



The Murder of the Century: The Gilded Age Crime that Scandalized a City and Sparked the Tabloid Wars

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On Long Island, a farmer finds a duck pond turned red with blood. On the Lower East Side, two boys playing at a pier discover a floating human torso wrapped tightly in oilcloth. Blueberry pickers near Harlem stumble upon neatly severed limbs in an overgrown ditch. Clues to a horrifying crime are turning up all over New York, but the police are baffled: There are no witnesses, no motives, no suspects.

The grisly finds that began on the afternoon of June 26, 1897, plunged detectives headlong into the era's most baffling murder mystery. Seized upon by battling media moguls Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, the case became a publicity circus. Reenactments of the murder were staged in Times Square, armed reporters lurked in the streets of Hell's Kitchen in pursuit of suspects, and an unlikely trio — a hard-luck cop, a cub reporter, and an eccentric professor — all raced to solve the crime.

What emerged was a sensational love triangle and an even more sensational trial: an unprecedented capital case hinging on circumstantial evidence around a victim whom the police couldn't identify with certainty, and who the defense claimed wasn't even dead. *The Murder of the Century* is a rollicking tale — a rich evocation of America during the Gilded Age and a colorful re-creation of the tabloid wars that have dominated media to this day.

The Murder of the Century: The Gilded Age Crime that Scandalized a City and Sparked the Tabloid Wars Details

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AdultNonFiction Teton County Library says

Teton Co Call No: 364.152 Collins P

Julia's rating: 4 stars

What a page turner! True crime junkies, get your fix!

Collins, whose other books I now must seek out, has done insanely extensive research (there are forty pages of sources and notes) to retell a scandalous tale of Gilded Age New York that was followed in newspapers around the globe.

Picture New York in 1897 where Harlem is a land of farms and a place to go berry-picking. Picture the newspaper magnet William Randolph Hearst as a young and ambitious contender willing to do anything to stake his claim in the newspaper biz - above Joseph Pulitzer. McKinley's not yet gone to war in the Phillipines. Teddy Roosevelt is still freshly remembered as the NYC Police Commissioner. Picture a barber shop, a soda shop, the local bakery, the piers, the Bowery, tenement houses and the Fourth of July - all this (and more) plays into this intriguing tale of a murder fueled by infidelity, jealousy and deception, and an investigation that takes you from Manhattan to Harlem to Long Island and back again. And tabloids, called "yellow newspapers," had the story that would put them on the map and in the money.

The crime is grisly, the characters shady yet strangely sympathetic, the evidence and methodology questionable, the public interest at a fever-pitch and the drama rather unstoppable. The narrative is packed with quotations taken from first hand reports and trial transcripts diligently researched and documented. These details add so much color that you can practically feel the street mud on your boots, the nickle for the paper in your pocket and hear the newsboys crying out another headline.

Rebecca Foster says

Collins is a master of the nonfiction narrative, but I was a bit let down by this one. What he does best is a brand of creative nonfiction that blends memoir, travelogue and history with a penchant for finding the quirky and previously undiscovered (I'm thinking mostly of *Sixpence House*, but *Banvard's Folly*, *The Trouble with Tom* and *Not Even Wrong* also fit the bill). This is more of a straight journalistic inquiry, something any author might have written if provided with an idea and enough archival evidence. I expect Collins to look deeper into the nooks and crannies of history to find the delightfully strange stories we didn't even know we didn't know.

All the same, Collins certainly had a great story to work with here: a sordid murder and dismemberment case in which various sections of a man's body were found around Long Island. First a chest (with tattoo dug out) and arms, then a torso, then a pair of legs, all wrapped in a distinctively patterned oilcloth. The victim, William Guldensuppe, had worked as a masseur at the public bathhouse (which sounds like a euphemism to me if there ever was one!) and had particularly memorable genitalia that helped his colleagues identify him.

The guilty parties (and there wasn't much doubt about their guilt, unlike Franz Müller's in *Mr. Briggs' Hat*) were Augusta Nack, a German midwife who also performed abortions, and her new lover Martin Thorn, who lured Guldensuppe to a suburban cottage where they shot him and then hacked him into rough pieces.

Although this is undoubtedly sensational material and interesting enough in its own right, it lacks something in the telling. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is still the last word in how to write a fascinating true crime narrative that grips the reader from first word to last. Capote may well fictionalize and sensationalize in places, but his book is better and stranger than any fiction. Collins is perhaps too slavish in his adherence to the chronological facts, so that his narrative becomes, like history, just 'one damn thing after another'.

(The more intriguing story here is about the rise of the tabloid newspaper, particularly through the rivalry between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer and their respective New York rags. Hearst was especially shameless in taking advantage of the Guldensuppe murder for his own financial gain.)

Cassie says

This book was so entertaining! It is not only about an astonishing true crime, but the rise of tabloid journalism, and a little known episode in history that pitted two great giants- Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst - against on in another in an event that forever changed the way we receive our news. Paul Collins combines all of the things that I love in a book: non-fiction, criminal minds, history, and wit. I really enjoyed it!!

Chrissie says

I think lots of people would like this book/audiobook. Both the murder itself and what the tabloids did with this story are the two main themes. The book is non-fiction but reads as a novel. However, this is a double-edged sword. The press turned the murder/crime/trial events into pure sensationalism. The author too writes of the events in a sensational style, to capture the mood, the time, the way it was! That is good, BUT at the same time I found myself asking if the facts were being delivered in a straightforward, objective manner. No they were not. And if this is to be called non-fiction then you cannot add subjective interpretations into the story-telling. Yet, the story was fun because of the very way it was told. At the same time, the story is thoroughly told. You leave the book with a very clear understanding of what actually happened, of the trial and of the media at the turn of the 20th century in NYC. Equally interesting and well covered are the later events in the main protagonists' lives. It is books like this that will make people realize that non-fiction need never be dry.

The narration by William Dufres captured perfectly the sensational tone of both the criminal events and the press.

Jan says

Whenever I read books like this, I always think about how people (usually older people) like to reminisce about the "good old days" when everyone was somehow magically moral, upstanding, and law-abiding. Then I chuckle a bit.

Okay, so maybe it's a little weird to be chuckling when I'm reading a book about a murder, but cut me some slack. It amuses me that anyone would think that immorality is confined to the modern age. Yes, even back in those alleged "good old days," people were murdering each other for stupid reasons and trying to cover it up in bumbling, ineffectual ways.

The story begins on a hot summer day in the late 1890s, when some boys playing in a river in NYC fish out a wrapped package that they think will hold something of value. Instead, it holds part of a dead man's body. What follows is a sensational tale of infidelity, divorce, back room abortions, yellow journalism, and, of course, murder most foul.

Honestly, except for the dismembered body (which always seems to rev up people's outrage factor), the murder turns out to have been rather pedestrian. Still, the book is a fairly fun read and it was obviously well researched. I've read more engaging true crime, but I've also read much more poorly written true crime. I'm sure most true crime buffs would like it. Others, perhaps not so much.

Tony says

THE MURDER OF THE CENTURY: The Gilded Age Crime That Scandalized a City and Sparked the Tabloid Wars. (2011). Paul Collins. **.

I have to confess up front that I couldn't finish this book. It was so poorly organized that by the middle I was so confused that I no longer able to follow the story. I may not be the brightest penny in the pile, but I am usually a careful reader. The author, in his attempt to capture every detail of this crime and the resultant newspaper wars that it sparked, managed to throw in everything except the kitchen sink (that may have come after I stopped reading it) into his narrative. The year is 1897. Body parts are discovered and recovered from the East River and from a remote area in Queens. The parts belong to the same body: a white male about 5'11" tall. The head was never found. The parts that were discovered contained no distinguishable marks. If there had been scars or tattoos, they had been cut out. The parts were wrapped in oilcloth and tied off with common twine. The two major newspapers in New York at the time were owned, respectively, by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Both men were trying to boost their papers' circulations and ultimately become the top paper in NYC. The author chose to follow the developments in this case on a day-by-day basis. Unfortunately, the daily path was full of lies and misrepresentations on the part of each newspaper, so that following the actual case was impossible. Headline in each paper became more and more lurid and sensational. Both papers threw vast numbers of reporters against the case, and findings – even those that had nothing to do with the murder – screamed out in daily headlines. The author picked out three people to focus on: a NYC policeman, Detective Arthur Carey, a reporter from the New York World (Pulitzer's paper), Ned Brown, and a professor of chemistry and toxicology from NYU, Dr. Rudolph Wittham. These three men were mostly responsible for narrowing down the search for the killer and examining clues for their value. In the end, arrests were made based on circumstantial evidence. Those charged were involved in a love triangle and the victim – although he was never really identified – was one of the characters. The story was a wild one, and could have been a riveting chance to explore the murder better, but I couldn't after a while. There are lots of facts in this book about terms that were used at the time that were interesting, e.g., the name of the Bowery comes from the Dutch word, *bouwerij*, which simply means Dutch farm – what the area was before it became built up. An Inspector Byrnes from the NY police is credited with the first use (invention?) of the term, "third degree." The term Yellow journalism comes from the first use of color printing in a daily newspaper. It was used in a comic strip titled, "The Yellow Kid." The kid was printed in the color yellow. Sorry I couldn't make it through.

Connie D says

4.5 stars. This is fascinating as a murder mystery, a courtroom drama, and a look at the strange media wars and early paparazzi of late 19th century New York. It kept my attention even late at night when I normally fall right asleep. (And yes, it is quite gruesome at times.) It's especially disturbing because it's true.

Mo says

2 ½ stars

If you were one of those people who were caught up in the O.J. Simpson case, watched all of the coverage on TV, and devoured every detail, then this might be a good book for you. If you went so far as to wait outside the courthouse every day, then I can definitely recommend this book to you!

Umm... I was not one of those people.

I thought this a story of mob mentality, and how the press creates and/or caters to it. I'm not even sure what led me to this book. I have no interest in eagerly sucking up coverage of the latest sensational trial, and those people who become celebrities due to their resulting infamy actively anger me.

There were a lot of people to keep track of in this story. I felt like I needed one of those big white boards covered with sticky notes that the police use while solving a case. At times I was left scratching my head! A led to B, which caused C, witnessed by D, told to E, reported by F, which caused G... my head to start spinning!

(view spoiler)

This book was very well researched; perhaps a bit too well. There was WAY too much minutia for me. I admit that I skimmed the last few chapters.

NOTE: There were some nuggets of gold to be gleaned along the way. Ever wonder why it's called 'yellow' journalism? Want to know where the expression 'as dead as Kelsey's nuts' came from? Did you know that Henry Stanley was a reporter sent in search of Dr. David Livingston? These are just a few of the factoids that each gets a brief mention, but unfortunately, there were far too few of them... at least for me.

Elizabeth Cárdenas says

Murder of the century? Really? Which one?

Not well organized. It was so confusing that I was forever going back to see who/what the author was talking

about.

Easy to put down. I read a little bit for short periods of time - not compelling enough to keep my attention. One would think that the "Murder of the Century" would keep you intrigued. It did do one thing well: I got a good night's rest every time I picked it up at bedtime.

Not sure how the title applies - It didn't convince me that the crime was "the murder of the century." Perhaps that description is so overused now that it has lost meaning. Certainly it did not have the impact of the Simpson trial or the Scopes Monkey Trial because I never heard of it before.

The story that interested me most was the war among the newspapers / publishers. Proving that FOX News did not invent sensationalism, news reporters of the day were shameless in their pursuit of a salable story. Because the author tried to cram too much information about both the media and the crime, the book became a disjointed account of forensics & media reaction. This was a time during which police didn't secure crime scenes & news people had unlimited access-that in itself should have made for a compelling read. Perhaps The author could have used a little more sensationalism in his writing?

Lots of interesting information that should have created a compelling story. The author could have focused on one subject and written two books: media sensationalism or crime/forensics. If he wanted both subjects, he could have styled it more like Erik Larson's The Devil in the White City - which had had better continuity.

All is not lost if you trudge through this book. If you get through the labyrinth of information your reward will be information with which you can make impressive cocktail conversation.

Beela says

This book is now one of my favorites of ALL TIME. Hands down, the best true crime story I have ever read.

Margaret says

I won an advance reader copy of this book from a Goodreads giveaway and Crown Publishing, and I want to thank them for the opportunity to read and review this book.

Murder of the Century: The Gilded Age Crime that Scandalized a City & Sparked the Tabloid Wars covers the recovery of a torso, arms, and various parts of a man found in the river in New York City in 1897 and the ensuing trail both inside and out of the courtroom. The bizarre murder sparks controversy from the very beginning when multiple people arrive to identify the remains, and cannot agree upon who was murdered. The case becomes more and more strange as the trial approaches and the media empires of Hearst and Pulitzer square off the get the scoop first.

The main interest of this book comes in with the fierce battle over information and competition between the two rival tabloid newspapers, stunts that would even shock 21st century news media consumers (at one point the crime scene is bought so reporters from that particular newspaper would have exclusive access to it). Moreover, this case was just before the advent of modern forensic science. The medical examiners dismiss fingerprints as reliable evidence and the forensic toxicologist, though a brilliant expert, does not quite yet have an expert reputation in the courtroom. With the stranger details of the case arriving, a modern reader

yearns for some sort of physical evidence for that "aha!" moment in a whodunnit; this was before much of the "CSI" forensic science was invented or recognized as effective or credible.

Overall, it is surprising how little coverage of sensational crimes has changed in the United States since the late 1800's. At one point, the book quotes the New York Herald's publisher saying "The newspaper are becoming the only efficient police, the only efficient judges that we have." Trials begin conducted in the newspaper, even without forensic evidence, is something that appears to be a fixture in American news coverage.

While the topic was interesting and well researched, I had some issues with the tone in which this book was written. It is non-fiction and well researched, having the endnotes to prove it. However, the author uses quotes from these sources in a way that seems like the historical figures are speaking it immediately as dialogue in a scene from a novel. This is a bit confusing, especially when at first I couldn't tell if this was true crime, history, or something in between. The press coverage, as explained in "A Note on the Text", allowed the author to use many eyewitness sources. It took a while getting used to and the details of the crime, tabloids, and forensic science at the time are worth it.

Sally says

Occasionally, a book comes along that makes you really want to read it. The title is usually a hook, especially when the book is on a library shelf. The title here is representative of a newspaper headline. Whatever is published 'above the fold' is supposed to draw you in.

The murder featured in Collins' book is not well known. When I searched online, I could find very few references to it, and most were in relation to Collins and this book. Calling it 'The Murder of the Century' is definitely tabloid exaggeration. Surely more would have been written on it if it had such importance in print media history?

The book also lacks photographs of the newspaper front pages which would have made good supporting evidence for it. To be honest, at times I thought I was reading a work of fiction. Individual chapters on Hearst and Pulitzer would have been good in order to understand properly what made them tick, as would individual chapters on the histories of their newspapers. Instead, we got brief paragraphs. And how did this murder 'scandalize a city'? Were the Vanderbilts and other famous families of the Gilded Age discussing it at their parties or in their drawing rooms, or did they did they refuse to speak of such subjects?

Essentially, this book could have been so much more, especially when so much was apparently published in the tabloids on the murder. Instead, this reads like a synopsis for a greater work that was never written. What a waste.

Leona says

I came across this book in the WSJ. After hearing/listening/reading about the Casey Anthony trial, one would think that the sensationalism connected to that case was a modern day phenomenon. Not so. As far back as 1897, the public was fascinated by the murder this book is about. While not a 24/7 news cycle as we have with the internet, the newspapers were reporting on this story day in and day out and the people couldn't get enough of it. You have the crazies writing love letters to the defendants, you have the salacious details of the relationships between the victim, Augusta Nack and Martin Thorn, there was a trial which captured the

attention of everyone, the newspapers were battling, obviously not for ratings, but for circulation. The two rivals, William Randolph Hearst who owned *The Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer who ran *The World* were competing for readership. It was during this time that the term "yellow journalism" took hold and continues until this day.

John says

Carrier pigeons transported courtroom sketches while telegraph wires carried breaking news. Collins' nonfiction book does more than just depict a grisly murder which stunned New York. He uses the crime as an examination of yellow journalism in Fin de siècle Manhattan as Pulitzer's *New York World* and Hearst's *New York Journal* competed for readership by offering many grim and gory details as any "if it bleeds, it leads" 21st century local newscast.

The trial of accused murderer Thorn allowed the papers to use their most modern techniques while he awaited a most modern fate: the electric chair. Collins does a good job of depicting the challenges for investigators who were using the most rudimentary forensic techniques (examining blood but not fingerprints.) Collins, unlike many authors including the star of the pack Eric Larson, actually draws a conclusion about who was responsible for the murder. His very logical take, completing a very compact and compelling work makes it easy to recommend this book.

Doreen says

I've never really been a fan of the true crime genre as I grew up on a steady diet of murder mysteries, and true crime always pales in comparison. That said, I do enjoy the popular history genre, as it both entertains and makes me feel virtuous for learning something actual.

This book is equal parts true crime and popular history, as it spends as much time describing the Guldensuppe case as it does the atmosphere around it, particularly the rambunctious journalism that sought to make news as much as report it. The exploits of the young William Randolph Hearst are fascinating, and almost overshadow the murder that gave his newspaper the excuse to institute such crusading groups as the luridly named Murder Squad.

That said, it was the efforts of reporters that really solved this case, so to speak, and brought it to trial. Don't let the synopsis fool you: this book doesn't follow the actions of three investigators so much as it introduces you to a wide and colorful cast of characters involved in the trial. There isn't really that much of a mystery, not in the way Mr Collins presents it (my reaction to the "reveal" at the end was a "Well, duh.") As popular history though, and in particular as a report on the beginning of the tabloid wars, anchored in this trial, it's an excellent account.

I received this book gratis as part of ELLE Magazine's "ELLE's Lettres" Readers' Prize program.

Cindy says

The author skillfully combines a sensational turn of the century murder with a historical look at New York and the newspapers that ruled the day. This crime, while an event for its day, was unknown to me (and I read

a goodly amount of true crime). It is a love triangle between a woman and her two lovers. The crime takes place in 1897 at the beginning of the advent of forensics - fingerprinting is just being proposed, there is little in the way of crime scene preservation as the police, press, and rubbernecker flock to potential crime sites, and the identification of victims is a tedious process in a morgue without refrigeration. The victim - eventually identified as William Guldensuppe - is found in pieces (torso, arms, legs) and his head was never found despite extensive searches by the police, the press and the general public. The pair accused of his murder are his lover Augusta Nack and her current beau Martin Thorn. The murder and subsequent trials fire up the press (and there were scads of papers then) and the general public. The 'press wars' eventually come down to Hearst's *Journal* and Pulitzer's *World*. The pressure of attempting to scoop each other actually contributes to the solving of the crime as both papers were investigating side-by-side and, sometimes even ahead (no pun intended), of the police. This was a well researched and engaging look at a bygone era.

Faith says

Hmm. This was a well-written book, and it has an interesting premise: looking at the rapid growth of late nineteenth century "yellow journalism" through the prism of a sensational, mostly forgotten murder case. I love to read about unscrupulous reporters as much as the next girl, and the trial sections of the book were pretty fun, but... the case just isn't very interesting. It's basically the Ruth Snyder/Judd Gray case from the twenties with the names changed, and while the first few chapters set up as a mystery, the book drags a lot after the defendants are taken into custody and start sniping at each other about which of them murdered the unfortunate victim *more*, which takes up most of the book. The trial perks things up a lot, and the author does his level best to provide a little more excitement with the generous addition of outlandish contemporary rumors, but the lack of fleshed-out characters or a real whodunnit hurts the book a lot, and there aren't enough unscrupulous newsmen to make up for it. I'm still extremely excited about the author's next book about the Elma Sands murder, which will not only have a ton of plot (the case was never solved), but stars Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr as defensive lawyers. Way to market a book directly to me, Collins!

J.M. says

Well-written look at a gruesome murder and subsequent trial that was played out in the tabloids back in 1897.

Melinda says

In the summer of 1897 pieces of Willie Guldensuppe began bobbing up in the East River. Each section was neatly wrapped in distinctive red and gold oil cloth and bound with window shade cord. Guldensuppe, a German immigrant and masseur at the Murray Hill Turkish Baths, was one of over 100 murder victims in NYC that year. But this was also the "yellow journalism" era and that was how this story became a sensation. A well-researched true crime story with plenty of colorful characters this book read like a mystery with Hearst and Pulitzer shenanigans thrown in to make it even more interesting. An enjoyable read!

Kris Irvin says

Why did I read this book? (No. Really. Why?) OH right, it's because it was mentioned in The Poisoner's Handbook, an excellent PBS documentary.

The synopsis of this book is about 10 times more thrilling than this book itself. You'd be better off reading the Wikipedia articles, people. It's long, it's boring, it's repetitive. But someone worked their butt off on researching it so I gave it 2 stars.

Never again. PBS, you have betrayed me for the last time.
