



## The Fear of 13 Discussion Guide

Director: David Singleton

Year: 2015

Time: 96 min

### You might know this director from:

Licence to Kill (2015)

The Flaw (2011)

In the Shadow of the Moon (2007)

## FILM SUMMARY

What would drive a man to plead for death? This was the fate of Nick Yarris, a man convicted of murder who spent 21 years on Death Row in Pennsylvania before petitioning the courts to go forth with his execution. Before his final day was to pass, Yarris sat down with director David Singleton to tell the story how he ended up in this dire position.

Yarris transforms his tragic tale into a breathtaking one-man show of sorts, meandering with mesmerizing gravitas from his broken home roots through his teenage drug addictions and gigs of grand theft auto, to the conflict with a police officer and the murder case that led to his eventual conviction. And like any good blockbuster prison story, there is an action-packed prison escape and a stirring romance that blossoms, even as barbed wire and concrete walls separate the lovers. Yet, Yarris's narrative is not all show-stopping whiz and bang. Prison life is a solitary terror, an existence of mind-melting silence and horrific violence, and Yarris's experience was no different. That is, until he discovered the joy of reading, a world where he could dive into places far away from inside his locked cell.

Justifiably confident in his subject's ability to spin a spellbinding yarn, director David Singleton centers his film wholly around Yarris, almost statically so, only venturing away to accentuate story points with occasional Errol Morris-inspired reenactments. Working through this winding narrative, Yarris believes that his experience behind bars has changed him for the better—he learned to love himself and others, but also the human capacity to relay emotion through stories. Of the many jewels to be harvested from THE FEAR OF 13, the most poignant and touching is just how much power and influence storytelling itself can have on a life, as short as it may be.

## FILM THEMES

Prison tends to change people, and often times, not for the better. Surprisingly, death row inmate Nick Yarris claims that prison saved his life.

### THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

It is immediately apparent why director David Singleton wanted to create a film with Nick Yarris sitting center stage, simply telling his story—he is a master of weaving a narrative with his voice, face, and hands. Yet, his own story was shaped by his discovery of books while imprisoned on death row. They not only allowed him to escape the boredom and solitude of his cell, but expanded his sense of the world countless times over. With access to the prison library, a dictionary, a notepad, and countless hours of time on his hands, he was able to go from being almost illiterate to one of the most well spoken on-screen storytellers we've ever seen.

### MAINTAINING ONE'S HUMANITY IS TO MAINTAIN HUMAN CONTACT

Following an initial period of silence and isolation meant to break inmates down, Yarris managed to develop a relationship with a woman outside of prison via regular letters, phone calls, and visits. It is in our nature that we are communal beings who thrive on our connections with other people. So, it should be no surprise that in the most dark and solitary places imaginable, this man found a beacon of light in the severely limited amount of communication he was able to receive from the outside world.

### LEARN TO LOVE YOURSELF

Before going to prison, Nick Yarris was a mess—he was without family support, a drug addict, and was a serial car thief. An enforced life of solitude forced him to reconsider his ways, and what he realized was that he didn't like himself very much. So, he decided to change. He taught himself how to read at an extremely high level of comprehension. He learned important life lessons from the books for which he fell head over heels. He learned to love himself for the person that he'd become while behind bars, and once he had realized this, he began to trust himself enough to share those feelings of love with the world by reaching out to those willing to share those earnest feelings of compassion.

### THE U.S. JUSTICE SYSTEM IS NOT PERFECT

Few systems are perfect, but when the U.S. criminal justice system convicts an innocent man of a crime so serious that he is sentenced to death, this is obviously a major problem. One has to wonder how, without any direct evidence to the crimes at hand, a defendant is proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Yet after his conviction, Yarris was one of the very lucky few who managed to see their case reassessed thanks to a relentless inner drive to prove their innocence and new scientifically verified evidence that, in his case, could prove that he could not have been the person who abducted, raped, and murdered Linda May Craig back in 1982.

**“The power of storytelling is exactly this: to bridge the gaps where everything else has crumbled.”**

Paulo Coelho

**“Prison itself is a tremendous education in the need for patience and perseverance. It is above all a test of one's commitment.”**

Nelson Mandela

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of Nick Yarris or the Linda May Craig murder case before seeing THE FEAR OF 13? What was your initial reaction to the film?
2. Yarris was exonerated of his conviction of rape and murder after 21 years on death row. What are your thoughts on this?
3. How frequently do you think people convicted of a crime are actually innocent, wrongly sentenced to serve prison time or death?
4. Have you heard of any other people that were exonerated of some kind of serious crime? Do you remember your reaction to the news?
5. The majority of THE FEAR OF 13 was constructed around an interview with Yarris in which he tells his story. How did this work for you as a film? Did his ability to tell a story keep your attention?
6. Yarris discovered the power and joy of reading while in prison. Are you a big reader? If so, what kind of books most inspire you? If not, why not?
7. Some sequences in THE FEAR OF 13 are cinematic recreations in the style of Errol Morris’s great crime documentary work. What do you think about the use of recreations in documentary?
8. What was your biggest personal take away from THE FEAR OF 13? What most impacted you?
9. Reading in prison seems to have kept Yarris in a relatively positive mindset while on death row. Do you think improving the literacy and offering education to prisoners has an impact on the number of people who return to prison?
10. Would you recommend THE FEAR OF 13 to friends, family, or co-workers? Why or why not?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- After having a work-in-progress preview screening at the Sheffield Doc/Fest in 2014, *THE FEAR OF 13* had its world premiere at Copenhagen's CPH:DOX where it won the festival's Politiken's Audience Award. The film went on to screen at such prestigious events as Tel Aviv's DocAviv Film Festival, the London Film Festival, and Munich's DOK.fest.
- On December 20, 1981, in Chester, Pennsylvania, Patrolman Benjamin Wright stopped 20-year old Nicholas Yarris for a traffic violation. Yarris was high on methamphetamine at the time and an altercation ensued between the two during which Wright's pistol was discharged into the ground. Yarris was charged with attempted murder and kidnapping, among other charges, and was held in jail in lieu of \$100,000 bail.
- According to the Death Penalty Information Center, 1,442 people have been executed since 1976. In the same time period, 156 people received death row exonerations after proving their innocence.
- The last national assessment of literacy in prisons, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics back in 2003, revealed that 56 percent of inmates had only basic or below-basic literacy skills.
- Researchers from the nonprofit, nonpartisan Rand Corporation found that inmates who took part in education programs had 43 percent lower odds of re-offending when they got out of prison. On average, about half of all U.S. inmates re-offend and are re-incarcerated within three years of their release.
- According to *The Guardian*, Nick Yarris wrote a book about his tragic story entitled "Seven Days to Live," which was set to be published by HarperCollins and go on sale in July 2008. However, days before the release date, Yarris was arrested and charged for growing marijuana. That prompted HarperCollins to swiftly halt the book's publication—but not before a number of copies had been passed to retailers for sale. The marijuana-growing charges against Yarris were later dismissed. In the fallout, Yarris filed a legal claim against the publisher for breach of contract and loss of opportunity.
- Following his exoneration, Yarris has pursued public speaking, urging people to write to death row prisoners. He is currently writing a second book, "Seven Days to Love," about life in England since his release.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Support** the [Innocence Project](#). Contributions help continue the fight for criminal justice reform and the exoneration of wrongfully convicted individuals.
2. **Donate** books to the [Prisoners Literature Project](#), an all-volunteer grassroots group that sends hundreds of free book packages to needy prisoners in the United States every month.
3. **Volunteer** for prisoner education services like [The Petey Greene Project](#), which work to supplement education programs in correctional facilities—at no cost to prisons or taxpayers.
4. **Write** to a prisoner. Prisoners are starved of human contact and will reap great rehabilitative benefits from having a pen pal. Services like [Write To Prisoners Project](#), [Black and Pink](#), and [Friends Beyond The Wall](#) can help you find someone to reach out to.

## 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.**