

On the Leopold-Loeb Case
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These days in retirement, I go wherever my impulses take me. I don't try to figure anything out, I just do what I'm told. This past weekend, it was a book on a murder case from the 1920s, the Leopold-Loeb case, that I have heard about all of my life. Two rich college students from Chicago, last names Leopold and Loeb, who were all-around superior beings, devised a brilliant scheme to murder a young boy for the challenge and excitement of it—that's as much as I knew. I read a book on the case, *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Jazz Age Chicago* by Simon Baatz (HarperCollins, 2009). I couldn't put it down--fascinating, thought-provoking. I also Googled around and watched a PBS documentary on the case, "The Shocking Criminal Case of Leopold and Loeb"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xjLJPGOI8o>, but the Baatz book would have been enough.

Some Wikipedia-derived background:

In May 1924, Nathan Leopold, Jr (born, 1904) and Richard Loeb (born 1905), two wealthy students at the University of Chicago, kidnapped and murdered 14-year-old Bobby Franks. The two committed the murder—characterized at the time as “the crime of the century”—as a demonstration of their intellectual superiority, which they believed enabled, and entitled, them to carry out a “perfect crime.” After they were arrested, Loeb's family retained famed attorney Clarence Darrow as lead counsel for their defense. Darrow's 12-hour summation at their sentencing hearing is noted for its influential criticism of capital punishment. The Franks murder has been the inspiration for several dramatic works, including Patrick Hamilton's 1929 play “Rope,” which was the basis for director Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film with the same name. Other films based on the crime include “Compulsion” (1959), adapted from Meyer Levin's 1957 novel; “Swoon” (1992); and “Murder by Numbers” (2002).

Reading the Baatz book brought up a host of considerations for me, including why we do what we do, how we justify evil to ourselves (like dropping atomic bombs on civilian populations—I just watched the classic film from the ‘50s, “Hiroshima Mon Amour”—and how we believe so confidently in fallacious stories, or narratives, about people and events.

On this last one, and I hope I’m not ruining your encounter with the Leopold-Loeb case, I was taken with how conventional wisdom about this case doesn’t hold up. Cases in point: These two, especially Loeb, were far from superior beings. They came nowhere close to planning and executing the perfect murder; in fact, they were bunglers of the first order. And Darrow’s assumed-to-be brilliant argument at the sentencing hearing was a rambling, disjointed hodge-podge that had no discernable impact on the judge’s sentencing decision. The Baatz book followed a pattern for me. It seems that no matter what I get into that I think I already basically know about—say, the 1938 Munich Agreement, which we all know was a disastrous appeasement, a sell-out to Hitler—it turns out that it didn’t actually happen that way.

Anyway, check out the Leopold and Loeb case for yourself. All I can say for sure is that the Baatz book was a very rewarding experience for me.