



Simon Baatz. *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder that Shocked Chicago*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. xiii + 541 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-078100-2.

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Published on H-Law (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer

## The Leopold and Loeb Case

In *For the Thrill of It*, Simon Baatz examines the Leopold and Loeb case. He recounts a familiar story, providing remarkable detail of Nathan Leopold's and Richard Loeb's 1924 murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks in Chicago. Baatz focuses his analysis on the courtroom wrangling that determined the fate of the killers. This case commanded enormous attention because the crime was so unusual, so senseless, and so vicious. While most Chicago murderers and victims were poor, these killers were well educated and came from affluent, Jewish families, and their victim, a neighbor of Leopold and Loeb and a cousin of Loeb, also came from a wealthy family. Moreover, salacious elements helped to make this murder one of the "crimes of the century." Leopold and Loeb were teenaged, homosexual lovers, and they killed Franks solely "for the thrill of it"—to see if they could commit the perfect crime.

The case featured larger-than-life characters as well. Clarence Darrow led the defense team and proved as brilliant, iconoclastic, and irascible as he had been when he defended Eugene V. Debs and as he would be in the years following the Leopold and Loeb case, when he defended Ossian Sweet and John T. Scopes. Darrow's legal strategy focused on saving Leopold and Loeb from the gallows. Even before the killers' families secured lawyers for the teenagers, Leopold and Loeb confessed to the crime and preened for local reporters and law enforcers, reveling in the attention heaped upon them. Cognizant of the public outrage over both the crime and the killers' strangely self-congratulatory revelations, Darrow saw little hope of avoiding a conviction. As a consequence, he instructed the killers to plead guilty, which insured that the punishment would be determined by a judge after a hearing—rather than by a jury after a trial. Having exerted considerable control over the legal proceeding and removed the public from any decision-making role in the case, Darrow sought to establish mitigating circumstances that

would convince the judge to refrain from sentencing the killers to death. The lawyer and his colleagues argued that Leopold and Loeb suffered from mental illness and therefore should not be held entirely accountable for the gruesome thrill killing. This courtroom strategy reflected Darrow's long-standing belief that larger, wider forces shaped individual behavior. Earlier in his career, he had emphasized the ways in which poverty and inequality limited individual responsibility. In the Leopold and Loeb case, the defense attorney looked to science, in particular to psychiatry, averring that biochemical processes led the teenagers to commit their horrific crime.

Darrow's adversary, State's Attorney Robert Crowe, was politically ambitious, highly skilled, and occasionally unscrupulous. The product of Chicago's political machine and hoping that the executions of Leopold and Loeb would catapult him to higher office, Crowe fervently believed that this murder, and crime in general, was the product of personal choice, and hence criminals were responsible for their actions and should be punished. Crowe argued that Leopold and Loeb were sane—but evil—and thus culpable for the brutal, unprovoked murder of Bobby Franks.

Both sides paraded experts before Judge John Caverly, and both sides invoked the indisputable, seemingly objective authority of "science." Darrow's expert witnesses, who were neurologists, testified that the killers suffered from mental illness, the product of endocrinological abnormalities, while Crowe's experts, who were psychoanalytical psychiatrists, testified that the teenagers were sane and therefore fully responsible for their actions. In the process, the dueling psychiatrists poked, prodded, and evaluated Leopold and Loeb, generating the copiously detailed reports that provided Baatz with extraordinarily rich sources on the killers and on the murder that they meticulously planned and clumsily executed.

A historian of science, Baatz is at his best when reconstructing and explaining the medical testimony at the core of Darrow's legal strategy. According to the defense experts, Leopold and Loeb suffered from clear, demonstrable mental illness; the former showed signs of "dementia praecox" and suffered from a paranoid psychosis, while the latter was a schizophrenic. Baatz skillfully translates the arcane and technical jargon of the battling psychiatrists into clear, straightforward language. Because the courtroom drama unfolded in this hearing, and because the lawyers and their experts emphasized the mental state of the killers, Baatz focuses his narrative on competing visions of the role of science in explaining human behavior.

Baatz offers no significant new interpretations of the case, though *For the Thrill of It* is the most detailed and careful account of the Leopold and Loeb case. In 447 pages of text (not including a brief discussion of the case in fiction and an author's note), Baatz recounts the lives of the killers, leavening a compelling narrative with intriguing psychoanalytical insights unearthed by the experts. The author writes elegantly and manages to keep the narrative engaging and fast-paced, despite the complexity of the scientific evidence and the girth of the book.

Baatz pitches the book for a general audience, and this decision shapes *For the Thrill of It*. In the first line of the preface, for example, Baatz informs the reader that "This is a true story" (p. xv). Moreover, in the author's note, he explains that he has chosen "to tell this story in a literary style" (p. 454). Such an approach accounts for the strengths but also the relative shortcomings of the book. To make the story accessible for a wide audience, Baatz focuses the narrative tightly on the case, particularly the courtroom testimony. Hence, he provides rich detail on the main characters and seldom strays from the principal actors or the courtroom drama. As a consequence, Baatz provides little of the broader context that scholars usually expect. He stops short, for instance, of placing the murder in the context of early twentieth-century crime or 1920s Chicago. Nor does he situate the case in scholarly context. Baatz does not engage, even implicitly, the secondary-source literature, and he cites little of the scholarship on criminal justice, Chicago, the 1920s, or thrill-killing. Baatz neglects to explain, for example, that

prosecutors seldom secured convictions in Chicago murders during this period or that killers were very rarely sentenced to death. Furthermore, Baatz's sharp focus on the hearing, the lawyers, and the scientific evidence results in a curiously anticlimactic ending to this long book. Despite Darrow's and Crowe's emphasis on scientific evidence about mental illness, and despite Baatz's emphasis on this courtroom testimony, Judge Caverly based his decision to sentence the killers to life in prison solely on their ages. Yet Baatz devotes little of the book to early twentieth-century notions of childhood and adulthood or to the youth culture that informed Caverly's decision. Simply put, the scientific evidence that formed the core of the book did not directly influence the outcome of the case, and Baatz, with his precise focus on the sentencing hearing, does not demonstrate that the Leopold and Loeb case affected the larger use or authority of scientific evidence in American courts.

In other ways as well, Baatz's "literary style" is double-edged. In his effort to "reach a wider audience" (p. 454), the author sometimes includes rhetorical flourishes that run against the grain of scholarly writing. For example, he describes, without documentation, how Judge Caverly's "maid had recently cleaned the apartment, and swirls of dust, launched into the air by her exertions, were caught in the rate of light that filtered through the large windows that faced Lake Michigan" (p. 391). Likewise, and also without documentation, Baatz details the unspoken, unrecorded thoughts and feelings of individuals and groups, such as his assertion that, for women in courtroom, "Darrow's seductive voice caught at their emotions" (p. 378). Furthermore, this prose style occasionally leads Baatz to hyperbolic statements, including his assertions that "every Chicagoan had hoped to see Leopold and Loeb swinging from the end of a rope" (p. 405) and that "gangland killings were a daily event" in Chicago (p. 425). Such rhetorical excesses stand in sharp contrast to Baatz's well-informed and measured treatment of scientific evidence.

But these are relatively minor shortcomings in an otherwise impressive and effective book. Baatz has produced an engaging, intelligent, and thorough account of one of the most celebrated murder cases of the twentieth century. Though perhaps a bit long for classroom use, the book deserves a wide audience.

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**Citation:** Jeffrey S. Adler. Review of Baatz, Simon, *For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder that Shocked Chicago*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

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