

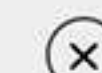
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# 'True Crime Story: It Couldn't Happen Here' Review: Big Shocks in Small Towns

A six-part true-crime series looks at murders in seemingly idyllic places



\*Hilarie Burton Morgan and Jessica Cino  
PHOTO: SUNDANCETV

By [Dorothy Rabinowitz](#)

Sept. 2, 2021 7:20 pm ET

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2

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As the title of this six-part series suggests with full ironic intention, the idea that murder and other crimes of violence are unlikely to occur in a small town is alive and well. Notwithstanding the contrary reality so evident in the vivid case histories presented in "True Crime Story: It Couldn't Happen Here." The first three episodes offer rivetingly detailed stories of homicide set, respectively, in the town of Adel, Ga.; the hamlet of Sauquoit, N.Y.; and the (tiny) city of St. Augustine, Fla. The will to murder knows no bounds, as Tony Soprano's creator well understood when he had Tony take time off from a road trip visiting colleges with his daughter for a side trip to strangle a snitch. No explanations were necessary in that fictional series.

But in this saga of true crime, hosted by Hilarie Burton Morgan, explanations are called for, which, when produced, yield some of the series' most engaging scenes. The list of possible causes that would account, in episode 2, for the sudden death in Sauquoit of Mary Yoder, a prominent, radiantly athletic professional woman, are intriguingly debated, the important question being the poison involved. Clearly, it's explained, the victim had ingested something so toxic it caused her organs to shut down within a day. What the substance turned out to be—a choice of poison that showed no little inventiveness—is best left to the documentary to disclose. This victim's death, like the rest, would lead to a bitter legal struggle once the forces of law identified a likely perpetrator.

The series' strongest impact derives from its focus, in episode 1, on criminal suspects in Adel who years ago ran afoul of a legal system that failed to treat their cases in accordance with the principles of justice—treatment their families today recall in searing detail. The series proffers its view on all this in its description of the show, which suggests that whatever its virtues, its storied warmth and neighborliness, small-town America is at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with crimes and their aftermaths.

Still none of this is to underestimate the indisputable drama of this history of injustice, or the unforgettable presence, and eloquence, of the parents of Devonia Inman, the man convicted, decades ago, of the murder of Donna Brown, the town's Taco Bell night manager. Their son continues to maintain his innocence, as he has since his conviction. The lives of these parents are rooted in the anguish of that time. Still they have hope.

As do the members of the grieving family at the core of the darkly enthralling case involving a sheriff's department in St. Augustine. It is episode 3's chronicle of Michelle O'Connell, a young woman, a single mother, shot to death in 2010, daughter of a close and devoted family instantly certain that this was no suicide as her live-in partner, Jeremy Banks, a sheriff's deputy, claimed. It's a case that has gotten some coverage in the time since the event, and for good reason. Rarely is there a question of the corrupt use of power on such fascinating display as in this story of an officer of the law who apparently enjoyed the unstinting protection of his superiors in the system. The weapon that killed her was his service weapon. An impressive number of indicators pointed to a woman happy because she was going to begin a new job the next day, who was planning escape from a man who had become controlling and physically abusive—significant physical evidence would emerge on that. (Mr. Banks denies claims of abuse and any involvement in her death.) The chief protector of the deputy sheriff, David Schoar, is described by an embittered member of the dead woman's family as a kind of Godfather. The reference is fitting. True-crime story though this documentary is, there's something startling about the powers at work in this splendidly reported battle.

True Crime Story: It Couldn't Happen Here

Begins Thursday, Sept. 9, 10 p.m., on Sundance TV and AMC+

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