
Dirty John

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Dirty John is the crack cocaine of podcasts. Just ask any one of the five million listeners who were hooked on the series within the first three weeks of its launch.

Dirty John has all the elements of a great story – a dodgy con artist with a dubious past, a wealthy four-time divorcee looking for love, family machinations, rumours and lies, major manipulation AND a dead body – all set against the uber-wealthy backdrop of Newport Beach in Orange County South of Los Angeles, where the rich, beautiful and botoxed live. The first episode begins with a dead body. But this is no ordinary cadaver, it's one that has been stabbed 13 times. We don't know who the body belongs to – and L.A. Times reporter Christopher Goffard keeps us guessing all the way through to the last episode.

The best thing about this wunderkind of podcasts (launched in October 2017 along with the L.A. Times print version) is that it is based on a true crime, as told by Goffard, who first came across the story when he learnt that the cops were investigating a 'possible' murder in Newport Beach.

The story centres around two main characters: John Meehan (who was known as 'Dirty John' at university) and successful 59-year-old businesswoman Debra Newall, who runs an interior-design business.

They met on an Internet dating site for the over 50s. To Debra, John Meehan sounded like a good catch and ticked all her boxes – handsome, Christian and a medical professional.

"John Michael Meehan had thick dark hair and a big warm, friendly smile that invited trust. If you saw his smile on a billboard, you would want whatever he is selling," says Goffard in the first episode, titled The Real Thing.

The first date wasn't that successful, with John displaying some seriously odd behaviour (being overtly taken with her mattress, it seems) and being a bit too touchy feely, but Newall was willing to give him another chance. "By the second or third date," notes Gifford, "he was telling her he loved her, that he wanted to marry her."

Apparently, she ended up not minding his (many) "idiosyncrasies", which included wearing his grubby medical scrubs out at every occasion. As Goffard reports, "some people snickered, but she thought, 'busy doctor'."

Enter Debra Newall's family – daughters Jacquelyn, Nicole and Terra, her mom Arlene and her nephew Shad Vickers. Pretty soon the 'red flags' start flying as mom's new boyfriend doesn't exactly win them over.

The podcast is riveting because of its incredible production value. It consists of interviews with each of the characters – from Debra Newall talking about her hopes and dreams for her marriage, to John and the hushed tones of meek and mild Terra, the youngest daughter who is a dog groomer and known for her fragile spirit (well, apart from her fixation with zombies and how to survive an apocalyptic event).

We hear stories from other characters: John's first wife, Tonia Sells, nephew Shad, who has his own tragic story to tell, and John Dzialo, the attorney. There is something truly intimate in listening to the comments and opinions of those involved. This feeling of actually 'knowing' the character, as well as a perfectly timed violin soundtrack, make for fabulous listening and theatrical storytelling.

The layers of the story are, of course, deliberate, all thanks to Goffard who, according to Rolling Stone, spent seven months reporting the story and then another three months writing and recording with the podcast network, Wondery. While there are

differing opinions on which is best – the print feature series or the podcast – one can't deny that either or both are simply addictive.

In his Rolling Stone interview, Goffard says: "It's reinvigorated my love of storytelling in ways that I could not have expected." He says, "I think the structure of Dirty John owes a lot more to the stuff I absorbed as a kid – like old-time radio suspense dramas and anything with Orson Welles – than any of the current podcasts I enjoy." (In the same vein, many over-the-age-of-40 South Africans might recall huddling around the radio listening to Springbok Radio's "Squad Cars".)

What began as an intriguing crime story "grew and grew", Goffard says, to an "all-consuming" deep dive. "One success begets another, you know? One person opens up and that opens another door and that opens another door."

Certainly, as each door opens, the layers to the story become more and more evocative and the sense of dread that something dark and dreadful is just around the corner keeps you listening.

In an article in the New Yorker titled Journalism as Noir, writer Sarah Larson comments that Goffard's exhaustive reporting, from extensive audio interviews to archival sound bites and 911 calls, adds to the "deep dive" into the story.

She says, "The story is so crazy and terrifying that if it were fiction you might not find it plausible."

"It's a story that needed to be told," says Christopher Gifford in an NBC interview.

"It's a psychologically interesting story and it strikes a chord in people because a lot of people have dealt with a version of John Meehan in their life. Not that extreme, but we have all had somebody we loved who was in a relationship that was self-destructive and we begged and pleaded but they couldn't get out of it and the ending takes people by surprise."

I guess you'll have to listen all the way to the end to find out what happens. I promise it won't be hard, and once you're done you'll be scrounging for more of the same.

Visit: <http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-dirty-john/>

Dirty John was produced and created by the L.A. Times and Wondery.