

# An analysis of the serial killings in west memphis

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## **Dances with Satan: The West Memphis Three Murders**

When broaching the topic of Satanism, a large majority of people feel a certain hesitation or fear towards discussing it. Satanists are typically thought of as “ devil worshippers” or a “ cabal of evil lunatics worshipping Satan for personal gain (TV Tropes).” The “ Satanic Panic” of the 1980’s and 1990’s only furthered this stereotype. Evangelicals claimed that those who listened to heavy metal music or wore all black were also involved in and practiced rituals of the occult or worshipped demons. In the case of the West Memphis Three, three teens, whom of which were convicted of the first-degree murder of three eight-year-old boys, fit the bill for all these characteristics and were condemned for allegedly conspiring in practices of the occult or the worship of Satan. To investigate how influential this case’s geographical and cultural position was in the investigation and conviction of the defendants, I examined testimonies and newspaper articles written around the time of the murders, as well as utilized secondary sources explaining the nature of the trials. Testimonies from those related to the defendants and newspaper articles, help to characterize the pervasive Southern Baptist beliefs in the Bible Belt region as a response to the nature of the murders. An analysis of these testimonies and articles reveals that the heavily Christian community of West Memphis, Arkansas and its perception of what they believe Satanism to be may have been the deciding factor in the jury’s guilty verdict.

Around the same time period as the rise of Satanism as a religious practice, so was Christian fundamentalism and the literal belief in angels and devils on

the rise. Fundamentalist preachers and anti-occult crusaders alike, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Pulling, gained height around the country, spreading fear-mongering ideas and claims, some as ridiculous as role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons being dangerous and demonic. It was this ideology that spread rapidly across the southeastern and south-central United States, or what is now informally known as the “ Bible Belt” of America. Rumors and allegations of satanic ritual abuse were also spread by these so-called “ occult experts,” many of which claimed to involve the physical and sexual abuse of people. At the height of the panic, the highly emotional accusations and circumstances of many satanic ritual abuse allegations made it difficult to investigate claims, with the accused being assumed as guilty and skeptics becoming co-accused during trials, and trials moving forward based solely on the testimony of very young children without corroborating evidence.

Prior to the 1990's, West Memphis, Arkansas was considered just a small, sunny town in the middle of the Bible Belt. Yet in May of 1993, the bodies of three eight-year old boys, Christopher Byers, Steve Branch, and Michael Moore, were found sexually mutilated and murdered in a muddy creek of Robin Hood Hills park. The community was shocked and anguished by the brutal nature of the crime in their own backyards, disgusted by how someone could hurt such innocent children. In a report from The Commercial Appeal, a newspaper based out of Memphis, Tennessee, writers interview people around the West Memphis community to get their reactions to the crimes. Charity Collum, one young teen who was interviewed, states that, “ People go into those woods all the time. There's no telling who was back

there then. It's really pretty scary...I had a hard time getting to sleep last night. It's all so close (Commercial Appeal 1993)." The words of a parent of the West Memphis community are also referenced in the article, as Donna Johnson states that she's not, "...going to let them get out of my sight until they catch who done it...There is fear over here. It happened right in our backdoors. That's scary (Commercial Appeal)," when discussing the safety of her own children. These interviews highlight the widespread and valid fear for the lives of the children of West Memphis.

Though the West Memphis police department was still trying to develop a killer profile for the murders, many people within the community began to speculate about the odd nature of the crimes, describing them as "satanic." Due to West Memphis's geographical and cultural position within the Bible Belt, as well as the influence from the "Satanic Panic" movement, Fundamentalist ideology was pervasive in all aspects of the community. One that wore black clothes, listened to heavy metal bands such as Metallica, and read Steven King novels was more than likely to stand out in the crowd. These characteristics were unacceptable and outside the norm in the 1990's, and the community began to point fingers at the "troubled youth" of the town. Fueled by fear and their Christian belief system, the West Memphis community demanded that local police detain and interrogate Jesse Misskelley, a borderline mentally-retarded teen who was known to hang out with rumored "Satan-worshippers," Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin. The Commercial Appeal featured an article that brands the teens as "deadly disciples" of the occult, referring to the apparent confession by Jesse Misskelley to the murders and the practice of satanic rituals. Though there is

blatant police interference in Jesse's "confession," as can be seen in the transcription of the interrogation, the article excludes this fact. The ability to simply overlook such mishandling of police conduct alludes to a certain need for a religious explanation of the murders by the community of West Memphis.

With the recent "Satanic Panic" scare fresh in the minds of the West Memphis community, prosecutors used the lifestyles and demeanors of the suspected teens against them during their trials. They specifically brought up one witness, Vicki Hutcheson, to testify against the teens. Hutcheson claimed that she purposefully tried to acquaint herself with Echols after the murder in an attempt to get him to confess, without knowledge of the West Memphis Police Department. She recounts that she was taken to an esbat, or an occult satanic meeting by Misskelley and Echols after the murders. In the transcription of this testimony, the prosecution describes what Hutcheson had relayed to them; that she was taken to this meeting and upon arrival she witnessed "children having sex in the woods with devil signs around." When directly examined later, Vicki reassures the jury that the story the prosecution has illustrated is the truth. This testimony could have possibly been the deciding factor of the verdict, as it paints a vividly disturbing picture of the suspects as these occultists for the jury. Hutcheson later redacted her statement in 2004, almost ten years after the trials, stating that her testimony was a complete fabrication by the West Memphis Police Department, who in an attempt to get results in the murders of the three boys, told her that if she did not testify she would have her child taken away from her and be implicated in the murders.

The community of West Memphis was deeply disturbed by the murder of these three boys. The Christian fundamentalist ideology and “Satanic Panic” movement, which were widely spread and deeply rooted throughout the Bible Belt region of the U. S. during the 1990’s, led to the prosecution and imprisonment of the three teens who just happened to like heavy metal music and magic.