

SEASON ONE · EPISODE FOUR

The Performer

A boy who spent his whole life as a story someone else was telling.

THE CASE, IN BRIEF

This episode turns to Richard Loeb, the charming one, the one with the mystique. A boy who learned very young that the constructed version of himself was safer than whatever was underneath.

Loeb left almost no record in his own words: no diary, no memoir, flat answers in his confession. The facts below come largely from psychiatrists paid by his family to save his life, examining a young man who had spent that life performing. Hold the source in mind as you read.

◇ BORN

1905, third of four sons. His father rose to vice president of Sears, Roebuck. A family friend called them “really decent people.”

◇ THE GOVERNESS

Emily Struthers shaped a decade of his life, pushed him hard, and isolated him. He revered her and lied to her constantly.

◇ ARTIFICIAL SITUATIONS

His own phrase, to the psychiatrists, for fabricated scenarios maintained for weeks. He came to struggle to tell which of his stories were true.

◇ THE FANTASY

Hidden detective magazines and a consuming inner life as a master criminal, one step ahead of the detectives sent to catch him.

◇ THE RANSOM LETTER

Closely tracked a story in a magazine Loeb subscribed to. Reporters noticed the day after Bobby’s body was found. Loeb denied it.

◇ HIS DEATH

Killed at Stateville in 1936, at thirty. The only account came from the man who killed him, and was the version a jury accepted.

His best pal, and the greatest enemy he had ever had. Both, in the same sentence, neither resolved.

The episode ends by turning the question on the listener: the pull toward Loeb, the hour spent trying to understand him, may be exactly the audience he spent his whole life needing.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 The episode describes Loeb learning, as a small child, that the safest self is a constructed one. Have you ever built a version of yourself for someone whose approval mattered enormously? Did the construction ever start to feel more real than what was underneath?
- 2 The episode raises the possibility that Leopold, not Loeb, may have been the more driving force, and notes that Leopold's version survived longer. Does knowing that change how you've thought about this case? Does the person who outlives the story get to own it?
- 3 The episode refuses to decide whether Loeb's kindness in prison was genuine or simply his performance adapting to a new environment. Is there a meaningful difference between a person who performs kindness consistently for years and a person who simply is kind? Does it matter if you can't tell?
- 4 The psychiatric record describes Loeb as emotionally infantile, but it was produced by paid witnesses, from material Loeb supplied, to save his life. How much weight should we give clinical conclusions drawn under those conditions? How do we decide when expert testimony is evidence and when it's advocacy?
- 5 The episode draws a parallel between Emily Struthers and Nathan Leopold, two figures who functioned as the primary audience for Loeb's performance. Do you buy that parallel? What does it suggest about what Loeb was actually getting from each of those relationships?
- 6 We ended by asking whether our own fascination with Loeb is itself what he spent his life producing. Do you feel like you understand him better after this episode, or like you were given a more sophisticated version of the same performance? Is there a way to know?

There are no answers printed here, and that is deliberate. The show resolves no one. If your group lands somewhere certain, it is worth asking what the certainty is built on.

FURTHER READING

A short, opinionated list on the case. The accounts disagree with each other in places, which is part of the point. Where they conflict, sit with the conflict rather than picking a winner.

Leopold and Loeb: The Crime of the Century

Hal Higdon · 1975, centenary edition 2024

The thorough, patient standard account. Higdon stays genuinely interested in the question the case never answers: which of the two actually killed Bobby Franks.

For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Jazz Age Chicago

Simon Baatz · 2008

A vivid, narrative reconstruction that sets the crime against the speakeasies and excess of 1920s Chicago. A New York Times bestseller and Edgar Award finalist.

The Leopold and Loeb Files: An Intimate Look at One of America's Most Infamous Crimes

Nina Barrett · 2018

Built around primary documents, including confessions, letters, and psychiatric reports, letting the record speak with less narration between you and it.

Compulsion: A Novel

Meyer Levin · 1956

The famous semi-fictionalized telling, by a writer who knew Leopold at the University of Chicago. Useful precisely for the questions a novel can raise and a history cannot settle.

Clarence Darrow's closing argument

Cook County courtroom, August 1924

Widely reprinted and available in full online. The most significant piece of rhetoric the case produced, and worth reading knowing it was delivered by a man fighting to keep two clients alive.

Re:Examined is a podcast that examines historical crimes through psychological and social lenses. The host is not a medical, mental health, or legal professional, and nothing in this guide is professional advice. The historical record on this case is incomplete and sometimes contradictory; where the facts are murky, the show says so.