

## A Life of Crime (John Walsh)

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The photos are everywhere. Gap-toothed faces with awkward squinty grins, school portraits of broadly beaming adolescents. They flash on the television screen; they populate the purgatory of cyberspace. Of course, each image is freighted by the space between the carefree moment of the snapshot and the nameless horror that may have occurred later. Occasionally -- and with depressing regularity in recent months -- one flares up in the national consciousness as a major news story, but the hundreds upon hundreds of others have names attached to them, too, and, honestly, John Walsh seems to know them all. Logan Tucker. Kiplyn Davis. Christopher Samples. Sabrena Beck. **Erin Pospisil**. He has the details: ages, the days and times of abduction, the backyard or mall parking lot where they were last seen. Most of all, he knows the drill on the suspects in each case: previous convictions, hair color, cigarette brand, the scars and last-seen-driving information. He's got them cold; he tolls them in a high-intensity monotone, like a machine gun spitting bullets.

I haven't asked for this information; it just comes out of him. We're here to talk about him, John Walsh the man. Surely he is not synonymous with the comic-book crime fighter he has portrayed every Saturday night for the past 15 years as host of the Fox TV show "America's Most Wanted," the one-dimensional tough guy with the leather jacket, the defiant folded-arms stance and the deadpan delivery in the tradition of Joe Friday, the guy out to nail slime balls, who signs off with a trademark line: "And remember, you can make a difference."

The temperature is in the 90's on the outskirts of the nation's capital, and it has been a long day of shooting for episode No. 683 of "America's Most Wanted" (two murderers, a rapist and a drug trafficker); in his frostily air-conditioned trailer, having changed into jeans, a black T-shirt and snakeskin boots, Walsh is refreshed and raring to go, but every time he starts talking about himself he seems to wind up back at the same nest of concerns. Statistics about missing children. The murder rate in the United States. What's wrong with the legal system. Why cops are heroes and most politicians are "spineless [expletive]." All of which, of course, fits the persona of the "America's Most Wanted" host like that leather jacket.

On Sept. 9, he will build on that persona, with the debut of his new syndicated daytime talk show: an hourlong, five-day-a-week question-and-answer stint deep in the heart of Oprah territory. From the sound of it, "The John Walsh Show" will have more in common with "Nightline" than with morning tabloid programs. Each broadcast will be driven by current events and will open with a taped package of footage from NBC News, and Walsh insists that it won't be all "gangland murderers and the cops who pursue them." "I've done lighter stuff," he says and mentions his appearance on "The Simpsons." "So not every show will be serious. I do have a sense of humor."

Putting him on daytime seemed strange at first, even to Walsh: "I said, 'I thought everyone thought I was the leather-jacketed manhunter on Saturday night.'" But the producers' focus groups told them that people also knew him from the hundreds of talk-show appearances he has done. They knew him as a victims' advocate and as something more, which the producers hope will be particularly appealing to daytime's overwhelmingly female viewers. "After all this time," says Alexandra Jewett, the executive producer of "The John Walsh Show," "the essence of who he is is the father of a murdered child."

The story of Walsh's tragedy -- the abduction and murder, 21 years ago, of his 6-year-old son, Adam -- is well known. What is less well known is how thoroughly the defining event in his life still controls the man, dominates his decisions, has grown into a ferocity of purpose that has caused him to put his own life and, incredibly, the lives of his three surviving children, at risk. As the high-profile abduction cases and trials mounted this summer -- Danielle van Dam, Elizabeth Smart, Samantha Runnion -- Walsh's full-throttle commitment to the cause of finding missing children went into an even higher gear. He seemed to be on at least one major talk show a day, and when he wasn't doing media, he was meeting with parents or law-enforcement officials. At the same time, his own marriage was falling apart -- on July 17, Revé, his wife of 31 years, filed for divorce.

It's hard to imagine a more psychologically punishing set of circumstances than that surrounding Adam's death. Not only was his son murdered, his severed head was the only part of him ever recovered, the features so distorted that the family friend who first identified it was forced to do so by the pattern of missing baby teeth and the one new tooth that was emerging. No arrest was ever made; the psychopathic drifter who Walsh says he believes was responsible died in prison without being charged for the crime. What television viewers have witnessed over the past two decades -- the development of the "America's Most Wanted" persona and the constant, laser-focused presence on the talk-show circuit -- is a result of the brutal awareness that Walsh is never going to get his son back or find his killer. It's as though the only thing left for him to do, over and over, on the air, is to replay the story and try to make it right. "We've gotten 31 kids back alive," he says with sharp satisfaction, referring to missing-children cases that "America's Most Wanted" has profiled, "and to me every single one of those is a miracle."

Walsh's obsession hasn't abated but seems actually to have grown with the passage of time. It has made him a television celebrity, his rage sublimated into stardom. At the age of 56, after 21 years of staring down criminals, an ordinary human being might consider retreating from the public eye, rather than moving toward even greater media exposure. But the media persona is who John Walsh is now. "I don't know how to do anything else," he says.

"With John, what you see is what you get," his former assistant Cheri Nolan tells me. "There is no other John Walsh underneath."

In 1981 America, as John and Revé Walsh discovered in the aftermath of their son's abduction, there was no nationwide system for reporting missing children, no means by which various law-enforcement agencies could communicate, compare cases, trade tips. So Walsh took a hiatus from his job as a developer of resort hotels and, with the aid of friends and family, went about creating such a system. In the process of trying to find his little boy, and then his killer, Walsh started a movement. An appearance on "Good Morning America" made him an instant media wonder. He had a natural punchy style of delivery that suited television, a regular-guy aspect that was sharpened by an arrogant I'm-mad-as-hell-and-I'm-not-going-to-take-it-anymore insistence that the system had to be changed. He testified before Congressional committees on behalf of the Missing Children's Act, which would mandate the creation of a nationwide database, and was a guest of President Reagan in a 1982 Rose Garden ceremony to mark the signing of the bill into law. Two years later, he and his wife founded the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Then in 1987, he got a call. The nascent Fox network was working on a new, interactive kind of TV show, in which crimes would be luridly re-enacted, the bad guys' mug shots would be displayed and viewers would call in with tips. The producers considered macho actors like Brian Dennehy, but they preferred a host from outside the entertainment industry. They thought about the crime novelist Joseph Wambaugh and Senator Bob Kerrey; they talked to Bob Woodward and to a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Then Thomas Herwitz, an executive at Fox, saw Walsh in a TV appearance. "He had that freshness," Herwitz says. "But he also seemed to have the heart and mind and seriousness of purpose."

The pilot they shot had a rough feel, but Walsh's lack of polish struck Herwitz as authentic. They showed the pilot at a production meeting at which Barry Diller, then the chairman of Fox, presided. "Someone suggested we send Walsh to television school," Herwitz says. "Barry Diller's head shot up, and he said, 'If you do that, I will kill you.' He knew right away you wanted John Walsh to be John Walsh."

"America's Most Wanted," with its W.W.E.-meets-MTV production values, has long since entered television and law-enforcement record books. It's the fifth-longest-running prime-time show on television; 717 fugitives have been caught thanks to viewers phoning its switchboard. Walsh is a hero to cops of every variety, who become like groupies in his presence. Victims' rights groups cluster around him like barnacles. Both the show and Walsh got a new lease on life after the Sept. 11 attacks; at the White House's request, "America's Most Wanted" put its resources into the hunt for terrorists, and Walsh's orbit widened to places like Dubai.

The show worked in part because Walsh became one with it. As it turned out, it was just what he needed to keep his sanity. He had flirted with suicide in the aftermath of his son's

murder and the appalling things he and his wife had to endure. There was the time when the police caught a serial abductor who had made an audiotape of himself torturing and murdering his victims. Walsh had to listen to it and try to determine whether any of the cries of agony sounded familiar. None did, but the voices still echo, the sounds of angels trapped in hell. How did he and his wife survive such horrors?

"They're unbearable," Walsh says in a crisp, matter-of-fact tone. "But you've got to stay focused. I know that incredible evil walks this planet. That's what I stay focused on."

The fact is, Walsh has always fancied himself a tough guy, a man of action, a hero. Growing up in an Irish Catholic family in the town of Auburn in upstate New York, he was a street brawler and a soccer player. "I was trained to win in the fourth quarter, to win in overtime," he says with a customary lack of humility. Later it was boxing, deep-sea diving and motorcycles. Drifting into depression and addiction wasn't an option that suited his temperament; getting mad was. What had been a high-octane personality shifted into overdrive, where it has been ever since. "Certainly Adam's murder changed my level of intensity," Walsh says. "And it refocused me in a whole different direction. I didn't care about building luxury hotels. So I directed all my anger and bitterness to taking on the F.B.I., first of all. I wanted to make sure Adam didn't die in vain."

Larry King had Walsh as a guest on his radio show in the period after Adam's death; over the past 20 years the two have become friends, and Walsh is a regular on King's CNN show. "His anger was really starting to build back then," King says. "That pain and anger is still present in him, and it's going to be there until the day he dies. But it's a controlled anger that he can present very well on television. All he's done is hone it over the years."

Air Force One sits on the tarmac. The presidential motorcade pulls up -- sirens and whipping lights. Secret Service agents pour out of the vehicles and surround the black limo in the center. The door opens, the cluster of agents tightens and out steps . . . John Walsh. He's a small, compact man with a vitality, a strut, a magnetism, and on a shoot, that life force is fairly crackling in him. He pivots sharply, stares into the camera, points a finger like a gun and squeezes off the words as if they were supercharged with meaning:

"Now here's a review of tonight's cases!"

We're at the Secret Service training facility in Beltsville, Md. This week's episode of "America's Most Wanted" will illustrate how those who guard the president practice their craft. Walsh gets to play the role of the president, then a Secret Service agent on a mock city block. Suddenly a team of assassins comes flying out of a nearby building; he runs for cover behind a parked car, pulls his pistol from its holster and opens fire, teeth gritted and eyes flaring; shell casings fly, and the bad guys collapse one by one to the pavement. He seems to enjoy the role-playing immensely.

Walsh's story is, after all, the archetypal Hollywood hero-genesis theme: the ordinary guy who transforms when violence is done to a loved one and goes on to fight evil. Only

this wasn't a Charles Bronson or a Clint Eastwood character; it was real life. And Walsh has gotten to play the avenging angel on TV, and in a role that, for all its staginess, gets the most concrete of results. The leather jacket first appeared in 1996. His "America's Most Wanted" persona has become more macho over time.

The slightly queasy part is how thoroughly the angry-hero stuff suits Walsh's ego and whether, therefore, it may have a downside. "I think his kind of approach continues to feed on the loss," said Rachel King, a lawyer who has a book coming out in the winter on how families of murder victims cope with their loss. "I've found that the families who move through the anger and come to reconcile have happier lives."

"Happy" is not a word that comes to mind when you meet John Walsh. And while he considers himself fiercely devoted to his three children, it's also true that his chosen mission puts a burden on them. The family has had to live with regular death threats, and the children have grown up with bodyguards and security cameras. Recently, because he has targeted anti-abortion terrorists on "America's Most Wanted," Walsh's name has been on the hit list of a radical anti-abortion group. In typical fashion, rather than back down or keep mum, Walsh the street fighter chooses to taunt: "They put me right on their Web site. But whenever I make public appearances I have 90 zillion undercover cops with me. And I've got special training. I know how to use guns. I know how to kill people. I know I'm not bulletproof, but I think it would be damned hard to kill me. I just hope and pray that someone who's trying to kill me won't end up killing one of the people around me or someone I'm related to."

While Walsh is understandably guarded in discussing his family life, a small window into its difficulties opened up this summer, when Revé filed for divorce. Walsh admits that his womanizing has damaged the marriage, but he has persuaded Revé, who does not do interviews, to enter couples' counseling. According to Walsh's publicist, "She's giving him six months to work through his problems."

His inexorable schedule won't help. "America's Most Wanted" tapes 46 weeks out of the year, and alongside it he manages to have a whole other career as a victims' rights advocate. He'll tape until midnight on the West Coast, then fly to New York in time for a segment on "Today" about missing children and be in Washington in the afternoon lobbying for the crime victims' rights amendment -- all this before he even starts working on the talk show. He burns through staff members, who eventually get tired of existing on three or four hours of sleep. "Sleep is not important to me," he says. Wherever he shows up there are fans waiting. He'll sign every autograph, pose for every photo. He usually has a word or two for each person. To a parent, he'll say, "You take good care of those little girls, you hear me?" To a Secret Service officer, "I'm proud of the work you're doing." Then, of course, there is that special group, the parents of murdered or abducted children. When Elizabeth Smart went missing in Utah, he spent two and a half hours on the phone

with her father. He still fields calls from confused or irate parents, sits with them at conferences, soothes them with his presence, providing an example of someone who has survived the loss of a child and has found a way to manage the streams of jagged emotions that keep coming, year after year. It would be natural to be dragged down by all this misery. For the most part, though, Walsh seems to draw strength from it. He has an oddly uniform energy that seems to radiate from his whole being; you get the sense that this work is both an obsession and a fuel.

But there is a toll. The obsession is also an obligation, isn't it? "Absolutely," Walsh says. "After the Oklahoma City bombing, I was asked by the coroner to go into the morgue tent and give a pep talk to the people who had been up all night pulling out body parts. They wanted me. At ground zero, I was the only TV guy allowed on the scene at first, and workers would come up to me and say, 'Go get the bastards who did this, John.'"

Six months ago, Walsh got a call about the disappearance of Danielle van Dam. The case wasn't getting much publicity. "The next morning I was on the CBS morning show, 'Good Morning America' and 'Today' with the van Dams -- all in the same morning. Then came Larry King, CNN News, Fox News -- it became a national story." The van Dam case ended sadly: searchers found the girl's body three weeks later. But the story illustrates Walsh's power. "I know I have this vehicle," he says. "I have the attention of the nation, and the support of all these wonderful people out there, and the support of law enforcement." He leans forward, and his voice lowers. "And you know what? It's great to hunt the bastards down."

It might also be nice to move on a bit, though. Maybe the leather jacket is becoming a bit of a straitjacket. After turning down several offers over the years to host a talk show, he said yes this time. He plans to continue with "America's Most Wanted," but he's looking forward to the challenge of "The John Walsh Show." There will be the immediacy of performing in front of a studio audience, and the chance, in that venue, to reveal more of himself. In promos, the man hunter image gives way to a dad-at-home look; he talks about his three kids. Walsh the parent vows to devote a significant portion of air time to the other side of the issue that has held him in its thrall all these years, and one of particular concern to women: safety. "I think people are more than ever concerned about safety," he says. "How to make your home safe, how to keep your children safe, how to keep yourself safe." A talk show, maybe, for the terrorist age.

Larry King, who knows as well as anyone what it takes to succeed in talk, offers this assessment of Walsh's prospects. "John is utterly compelling on television. He's clicker-proof: if he's on, it's hard to hit that button. What we don't know is how well he'll do in this format, asking the questions. You've got to have a natural curiosity. How curious is he about other subjects?"

Not even those closest to Walsh seem to know the answer.