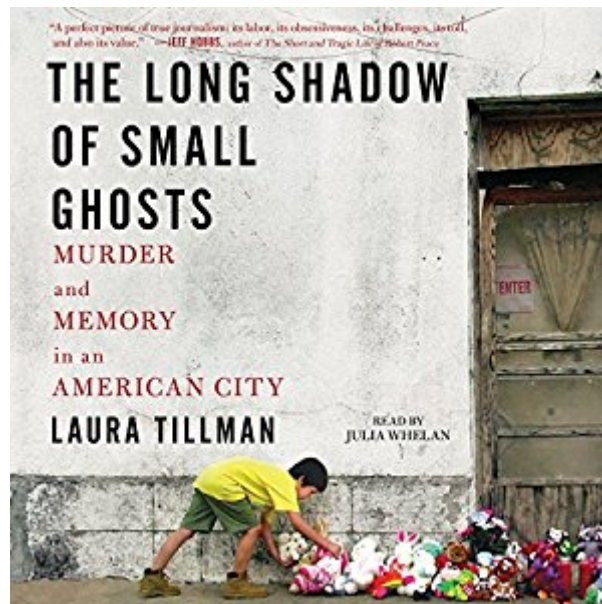


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# The Long Shadow Of Small Ghosts: Murder And Memory In An American City



## Synopsis

In *Cold Blood* meets Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*: a harrowing, profoundly personal investigation of the causes, effects, and communal toll of a deeply troubling crime - the brutal murder of three young children by their parents in the border city of Brownsville, Texas. On March 11, 2003, in Brownsville, Texas - one of America's poorest cities - John Allen Rubio and Angela Camacho murdered their three young children. The apartment building in which the brutal crimes took place was already run down, and in their aftermath a consensus developed in the community that it should be destroyed. It was a place, neighbors felt, that was plagued by spiritual cancer. In 2008 journalist Laura Tillman covered the story for *The Brownsville Herald*. The questions it raised haunted her, particularly one asked by the sole member of the city's Heritage Council to oppose demolition: Is there any such thing as an evil building? Her investigation took her far beyond that question, revealing the nature of the toll that the crime exacted on a city already wracked with poverty. It sprawled into a six-year inquiry into the larger significance of such acts, ones so difficult to imagine or explain that their perpetrators are often dismissed as monsters alien to humanity. With meticulous attention and stunning compassion, Tillman surveyed those surrounding the crimes, speaking with the lawyers who tried the case, the family's neighbors and relatives and teachers, even one of the murderers: John Allen Rubio himself, whom she corresponded with for years and ultimately met in person. The result is a brilliant exploration of some of our age's most important social issues, from poverty to mental illness to the death penalty, and a beautiful, profound meditation on the truly human forces that drive them. It is disturbing, insightful, and mesmerizing in equal measure.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 6 hours and 47 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Simon & Schuster Audio

Audible.com Release Date: April 5, 2016

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01COOXKWO

Best Sellers Rank: #65 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Violence in

Society #79 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Urban #85 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > True Crime

## Customer Reviews

This is a true crime book for people who don't read true crime. If you go in expecting a lot of details about the murder of three children by their parents or the court case, you're going to be disappointed. Rather, this is an unflinching look at class and poverty in America, and some of its subsequent effects on communities. It's like classy true crime with a social justice bent. But there is totally a chapter titled "Don't Read This Chapter before Going to Bed." Tillman's journey started as she reported on a building that people wanted torn down. The building where three children were killed by John Allen Rubio and their mother Angela. Tillman looks at both the poverty and the sense of community in Brownsville, Texas which is on the very southernmost point of the state. In this border town, drugs are a problem and so is unchecked mental illness. Rubio claims that they killed their children because he believed they were possessed by demons. It's dark and it's complicated. So Tillman starts to talk to Rubio in prison to hear how he speaks about the situation, and eventually she meets him in person. No perspective that could be taken on this crime is left unresearched. And Tillman's writing is so good, and she's so excellent on honing in on what's important, that we're not left with a bloated, dense piece of detail-heavy work. I'm not good at reading nonfiction, but this book was impossible to put down. Definitely a page-turner. This book doesn't try to answer questions for us. It doesn't break down the crime and explain exactly what happened and why. It shows us the grey areas. The grey areas in why this horrific crime took place. How multiple internal and external forces could have led to this event, and events like it throughout the country.

TRUE CRIME Laura Tillman *The Long Shadow of Small Ghosts: Murder and Memory in an American City* Scribner Hardcover 978-1-5011-0425-1 (also available as an ebook and on Audible), 256 pgs., \$26.00 April 5, 2016 Laura Tillman was a rookie reporter at the Brownsville Herald in 2008 when she was assigned to cover a story about whether a historic building in Brownsville's Barrio Buena Vida should be demolished. In a tiny apartment in the building, five years earlier, three children were murdered by their parents. Tillman interviewed Brownsville residents, some of whom said the building should go because it was haunted and a constant reminder of the unthinkable. Others said that was superstition "it was just a building. The father of the children, John Allen Rubio, was born and raised in Brownsville. He pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, but the jury rejected that argument and sentenced him to die. Rubio's lawyers won an appeal, but a second jury

convicted him and again sentenced him to die. Tillman began collecting stories about the crime, reviewing courtroom evidence, and initiated a correspondence with Rubio, eventually interviewing him in prison. Maria Angela Camacho, Rubio's common-law wife and the children's mother, who was convicted and sentenced to three concurrent life sentences, never responded to Tillman's letters. Rubio's childhood, Tillman found, was devastatingly dysfunctional, marked by fetal alcohol syndrome, a missing father, a drug-addicted mother, and hallucinations. Rubio's teachers noted emotional disturbance from kindergarten and, oh yeah, he was probably schizophrenic and believed that his dead grandmother was a witch, issuing instructions.

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