

SEASON ONE · EPISODE FIVE

Bobby Franks

Present in every episode, named in every discussion, and never once given the floor.

THE CASE, IN BRIEF

The season finale turns to the boy who got in the car. Four episodes were spent with the two men who killed him. This one is spent with Bobby Franks, and with why the record kept so little of him.

The shortness of the facts below is the point of the episode. Leopold and Loeb generated hundreds of pages because two legal teams needed them to. Nobody needed Bobby Franks's interior life for anything, so the excavation never happened for the boy they killed.

◇ ROBERT FRANKS

Born 1909, youngest of three children of Jacob and Flora Franks. Bobby to everyone who knew him.

◇ THE NEIGHBOR

A distant cousin of Richard Loeb's, living across the street. They had played tennis together more than once.

◇ HIS SIBLINGS

A sister, Josephine, three years older. A brother, Jack, two years older, sixteen when Bobby died.

◇ MAY 21, 1924

Fourteen years old, walking home from the Harvard School. He recognized a familiar face in a passing car and got in to talk about a tennis racket.

◇ THE DEBATE

Two weeks before he died, he argued capital punishment on his school debate team. His mother later cited his view when she declined to ask for death.

◇ WHAT SURVIVES

An inquest, a funeral notice, a handful of newspaper paragraphs. Most of what's written about him fits in a chapter of someone else's book.

His blessed little pal, his guiding star. A dedication his brother addressed to him, in the present tense, two years after he was gone.

A genre built on sitting with contradiction will always have less use for the one person in the story who supplies none. The episode turns that observation into a question for the listener.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 This episode argues that the historical record itself, not just storytellers, is asymmetrical, with far more material preserved about Leopold and Loeb than about Bobby Franks. How much of that asymmetry is structural, and how much is a choice made by the people retelling this story afterward?
- 2 The episode asks directly why you kept listening through four episodes about the killers. Sit with your own honest answer for a moment. What does it tell you about what holds your attention in a story like this?
- 3 Flora Franks told a reporter her son had said capital punishment was wrong, and that she couldn't ask for it once she'd lost him, while at least one other family member disagreed. What do you make of a grieving mother building her public response around what she believed her son would have wanted?
- 4 The episode argues that ambiguity, not innocence, is what true crime storytelling is built to hold, and that this structurally disadvantages victims like Bobby, who left behind no contradiction to explore. Do you agree, or does that explanation let the genre off too easily?
- 5 This show spent four episodes resisting the urge to flatten Leopold or Loeb into a simple monster. Should the same caution apply to how we talk about victims, resisting the urge to flatten them into pure innocence? Or is that comparison itself part of the problem?
- 6 If you could ask the people who actually knew Bobby Franks one question, his brother Jack, his sister Josephine, a friend from school, what would you want to know that the historical record never thought to ask?

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. They spend most of their pages on the two killers, which is the very asymmetry this episode is about. Read them with that in mind.

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.