
West Cork by Audible

Author: Alistair Duff

West Cork, named after the Irish region in which the events take place, is the latest in a series of true crime stories developed for podcast. As a genre, there is an ever-growing selection, some good and some less so. As with most entertainment enterprises the challenge is to offer something new, unique, outstanding to rise above the burgeoning mass of choice. West Cork manages this challenge with ease and is likely to have caused a few late arrivals to work, or delayed several nights' sleep. It is both intriguing and immersive to a far greater extent than the majority of its predecessors.

To begin, it is important to recognise that West Cork was seen as an idyllic place somewhat apart from the world, not only in distance but even more so in lifestyle.

The rural setting was seen as an escape from the world. Its country charm and close community had begun to attract not only those seeking an easy life, but also successful business people and celebrities seeking a return to a simpler time. It is not the type of scenario in which murder was even a consideration, until one night in 1996 when everything changed forever.

The victim was French film director Sophie Toscan du Plantier, one of the public figures who saw her home in Schull, a village in West Cork, as her retreat. Her body was found severely beaten, stabbed and abandoned on a remote street near her farm. It was a tragedy that would become the most infamous murder case in Irish history. To this day, no suspect has been charged and it is by no means a closed investigation. As such, it remains in the minds of the Irish populace, unresolved and a blight on law enforcement and, to a degree, their society as a whole. This untenable situation is made no easier by the fact that the prime suspect still lives among them.

As the crime was as recent as 1996, it is still possible to question the majority of those involved or affected by the killing. This is the key strength of the series which, like many, makes use of exhaustive investigation, although it is done with the real participants and allows the audience a persistent "fly on the wall" experience. This approach successfully entrenches the listener in West Cork, its people, their way of life and the radical change that resulted from the murder. We are also given unrestricted access to the number one suspect whose craving for attention makes his contribution almost overpowering while, more often than not, leaving more questions than actual answers.

The story that emerges is quite simply incredible as the combination of a wily suspect, an ineffectual police force at times crossing the line to resolve the matter, and a community genuinely unprepared for such an eventuality begin to interact. As with many such podcasts, the creators openly admit to changes in chronology, but it is done seamlessly in West Cork, allowing for an effective and gradual understanding of the matter at hand. There is no better instance of an audience joining the investigation and progressing through it with the narrators.

The story is narrated by the creators, Jennifer Ford, a documentarian and Sam Bungey, an investigative reporter, and they collaborate to great effect. Their explanations are very human, contrite, and honest. We are privy to their deliberations, to the succession of rabbit holes they disappear into without success, and to the genuine interactions they share with the people of West Cork.