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Episode 169: Masquerade
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Phoebe Judge: In 1979, a children's book was published called *Masquerade.* It's a love story about the moon falling in love with the sun. The moon knows that the sun is lonely and decides to send a gift. The moon thinks maybe it will cheer up the sun and maybe the sun will take notice of the moon. The moon decides to make the gift. It's an ornate little sculpture made of gold in the shape of a hare, like a rabbit. And then the moon asks a hare named Jack Hare to be the messenger of this gift and deliver it to the sun. Jack Hare travels across the Earth to make the delivery. But when he finally arrives to the sun at the end of the book, [music comes in] he realizes he doesn't have the gift anymore. He's accidentally dropped it somewhere along the way. And then, the book tells us that it's our job as readers to find it. And you actually could. A real 18-karat gold sculpture of a hare with a ruby eye and turquoise and moonstones had been buried

somewhere in Britain. And there were clues throughout the book. The title page reads, “To solve the hidden riddle, you must use your eyes and find the hare in every picture that may point you to the prize.” It was a real-life treasure hunt.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

The book was created by a British artist named Kit Williams.

[archival audio comes in]

Kit Williams: I thought I must have some way in which once they open that book, they look, and they look again, and they look again — to really get them involved. And then the puzzle was really a device to do that, to make them really look at the pictures. Having thought, *Well, what they gonna do once they've looked and once they found? Then they've got to have something. Let's have a prize!* And the romantic part of me said, “It must be… not sort of like a Cornflakes' prize, you know, a transistor radio or something like that, it must really be a real wonderful bit of treasure.”

[archival audio fades out]

Phoebe: Kit Williams spent three years painting the fifteen illustrations in the book. They're very intricate. There's a lot going on in each one. And lots of little things you don't notice at first. And there's a hare in every illustration. Sometimes it's hidden. Around each illustration there's a border of text. For example, in the first one, we see the moon over a countryside. And the text around the border reads, “I am as cold as Earth, as old as Earth. And in the Earth am I, one of six to eight.” Another says, “Round and round I follow you. Round and round you follow me.” The back cover of the book had a photo of the actual gold hare pendant that was hidden somewhere in Britain for the reader to find.

There's this actual real treasure that was buried somewhere.

Speaker 1: I mean, to take that mythology and then tie it to this very real treasure was just ingenious. [music fades out]

Phoebe: Kit Williams had actually designed and created it himself. It's five and a half inches long hanging from a chain. He said, “I felt I was doing something for my own childhood.” [music comes in]

He said he chose the hiding place two years before he actually buried it while on a picnic. And had marked the exact place with a magnet. He said that when he was ready to bury it during a full moon, he used a compass to find the spot.

Speaker 2: He placed the jeweled hare inside of a ceramic kind of casket, which was also shaped as a hare, as a rabbit, which he made. And inscribed on the ceramic casket

are the words, “I am the keeper of the jewel of *Masquerade* which lies waiting safe inside me for you or eternity.” And he made this very specific ceramic casket that I think it was lined with clay to kind of resist metal detectors. And ultimately, at the insistence of the publisher, Kit had one witness, Bamber Gascoigne—who was a British talk show host and pretty well-known—go with him when he buried the hare, which was about one week before the book's publication in August of 19Ï79.

[archival audio comes in]

Kit Williams: Now the hare’s been buried. It's up to you to find it.

[archival audio fades out]

Phoebe: Its value was initially said to be 5,000 pounds. A photo of the hiding place was put into a safety deposit box, along with the solution to the puzzle, just in case Kit Williams died before someone solved it. We're talking about him with children's book author, Kit Rosewater. She's been researching the story for years. She wrote her thesis on it, and over the years she's gotten to know Kit Williams and has even visited with him in England.

[to Kit]

It's funny that both of you are “Kit”.

Kit Rosewater: Yes. Kit Williams’ first name is Christopher and mine is Crystal. And I do write sometimes to Kit and his wife, Eleyne, and I always go by Crystal because I don't want it to be weird. [Phoebe chuckles softly]

Phoebe: So, explain how a riddle would appear within an illustration in this book.

Kit Rosewater: OK. In every illustration, Kit actually has his figures sort of pointing and indicating various letters around the border. And he had this system that we would draw a line from the person’s left eye through their left middle finger, and that's going to point to a letter. That's going to be the first letter in that page's hidden message. And then we're going to see if we can see a line from their left eye through their left toe. And if we can, we draw a straight line through there, and that will intersect with the next letter on the board.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Following this method, you can identify letters that spell out these words: “Catherine's long finger overshadows Earth buried yellow amulet midday points the hour in light of Equinox. Look you.” And then, you're not done. If you read the first letters of all those words vertically, there's an acrostic that says, “Close by Ampthill”.

Kit Rosewater: Ampthill is a small town in Britain. And what “Catherine's long finger” is referring to is a monument of Catherine of Aragon, the first wife to king Henry the VIII and that's readily apparent. Ampthill is a very small town, so, if you'd look that up, you'd see that there was a big monument to Catherine. And so, the idea was if you go to the monument for Catherine of Aragon in Ampthill at the Spring Equinox, that the shadow of the very tip of this monument, which is kind of this big cross, it falls directly on the point of earth where Kit buried the jeweled hare.

[to Kit]

Phoebe: This puzzle seems impossible to solve. [Kit and Phoebe laugh] I have no idea how I would even start. But I guess if you knew that this prize was worth a lot of money, you’d try pretty hard to solve it.

Kit Rosewater: Oh, oh, absolutely. So, so, *so* many people spent months, years trying to get the solution. They could send Kit letters and he could confirm a solution. In fact, to make it fair for anyone living all over the world, basically Kit and the publisher had told the public, “If you send them the correct solution, Kit Williams will purchase your plane ticket to come here to Britain and dig it up with you.” So you didn't need to go digging around by yourself. [music fades out] This meant that Kit received over 30,000 letters in just the course of two and a half years from people trying to guess the proper solution.

[archival audio comes in]

Kit Williams: And they didn't just write letters, they wrote nine-foot poems. They made cakes, and they put messages inside the cake. They made pullovers. What'd you call them in America…?

Interviewer: Cardigans?

Kit Williams: Cardigans. Jumpers.

Interviewer: Mmhm.

Kit Williams: They— little old ladies in the sort of… out west [laughs] wrote musicals about the book and sung it and played it on tape on an old piano. Wonderful things were sent to me.

[archival audio fades out]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: He said he opened and read every single letter. Sometimes as many as 200 a day. One letter read:

I am ten. Your puzzle is easy. The treasure is on the North Hill in an old grave. It is a moldy old grave.

P.S. I hope you'll write another book and let me hide the hare. I think I could do better than you.

P.S. I am almost ten.

Kit Williams was overwhelmed with not just letters, but also people calling his house at all hours. And even showing up at the front door desperate to ask questions and see if they were on the right track back. The book was an international best-seller. But as time passed and no one was getting any closer, Kit Williams started to worry that maybe the puzzle was too hard. [music comes in] Readers were becoming suspicious that there wasn't any treasure. And that the whole thing was just a stunt to sell books. Some people speculated that there was no Kit Williams at all. One person claimed that the whole thing — the children's book, the puzzle, the treasure, and even Kit Williams were the deathbed inventions of Agatha Christie, her final mystery. She died three years before *Masquerade* was published.

[to Kit]

No one could get it.

Kit Rosewater: No one could get it. And some people were extremely close. But kind of unknowingly close. Kit was… you know, I think that he is very polite about it, but I think he was a bit frustrated with the fact that a lot of the people who were trying to get it, to him at least, it seemed like a lot of random guesses were coming to him. And people were kind of relying on what's called confirmer clues, which means they would come up with a location completely on their own, and then be searching the book to try to find things that would confirm that their guess was right.

Phoebe: I mean, it's interesting that all of this care and energy would go in from thousands of people, because it's not like you would find this prize and it would be a million dollars in cash. [Kit laughs] I mean, it was this odd little jeweled sculpture thing… [Kit affirms] very unique item that you would be rewarded with.

Kit Rosewater: Yeah. I've thought about that too. Just because when you start to read stories of… they call themselves “Masqueraders”, the people who were really, really kind of in deep into this puzzle. When you read some of the stories about the travels that people have gone on, the money that they've spent trying to hunt around Britain for the treasure, it doesn't seem in terms of pure value to be worth the effort that so many people around the world were spending. And honestly, if you ask some of those Masqueraders, they say it wasn't really so much about the treasure or at least it wasn't

about the monetary value of the treasure; it was much more about this childhood excitement and adventure in finding treasure buried in the ground. [music fades out]

Phoebe: It's like some things actually coming alive. [Kit affirms] We read about all of these quests and mysteries and children's books, and now this one actually is real.

Kit Rosewater: Yes! This magic that we normally only see in books. We usually only see characters going on these treasure hunts. And then we're given this opportunity for us to do so ourselves. And Kit, he was adamant about the fact that a child could solve my riddle, a ten-year-old could solve my riddle. And I think that people found that really exciting. So this was something that families were pouring over together, really. It wasn't just a children's book, and it wasn't just an adult book either.

It was something that was really shared by a lot of households during kind of the height of the *Masquerade* mania.

Phoebe: So, thousands of people are sending in letter with incorrect solutions. And then what happened?

Kit Rosewater: So everyone's looking, everyone is sending an incorrect solutions. Millions of copies had been sold, and worldwide. Kit who is starting to kind of become wary of receiving all these letters, he releases a clue in *The Sunday Times* on December 21st, 1980.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: More than a year after the book came out. It was a drawing of Kit Williams himself, surrounded by animals — an elephant, a monkey, a hedgehog. He's holding a fish in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. The paper has writing on it, but you can't understand what it says, unless you fold that drawing in half and hold it up to a mirror. [music comes in] If you figured that out, you could read the words, “To do my work, I appointed four men from twenty.” This is a reference to fingers and toes. The clue continues, “The tallest and the fattest”, meaning our big toes and middle fingers. The clue while making absolutely no sense to me, tipped off two physics teachers from Manchester.

These two physics teachers named Mike Barker and John Rousseau realized that they needed to follow the middle fingers and big toes of the people and animals in Kit Williams illustrations, which would point them to certain letters in each illustration’s border. And finally, they crack the puzzle. They knew to go to the cross-shaped monument to Catherine of Aragon in Ampthill Park on the Equinox and follow the shadow coming off the tip of the cross. The end of that shadow would show them exactly where to dig.

Kit Rosewater: I believe it was Mike Barker who goes up to Ampthill, and he goes to kind of poke around. The problem is at this point, it's February 18th, 1982, which means there is no Spring Equinox shadow that's going to point him to the exact location. And he comes up with this really impressive, clever gadget. I think it's called an inclinometer, and he's trying to figure out where the shadow will be, but he can't quite fully tell. And he doesn't find the hare. He decides, *You know what, it's mid-February.* At this point, I mean, it's been over two years, it's been two and a half years. And so, he thinks, *It's fine. I'll wait for the Equinox*, which that year fell on March 20th.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Mike Barker and John Rousseau had actually drafted a couple of letters to Kit Williams describing the correct solution. But they hadn't mailed them. They wanted to wait until they'd completely solved it and found the hare. But then on February 19th, 1982, the day after Mike Barker had gone digging with no luck, Kit Williams received a letter. [music fades out]

In February of 1982, two and a half years after his book was published, Kit Williams received a letter. It was handwritten in cursive and read:

> *Dear Mr. Williams,*
>
> *Please excuse me from not writing in my address. But if I'm correct about the whereabouts of the hare, and this letter fell into the wrong hands, all my efforts over the past eighteen months would be for nothing if I were to be followed to the site, and it's difficult enough with it being a public place. I believe the hare to be in this area.*

[music comes in] And they included a drawing.

Kit Rosewater: That looks quite childlike. The only things that are on it are a big cross, another cross, a little kind of wobbly circle that's meant to be a stone, and I think a rugby playing field. And basically, the words that are on the letter indicate that the person who's writing it, he doesn't want this letter to be intercepted and someone to know what he's talking about. So, he's done very few labels to not give up way what he knows. But on one of the crosses, there is a shadow drawn from it and an arrow pointing to the tip of the shadow, and then the word "hare". And Kit sees this drawing. He, at this point, he's just so elated. He thinks someone's cracked his puzzle entirely, and he immediately rings up the person who sent the letter because he's included his phone number. And the man answers. And he's like, "You've got it! You've got it!" And Kit starts talking to him about the puzzle, and it dawns on Kit during the conversation, he just, he absolutely sinks to realize that this man actually has not solved the puzzle at all. And it just turns out that he's come across the hare's location by saying completely

different circumstance. Essentially what it is, is what everybody else has been doing of guessing places. And then looking for confirmer clues. And what seems to Kit in this moment is that that's what this gentleman has done too. He hasn't solved Kit's puzzle. [music fades out] Instead he has guessed this location and he happens to be right, and Kit's already confirmed it.

Phoebe: Kit Williams didn't know what to do. So, he told the man to go out and dig up the hare. The man replied that he wasn't feeling well. He said maybe he would feel better in a couple of days and would dig it up then. And then he hung up the phone.

Apparently, the man went out digging for several days, by some reports as many as four days, and wasn't able to find it. And then finally, he did find it. *The New York Times* reported, “The British treasure hunt for jeweled rabbit is over.” But the man who'd won didn't want anyone to know his name. He said he didn't want to be bothered by all of the thousands and thousands of people who were obsessed with the puzzle. He said he was using a fake name so he wouldn't “get an avalanche of calls and letters from addicts.” The fake name was “Ken Thomas”. Reporters photographed Ken Thomas standing next to Kit William.

Kit Rosewater: The photos of that event are really quite fascinating. Because Ken Thomas, I mean, he's almost comically mysterious. He keeps his face turned away from the camera. He has a kind of old fisherman's cap on, he's got a pipe, he's got this giant mustache, which is obviously fake. He has this big coat, and he keeps the collar popped up. And he's just this really odd guy. And people don't know what to make of him. And in the end, he's bombarded with all these requests for interviews, and he takes *one.* And he refused to be on camera, it's just his voice. And then later, he— I think it’s his wife even asks that they disguise his voice, but she asks too late and the interview is already happening and she faints. And so, there's this really odd air about Ken from the very, very beginning.

Phoebe: Ken Thomas claimed he'd stopped at Ampthill Park to let his dog run around. Here he is in that interview from 1982.

[archival audio comes in]

Ken Thomas: I stopped at Ampthill Park to let the dog go for a run. And I see these two lovely crosses at Ampthill Park. And there’s this thing that indicates to [indistinguishable] in the earth. Saw ‘em on there.

Interviewer: How’d you actually find the stat?

Ken Thomas: My dog went over and wee’d against ‘em. I followed it over. And then I turned and looked at the crosses, and things came together. So I investigated one of

the crosses and turned out to be Cate’s cross, Catherine’s cross. Apparently, she was imprisoned there. And I just transferred all my clues to Ampthill.

[archival audio fades out]

Kit Rosewater: Ken says he gets really kind of excited and interested about this area. And it's clear from his digging, he has no idea where exactly the hare is. So when Ken does finally come across the hare, the ceramic casket, and it's broadcast on television, at this point Mike Barker and John Rousseau have not reached out to Kit Williams. And, you know, their hearts sink, but they also realize from watching that really weird interview with Ken Thomas, they realize, *Oh, he hasn't solved it either.* And they decide that basically there is still a title they can claim of solving the puzzle of kind of being the winners, even if they don't have a prize. And so, they send a telegram to Kit. And basically, they say nothing else on this telegram except for “Close by Ampthill.” [music comes in] And Kit gets this telegram, and he knows they've cracked it. He knows that they've fully solved it in seeing that.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: But it was too late. Ken Thomas had the treasure, and the whole thing was over. Fans of the book were disappointed that after all this time, and so many thousands of people trying to solve the riddle, the winner didn't seem to want to talk about it.

Some people thought his behavior might even be its own set of clues that the puzzle continued. One person pointed out that if you rearrange the letters in his pseudonym, Ken Thomas, you get the phrase, “The mask on.” And that you could rearrange the letters in the name Kit Williams to spell, “I will mask it.” Some people just didn't want to believe it was over. And then, in 1988, news broke that the golden hare was going up for auction at Sotheby's. Kit Williams himself tried to bid on it. He had to drop out at 6,000 pounds. The hare sold for almost 32,000 pounds. [music fades out]

People wanted to know who was selling the hare and why, especially one reporter named Frank Branston. He started asking questions. Frank Branston learned that the gold hare was being auctioned off to cover the debts of a software company called Haresoft. [music comes in]

In 1984, Haresoft made a computer game, a puzzle game, basically copying the premise of Kit Williams’ *Masquerade*. It was called “Hare Raiser”. Players were told that if they solve the game’s puzzles, they could win the actual gold hare treasure that the man calling himself Ken Thomas had found.

Frank Branston started looking into the software company Haresoft — who was behind it, how it was connected to the so-called Ken Thomas and why Ken Thomas was really using a pseudonym in the first place.

Kit Rosewater: And once we kind of get a glimpse into understanding that Ken Thomas wasn't all what he seems, then we've got that reporter Frank Branston, and he thinks to himself, *Yes, I am going to blow this wide open.* [music fades out]

Phoebe: The reporter Frank Branston looked into the owner of Haresoft and found that it was owned by a man named Dugald Thompson. He looked into Dugald Thompson and saw that he'd been in business with a man named John Guard. That name was familiar to Frank Branston. The two men were acquaintances. They'd worked together years before.

John Guard had once told Frank Branston that he knew where the hare was buried. Frank Branston didn't take him seriously. He assumed he was bluffing. With John Guard did have some inside information. His girlfriend used to date Kit Williams. [music comes in] Her name was Veronica Robertson.

Kit Rosewater: Veronica was on the picnic with Kit where Kit decides the spot where he's going to hide the jewel. And so, she kind of has this idea that that's probably where Kit hid the prize when this book comes out. And she's not interested in— she doesn't want to hurt Kit. She's not interested in the money. But she's really, really interested in animal rights groups. And so, John Guard convinces her that they're going to dig up the jeweled hare, they're going to sell it to this store in Texas in the U.S. and they're going to use the money for animal rights group. And so, Veronica doesn't know the answer to the puzzle either, but she does know the rough location.

Phoebe: She told John Guard what she knew, and he tracked down a guy who was enthusiastic about metal detectors. They started digging trenches for midnight to sunrise, sweeping the ground, trying to find the gold hare. But there was a problem. If John Guard did find the hare, he could be easily connected to Veronica and people would know he'd cheated. He needed to find someone willing to be the face of this thing and say they'd solve the puzzle. That way he'd get the gold hare, and no one would know.

Kit Rosewater: And he ends up turning to a colleague of his named Dugald Thompson. And of course, Dugald Thompson is our Ken Thomas. And so, Frank Branston basically links all of these figures together, and he just blasts them in this article that comes out and I believe in— I think it was December 4th, 1988. And he releases all of his findings. This is the first Kit's learning the full extent of it. And Kit's pretty heartbroken. I mean, he's knew that Ken Thomas hadn't solved his riddle, but he didn't know that this all

basically stems back to someone in his life who happened to see him as he was first coming up with the bare bones plans for his book.

[to Kit]

Phoebe: So… John on Guard's girlfriend, Veronica used to be Kit William's girlfriend.

Kit Rosewater: Yes.

Phoebe: And she knew where the treasure was buried because she was dating Kit Williams when he buried it. And so, she tells her new boyfriend.

Kit Rosewater: Well, she wasn't dating Kit when he buried it. Kit is very, very smart. And when he got the idea to bury the hare at the Spring Equinox shadow, what Veronica witnesses is Kit very subtly places a magnet in the ground. He pushes a magnet down and he specifically turns the magnet so that it's not facing true north. And Kit ends up using that magnet years later to bury the hare. But what Veronica witnesses is him poking that little hole in the earth and kind of sending a magnet down. And it was at least according to her testimony, it was more that they went on this picnic together and she noticed Kit looking around. [music fades out] And she knew that Kit was coming up with this riddle and he wanted to bury a treasure, and so she kind of puts two and two together.

Phoebe: OK. So, Veronica's new boyfriend, John Guard kind of gets obsessed with this.

Kit Rosewater: Yes.

Phoebe: So, he knows where it is, but he doesn't know how to solve the riddle at all. And he goes to this colleague, Dugald Thompson and says, "Hey, will you be the face of this thing?"

Kit Rosewater: Mmhm. Yes.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: In 1988, Veronica Robertson told the *London Times* that she hadn't known anything about the. But the metal detector enthusiast claimed that Veronica Robertson joined them on at least one dig. When asked about that by a reporter, she said she couldn't remember. She said it wasn't until after the hare was found, that her boyfriend, John Guard told her that the treasure hunt winner, the so-called Ken Thomas, was actually his colleague, Dugald Thompson. "It was mind boggling," she said. "I was very worried that the link might be made." And she said she had apologized to Kit Williams.

Frank Branston later wrote that he thinks John Guard knew the general location, but it was only when he saw the holes dug by the two physics teachers that he was able to get closer. [music comes in] And that's when he and Dugald Thompson decided to send the letter to Kit William.

When all of this came out Kit Williams said, “This tarnishes *Masquerade*, and I'm shocked by what has emerged. I feel a deep sense of responsibility to all those many people who were genuinely looking for it.”

[to Kit]

Phoebe: I feel like people would be really mad at John Guard and Dugald Thompson. [Kit laughs] I mean, they ruined this.

Kit Rosewater: Yeah. Yeah. I think, you know, it's such a different experience I had because when I came across this book, it was I think 1996 and long past it. But I feel that way, looking at everything. Just because there were so many people who really wanted to play Kit's game the way he imagined it. It was a fun game. It wasn't a game that needed to have rules broken or to be ruined. But he really did. He really did decide to kind of ruin it.

Phoebe: You know, if there is a children's book story about what happened here, these two guys would be sent on an ice flow [Kit laughs] off somewhere, and all the children would be standing waving at them as they went off into the distance to never be seen again.

Kit Rosewater: I think that that would make a really satisfying ending to that story. And I do think about the children. And really, it is such a shame that these two men who had nothing to do with children swooped in and took this thing. And so, I think it would be really lovely to have this narrative of them getting their just desserts, and the kids winning at the end of it.

Phoebe: What does Kit Williams say about all this? I mean, it had to be heartbreaking.

Kit Rosewater: Yes. Um… you know, well, one thing that that Kit has done is he doesn't really take a lot of a lot of interviews, because I think that talking about it probably brings him some pain. But when you look at interviews, when Kit does talk about all the letters he received, he does have some humor about it. I think he does prize the fact that a lot of people— the book touched a lot of people! I mean, his initial aim, if we go way back to 1976, was to write a book that people would spend time with. That they would look at his paintings really carefully. So even though the actual treasure hunt and the treasure-finding doesn't turn out the way Kit wants, his book still has a really lasting and, I think, a really positive legacy.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: For many years after the Sotheby's auction, no one knew where the gold hare pendant was. In 2009, a woman heard about Kit Williams on the radio and realized that her grandfather was the current owner. She contacted the radio show and arrangements were made for Kit Williams to see his handmade gold hare again. When he saw it for the first time in more than twenty years, he said, “It sparkled in a way that I had forgotten. I had imagined I would never see it.”

Kit Rosewater: And he's able to meet Mike Barker and John Rousseau. And there's kind of the shared idea that even if they don't have the physical treasure, I mean, it's almost like a silly cliché, but they have the story. And Mike and John are still the puzzle solvers. And so, even though everyone comes away a little more empty-handed than they wanted to, they're not completely empty handed, because they still have the adventure even if they don't have the buried treasure.

Phoebe: Back when *Masquerade* came out and was on bestseller lists all over the world, An Oxford professor and psychoanalyst named Anthony Storr was asked why he thought the book was so popular. He said, “The world has become less and less mysterious. And science has reduced our scope for fantasy. We love the magic element and fairy stories when we are young. And it seems we never really outgrow the need for it.”

Criminal is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Susanna Roberson is our producer. Engineering by Russ Henry. Audio mix by Michael Raphael, Rob Byers and Johnny Vince Evans, of Final Final V2. Special thanks to Kit Rosewater and Lily Clark.

Julienne Alexander creates original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com.

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Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

END OF EPISODE.