Truth Be Told doesn’t know how to make a murderer

Truth Be Told should be a home run. Its premise — the story of a podcaster revisiting a murder case 20 years after a suspect has been incarcerated — immediately evokes *Serial.* The pilot, which showcases what appears to be a coerced minor’s testimony, might as well mention *Making A Murderer* by name. These are popular, compelling true crime stories, and *Truth Be Told* is out to recreate the thrills of the genre through fiction.

Truth Be Told is the latest original series from Apple TV Plus. Poppy Parnell (Octavia Spencer) is a true crime podcaster returning to the case of Warren Cave (Aaron Paul), a man convicted of murdering his neighbor when he was a teenager. Poppy has reason to believe that Warren might be innocent, but she’s also got some skin in the game — it was her reporting that led to Warren’s conviction 20 years ago, a series of stories that made her career. “Doesn’t that mean it’s just a crime story?” you might ask, and you know what? You’d be right! It’s a crime story, with the reportorial inflection of your favorite nonfiction podcast. I wouldn’t think about it too much, because *Truth Be Told* does not. It’d be much nicer if it did.

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Almost immediately, there’s a dissonance between the facts as the show lays them out, and how it considers them. Most glaring is Poppy’s portrayal as directly responsible for Warren’s incarceration, thanks to her reporting — which means she has a stake in this story that wouldn’t pass a journalism sniff test in a million years — but *could* make for a compelling thriller as Poppy gets more wrapped up in a story she’s far too close to. (Though if Poppy’s reporting helped

land Warren in prison and he's actually innocent, that means *Poppy is a bad reporter and shouldn't be trusted to get it right the second time!*)

Unfortunately, *Truth Be Told* isn't terribly interested in these ideas, painting the podcast instead as Poppy's crusade to clear a man who might be innocent. This makes her seem like a completely self-interested jerk instead of the brave reporter the show needs her to be.

There's very little tension
Truth Be Told instead supplements its central mystery with Poppy's increasingly complicated family life. Her career as a podcast icon has also lifted her comfortably into the middle class, something that's making it harder and harder to connect with her less fortunate family. There's rich drama to mine there, but, like the Cave case, it's all hamstrung by the show's perplexing disinterest in making Poppy out as anything other than a hero.

This bleeds over to *Truth Be Told*'s plotting, which doles out twists in its murder mystery as Poppy is about to discover them for herself. There's very little tension, and that compulsive 'can't wait to learn what happens next' feeling you get from true crime stories in the *Serial* mold is completely missing here.

It's a huge shame, not just because the cast seems to be put to poor use – which, in addition to Spencer and Paul, includes Lizzy Caplan and Ron Cephas Jones, all giving perplexingly muted performances – but because *Truth Be Told* assembles a well-rounded cast of black characters from all walks of life, the main exception being everyone tied to the Cave case. It's a nice diversion from the overwhelmingly white world of popular true crime podcasts, and one the show does matter-of-factly.

This hurts the show, both depriving it of desperately needed depth and giving inadvertent absolution to the flaws of modern true crime. “In a way, crime stories, true or otherwise, have always been about self-soothing,” writes Andrea DenHoed for *The New Republic* in a criticism of popular true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder*. “It’s a genre whose satisfactions derive largely from the finality of the big reveal, and it’s not, consequently, particularly well equipped to deal with nuance, contradiction, and ambiguity.”

It is unfair to expect *Truth Be Told* to single-handedly improve upon, or even account for, the failings of the storytelling genre in which it has situated itself. It’s okay if the show, in emulating those influences, shares their lack of the nuance, contradiction, and ambiguity that DenHoed describes. Unfortunately, it also lacks the base satisfaction of a true crime podcast, the vicarious thrill and morbid compulsion to keep looking at tragedy, to pry further into somewhere we don’t belong. Perhaps the most damning criticism of *Truth Be Told* is a simple one: I don’t care whether Warren Cave killed that man or not.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/6/20999451/truth-be-told-apple-tv-plus-true-crime-octavia-spencer-aaron-paul-making-a-murderer