

"A rollicking, often nail-biting chronicle of the wave of kidnappings that overwhelmed law-enforcement agencies in the Great Depression."

—PHILIP SHENON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Cruel and Shocking Act: The Secret History of the Kennedy Assassination*

THE KIDNAP YEARS

The Astonishing True History of
the **Forgotten Kidnapping Epidemic**
That Shook Depression-Era America

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Prior to reading this book, how much did you know about the lawlessness of the Great Depression? Did you recognize any of the cases covered in the book?
2. How do you feel about the kidnapping of Buppie Orthwein by Charles Abernathy, where the kidnappers were not cruel or malicious, merely desperate? Discuss your feelings regarding crimes like these. Are they comparable to violent kidnappings? Should these crimes be treated similarly?
3. Before the advances in forensic science and technology of today, investigating violent crimes was especially difficult. Were there any investigations that you found impressive? Which ones did you find lacking?
4. Discuss which unsolved cases you think could be solved by modern-day forensics.
5. Some instances of kidnapping, like Marion Parker's, are especially gruesome. Which cases were the most difficult for you to read about?
6. During the "kidnap years," it became common for people to be

taken from their homes, schools, and places of work. Imagine you lived during this time. How would you feel going about your day-to-day routine?

7. While this kidnapping epidemic terrorized the States, they produced some positive results. Discuss the good that came out of such a dark history.
8. Many of these stories involve poorer people kidnapping wealthier ones. Given the desperate poverty suffered by many at the time, how do you feel about the motives behind some of these abductions? Does this change the way you think about crime and those who commit it?
9. As the kidnapping epidemic continued, people became violent in their fear, like when a mob took justice into their own hands by lynching Thurmond and Holmes. Citizens and officials alike supported this action, and many encouraged further vigilante justice. Do you think it's important for the government to reserve the right to dictate punishment? How did you feel reading about the mob?
10. Charles Lindbergh's celebrity status granted him a certain amount of freedom in the investigation of his son's kidnapping. If he hadn't been famous, how do you think the case would have been different? Would the investigation have been more or less successful?
11. The press was clearly biased during the Lindbergh trial—do you think they influenced the outcome of the investigation or the trial? Do you think the impartial reporting of crimes is important?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How has your career as a journalist informed the way you approach writing books?

A journalist wants to learn as much as he can about a subject. He won't write everything he knows, but his depth of knowledge makes his prose more muscular, gives him access to vivid examples and vignettes, and lets him use shorthand with far more confidence. It's far less satisfying for a journalist to have to concede, or spackle over, gaps in his information.

This book necessitated an incredible amount of research. Can you talk a little bit about your methods?

I relied a lot on microfilm from the *New York Times*, where I worked for twenty-eight years, and other newspapers. Plus, I read a number of books on important individuals, like J. Edgar Hoover, and especially noteworthy cases, the most famous being the Lindbergh kidnapping. And with some persistent internet surfing, I came across a magazine article and a book from the 1930s. The article was by a wood expert

who traced the source of the Lindbergh kidnapper's ladder, and the book was by a psychiatrist who pioneered criminal profiling and predicted—accurately—the kind of man the kidnapper would turn out to be, once the police caught him. A little extra digging can pay big dividends!

This kidnapping epidemic has been largely forgotten—why do you think that is?

Years went by, and other events seemed far more important: World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, and so on. A lot of the kidnappings that were front page news at the time then faded from memory.

In this book you discuss dozens of cases of kidnapping. How did you decide to structure the project?

I decided early on that it would be a mistake to recount every case in a single chapter, although I treated a number of cases that way. But I felt that the Lindbergh case was so fascinating, from the kidnapping through the arrest of suspect Bruno Hauptman two and a half years later and through his trial, that I needed to make the most of it. So I spaced the events of the case throughout the book to create suspense. I used the same technique with the 1928 kidnapping of little Grace Budd and the arrest of the kidnapper more than six years later. It would have been a mistake to use a strictly linear time line. Incidentally, I had to decide which of the many kidnapping cases of that era to include in the book and which to leave out. How did I decide? Instinct.

The Lindbergh case was hugely influential in shaping legislature, and the case itself was widely publicized—is this simply because the victim was a celebrity, or were other factors at play? Why was this case so culturally significant?

Lindbergh's celebrity status was the main factor. Plus, his wife was

an appealing person (and from a famous family), and their baby was adorable. And Lindbergh was more than a celebrity; he was an idol. His great courage in flying utterly alone across the Atlantic, his all-American good looks, his “aw shucks” smile—all contributed to his image. And there was far less debunking of famous people than there is today.

The prevalence of kidnapping during the Great Depression was enabled by the lack of technology and forensic science available to law enforcement. Do you think it would be possible, in the present day, for a crime epidemic to occur on a similar scale?

Probably not, given the instant, multi-state communications available today, making it possible for police agencies across the country to talk to one another. But there is still the human factor. For instance, the investigation into the 1969 murders of actress Sharon Tate and several others was hampered by poor communication within the Los Angeles Police Department.

Your body of work largely covers the investigation of violent crimes. What is it about this topic that interests you?

Let's stick with murder. A murder changes everything forever, at least for the victim and those close to him or her. There is nothing on this earth than can undo it, and there is no true justice this side of heaven. Even if the killer is caught and punished, the victim is gone forever, and those close to him or her are scarred forever. And I have occasionally reflected on how issues of profound legal importance reach the Supreme Court after originating in, say, a shabby rooming house or a grimy saloon or pool hall.