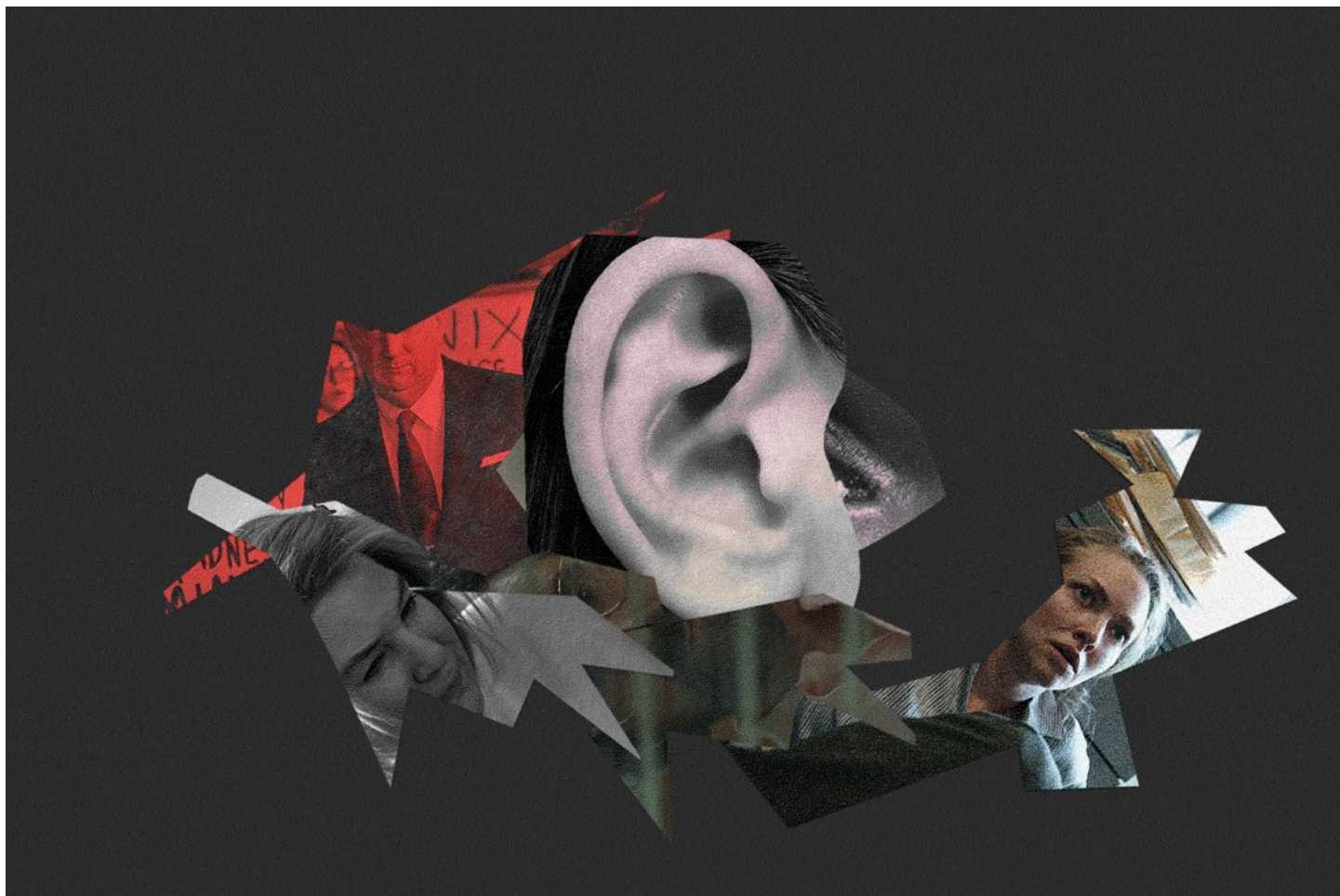




AWARDS

## True-crime podcasts coming to a limited series near you



The ongoing popularity of podcasts has provided fertile ground for TV adaptations, as producers, networks and other developers latch on to the deep, first-person journalistic reporting in podcasts to launch more glossy, A-list-starring reinventions. (Illustration by Franziska Barczyk / For The Times; photos from Hulu, NBC and AppleTV+)

BY RANDEE DAWN

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Here's how to know you're living in peak TV: when the very specific subgenre of true-crime-podcast-inspired anthology/limited series has enough shows in it to make up a whole possible Emmy category. This season alone, potential contenders include

[“Gaslit,”](#) “The Thing About Pam,” “Dr. Death,” “The Shrink Next Door” and “The Dropout,” just for starters.

And here’s one other way to gauge it: The genre is so popular it’s even been meta-fictionalized in yet another series, [“Only Murders in the Building,”](#) in which three amateur detectives become amateur podcasters for the sole purpose of discussing their crime-solving with the public.

So yes: It’s peak true-crime-podcast season, and welcome to it.

“We gravitated to podcasting because it felt like this classic and modern confluence,” notes “Murders” executive producer Jess Rosenthal. “It’s a new way to do voice-over, and I love that podcasting is considered so modern and in the zeitgeist — but is also a wonderful return to early radio.”

The ongoing popularity of podcasts has provided fertile ground for TV adaptations, as producers, networks and other developers latch on to the deep, first-person journalistic reporting in podcasts to launch more glossy, A-list-starring reinventions. Some touch on national scandals (“Dropout” focuses on Elizabeth Holmes/Theranos; “Gaslit” on Martha Mitchell/Watergate); others look at crimes usually handled by newsmagazines (“The Shrink Next Door” is about a businessman and the psychiatrist who exploited him for decades, while “The Thing About Pam” is based on a “Dateline” podcast and tells the story of an eccentric woman’s involvement in another woman’s murder); others come with a social agenda (“Dr. Death” is about a neurosurgeon who brutalized his patients, but it also puts the medical system that allowed him to continue practicing under the microscope).



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The question, though, is why? Of all the true crime out there, what is it about the fact that all these stories inspired podcasts that makes them worthy of retelling in another medium?

The answer is complicated. The simplest reason seems to be that podcasts — as Rosenthal notes — are part of the zeitgeist. There's a brand recognition that makes them seem trendy and fresh, even if they are basically long-form radio journalism. But it also appears that showrunners who turn podcasts into TV series hope to fashion an additional narrative dimension to the stories being told. And that means they can weave some fiction into the facts of any given case.

"I never wanted to do a Wikipedia rundown of what happens," says Robbie Pickering, creator and showrunner of "Gaslit." "I feel less adherent to the actual events than to the emotional truth of what happened — and the emotional truth of the characters. I was interested in doing a show about the wages of complicity. That felt like a real emotional question to me."

There's an interesting switch that flips when a podcast becomes a TV adaptation. Real people become "characters" and in doing so become hybrids of the real and the symbolic. "Pam's" creators were so entranced by the weird machinations of the real-life Pam Hupp that showrunner Jenny Klein says they told whole sequences through a "Pam vision" POV.

"That's where we're representing the way Pam tells stories, which are jagged and abrupt and contradictory and sometimes physically impossible," Klein says. "So that absurdity became part of the woven tone of our show."

In such a shift, the show creator or showrunner's underlying thesis is exposed: This is how they want to connect the individual crime to larger societal ills or psychosis. "Shrink" showrunner Georgia Pritchett says the gaslighting the doctor does to the businessman is something everyone can relate to and understand, post-Trump

presidential years.

“I felt in the right circumstances it could happen to any of us,” she says. “I’ve written about the country being in an abusive relationship with the president, who gaslit [citizens] and insisted he didn’t say what he said. Even though this story started in the 1980s, it felt like something we’re in danger of and experiencing in the current climate.”

Podcasts are at least as old as the new millennium and have been increasing in popularity for years. But the lockdown and quarantines of the pandemic seem to have turbocharged interest in them, as audiences searched for fresh material to listen to (and show creators looked for new stories to tell).

“We were all closed up in our homes and escaping through podcasts, and these true crime stories speak to our collective fascination for the macabre,” says Klein. “Taking in these true, scary stories in the safety of your own home — there can be a comfort in that, like when you’re in bed and you hear a thunderstorm.”

“Everyone was so desperate for content for entertainment [during the pandemic] that podcasts could take their minds off what we were dealing with,” says “Dr. Death” creator-executive producer Patrick Macmanus. “You couldn’t take your TV with you when you got out of the house — so you’d take walks and listen to things. You could become the filmmaker in your own mind of what you’re reading and listening to.”

Additionally, podcasts are TV-friendly in a structural way; episode counts are often similar to streaming season episode numbers, and stories naturally revolve around a limited group of individuals who might inspire a producer to think about casting decisions.

“It’s a great styling tool for television,” says “Dropout” creator Elizabeth Meriwether. “Many podcasts have that bingeing structure, where at the end of one episode you feel

like you have to listen to the next one.”

“They give producers brand reassurance,” agrees Pritchett. “People have already responded to this story, so they’re willing to make things more interesting and diverse. So many podcasts are well made and so evocative that people feel they’re unwrapping something. There’s something immediate about hearing that voice in your ear telling you a story.”

Whatever the reason, Hollywood seems likely to remain in love with true crime podcasts for a while yet. There’s an unending stream of surprising tales that can provide windows into that emotional truth creators seek.

“When you watch a fictional fantasy show, the entirety of the story is in that show,” says Klein. “There’s nothing else. But with a true crime story, there’s always more. There’s a whole rabbit hole of details. The story — it’s alive.”

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