

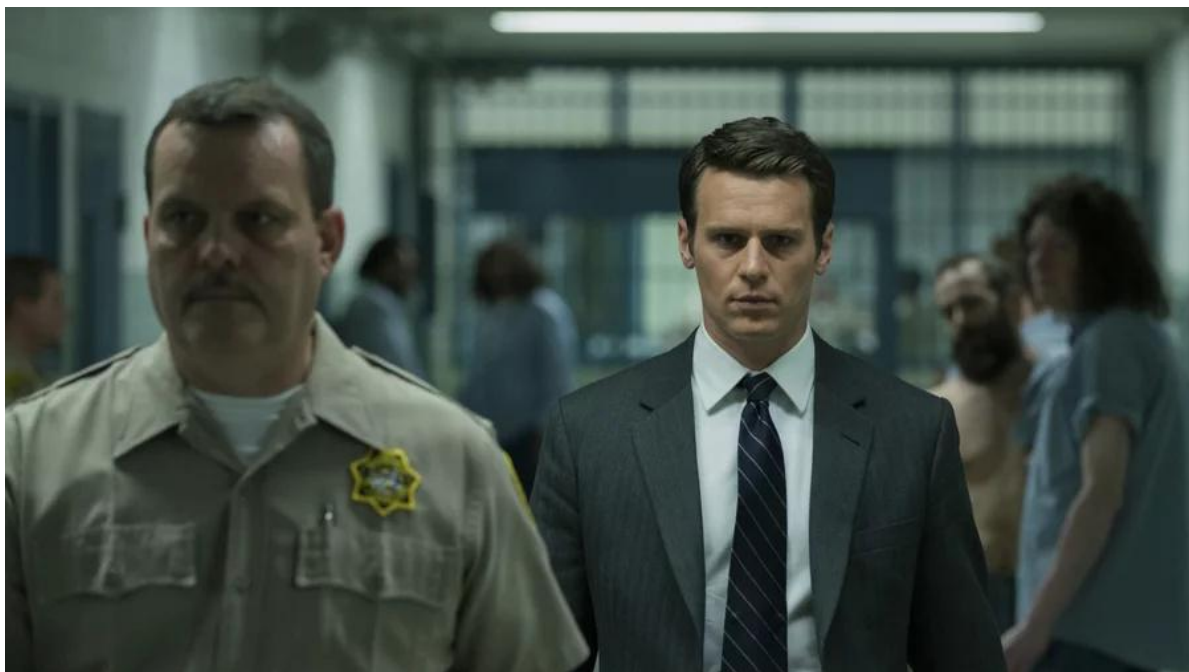
FBI Profilers Pursue Serial Killers And Their Motives In 'Mindhunter'

David Bianculli

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Contents

Transcript 5



Jonathan Groff plays a young FBI agent with bold new ideas about how to learn from imprisoned murderers in the Netflix series *Mindhunter*, which becomes available on Friday.

Patrick Harbron/Netflix

Producer-director David Fincher is attracted to stories and characters that are dark and complex. That's certainly true of *Mindhunter*, his new police drama series for Netflix — though the connections that led him there are pretty straightforward.

Way back in 1995, Fincher directed *Se7en*, the ultraspooky serial-killer drama starring Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman as detectives on the trail of a murderer played by Kevin Spacey.

Then, four years ago, Fincher directed the first two episodes of Netflix's *House of Cards*, starring Spacey — who, like Fincher, also served as an executive producer for the series.

Having helped to make Netflix into a respected player in original TV programming, Fincher returns to the network with a new drama about the hunt for serial killers.

Mindhunter begins in the late 1970s. It's adapted by Joe Penhall and based on a book with the same name by John E. Douglas and Mark Olshaker. Douglas is a real-life FBI investigator whose actual career is dramatized by one of the two protagonists at the center of the TV drama.

Jonathan Groff, who played Jesse on Fox's *Glee*, is Holden Ford, a young FBI agent with bold new ideas about how to learn from imprisoned murderers by interviewing them. Holt McCallany — who played the boxer on FX's *Lights Out* and was also one

of the boxers in Fincher's *Fight Club* movie — is Bill Tench, the veteran FBI instructor who thinks young Holden may be on to something.

But after Holden tests his theory by visiting Edmund Kemper III, the so-called Co-Ed Killer, in prison, their FBI boss, played by Cotter Smith, is furious — and threatens to demote and even fire Holden, until the veteran Bill speaks up to defend him and his approach.

This new approach to solving crime was novel in the 1970s, when the term "serial killer" had yet to be widely used. But on television, fighting for a new way to catch killers is nothing new. Discovery Channel did it earlier this year by showing the institutional battles that had to be fought so that the Unabomber could be hunted in a new way in the miniseries *Manhunt: Unabomber*.

Netflix's *Mindhunter* is the same type of story. There are crimes to be solved, but internal politics are just as big a part of the show. And for *Mindhunter*, an even bigger part is when the FBI agents visit prisons and sit down for intimate chats with the captured killers.

The first time is when Holden visits Edmund Kemper — a soft-spoken giant of a man played with unshakable creepiness by Cameron Britton. The real-life Kemper not only killed several people in succession but also murdered his own mother — and continued to take out his rage on her corpse. Yet to Holden, this chilling killer initially comes off as deceptively average ... until he doesn't.

Mindhunter is the story of the formation of the FBI criminal profiling unit, and the mysteries are less about murder than about motive. What drives the mass murderer to commit such awful acts, and can anything be done to predict and prevent them? After events as recent as the mass shooting in Las Vegas, these questions are almost painfully topical — even though this drama is set in the 1970s.

Holden, the central character, is almost entirely passive during the first two episodes. He's less dynamic and has less memorable lines of dialogue than his partner, his boss, his new girlfriend (a psychology graduate played by Hannah Gross) and certainly the first killer he gets to meet.

But I don't think that's a knock on Groff, who was a scene-stealer in *Hamilton* on Broadway as King George III. His character of Holden, like *Mindhunter* itself, is intended to reveal itself at a more deliberate pace. One of the show's major stars, Anna Torv from *Fringe*, doesn't even appear in the two episodes previewed for critics.

Netflix already has renewed the series for a second season, so *Mindhunter* can take its time. The opening hours, directed by Fincher, are fascinating, even while they're in no hurry to tell the origin story of the FBI profiler. There are a couple of montages in particular that are beautifully assembled, showing the two agents trying to teach their theories to local police who, for the most part, are resistant to them.

But their new approach is precisely what makes *Mindhunter* so compelling. Most TV crime dramas are whodunits. *Columbo* famously reversed things by starting with the murder, and making it a "How'd he get him?" *Mindhunter*, in contrast to both those approaches, is all about motive. It's a "Whydunit."

Transcript

TERRY GROSS, HOST: This is FRESH AIR. Netflix has another drama series premiering tomorrow, and it's one that has ties to "House Of Cards," the streaming service's first big, original success story. That series was executive produced and its first episodes directed by David Fincher. The same is true of this new series, which is called "Mindhunter." Our TV critic David Bianculli has this review.

DAVID BIANCULLI, BYLINE: Producer-director David Fincher is attracted, for the most part, to stories and characters that are dark and complex. That's certainly true of "Mindhunter," the new Netflix police drama series. But his path to get there is pretty straightforward. Way back in 1995, Fincher directed "Se7en," the ultra-spooky serial killer drama starring Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman who played detectives on the trail of a murderer played by Kevin Spacey.

Then four years ago, Fincher directed the first two episodes of Netflix's "House Of Cards," starring Spacey, who, like Fincher, also served as an executive producer. And now Fincher, the guy who helped make Netflix a respected player in original TV programming, returns to the network with a new drama about the hunt for serial killers.

"Mindhunter" begins in the late '70s. It's adapted by Joe Penhall and based on a book by John E. Douglas. Douglas is the real-life FBI investigator who, under another name, is one of the two protagonists at the center of this TV drama. Jonathan Groff, who played Jesse on Fox's "Glee," is Holden Ford, a young FBI agent with bold new ideas about how to learn from imprisoned murderers by interviewing them. Holt McCallany, who played the boxer on FX's "Lights Out" and was also one of the boxers in Fincher's "Fight Club" movie, is Bill Tench, the veteran FBI instructor who thinks young Holden may be on to something.

But after Holden tests his theory by visiting the so-called coed killer in prison, their FBI boss, played by Cotter Smith, is furious and threatens to demote and even fire Holden until Bill, the veteran, speaks up to defend him and his approach.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "MINDHUNTER")

HOLT MCCALLANY: (As Bill Tench) Sir, permit me to speak. I trained Holden because he was transferred to my department. He knows his criminal psychology. He's done his homework, worked his butt off, and now I think he's on to something.

COTTER SMITH: (As Shepard) On to what? He made friends with the coed killer.

MCCALLANY: (As Bill Tench) If any of this is going to work, we need to talk to more subjects.

SMITH: (As Shepard) More? No, no, no. What's next, Charles Manson? When's he booked for?

JONATHAN GROFF: (As Holden Ford) We were thinking June.

MCCALLANY: (As Bill Tench) I think it's right. We need to use whatever resource...

SMITH: (As Shepard) Resource, my ass, Bill. What's the matter? You bored with golf?

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) California jails are full of thrill killers and lust murders.

SMITH: (As Shepard) And we put them there. That's our job.

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Dying and rotting on the vine.

SMITH: (As Shepard) Cry me a river, Holden - all the wasted potential.

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) It is wasted potential, sir. It is, because we could be using these people.

SMITH: (As Shepard) Using how?

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Their knowledge and insight.

SMITH: (As Shepard) Of what?

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Themselves.

SMITH: (As Shepard) Who's selves?

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Then we might know what we're talking about when we speak to other law enforcement.

SMITH: (As Shepard) Can you make him shut up?

MCCALLANY: (As Bill Tench) I have not been able to do that, sir. How do we get ahead of crazy if we don't know how crazy thinks?

BIANCULLI: This new approach to solving crime was novel in the '70s, when the term serial killer had yet to be widely used. But on TV, fighting for a new way to catch killers is nothing new. Discovery Channel did it earlier this year by showing the institutional battles that had to be fought so that the Unabomber could be hunted in a new way in the miniseries "Manhunt: Unabomber." Netflix's "Mindhunter" is the same type of story. There are crimes to be solved, but the internal politics and policies are just as big a part of it.

And for "Mindhunter," an even bigger part of it is when the FBI agents visit prisons and sit down for intimate chats with the captured killers. The first time is when Holden visits Edmund Kemper, the coed killer, a soft-spoken giant of a man played with unshakable creepiness by Cameron Britton. The real-life Kemper not only killed several people in succession but murdered his own mother, then continued to take out his rage on her corpse. Yet, to Holden, this chilling killer comes off as deceptively average, until he doesn't.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "MINDHUNTER")

CAMERON BRITTON: (As Edmund Kemper) I was a regular guy most of my life with a nice home, nice suburb. I had pets. I went to a good school. I was a thoughtful, educated, well-brought-up young person. There's no question about it. But at the same time, I was living a vile, depraved, entirely parallel other life filled with debased violence, and mayhem, and fear and death.

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Wow. Certainly seems to me like you had your own unusual...

BRITTON: (As Edmund Kemper) An unusual MO - well, sure

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Well, I was going to say signature.

BRITTON: (As Edmund Kemper) Or an oeuvre, if you will. You can study it. You could spell oeuvre, can't you, Holden? You know, there's a lot more like me.

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) Do you think so? People that kill in sequence like you did...

BRITTON: (As Edmund Kemper) A sequence.

GROFF: (As Holden Ford) One right after another at regular intervals. I've just been calling them sequence killers, if you will.

BIANCULLI: "Mindhunter" is the story of the formation of the FBI profiling unit, and the mysteries are less about murder than about motive. What drives the mass murderer, in particular, to commit such awful acts? And can anything be done to predict and prevent them? After events as recent as the mass shooting in Las Vegas, these questions are almost painfully topical, even though this drama is set in the '70s.

Holden, the central character, is almost entirely passive during the first two episodes. He's less dynamic and has less memorable lines of dialogue than his partner, his boss, his new girlfriend, a psychology graduate played by Hannah Gross, and certainly, the first killer he gets to meet. But I don't think that's a knock on Jonathan Groff, who was a scene stealer in "Hamilton" on Broadway as King George III. His character of Holden, like Mindhunter itself, is intended to reveal itself at a more deliberate pace.

One of the show's major stars, Anna Torv from "Fringe," doesn't even appear in the two episodes previewed for critics. But Netflix already has renewed the series for a second season, so "Mindhunter" can take its time. The opening hours, directed by Fincher, are fascinating, even while they're in no hurry to tell the origin story of the FBI profiler. There are a couple of montages in particular that are beautifully assembled, showing the two agents on the road, trying to teach their theories to local cops and detectives who, for the most part, are resistant to them.

But their new approach is precisely what makes "Mindhunter" so compelling. Most TV crime dramas are whodunits. "Columbo" famously reversed things by starting with the murder and making it a how'd-he-get-him. "Mindhunter," in contrast to both those approaches, is all about motive. It's a why-done-it.

GROSS: David Bianculli teaches TV and film history at Rowan University. His latest book, "The Platinum Age Of Television: From I Love Lucy To The Walking Dead, How TV Became Terrific," is now out in paperback. Mindhunter begins tomorrow on Netflix.

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(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "PSYCHO KILLER")

TALKING HEADS: (Singing) I can't seem to face up to the facts. I'm tense and nervous, and I can't relax. I can't sleep 'cause my bed's on fire. Don't touch me. I'm

a real live wire. Psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est? Fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa - better run, run, run, run, run, run, run away. Oh, oh, psycho killer, qu'est-ce que c'est? Fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa-fa - better run, run, run, run, run, run, run away. Oh, (vocalizing). You start a conversation. You can't even finish it. You're talking a lot, but you're not saying anything. When I have nothing to say, my lips are sealed. Say something once, why say it again?

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