



## Capturing the Friedmans Discussion Guide

Director: Andrew Jarecki

Year: 2003

Time: 107 min

**You might know this director from:**

All Good Things (2010)

### FILM SUMMARY

CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS is a gripping family story that follows the unfolding tragedy of a seemingly typical middle-class couple living with their three sons in Great Neck, NY during the 1980s. Their average life is turned upside down when the father, Arnold Friedman, and his youngest son, Jesse, are accused of molesting neighborhood children. In this riveting film, various people are interviewed, including the family members, policemen, defense and prosecuting attorneys, court officials, and former students of Arnold Friedman. Their memories often conflict, creating a dizzying Rashomon experience for the viewer. As a result, the film explores the elusive nature of truth and the subjectivity of memory.

The drama begins in November 1987 when a federal sting operation reveals that Arnold Friedman received a child pornography magazine by mail from the Netherlands. Further investigation uncovers a larger cache of pornographic magazines. Local police learn that Friedman was teaching computer classes from his home basement and begin to suspect him of abusing his students. Further investigation unleashes a wave of sensational press coverage and panic among parents whose children have taken Friedman's computer classes. Ultimately, both Arnold and his youngest son, Jesse, are put on trial for multiple counts of sexual abuse. As the trial ensues, the film captures a family spinning out of control under the weight of uncertainty.

Relying on a wealth of home movies that provide a raw, intimate glimpse into the family's devastation and dysfunction, the film reveals how the case against Arnold and Jesse becomes increasingly convoluted and conflicting, leaving the viewer with more questions than it answers.

## FILM THEMES

The film raises complex questions about group psychology, the manipulation of “facts,” and the American justice system. Viewers are apt to make assumptions, form their judgments, then revise them again and again as new revelations further complicate the story.

### THE ELUSIVENESS OF TRUTH

The film offers a wealth of information from audio recordings to home videos, but the facts are scant. Even in home video clips, the Friedmans seem most at ease when they are performing. Many people tell their versions of what happened, but these stories are contradictory. Arnold pleaded guilty in order to reduce prison time for his son, and Jesse pleaded guilty to avoid a life sentence. The court case reveals more about the law and the system than it does about those on trial. Ultimately, the film presents few “facts,” but many subjective truths.

### DOCUMENTARY FILM ETHICS

LA Times journalist, Kenneth Turan, was critical of filmmaker Andrew Jarecki’s approach to filmmaking and wrote in a review, “Jarecki decided to structure the project around his refusal as filmmaker to say if he thought the Friedmans were guilty or not. And it is with this pose of neutrality that the film’s troubles begin.” Other critics point out that the film’s even-handed approach was crafted for dramatic purposes, leaving out information that would sway viewers in a certain direction. How much objectivity can we expect from filmmakers? Are they responsible for taking a stance and presenting their own viewpoints?

### CONSTRUCTING MEMORY

When David is alone confessing his anguish to his camcorder, he seems to be physically present but emotionally absent. With today’s technology, we can record the events of our lives as they occur, but for many, this creates a life that is documented and posted, rather than experienced. Being occupied with recording events may hinder us from engaging with the moment and the others involved. For David, the camera may have helped him survive a difficult period, as he relied on it to capture certain moments, especially those last nights before his father and brother went to prison.

### SINS OF THE FATHER

David Friedman was a successful children’s party clown called “Silly Billy” when he met director Andrew Jarecki. Once the film was released, Silly Billy’s bookings dried up. Though David was never implicated in the case, he struggled to earn a living for several years. Furthermore, it’s believed that Jesse pleaded guilty only because his legal team didn’t believe a jury would find him innocent if his father pleaded guilty. The film shows the inextricable link we share with those closest to us, how we can become tainted by their actions, charged guilty by association rather than being judged as our own beings.

**“I feel like the government stole 25 years of my life. And the most I’m going to get is a half-assed apology, if that.”**

Jesse Friedman

**“I am just filled with rage about all of this. Rage that the cops could do such a thing and build their careers on such heinousness and that we as a community were not brave enough to look at facts.”**

Jesse’s childhood friend, Judd Maltin

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. What do you think Jesse meant when he said, “You have to find a way to explain the unexplainable”?
2. The film explores the role of repressed memory. For example, Arnold Friedman’s brother says he might have been molested as a child, but he honestly doesn’t remember. How reliable are our memories?
3. Arnold agrees to plead guilty to all charges against him, despite the lack of physical evidence, in hopes of saving Jesse from prosecution. Do you agree with his decision? What would you do in his case?
4. Filmmaker Jarecki reveals the role of police and media in creating a climate of fear within the Great Neck community that helped sway public opinion against the Friedmans. But the director makes it clear that Arnold Friedman did engage in questionable sexual behavior. Do you think this ambiguity was intentional? Did it add to your appreciation of the film or leave you frustrated?
5. Do you feel sympathy for Elaine Friedman? How do her children characterize her? Does this conflict or agree with your understanding of her character?
6. Why do you think Jesse pleaded guilty, and even confessed his crimes on a major American TV news program, only to spend the next 13 years maintaining his innocence?
7. Many boys claimed they were repeatedly sexually abused, yet no medical testimony or physical evidence was introduced at the trial, and no child ever mentioned improper conduct while returning to Friedman’s computer classes week after week, until police began interviewing them. What are your thoughts on this?
8. Have you ever held a strong belief or opinion about something, only to later discover that you were wrong? What factors have been most influential in shaping your definition of facts, or of reality?
9. Elaine and Arnold were married and had three sons together, yet he kept his darkest secrets from her. Is it ever possible to fully know another person?
10. Are the Friedmans a typical American family, or are they uniquely dysfunctional? Does every family have its own dysfunction if you dig deep enough? Did this film trigger questions you may have about your own family?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- **CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS** was nominated for an Academy Award in 2003 and won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 2003.
- Andrew Jarecki was one of the founders of Moviefone, an American-based movie listing and information service that provides local show times, theater information, film reviews, and advance tickets. In 1999, the company was sold to AOL for more than \$400 million.
- Since the film was completed, director Andrew Jarecki has continued to investigate the allegations against Jesse Friedman and has concluded that he was wrongfully convicted amidst a climate of hysteria.
- Jesse Friedman served 13 years in prison before being released in December 2001.
- Jesse Friedman is now 44, married, and running an online book-selling business.
- Jarecki originally planned to make a film about New York City's professional clowns. The most successful clown was "Silly Billy," aka David Friedman, who made six figures entertaining at children's birthday parties. When Jarecki learned about David's family, he shifted his focus. **CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS** is the result.
- In 2004, Jarecki released *Just A Clown*, a 20-minute documentary about birthday party clowns in New York, featuring Silly Billy, who now goes by David Kaye on his website.
- Several film critics and journalists were critical of Jarecki, claiming that he intentionally made the facts appear ambiguous in the case against the Friedmans to create a more dramatic story which thereby raised serious ethical issues.
- In August 2010, a federal appeals court urged prosecutors to re-open Jesse's case. The Nassau County District Attorney's office conducted an investigation, and on June 24, 2013, released a 155-page report. The conclusion was: "By any impartial analysis, the reinvestigation process prompted by Jesse Friedman, his advocates and the Second Circuit, has only increased confidence in the integrity of Jesse Friedman's guilty plea and adjudication as a sex offender."
- Before the report's release, an alleged victim sent a letter, recanting his previous accusation, to the Nassau County D.A.'s office. He also implied that police coercion influenced his original testimony. Other alleged victims have also recanted or disputed parts of accusations attributed to them.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share the film and give others the chance to learn about the Friedmans' story.
2. Fight with Jesse Friedman and director Andrew Jarecki for the release of documents and other relevant information that could prove Jesse's innocence. Follow the on-going case and if you choose, sign the petition to exonerate Jesse. You can also volunteer to help with his legal defense.
3. Consider working with or donating to organizations that support victims of child sexual abuse.
4. Learn more about sexual assault, a crime that spans age, sexual orientation, religion and gender, affecting people of all socio-economic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and education levels and affects many lives—both directly and indirectly. Consider volunteering your time at a local non-profit or helpline that works on behalf of sexual abuse survivors.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**