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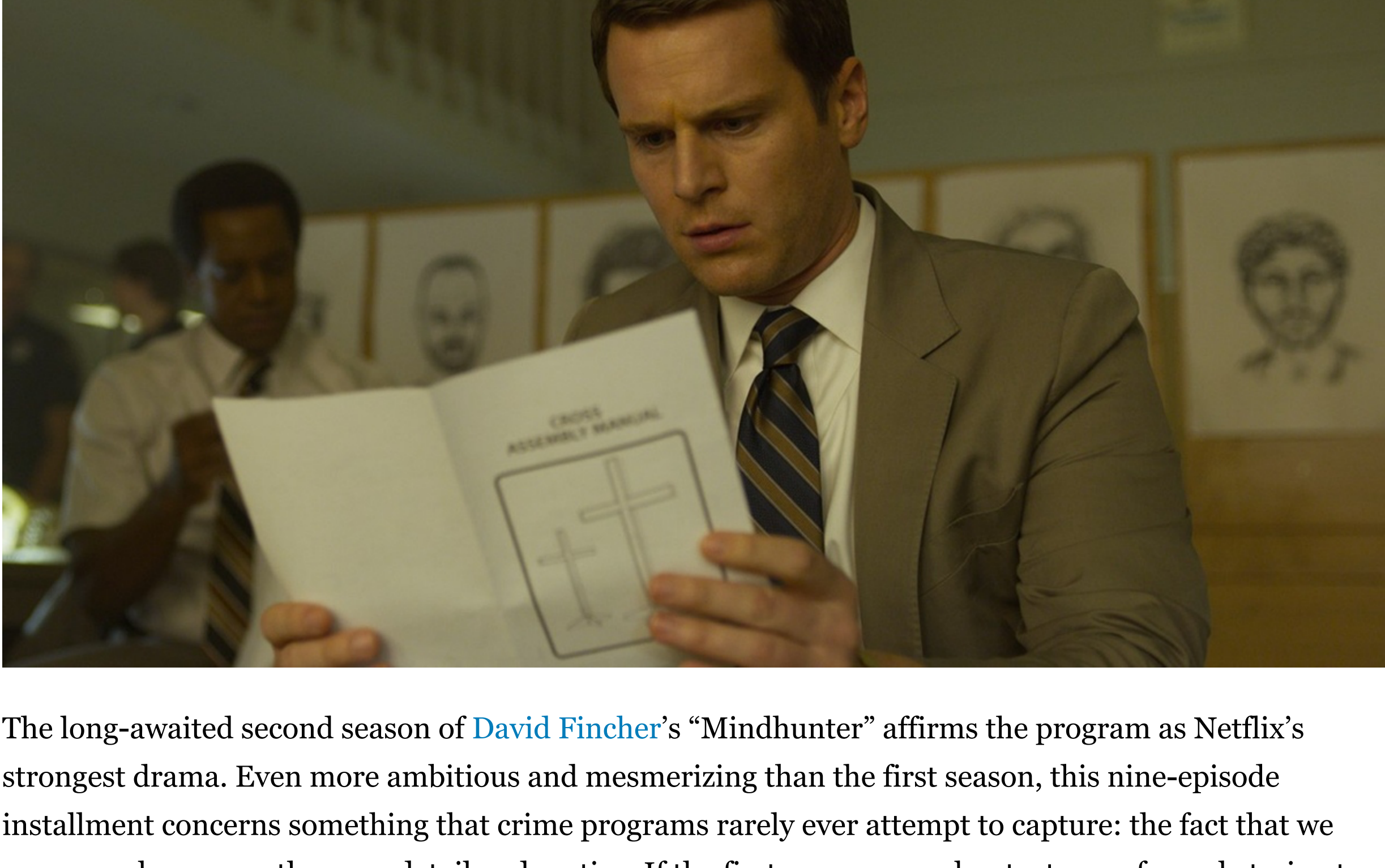
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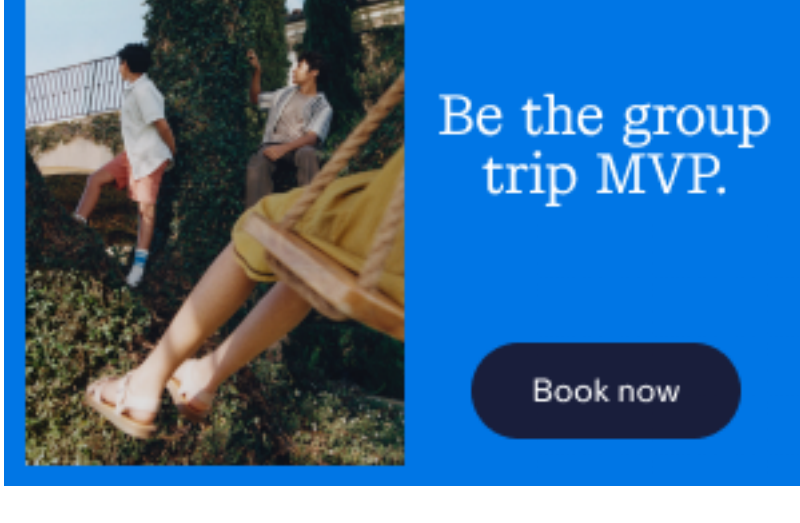
TV/Streaming

Mindhunter Stakes Claim as Netflix's Best Drama

 **Brian Tallerico** August 16, 2019 5 min read



The long-awaited second season of [David Fincher's](#) “*Mindhunter*” affirms the program as Netflix’s strongest drama. Even more ambitious and mesmerizing than the first season, this nine-episode installment concerns something that crime programs rarely ever attempt to capture: the fact that we can never know exactly every detail and motive. If the first season was about a team of people trying to find a better way to profile murderers, the second is about how much will always remain unknown. Fincher and his writers very purposefully filter the fictional part of their story through cases with variables that remain divisive to this day, especially that of the Atlanta Child Murders, for which Wayne Williams was convicted but many consider unsolved in its entirety. If season one was about trying to get closer to certainty, season two is about the truth that doubt will always remain. Doubt that the murderer didn’t get away; doubt that we can truly know our partners or children; doubt that anyone can ever be certain of the size of the gap between us and the dark side.



The season picks up right after the end of season one with Holden Ford ([Jonathan Groff](#)) shaken after the panic attack he had after visiting Edmund Kemper. He puts himself back together quickly after learning that the Behavioral Sciences Unit he’s heading with Bill Tench ([Holt McCallany](#)) and Wendy Carr ([Anna Torv](#)) has a new ally in a position of power, Ted Gunn ([Michael Cerveris](#)). With more freedom to do their work, the unit dives back into interviewing serial killers in an effort to uncover their motives and pathologies. The opening of the season focuses a lot on ritual, especially as Tench is called in to investigate the BTK Killer (who we see even more of in prologue sequences like last season). Why do killers take souvenirs? Why do they return to the scene of the crime? Why do they write letters and give themselves names? And why do some victims become killers? Early episodes include interviews with people like Tex Watson, who killed on Manson’s orders, and Elmer Wayne Henley, who was almost a victim of Dean Corll’s before becoming his lover and procuring victims for him. How do you profile these men who were more persuaded to become serial killers than fit the Ford model of sexual sadism?



All three of our protagonists get pulled away from their work by different forces. We spend a lot of time in a new relationship with Wendy in a subplot that doesn’t quite pay off like I wished it would, but does offer Torv a chance to do solid character work with a part that’s still underwritten. More effective is the arc of Bill Tench this season, which I won’t remotely spoil but fits in perfectly with the show’s overall themes about how difficult it can be to truly know someone’s motives. And this theme echoes in season two’s story of Holden Ford, which tells the investigation of the Atlanta Child Murders in 1981.



From 1979 to 1981, young boys were being murdered in Atlanta. In the show’s version of this case, which is slightly different than the real one, Holden Ford assists with every aspect of the investigation, being drawn into the case by a group of mothers with missing children (John Douglas, the inspiration for Ford, did notoriously profile the case but the quasi-fictional Ford feels far more hands-on than reality). Using what he’s learned, Ford quickly becomes convinced in his profile of the suspect as a young black male, despite evidence that the KKK may be involved. And so the question that lingers from there on out is if he is pushing the investigation to meet his profile or if his methods are actually solving the case. In the real world, Wayne Williams was charged with two murders, and officials closed the investigation, but someone, possibly Williams, possibly not, killed at least 26 other people. There’s still a great deal of controversy around the case.

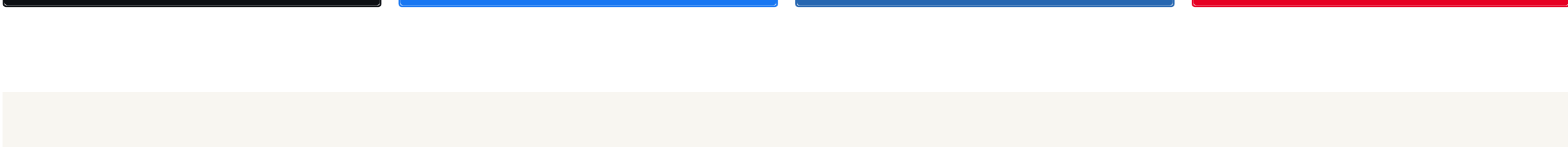
Once again, “*Mindhunter*” is as tight as television gets in terms of craft. The first three episodes were directed by Fincher himself, marking his first work behind the camera since the last season. The stunning mid-section is directed by [Andrew Dominik](#) (“[The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford](#)”) and the season is closed out by [Carl Franklin](#) (“[One False Move](#)”). There’s no fat on this season, even though so much of it defies what we’ve come to expect from a crime show. The biggest difference is the lack of visualization of murder. We see crime photos. We hear interviews. But we don’t see recreations of crime. A majority of the approaches to this story would include visualization, but “*Mindhunter*” is stronger by keeping viewers with the POV and knowledge base of its protagonists. The interview scenes are so vibrant—and often based on real interviews—that we can sense the danger even more strongly than if the show tried to bring it to life with actors.

Speaking of actors, they’re all once again great, but the season belongs to McCallany, who captures a man stuck in a nightmare. Season one Bill Tench was a bit of a straight man, the Joe Friday to Holden’s more extreme tendencies, and he’s still the more old-fashioned of the two, but McCallany finds the vulnerability in the stoic demeanor. This season Tench goes through one of those situations in which work comes way too close to home. It first seems a bit overwritten, but McCallany sells it and then it ties back in a way that feels thematically satisfying.



Crime shows are a billion-dollar business, but most of them exist to comfort us. Sure, there may be grisly activity on something like “*Criminal Minds*,” but the bad guy usually gets caught. That’s one of the reasons shows like that are so reliable—people like closure. The real world doesn’t give us much of that. And that’s what makes “*Mindhunter*” so captivating. It defies traditional storytelling, accepting the unknown in ways that remind me of Fincher’s masterpiece, “[Zodiac](#).” Holden Ford and [Robert Graysmith](#) are men who seek answers but become myopic through their obsession. Great fiction has been written about people who find the abyss looking back at them when they stare at it for too long. That was season one of “*Mindhunter*.” Season two asks: what if we’re all in the abyss, just fumbling around in the dark, never quite sure what we can hold onto?

Whole season screened for review.




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Brian Tallerico is the Managing Editor of RogerEbert.com, and also covers television, film, Blu-ray, and video games. He is also a writer for *Vulture*, *The Playlist*, *The New York Times*, and *GQ*, and the President of the Chicago Film Critics Association.


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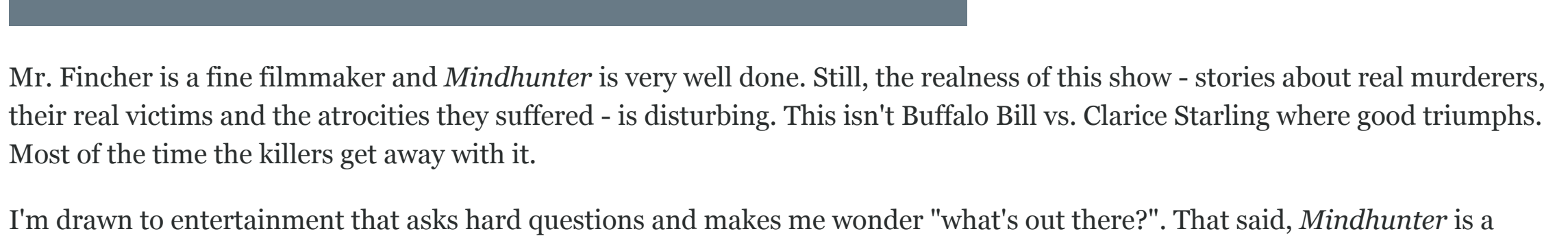


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 **Ken R.** 3 years ago edited
Mindhunter is very real and very dark.

I've read about most of the actual serial killers portrayed in *Mindhunter*, and watching this series is kind of like reliving these events that I read about or saw on the news all those years ago. Details were usually left out of the news stories back then.

*** SPOILER DISTURBING ***



Mr. Fincher is a fine filmmaker and *Mindhunter* is very well done. Still, the realness of this show - stories about real murderers, their real victims and the atrocities they suffered - is disturbing. This isn't Buffalo Bill vs. Clarice Starling where good triumphs. Most of the time the killers get away with it.

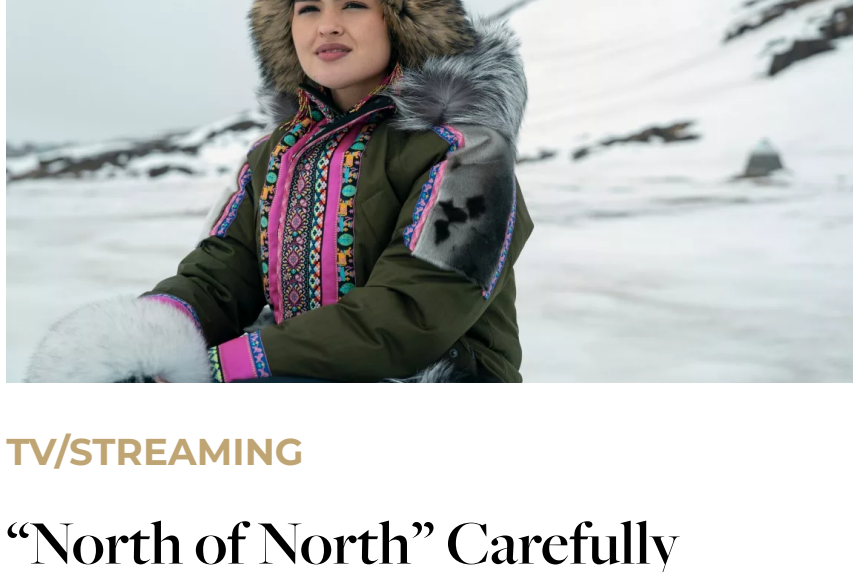
I'm drawn to entertainment that asks hard questions and makes me wonder "what's out there?". That said, *Mindhunter* is a tough row to hoe. These accounts of actual crimes and suffering are emotionally draining and the stuff of nightmares.

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