

Medicine on the big and small screen: *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Therese Jones, PhD, and Lester D. Friedman, PhD, Movie Review Editors

If Beale Street Could Talk

Starring KiKi Layne, Stephan James, Regina King

Directed by Barry Jenkins. Screenplay written by Barry Jenkins based on the book *If Beale Street Could Talk*, written by James Baldwin. Produced by Adele Romanski, Sara Murphy, Barry Jenkins, Dede Gardner, and Jeremy Kleiner. Released in 2018. Running time 119 minutes.

Available Formats: Netflix; for rent on YouTube, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime Video

Reviewed by Julie M. Aultman, PhD

False accusations of White women against Black men are deeply rooted in American history. In the late 1800s, claims that Black men had raped or made sexual advances on White women were frequently cited to justify lynching and other racist violent acts. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, in her pamphlet “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law and All Its Phases,”¹ wrote of Southern newspapers defending “lynch’s law” and claims of an epidemic of Black-on-White rape, while illustrating the reality of false accusations designed to hide consensual and taboo relationships between Black men and White women.^{1,2} Wells-Barnett, a Black social justice author, was commended by Frederick Douglass for her bravery in speaking out against racist violence and writing about the truth of these horrors. This published letter is included in Wells-Barnett’s book. Douglass wrote:

Brave woman! You have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured. If American conscience were only half alive, if the American church and clergy were only half Christianized, if American moral sensibility were not hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people, a scream of horror, shame and indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read.¹

In the history of American cinema, there are a number of films depicting the stories of Black men who have been falsely accused of rape including *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962); *Free, White and 21* (1963); *Mandingo* (1975); and *Marshall* (2017), which is based on the 1940 trial *State of Connecticut v. Joseph Spell* where Spell, a Black chauffeur, was accused of rape by his White socialite employer.

Free, White and 21 (1963) went so far as to have the audience become the jury. Ballots were handed out in movie theaters to determine if Ernie Jones (played by Frederick



O’Neal) raped Swedish immigrant Greta Mae Hanson (Annalena Lund).

The National Registry of Exonerations’ (NRE) 2017 report, “Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States,”³ notes that while African-Americans are only 13 percent of the population, they constitute 47 percent of exonerations. Considering wrongful sexual assault convictions specifically, a Black prisoner serving prison time for sexual assault is three-and-a-half times more likely to be innocent compared to White prisoners.³ Assaults on White women by Black men represent a minority of reported sexual assaults in the U.S. (less than 11 percent), but “constitute half of sexual assaults with eyewitness misidentifications that led to exoneration,”³ and some misidentifications are, in part, the products of racial bias, implicit bias, and explicit racism, according to the NRE report.³

The social, financial, psychological, and emotional impact experienced by Black men who have been falsely accused, often without the opportunity to have a voice and

defend their innocence, is a significant narrative thread in Barry Jenkin's 1970's Harlem-period film, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Quoting author James Baldwin, the film begins,

Beale Street is a street in New Orleans, where my father, where Lois Armstrong and the jazz were born. Every Black person born in America was born on Beale Street, born in the Black neighborhood of some American city, whether in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York. Beale Street is our legacy. This novel deals with the impossibility and the possibility, the absolute necessity, to give expression to this legacy. Beale Street is a loud street. It is left to the reader to discern a meaning in the beating of the drums.

Jenkins, the writer and director of *Moonlight* (2016), turned his artistic talents to the screenplay of Baldwin's novel, delving deep into issues of systemic racism pervasive in society, along with the mental health issues among Black men who are imprisoned and wrongly accused, often without exoneration. As a romantic drama, the film shows the authenticity of love between Clementine "Tish" Rivers (KiKi Layne) and Alonzo "Fonny" Hunt (Stephan James), and their irrepressibility in fighting perpetual injustices. While Beale Street is a loud street with the voices, rhythms, beauty, and drama of the community, beyond its metaphorical boundaries Jenkins reveals the silence and stifling of voices needing to be heard.

The introductions to the two lovers begin with Fonny behind prison glass and Tish disclosing she is pregnant. Fonny has been wrongly accused of rape after Officer Bell (Ed Skrein) tells the rape victim, Victoria, to identify Fonny as the perpetrator in a criminal line-up. This is not the first time that Fonny has encountered Officer Bell. When Tish was harassed by a man in a predominantly White grocery store, Fonny physically removes the perpetrator from the store to protect his beloved. Officer Bell attempts to arrest Fonny for the altercation until the store owner vouches for Fonny and chastises Bell for his racism.

Jenkins also presents a different rape narrative than what audiences have historically experienced with the character, Victoria Rogers (Emily Rios), who is a rape victim truly in distress, manipulated by Officer Bell to identify Fonny as her rapist despite his alibi and innocence. Victoria flees back to her home in Puerto Rico to be with a supportive family, but in doing so, fails to attend Fonny's trial to tell the truth about her perpetrator and Officer Bell's manipulation. While every effort is made by Tish and her

family to persuade Victoria to help them, they empathize with her suffering and do not blame her.

Black feminism is prominent in this dramatic film where audiences follow Tish as the lead storyteller and are exposed to the strength of the Black women who support her and surround her in the effort to free Fonny.

The emotional experience of rape, of being wrongly accused, of being imprisoned, alone, and mentally suffering are prominent threads throughout this film. Jenkins provides space for audiences to listen, understand, and feel his characters' deeply emotional connections to each other and to their experiences.

Wrongful imprisonment and what it actually does to a Black man, his family, and his community pushes audiences to recognize the impact of structural racism and why Beale Street has a voice that needs to be heard.

References

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2. Bouie J. The Deadly History of "They're Raping Our Women" Racists have long used rape to defend their worst racist violence. Slate. June 18, 2015. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/06/the-deadly-history-of-theyre-raping-our-women-racists-have-long-defended-their-worst-crimes-in-the-name-of-defending-white-womens-honor.html>.
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