

# **TRUE DETECTIVE:**

AN INVESTIGATION

by

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True Detective is an hour-long serial narrative which functions as a layered, literary mystery novel for television. Ostensibly, the eight episodes are about an epic twenty-year hunt for a killer, but the true subject of the story is its two lead detectives, their families, and the changes and contradictions in their lives and characters over these two decades.

True Detective reinvents the procedural form using a unique, layered story structure which braids multiple time-periods and employs occasionally unreliable narration. Used in service of a novelistic story, these devices allow the series greater depth, human nuance, and sophisticated suspense than the genre has generally seen.

The first season of eight episodes details the twelve-year partnership between two Arkansas State Police Homicide Detectives, Hart and Cohle, in the northwest district of the Arkansas Ozarks. While dramatizing a variety of relationships and personal storylines over the years involved, the story structures itself around two cases in particular, believed to be the work of a bizarre killer who is captured and arrested by the detectives in 2000. That man subsequently killed himself in custody. Now, in 2010, the murder has happened again, in the same ways, involving aspects only the killer could know. Only the killer, or one of the men who caught him...

## **A UNIQUE STRUCTURE:**

The narrative is structured in TWO TIME-FRAMES. The first is a dramatization of 1990-2002; the majority of the series exists as the dramatization of three central cases which relate to the hunt for the killer, as well as the complications of Hart and Cohle's personal lives over those twelve years. The second time-frame is 2010; punctuating, intercutting, and sometimes undermining the central

dramatization are scenes of Hart and Cohle in 2010, each separately giving testimony in a police interrogation room. Through these interrogations, Hart and Cohle are our occasional narrators, sometimes commenting on the action we watch, sometimes contradicting it with their statements. The entwining of these separate elements offers special storytelling opportunities through its juxtapositions, and allows suspense to be mined from unexpected corners. For example, an almost constant tension should result from the unreliability of Cohle and Hart's narration when it doesn't accurately describe what we witness on screen.

Though complex, this will be easy to follow onscreen, because of all the visual signifiers available and the unique way voice-over will operate. People will be surprised at how easily they track events. In that way, True Detective is designed specifically for the television medium, exploiting its advantages in ways few shows attempt.

Two rules for clarity— 1) the narrating voice may lie, but the images we see never will. So an audience can be sure they know exactly what happened, and also that they can tell when one of the detectives is lying. 2) We do not see Cohle and Hart's interrogators until the sixth episode. The interrogation scenes are sparse, confessional in their austerity, somewhat in the style of Errol Morris-- a man speaking into a camera.

### **SUSPENSE:**

**A.)** A primary layer of suspense is created in the hunt for the killer and the personal lives of the detectives. **B.)** A secondary layer of suspense is created in 2010, as we try to understand exactly why the two detectives are being questioned. At first, we learn that Cohle and Hart's old files were lost in a flood at State HQ, and it seems current investigators want to pick their brains for old case notes, in light of this new killing. Then it becomes apparent that the 2010 investigators are looking at one of the former detectives for the current murder. Then we see that current investigators have valid reasons for their suspicions. **C.)** A third level of suspense is created when, about a fourth of the way into the story, the 2010 testimonies by the detectives start to contradict one another. Eventually, we'll learn that a central issue is whether the detectives falsified evidence against the

serial killing suspect in 2000, the suspect who killed himself in custody.

#### **HUMANISM:**

Part of the driving, underlying drama of the series is in learning how the Hart and Cohle depicted in the '90s become the men being interrogated in 2010, as each has changed significantly. As the main storyline finds drama in the procedural aspects of homicide investigation, it also mines the personal lives and the contradictions essential in these two men, Hart and Cohle.

In so far as the narrative is a calculated series of revelations, the series itself is a procedural, its subject a dissection of the characters of these two men as much as the hunt for a killer. The much larger subtext and theme for the show, however, is a sustained, intelligent exploration of relationships between men and women.

#### **TWO LEADS:**

**Martin Hart:** 36-56 (1990-2010) In 1990, Martin is a Detective Sergeant in Homicide for the CID of the Arkansas State Police, Company D, involving the most northwestern counties around the Ozarks. He is a large, muscular man, an ex-college athlete. Blunt, serious, and somewhat ignorant of his own character, in 1990, he's been married for twelve years to Margaret Hart, and they have two daughters, Macie, 7, and Audrey, 10. At the story's start, in 1990, he's been partnered with Rustin Cohle for three months and doesn't like him. Hart has served with CID for eleven years, and is a taciturn, protective man who also cheats on his wife, and is often absent from the lives of his family members. Much of the drama of Martin's personal life involves his daughters' crises as they grow up, and the eventual dissolution of his marriage in 2002. In the course of his story he vacillates between sins of personal betrayal and dramatic stabs at culturally convenient forms of redemption (discovering Christ, joining AA, etc.). Generally he falls back into who he always was— an obsessive, semi-intelligent alpha who heeds dangerous urges and tries to keep himself under control with philosophically empty and short-lived belief systems. Like Cohle, he becomes obsessed with the killer they're tracking, and possibly falsifies evidence against a suspect in 2000, a suspect who kills himself in custody. During the search for the killer, Hart becomes fascinated with a young prostitute who seeks him out when she's older, and they have an affair. In 2010, retired, he

is sober and successful as the founder and CEO of Paladin Securities, a private security firm in Little Rock.

**Rustin Cohle:** 31-51 (1990-2010) In 1990, Rustin Cohle is a recent arrival to CID Homicide, transplanted from Louisiana at the behest of the superintendent, though his fellow detectives don't understand why he's there. He doesn't make friends, doesn't drink, and the rest of the detectives don't care for him. Unknown to his coworkers, for the last four years Cohle had been conscripted into undercover narco work in Louisiana and Texas, in order to keep out of jail for infractions and criminal conduct as a police detective working robbery in Louisiana ('82-'84). Back in '85, when Cohle's two-year old daughter died in a car accident, his marriage collapsed and he spiraled: transferred from robbery to narco, started ripping off dealers, became an addict. Then, caught by IA, he was conscripted to the DEA and State Interagency Task Forces as a deep-undercover narc. Four years of that and he had a breakdown, was placed in an asylum, and when offered a Section 8 dismissal, he instead called in favors to get assigned to a state homicide unit (due to his undercover work, he can no longer operate in Louisiana). When the story starts, he's been partnered with Martin Hart for three months, and they have their first major case, a woman's body found posed in the forest, wearing wings. At the time, Cohle is living alone in a dismal studio apartment, without furniture or TV, only investigative textbooks, a mattress on the floor, a crucifix above the mattress. Smaller and much more cerebral than Hart, extremely well-read, he has a nihilistically pessimist philosophy toward life, which does not prevent him from speaking for the dead. He is more obsessed and a better investigator than Hart, but more unstable as a person. He vacillates between addiction and despair when not working a case, and the majority of his personal story through the years 1990-2000 is how he re-connects to human life, primarily through Martin's family. When Hart's marriage breaks up in 2002, Cohle is a significant reason why. In 2010, Cohle is retired, a part-time bartender and full-time drinker, steadily annihilating himself with booze and living in near total isolation in the rural Ozarks. He also owns a storage shed which he won't permit the police to search...

#### **EPISODES:**

**ONE:** *'Long Red Dark'* Through separate testimony being given in a police station in 2010, Martin Hart and Rustin Cohle narrate their early partnership in 1990, and finding the murder victim Dora Lange, whose body is discovered posed in a forest, with wings soldered on her back. We learn fragments of each detectives life at the time, as well as their lives now, in 2010. They haven't spoken to one another in eight years. They detail the early days of the investigation in 1990, and we learn that Cohle's daughter died almost five years earlier, that he rarely sleeps. It also appears that he at least occasionally is subject to low-grade hallucinations. Hart tells about having Cohle over for dinner to meet his family, and Cohle showing up drunk. In 1990, they visit the victim's ex-husband, who's in prison.

In 2010 both men voice a suspicion as to the cause of their questioning. Cohle has his interviewers fetch him a six-pack. He surmises that though they supposedly caught this killer in 2000 and he died, he's somehow killing again. Cohle implies that he is not surprised by this, indicating to his interviewers that he has a kind of leverage here which they had not suspected...

**TWO:** *'Seeing Things'* In 2010, Rust wants to see the files on the new murder, but his interviewers won't let him. Both detectives continue their testimony relating the investigation into the murder of Dora Lange. They visit the victim's Mother, her friend, and a Woman's Shelter, learn that Dora Lange came from poverty, had drug problems and at least occasionally prostituted herself. Though he doesn't admit it, in 1990 we learn that Hart is cheating on his wife with a young court reporter. He and Cohle fight about this, though neither mentions it in their testimony. Cohle develops a quasi-friendship with a prostitute from whom he buys barbiturates to help him sleep. From her, he learns of a co-op south of the county, where a number of prostitutes supposedly live. He and Hart check it out, learn that Dora Lange stayed there sometimes, and that she'd left a bag. Among other things in the bag, they find a kind of journal and a number of flyers for 'Friends of Christ', as though Dora had been meant to pass them out.

We learn that Cohle's erratic hallucinations are essentially chemical flashbacks; nueral fallout from all his time undercover, years of using hard drugs and living in extreme paranoia. He lives with the visions because he knows they're not real, and after a couple years clean they go away entirely. We learn that in 2010 Rust is a part-time bartender who drinks too much. Martin Hart voices his

suspicion that his interviewers are trying to jam one of them up—probably Cohle. We receive indications that Cohle is in some way gaming his interrogators.

In 1990, the two men seek out the 'Friends of Christ' worship hall, but the closest thing they find is a demolished church, only its outer walls standing. Inside is trash and rubble, and it looks like a dead end. But Rust spots, painted on one wall, a naked, female angel kneeling, her head down, an exact reproduction of the pose in which Dora Lange's body was discovered..

**THREE:** Through testimony and dramatization, the investigation continues, now with Hart and Cohle focused on tracking down the 'Friends of Christ'. They're able to, and only find a 'Christian Identity' traveling revival preacher and his family, now traveling through southern Missouri. A few weeks back, they had a revival in the field outside the burned-out church Hart and Cohle found at the end of episode two. They vaguely remember Dora Lange, but so many various people come through it's impossible for them to get to know them. Cohle and Hart become convinced that Dora's killer is someone who attended the revival worship in Arkansas, and they requisition all camera footage of the revival (the church videos some of its services for promotional purposes). Hart and Cohle find Dora Lange on the video, but they cannot see who is with her, if anyone.

After that, in 1990, the case starts going cold. They continue with it, but there are no major breaks.

The next year Hart's wife, Maggie, sets Cohle up with a woman she knows, Amy. They hit it off, and Cohle begins to live more normally.

Hart's oldest daughter starts high school the next year, and starts getting into trouble. Hart encounters a young prostitute he first met in episode two; she's older now, and they begin a strange friendship. His youngest daughter is becoming more introverted and obsessed with death, and he and his wife are growing more estranged.

The next year, Cohle and Hart receive a case involving a 13-year old girl who was burned alive—

In 2010 testimony, Cohle asks again to see the case files on the new murder. He reveals that the 1990 case of the 12-year old girl would re-open the Dora Lange case. That it gave the killer a chance to talk to them..

**FOUR:** In 1993, Hart and Cohle investigate the torture murder of the 12-year old girl, almost instantly solving it. \*This case is an analogue to the real-life murder of Shanda Sharer in Indiana in 1992. In that case the girl was

tortured and burned alive by four other girls, led by a ringleader. During the trial, and long history of child molestation and abuse involving several of the girls' families came out, and the case effectively decimated the small town. Cohle and Hart experience the same sequence of events during the investigation and the trial of the girls.

During 1994, the trial pushes Hart closer to the edge, and during the same time, a patrol officer brings his oldest daughter Audrey home late one night. She was caught parked in a car with two football players, their clothes off.

The trial and its associations cause Cohle to pull away from Amy and fall back into destructive behavior. He manages to stop his regression and repair his relationship to Amy, though he isn't in love with her, and fears that he's unable to be in love.

1996, Hart's marriage is becoming more fractured than ever. He sleeps on the recliner every night, and he barely talks to his wife. He has started having an affair with Beth, the young former-prostitute he first met in 1990. Cohle comforts Maggie Hart.

Cohle and Hart receive a letter at CID which purports to be from Dora Lange's killer. He admonishes the detectives for doing such a poor job, and indicates that he was familiar with some of the men recently involved in the girls' trials. He also indicates that he committed another murder and no one's connected it to him...

In 2010, Hart wants to know why his interviewers are looking at Rust.

In 2010, Cohle wants to know if his interrogators have any idea who he really is... He promises to talk if he can see the new case file.

**FIVE:** In 1998, Cohle and Hart figure out the new murder to which the killer's letter referred. A homicide outside of Mena, Arkansas. A woman found strangled, with black crow's wings attached to her. The local sheriff arrested her boyfriend and he's awaiting trial. Cohle and Hart talk to the boyfriend, learn that the dead woman had broken up with him weeks before, was seeing someone else, a man he didn't know, who didn't live around there. Cohle take over the case and re-open the Dora Lange case. The boyfriend is exonerated, and both detectives begin working around the clock.

The majority of the episode is spent on this investigation, moving from 1998-2000. Cohle and Hart both become more erratic. Hart's oldest daughter overdoses. His youngest has an eating disorder. Hart is obsessed with

Beth, and Cohle has begun using again, though neither talks about these things during their testimony. In the investigation they make significant headway and are able to tie the murders to a charity program sponsored by the Governor, involving several of his extended family members. The program works to encourage religious organizations into community outreach. After questioning all members of the organization and encountering bureaucratic resistance, when they have a field of possible suspects, a man confesses to the crimes, turning himself in...

In 2010, Cohle examines the case file on the new murder, obsessively, as if he were still on the case.

In 2010, Hart wants to hear what it is they think Cohle is guilty of. He is handed photographs of a grisly crime scene...

**SIX:** In 2000, Cohle and Hart take the man's confessions about the crimes. He's in his 50s, knows all the details, but something about it isn't right to Cohle..

Maggie discovers hard evidence of Hart's betrayals with Beth. She seeks out Cohle for comfort, and they begin an affair.

Amy breaks off with Cohle.

In custody, the man who confessed to killing the women hangs himself. This closes the two cases.

Maggie confronts Hart, tells him about her and Cohle. Hart strikes her. At CID, Cohle and Hart have a bloody fistfight, and their personal laundry is aired.

Cohle begins another downward spiral, swearing that they haven't caught the killer.

Hart insists on drug testing for Cohle, and buries him in accusations. Cohle is discharged from the force.

Hart quits a year later, when Beth leaves him for a man her own age, and he begins stalking the couple. His ex-wife and daughters no longer speak to him at this point. He discovers AA and joins the Promise Keepers, starts a private security firm.

In 2010, we see for the first time the two detectives doing the questioning of Cohle and Hart. They've shown Hart pictures of a gruesome crime scene that echose the Dora Lange murders. They tell Hart that they have eye-witness accounts of Cohle's car being in the area of the murder in the days around it—an area hundreds of miles from where he lives now. They begin to pointedly ask questions about Cohle's capacity for obsession and violence.

In 2010, Cohle has finished studying the new file, taking notes on it, and the interviewers begin to brace him

more aggressively, asking his whereabouts at the time of the crime, asking about his earlier testimony about possibly losing his mind, his 'visions'. They ask him if he ever blacks out, can't remember what he does...

This question gives Cohle pause.

The detectives want to look inside a storage unit he keeps outside the town where he lives. Without denying anything, Cohle says that without a court order he refuses to let them see what he keeps there...

The interviewers let Hart hear Cohle's refusal to cooperate, and for the first time he begins to believe that Rustin Cohle might have committed this new murder...

**SEVEN and EIGHT:** 'Antigonish' In the final two chapters, the timelines catch up to one another, and the entirety of the story takes place in 2010. Rust is exonerated when another killing occurs, and he and Hart renew their association after eight years. Cohle reveals that he never stopped looking for the killer, always supposing they had the wrong man. He discovered that the man who confessed had lung cancer, that he might have received money for his family in order to confess. Still obsessive, alone, we learn that Cohle is not nearly the burnt-out alcoholic that he appears, and he was in some ways playing the men interviewing him until they showed him what he wanted. Working part-time at a bar, with all his spare time he's been working old open cases. Rust reveals what's in his storage shed— it's entirely filled with facts and research pertaining to the Dora Lange killer, and we learn that Rust has been tracking him all over the country, and this is why Rust's car was spotted in the area of the most recent murder. He's getting close to pinpointing his movements, but he still doesn't have an identity for the killer. Since he hasn't been a cop for eight years, he doesn't have access to evidence. Until this interrogation--

Going back through his old files, something Cohle saw in the new case file makes him reconsider a piece of old evidence that seemed inconsequential at the time.

This leads the two men to the real killer, and a decades long cover-up of murder by power.

The men find the killer, but not without paying a high price.

## **SEASON TWO AND FRANCHISE POTENTIAL**

Part of the unique nature of True Detective is that it proposes a change in the way we think about series branding. Though Hart and Cohle's stories definitively end with season one, treating these eight episodes like a single novel, the story structure is the franchise signature. Every season is two major actors enacting a season-long epic narrative, with great cinematic directors and writing.

For example, season two could revolve around two female leads, say an I.A. investigator and a patrol officer, with two great film actresses, giving the narrative the chance to revisit its themes and concerns from the other side of the gender experience.

Due to the compression of time and terminal narrative, every season has enough reversals and revelations for an entire, multi-season run of any other show, as well as a depth and nuance of character usually reserved for literature and stage.