who was dating Chambers. "She was right back there again," Sundberg says. "And to listen to her talk about being captivated by this guy who understood what his charm was — the charm factor that held a lot of people in thrall to Robert Chambers... I think that's why people gave him the benefit of the doubt."

It took two years for the case to go to trial and months to corral an acceptable jury. Meanwhile, the slut-shaming engineered by the defense permanently tainted Levin's memory. "Everything was made to denigrate my daughter," says her mother, Ellen Levin, who attended the trial every day despite her anguish.

She later derived satisfaction from lobbying to pass New York's rape shield laws, which limit evidence or cross-examination regarding a victim's previous sexual behavior. To that, she says, "This is what Jennifer would want me to do." —Ann Farmer



The trial of Robert Chambers, seen here leaving the courthouse, drew heavy press coverage.

SUNDANCE TV; PAUL DEMARIA/NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES/SUNDANCE TV