



Almost Home: My Life Story

Damien Echols

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"Almost Home" is a message to you from a faraway place. It is a message from a 12-foot by 9-foot cell in a cinderblock building surrounded by coils of razor wire in the middle of a dirt field in Arkansas. It was written by a young man named Damien Echols and it chronicles his life and his experiences in a way that clearly illuminates him, not as a monster, but as a human being. For over 10 years Damien has been an inmate on death row for a crime he did not commit. He, along with Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley have become known as The West Memphis Three, and though the story of their arrest and conviction is widely known, most people don't know the real people behind the sound bites and the TV news segment clips. Damien has spent much of his time behind bars diligently maintaining his integrity and his sanity by writing. "Almost Home" is the product of that self-discipline, and in it you will meet someone who has survived an ordeal many of us would find impossible to live through. There are a few who still believe that Damien is a devil-worshipping child killer, but as time passes and more facts rise to the surface, it becomes even more clear that he is the victim of a peculiar species of hysteria. Read this book and know the truth about him. It is an urgent message from death row; the whole story of who Damien Echols really is.

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From Reader Review Almost Home: My Life Story for online ebook

Joe Juarez says

To tell you the truth, I have not followed news coverage of the West Memphis Three: Three young men accused of a brutal murder in Arkansas. Two were given life imprisonment and the supposed ring leader, Damien Echols was sent to death row. All claimed their innocence, but the people assumed that they were devil worshippers and cannibals and wanted justice done the American way: by taking their freedom away.

In 2011, they were granted their freedom, but I am sure they endured a hell that they didn't deserve. Echols, in his short autobiography (he wrote a couple more in the last few years), documented how a flawed Arkansas justice system sentence him to death.

As the book documented the way he was treated, he wrote that America's definition of freedom was misunderstood. Just because he wore all black, had long black hair, and had a love for heavy metal music, he was singled out by his hometown people. They thought that the American dream shouldn't be like that. They didn't care that he was brilliant person who was interested in history or Zen Bhuddism, they just cared that he was off the streets.

This book taught me that just because a person is different doesn't mean that he or she is a danger to society. They could be helpful. All that society has to do is listen.

Xanthi says

I wanted to read this book before I read Damien Echols 2nd autobiography "Life after Death", which I intend on reading very soon.

Despite this book being full of typos, this book was a riveting read. I realized that I am just 4 years older than Damien, so as I read this book, I reflected on where I was and what my life was like at the same time frame as he is describing his childhood and teen years. We both come from first world countries, living in dysfunctional homes, in poor areas. His level of poverty, however, made my mind boggle. It was a level that went far, far beyond my experiences and made me wonder how it could be in a nation as rich as the United States?

Then there was the level of religious fear and small mindedness of people against someone who looked different. Reading his take on living in the South in the 80's and 90's and being into heavy metal music, wearing black, and having gothic leanings (as I do) and how people in his town (police especially) reacted to that, just blows my mind. This was, after all, the 1980's and not the 1880s.

This book was definitely an eye opener and it was fascinating to read about who he is as a person and where he came from, how he coped on death row for 11 years (when this book was written), with the specter of execution hanging over his head.

I looked forward to reading next book, which I am told is very well written, intelligent, and powerful.

Leticia says

I have long known the story of the West Memphis Three. One of my friends was deeply into the cause, and,

some years ago, ran a film night at Adelaide's Mercury Cinemas, to raise money to help their legal battles. She did a fantastic job; but more to the point, that was the first time I had ever seen anything much about the story.

This book is a simple, passionate, peaceful autobiography by Damien Echols, writing about his version of events. It details his life up to the point where he was arrested, and after that only covers the aspects of his life that he wished to bring to the world. As he pointed out in the book, the story of the WM3 had already been more than ably covered by other books and documentaries.

The beauty of this novel lies in its simplicity. It reads like a letter, which in many ways is how it was written. You come to know Damien very personally, and as far as much autobiography goes, is devoid of ego. It is rare to read a text like this, and I suspect it has something to do with his perspective on the world after devoting himself to studies such as Buddhism, Zen, and many other philosophies. I won't go into the detail, but it was this section of the work in which much of the story really drew me in. I'm a sucker for that stuff.

Downside? As always, the errors, man, the textual, unnecessary errors!! Fuuck me drunk, I fear I will never read another beautifully edited book in my life. I hope I'm wrong.

Laren says

This is the story of Damien Echols' life as told by him. Damien Echols is the "ringleader" of the West Memphis Three (www.wm3.org) whose story was told in the HBO documentaries "Paradise Lost - The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" and "Paradise Lost 2 - Revelations". Other books have been written about the trial, etc. but this one primarily focuses on Damien's childhood before the trial. The trial is glossed over, as is much of his ten years so far on death row. The book was transcribed verbatim from his handwritten notes from jail, and no editing was done whatsoever. This is good, in that you get his own words, not "prettied up" to make him sound smarter than he is. This is bad in that sometimes the errors are distracting (a boy named Brian is alternately called Brain; suddenly a person's name will appear without introduction or background so you don't know who they are). The book is fairly enjoyable, although his childhood is rather appalling. Still, once he gets to the trial, the book becomes less than satisfying, especially since his case is still under appeals, and therefore could not be tied up in a pretty ending either way.

Jenn says

Having followed the story of the West Memphis Three for many years I was interested in reading Echols own words and learning more about his life firsthand. What I found was an interesting read that gave me a glimpse of what it was like for someone going into the prison system at such a young age. If you are looking for a literary masterpiece this is not the book for you, understandably Echols has been stunted in almost all possible ways. The word "magick" is found on almost every page and there were other things that I found distracting at times. I found Almost Home to be a sad book overall, Echols has no concept of what it's like to live as a free adult. That is deeply reflected in his writing (and I say that in the nicest way, as I don't blame him). Hopefully justice will soon be had for the WM3 as I feel Echols has much to offer society, he just needs to be able to live as a free man and come into his own.

Amy Lora says

He was me at that age. He has spent 18 years in jail for a crime he's not guilty of. I support the West Memphis 3.

Cheryl says

I devoured this book from the moment I began reading it. I have known about this case since I was 15 years old (i'm 31 now) and I have followed it closely.

It tells Damien's life story from childhood up until the book was published, he's honest about the many people who came in and out of his life & he's very open about the way he was treated by adults throughout his life.

I can say that this book, at times, made me feel a lot of different emotions from fury, shock, sadness but also it made me laugh out loud at some things & chuckle in recognition at others.

One thing he says in the book he that he has taught himself to be a good writer and that's exactly what it is, I know for sure if he published other things i'd read them, I found his writing to be intelligent, honest, clever and funny.

Katherine says

I've followed the case of the West Memphis Three since the boys were first convicted, so I was glad to finally get my hands on Almost Home. If you're not familiar with the story, however, this is not the place to start. Instead watch the HBO documentaries Paradise Lost and Paradise Lost II. Then read Mara Leveritt's book, Devil's Knot. There are plenty of other books and films to check out from there, and Almost Home is one of the worthwhile. But. There is a powerful section in Echols' book where he discusses his famous (infamous) journal passages which were used against him at trial and celebrated by some of his supporters. He laments that most people get to put their embarrassing angst-ridden teenage years behind them—they're remembered, if at all, only by those who were close to them at the time. But in Damien's case, his age-typical cheesy depressive love poetry and scribbles were published for the entire world and continue to be passed around to this day. (Thank you, Internet.) He basically says he feels mortified every time he sees or hears about those journal entries. And who wouldn't? I'm embarrassed by things I felt in my 20's, let alone my teens. In any case, Almost Home was written while Damien was still in prison, had been in prison since he was a teenager, and I feel like his lack of adult experience outside of penal institutions is apparent in this book. I give him a great deal of credit for the maturity and discipline he had cultivated all on his own by this point, but there are still plenty of little reminders that Damien's been isolated 23 hours a day for the previous 15+ years and may have missed some developmental stages for lack of exposure. I fear that he may now look back at this book with some of the same feelings he has about his teenage journals. Not to the same extreme extent, of course, but still. I'm really looking forward to reading Life After Death.

Steve says

I have been fascinated by this story since the documentary on HBO, Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills. The murders took place in a poor section of the south. Watching the fair and evenly based

documentary, we were able to draw our own conclusions. I listened to this kind of music, wore some black and had a slick hairstyle for the time. Just like The West Memphis Three, I was having fun with friends and listening to music. I did not worship the devil and neither did these three. They have since been set free after pleading the Alford plea. This is not ideal, but at least after 13 years, they are free. This book by Damien Echols is an intimate portrait of his life. Excellent. This has since been placed in moratorium and it is expensive, but, if you can find a copy (I did at a used bookstore, Bookmans in Tucson AZ, for \$9.95) buy it immediately, you won't be disappointed. If you can't find it, Damien just published his more recent life story, Life After Death, which is available on amazon and also worth buying.

Diana says

This book is intense and compelling.

Echols is a coherent and sympathetic writer; he states that he wishes to laugh when he laughs, cry when he cries, and feel his emotions, and this is something he manages to accomplish.

My interpretation of the book was not that he was presenting himself in too positive a light; indeed, there were many times I thought "God, what a jerk" and he himself used stronger epithets than that to describe his own behaviour.

But whatever else this book is, it's not an easy read. It's gripping and emotional, and sensitive readers are advised to take it in stages.

This is not a criticism of Echols. There was a time in his life when the family was so poor they were living in a one-room tin shack with a dirt floor and trying to grow their own food to survive, and as an intelligent but (in my opinion) sarcastic and misanthropic teen with "unusual" interests living in small town deep South, his life was ripped away from him at an appallingly young age by corrupt authorities.

The list of injustices that have happened on this case are appalling and the fact that these things could happen in America in the late 20th century are frightening. This book, the documentary Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills and the case should be required reading and knowledge for all junior high and high school students, all criminal justice students and law students.

Elizabeth says

I picked this book up because there's a poster in the library of Margaret Cho encouraging us to read and she's holding this book. I thought, if Margaret Cho likes it...

I'm a bit obsessed now. This is the autobiographical story of Damien Echols, sentenced to death row at the age of 19 for the murders of three eight year old boys outside the trailer park Damien lived in. there is no physical evidence connecting him, or his two "accomplices" to the crime scene, and in past years with more sophisticated DNA evidence, they have found evidence implicating others (including the step-father of one of the victims) but not Echols or the other two men convicted of the crime. His childhood story is quite compelling. I especially like his stories about experiencing with religion, and deciding to join the Catholic church. Coincidentally, it was his library books on wicca and other occult religions that were considered

major evidence in this case.

I highly encourage everyone to watch the HBO documentary on the trials as well.

Aurora Dimitre says

I... okay.

I've been learning... a lot about this case in the past month. And I think they're innocent. I mean, I probably wouldn't be giving Damien Echols five stars on Goodreads if I thought this book was a pack of lies. But the thing is--the thing is, out of the three, Damien Echols has always elicited the least emotion from me. I mean, I feel terrible about what he went through and all, but I never connected to him the way I connected to Jason, and I never felt for him the way I felt for Jessie.

Until this book. I mean, there are times when he's a little self-important and there are times (particularly in the chapter about the Buddhism) when he loses me. But a lot of the time, when he's talking about particular feelings--man, I get him. I connected to it. And this book, maybe it's 'cause I read it so closely, 'cause it is for research so I annotated the hell out of it, like you should see the sea of tabs, but it made me laugh (boy's funny!), and it made me tear up, I was near crying a lot of times.

I know that his other memoir, Life After Death, is pretty much this expanded, but I'm gonna read that one too. Because I mean--the story reads different if it's in a different length, or whatever. But yeah.

Yeah.

Neja says

I am following The west Memphis case for years now. I have seen 4 documentaries about this case and it just made me so sad. The amount of injustice, hate, unfairness...is sickening. I am happy for all three men, that they did get their freedom but it's 18 years too late and sadly, they are still labeled as guilty. It's so incredibly sad how everyone in Damien's life failed him...his family, the state, justice system, judge, lawyer, prison guards,... I loveeeed the way he described his wife, the love he feels for her and their relationship. They were meant to be. What a man! He really has a writing talent.

Kate says

Free the West Memphis Three.

Patty says

I rate this book 5 stars, not necessarily due to its being a literary wonder, but because of its subject matter. It is an autobiography by a young man (Damien Echols) currently sitting on death row in an Arkansas prison

for crimes he did not commit. In 1993 three young boys were brutally murdered in West Memphis, Arkansas. Damien Echols was one of three teenagers who were convicted of the murders, although there was no physical evidence connecting them to the crime. The convictions of Damien, Jessie Misskelley, and Jason Baldwin (referred to as the West Memphis Three) were the result of a Salem-esque witchhunt due to the community's grief and outrage at the murders of young Chris Byers, Michael Moore, and Stevie Branch. This autobiography is appropriately titled Volume One. Hopefully there will be a Volume Two after the release of Damien, Jessie and Jason. I am one reader who is eagerly awaiting Volume Two! To learn more about and follow the legal process to free the WM3, go to: www.wm3.org
