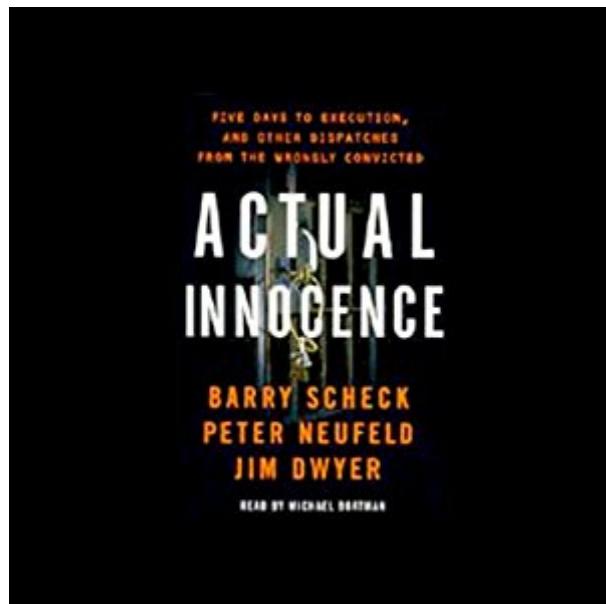


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# Actual Innocence



## Synopsis

Extraordinarily powerful stories of ordinary people locked up for crimes they did not commit, and how they were freed against great odds. A nightmare from a thousand B-movies: a horrible crime is committed in your neighborhood, and the police knock at your door. A witness swears you are the perpetrator; you have no alibi, and no one believes your protestations of innocence. You're convicted, sentenced to hard time in maximum security, or even death row, where you await the executioner's needle. Tragically, this is no movie script but reality for hundreds of American citizens. Our criminal justice system is broken, and people from all walks of life have been destroyed by its failures. But science and a group of incredibly dedicated crusaders are working to repair the damage. In the last ten years, DNA testing has uncovered stone-cold proof that sixty-five completely innocent people have been sent to prison and death row. But even in cases where there is physical evidence, the criminal justice system frees prisoners only after a torturous legal process. Incredibly, according to many trial judges, "actual innocence" is not grounds for release from prison. At the Innocence Project, Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld have helped to free thirty-seven wrongly convicted people, and have taken up the cause of hundreds more. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Jim Dwyer has been covering innocence cases for a decade. In *Actual Innocence*, Scheck, Neufeld, and Dwyer relate the harrowing stories of ten innocent men--convicted by sloppy police work, corrupt prosecutors, jailhouse snitches, mistaken eyewitnesses, and other all-too-common flaws of the trial system--and tell of the heroic efforts to free them. Intense, startling, and utterly compelling, *Actual Innocence* is a passionate and fascinating journey through the looking glass of the American criminal justice system. Tragically, this is no movie script but reality for hundreds of American citizens. Our criminal justice system is broken, and people from all walks of life have been destroyed by its failures. But science and a group of incredibly dedicated lawyers are working to repair the damage. In the last decade of this century, DNA testing has uncovered stone-cold proof that fifty-five completely innocent people were sent to prison and death row. At the Innocence Project, Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld have managed to free forty-three wrongly convicted people and have taken up the cause of two hundred more. Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Jim Dwyer covered this courthouse revolution from its very first days. In *Actual Innocence*, Scheck, Neufeld, and Dwyer relate the harrowing stories of ten of these individuals--convicted by sloppy police work, corrupt prosecutors, jailhouse snitches, mistaken witnesses, inept lawyers, and other all-too-common flaws in the trial system--and tell of the heroic efforts to free them. Intense, harrowing, and compelling, *Actual Innocence* is a passionate argument for sanity in our courtrooms and a fascinating journey through the looking glass of the American criminal justice system. --> --This text refers to the

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## Customer Reviews

Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld, once lawyers with the Bronx Legal Aid Society, co-founded The Innocence Project, which seeks post-conviction release through DNA testing. They are among the most prominent civil rights attorneys in the U.S. Jim Dwyer is the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the New York Daily News and author of several other books.I have to reveal that I know Jim Dwyer, he is the brother-in-law of one of my good friends, I've read many of his other books and I have really liked them all, so I may be a bit biased in my review of his books.If you are a fan of the podcast Serial or the TV show Law and Order or if you wonder about fairness of the criminal justice system in the US, this is a must read. While the information contained in this book may not help free Adnan Syed, it shows how many people are convicted with faulty evidence and unreliable eyewitness testimony.Each chapter takes on a different broken part of the justice system, from eye witnesses, to jailhouse, snitches, faulty lab evidence, police misconduct, confessions, lazy attorneys etc... Its terrifying to think of how many people are wrongfully convicted of crimes and how long it takes to get them cleared in this country. And the even scarier part is that there aren't systems in place to punish those who withhold evidence, force confessions, or give false testimony...most of those people aren't charged, convicted or punished in any way. There are very few safeguards.Once convicted of a crime its almost impossible to get back out. Some systems refuse to allow DNA testing after a conviction leaving innocent people in prison and even more startling are the times when DNA proves the person is innocent and the state won't allow them to be

freed saying they must have been guilty in some way. The facts according to the authors are that there are thousands more that could be freed with DNA testing. Although science is not the stop gap for flaws in any criminal justice system, the authors very convincingly argue that it would be a beneficial start. The stories in this book are accessible and easy to follow but not preachy. If you have any interest in the law or justice this is a must read.

I sent this and a similar book to a man in jail. He loved it so much he read it the first day he got it. I was pleased. He has since read it again. I selected it because it is on the reading list for a GMU law course on appeals and such for those already convicted and in jail. It is used for lawyers who represent them. Excellent choice.

Could be used as a handbook for aspiring defense investigators. For seasoned investigators it's a reminder on what to look for and why we do what we do. Don't be quick to judge - Of course there are actual criminals, but we have to be vigilant for the innocent who get caught in the mix by fallible witnesses and overzealous prosecutors. There are those who are actually innocent or who are over-charged with crimes. No innocent person should have to go through what the individuals in this book did. As Daniel Defoe said, "I hear much of people's calling out to punish the guilty, but very few are concerned to clear the innocent." As a witness or a jury member, you don't have a dog in the fight. Remain reasonable, unbiased, and a person of logic and fairness.

I am a big fan of Barry Scheck and his cohorts. The work they do is amazing. But this book really doesn't shed any new light on its subject.

The development of DNA technology allowed around 65 people to prove their innocence. Not just to raise some doubt about a technicality of their conviction or to find a legal loophole but to show that they were actually innocent of the crimes for which they had been charged. Now days the use of DNA has been incorporated into police investigations in most countries and it will not only prove guilt but it will enable innocent people to be removed from the list of potential suspects. This book is interesting as it gives a snap shot of how the American criminal justice system works and why wrongful convictions occur. One of the big problems is the unreliability of identification evidence. This book shows how that sort of evidence can be faulty. People will identify suspects for a range of reasons. If a crime occurs, and a person is seen in the lineup that looks familiar it is not uncommon for that person to be picked as the perpetrator. However it is easy for people to become confused

and pick people who have had nothing to do with the crime. One example in the book is of the identification by a ticket seller of a person who's face was familiar as he had purchased a ticket some time prior to the crime but who in fact had been overseas at the time the crime had been committed. Another was of someone who was picked as a criminal but the reason for the selection would seem to be that he had lived in the same neighbourhood. In all these cases the victim or witness honestly believes in the guilt of the person who is misidentified. In one case mentioned in this book the DNA evidence in the end cleared the initial suspect but the victim still lives with that face in her mind as the man who raped her. Identification is not the only reason why innocent people go to jail for crimes they do not commit. The book examines cases in which authorities concoct evidence, prosecutors fail to disclose exculpatory material and defendants are represented by incompetent Attorneys. One of the sad things about this book is that on average the people who were wrongly convicted spent an average of close to ten years each in jail. Some were entitled to compensation others to nothing at all. The authors suggest that the problems that led to these injustices still exist in the system and that a certain number of people will, as a result be spending long times in prison for crimes they did not commit. The final appendix of the book is a number of suggested reforms to the legal system. The book is not written that well and has a certain amount of padding which makes for rather dull reading but despite that it is an important book in evaluating the American Criminal Justice System.

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