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Mary Elizabeth Strunk. *Wanted Women: An American Obsession in the Reign of J. Edgar Hoover.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010. 304 pp. $29.95 (coth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1744-9.

Reviewed by Kathleen Cairns (California Polytechnic State University)
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The FBI Wanted Women

Female "outlaws" have been a staple of American popular culture at least since the 1830s, when *New York Herald* publisher James Gordon Bennett used the murder of prostitute Helen Jewett to cash in on public repulsion-fascination with an individual who so boldly flouted the rules of "traditional" womanhood. Sensational stories about Jewett's gruesome April 1836 demise (she was hacked to death and set on fire) made Bennett a wealthy man and paved the way for continuing media focus on "bad women," both as victims and as perpetrators of crimes. But media moguls have not acted alone in their efforts to bring public attention to the behavior of such transgressors. They have collaborated with powerful male political figures who have argued that the behavior of women who could be constructed as "bad" threatened to undermine social order. Left unmentioned was the fact that the objects of their rapt attention also challenged gender ideology that enabled white men to gain and to retain virtually unlimited power.

J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for nearly a half century, was both a product of and a prominent spokesman for this hypermasculine mind-set. He was a master at using stereotypes–both racial and gender–to promote fear-inducing scenarios with the FBI (read Hoover) as the last line of defense between order and chaos. As Mary Elizabeth Strunk convincingly illustrates in *Wanted Women*, female outlaws were destined to play a prominent role in this campaign. Hoover seems to have been particularly fixated on women who committed crimes in concert with men, since they could be spun as "emasculating" harridans who lured men into crime, and thus doubly dangerous to the social order.

"Spinning" played a large part in Hoover's strategy. From the early 1930s on, he used various forms of media, including magazines and film to demonize female outlaws and to promote his own brand of tough justice. But this effort carried unintended consequences since it also fueled public demand for more stories about the subjects of Hoover's ire that, over the years, came to bear little resemblance to the original versions. Eventually some of his "wanted" women morphed into "whatever various audiences have needed them or wanted them to be" (p. 2). By Hoover's death in 1972, at least one of his female targets, Bonnie Parker, had become a countercultural heroine for the generation coming of age in the turbulent Vietnam War era.

Strunk's title reflects the multilayered and shifting roles outlaw women assumed over the nearly fifty years of Hoover's reign. All of those she examines were both "wanted" by the FBI as criminals and "wanted" by audiences that continued to be fascinated by them. Though the introduction takes note of ten such women, Strunk devotes significant attention only to five of them. Three are from the 1930s: Parker, Kathryn Kelly (wife of George "Machine Gun" Kelly), and Kate "Ma" Barker, mother to a brood of outlaw men. Two women, Patricia Hearst and Joanne Chesimard (aka Assata Shakur), are from the 1970s. Five other women from the short-lived 1970s radical group, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), are also briefly featured.

Common threads linked the women. All were involved with male partners; had untraditional sex lives; and used their unconventionality, metaphorically at least, to "talk back" to male authority. And questions remained about the degree to which all of them actually participated in criminal activity. Were they wily and brutal perpetrators, passive observers of criminal activity, or victims of a punitive, overreaching system? Parker represents the best example of "wanted women" in both meanings of the term and Strunk uses her as a touchstone throughout the book. Like many others fascinated by the story of Bonnie and Clyde, Strunk notes that Clyde Barrow would have attained no particular notoriety during

his life and no fame afterward, without Bonnie.

A teenager when she partnered with Clyde, poverty and a yen for adventure apparently drove her to join up with the jug-eared, small-time criminal. Bonnie had a keen eye for imagery and a nose for fame. She proudly posed for the iconic photograph in which she wore a beret, leaned on the bumper of a car, held a pistol on her hip, and clenched a cigar between her teeth. She also kept newspaper clippings that bannered her exploits, and she wrote poetry, some featuring her partner in crime and, probably, in sexual exploits. She obviously had a healthy ego, since she put her own name first–hence Bonnie and Clyde, rather than the other way around.

Parker's death at twenty-three in a May 1934 police ambush in Louisiana catapulted her from an object of curiosity into a media celebrity, but it also raised questions. Her small stature–under five-feet-tall and less than one hundred pounds–made her seem little more than a child; thus her death could be spun as overkill. "Machine Gun" Kelly and "Ma" Barker joined Parker in Hoover's 1930s pantheon of "bad women." He portrayed Kelly as the brains behind her husband's criminal activities, which included armed robbery and kidnapping. "Machine Gun," in this version, was a "man-child," forced into crime by his domineering wife.

Hoover tagged Barker as one of his ten most wanted outlaws. Her greatest crime, in his narrative, was turning the role of mother on its head. Rather than nurturing and maternal, she was, instead, a "monster." But how much had Kelly and Barker participated in criminal exploits? Kelly, sentenced to life in prison for kidnapping, consistently proclaimed her innocence. Barker could not defend herself, having been shot to death in Florida along with one of her sons. Many years after the fact, Alvin Karpis, a member of the gang that included the murderous Barkers, denied that "Ma" had participated in any of the group's crimes.

Purveyors of popular culture happily pounced on the notoriety of all three "wanted women," but focused mostly on Parker and Barker, who were polar opposites in looks and demeanor. One of the best parts of *Wanted Women* tracks Hoover's early success at convincing filmmakers and others to adhere to his version of events, and then his growing inability to control the narrative. Kelly and Barker remained stock villains, but the rewriting of Parker's story began in 1937, with the film *You Only Live Once.* Sylvia Sidney played her as a good-hearted woman in love with the wrong man, played by an unlikely Henry Fonda, whose criminal exploits led Sidney to a life on the lam and, ultimately, to a fiery death. Twenty years later, *The Bonnie Parker Story*, starred Dorothy Provine as Bonnie, a woman "too smart and sassy for her own good" (p. 90).

Then, in 1967, came the iconic *Bonnie and Clyde*, which entered the national conversation at the same moment that the Vietnam War fueled a youth revolt against authority. Faye Dunaway's Bonnie was a romanticized character–beautiful, sexual, and misguided. Her slow-motion death, alongside Clyde (Warren Beatty) as bullets from machine guns strafed their car, left movie audiences reeling, and possibly reminded of young men sent to die in the jungles of Vietnam by an indifferent government bureaucracy. The next year saw a documentary, *The Other Side of Bonnie and Clyde*, which aimed to "correct" the Dunaway/Beatty film. Ironically, Strunk argues, this version also proved sympathetic to the doomed duo, since it depicted Bonnie and Clyde in human terms as driven to crime by poverty.

By the 1970s, Hoover's heavy-handed approach to law enforcement had been thoroughly discredited, as had the man himself. This part of the book is informative and entertaining, but works less well than the earlier chapters. Part of the problem lies in the absence of Hoover as a foil, since he died in 1972. While it is true that the FBI, and popular culture, continued to "want" female "outlaws," the circumstances that drove these women to crime–or, at least, to criminals–were far different than the catalysts for the earlier generation. Most SLA members were middle-class women using radical politics as a way to escape middle-class lives. Hearst was a kidnap victim. Chesimard/Shakur was an African American woman largely targeted for her involvement in a radical civil rights group.

Strunk rightly posits popular culture as a force linking both generations. Decades of public fascination with "bad" women enabled 1970s radicals to view crime as political theater and to put themselves in starring roles. Thus the widely disseminated photo of Hearst wearing a beret and brandishing a gun during a 1974 bank robbery mimicked Dunaway's Bonnie wearing a beret and brandishing a gun, which replicated the original, posed photograph from the 1930s. Irony abounds in Hearst's story, since her grandfather, media mogul William Randolph Hearst, was a master manipulator of audience emotions via sensational news stories and staged photos.

No matter how tempting it might be to squeeze Hearst and Shakur into the same mold as the 1930s women, the result comes up short. It took Parker's death to turn her into a celebrity icon. Hearst is still alive and, since her brief notoriety, has returned to a traditional life.

Shakur is a different story altogether. Arrested and tried in the 1970s for participating in murder, she escaped from prison and went underground. She now lives in Cuba, though she remains on the FBI's wanted list. From a distance of forty years, the charges against Shakur seem specious at best, outrageously unjust at worst.

Strunk may have somewhat missed the mark in her last chapters, but her book remains an invaluable reminder that popular culture is a slippery slope. Powerful individuals may believe themselves adept at shaping and controlling narratives. As Hoover's experiences illustrate, however, once they enter the public realm, the most riveting and often socially significant narratives careen away from their creators and take on a life of their own. In the end, the audience controls the story.

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