

# The Hunt for Bible John – is this the best true-crime documentary ever made?

A city is in crisis, a serial killer is on the loose in 1960s Glasgow and the BBC's excellent documentary series feels like a David Fincher drama

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One of the biggest television wishes I harbour for this year is the end of true-crime documentaries. Ever since Netflix's *Making a Murderer* hit big in 2015, the genre has found itself crashing from new low to new low. The majority of true crime shows since then have been grubby and exploitative – so quick to rush towards sensationalist thrills that they teeter on the brink of idolising criminals at the expense of victims. If I never watched another true-crime documentary, I'd be the world's happiest boy.

So it's irritating to discover that the first big true-crime documentary of the year is one of the best I've seen. *The Hunt for Bible John* (BBC Two) is technically not new – it aired on BBC [Scotland](#) late last year – but its BBC Two debut this week should bring it wider attention. If it does, it will be absolutely warranted.

The Hunt for Bible John tells the story of Scotland's most notorious series of murders. In 1968 and 69, three young women were killed. All three had been dancing at Glasgow's Barrowland Ballroom, and all three were found beaten and strangled. The nickname came from witness reports of the killer quoting from the Bible. The murderer has never been caught.

In other hands, this could easily have become just another true-crime documentary, trading on nothing but cheap gratification and bloodlust. What's so impressive here is how keenly the series wants to fit the murders into a wider societal context. A long introductory tract is dedicated to the state of Glasgow in the 60s. Grim and dark and still bomb-damaged from the war, it is a city in total collapse. Running water is scarce, open drains burble human effluent in the streets. The one escape, we are told, is dancing. This took place in venues such as Barrowland: dark, heady clubs where young men and women could meet and forget the outside world.



All three victims had been dancing at Glasgow's Barrowland Ballroom. Photograph: Andrew Cawley/Alamy

The clubs were a hive of anonymity – married men apparently made a point of visiting, twisting off their wedding rings in the toilets then hitting on girls under assumed identities – which provided perfect cover for Bible John – a tall, well-spoken man who reportedly liked to recite Old Testament verse.

Reportedly is the key word. The secret of The Hunt for Bible John is that it isn't really about Bible John – we're shown a handful of suspects, but they're quickly tossed aside – but about how utterly out of their depths the detectives were. The purported iniquity of the dance clubs meant that witnesses were loth to reveal themselves. The media coverage of the murders quickly whipped up a fearful hysteria that spread across the city. To this day, nobody can be completely sure if all three murders were committed by

the same man.

The best parts of *The Hunt for Bible John* show the police's desperate attempts to try anything that could bring the murderer to justice. For the first time in Scottish history, newspapers ran an artist's impression of Bible John. He was the subject of one of Britain's first photofits. Places of worship were scoured, since you can't get a nickname like Bible John without regularly attending church. They created a psychological portrait of the man. They flew in a clairvoyant from Belgium. Anything that could possibly stick was tried, and all to no avail.

Fans of David Fincher might know where this is going. One key touchpoint here is *Zodiac* – a film about another real-life serial killer who was never caught – with the show even going as far as to use songs from its soundtrack. Another is *Mindhunter*, Fincher's series about the birth of the FBI's Behavioural Science Unit. *Mindhunter* depicted a crucial turning point in the understanding and capture of serial killers as we know them; their compulsions, their motivations, their patterns. If Glasgow detectives had had the benefit of this expertise, Bible John might not have managed to evade justice so effectively. But his murders took place just before this development, in a city that had been all but written off. The police never stood a chance.

With everything we have now – improved knowledge of serial killers and advances in forensic technology – surely many, if not all, of these murders could have been

prevented. This is the real message of *The Hunt for Bible John*, and it's chilling. Less than a week in and we already have the best true-crime documentary of the year. Now, please: nobody make me watch any more of them.

- *The Hunt for Bible John* is on BBC Two on Tuesday 4 January at 9pm and [is available via BBC iPlayer.](#)