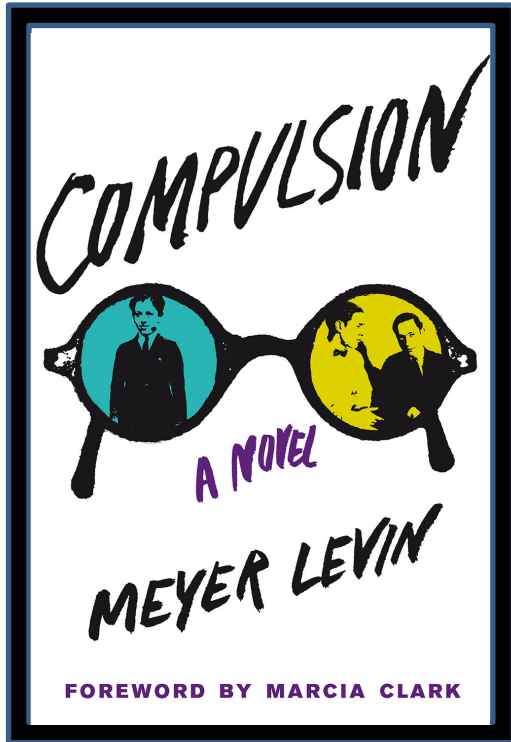


Foreword for *Compulsion* by Marcia Clark



Before *In Cold Blood*, before *The Executioner's Song*, Meyer Levin's *Compulsion* was the standard-bearer for what we think of as the nonfiction novel. I was eight years old when I read it for the first time. I'd found the paperback, already yellowed with age, on a nightstand. Though I could not possibly grasp the depth of the storytelling or recognize the beauty of the prose, the experience proved to be indelible. The story haunted me from that day forward. Reading it again now, I marvel anew at Levin's accomplishment, and the utterly fascinating and profoundly timeless aspects of the case of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb.

To fill in those who are not crime buffs, *Compulsion* tells the true story of two sons of multimillionaire families who, back in 1924 (the novel was written in 1956), when they were nineteen and eighteen years old, respectively, kidnaped and murdered a fourteen-year-old boy simply (ostensibly) for the thrill of it all, to prove that they could. The victim, Robert Franks, was the son of an equally wealthy family who lived in the community. Leopold and Loeb deliberately set the ransom low, at ten thousand dollars, because they knew the father would easily be able to pay it.

Though these two highly intelligent young men—one (Loeb) an obsessive reader of true-crime detective stories—planned the crime for the better part of a year, they made so many glaring mistakes in covering their tracks that some have hypothesized that they wanted to get caught. They rented the car in which they murdered their victim yet failed to wash down all the blood. They parked the car near Leopold's house, where the family chauffeur spotted it. They typed the ransom note on Leopold's portable typewriter, which was easily identified by college schoolmates. And Leopold lost his glasses very close to where the body was found.

Despite these gaffes, the police continued to look everywhere *but* at the true culprits, resisting the obvious logical conclusion to the bitter end. Because the last people they—or

Foreword for Compulsion by Marcia Clark

anyone else—were inclined to suspect were the two sons of well-heeled, well-respected South Side Chicago families.

The story held a nation in thrall back in 1924, and it continues to captivate even today. Other duos have committed more prolific crimes since then—Lyle and Eric Menendez, who slaughtered their parents; Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High School shooters. But none continues to fascinate in quite the same way as Leopold and Loeb.

I believe that the lasting impact stems from the fact that, unlike in most other crimes, the motivation did not fall into any of the usual categories. Leopold and Loeb were not serial killers and this was not a crime of passion, greed, or revenge.

The moment the teenagers were arrested and charged with the murder, this atypicality became the key issue in the case. There was no question of guilt: both of the boys confessed, and the evidence against them was overwhelming. Their lawyers, recognizing that the best they could hope for was to avoid the death penalty, had Leopold and Loeb enter guilty pleas and focused on proving that the boys suffered psychological problems serious enough to require that their lives be spared. And so both sides raced to hire the best, most respected “alienists”—as psychiatrists were then called—to find the explanation for the kidnaping and murder of Robert Franks.

The prosecution’s experts downplayed any evidence of mental disturbance and claimed the motive was largely financial. That was most certainly *not* true. With rich allowances and indulgent families, the boys lacked for nothing. Though they sent a ransom note demanding ten thousand dollars, these killers were heirs to fortunes thousands of times greater than the ransom. And in truth, they never had any intention of returning the victim to his family. For these boys, the ransom was a way to exert power over the victim’s family. The money was proof of their superiority, it was not the motive.

Leopold and Loeb claimed they committed their crime as an intellectual exercise, to prove that they were the living embodiment of the “*Übermensch*,” the superman described by Friedrich Nietzsche—so superior to the “herd” that ordinary laws did not apply to them. But that motive, as Meyer Levin shows us in this mesmerizing novel, was not the real one either. And it is Levin’s insightful account that provides some of the real and far more complex reasons for the crime. The exploration of what the true motivations might have been is what drives the narrative

Foreword for *Compulsion* by Marcia Clark

and gives us some understanding of the complex enigma of the damaged, twisted psyches that provoked these two young men to commit this crime.

There could have been no better person to write this book. Meyer Levin's masterful skill as a writer and profound psychological insight into the characters of Nathan Leopold (transformed in the novel into Judd Steiner) and Richard Loeb (fictionalized as Artie Straus) produced a powerful, nuanced, and impressively credible depiction of two equally—but differently—disturbed minds.

It can be a failing in nonfiction novels for the writer, in the course of the research, to develop a kinship with the defendant that leads to a sentimental, romanticized picture. Not so here. At no point does Meyer Levin attempt to rationalize or justify the “poor little rich boys.” Rather, the author draws heavily on the detailed psychological testimony and reportage—familiar to him through his own experience as a journalist covering the case—to give us an unflinching portrait of the killers' inner lives. When the author, through the voice of his alter ego, cub reporter Sid Silver, says he must imagine certain scenes or thoughts he could not personally witness, he is not merely taking artistic license to justify dramatic moments. Those scenes, those “imaginings,” are rather careful extrapolations based on actual expert psychiatric testimony.

For example, when Sid, the reporter, speaks of Judd's homosexual attraction to Artie, and his fantasies of being a branded slave to Artie, his king, that is not just the author's indulgence in artistic license. Those passages are based on the expert testimony in the case, which recounted statements made by both Leopold and Loeb during their psychiatric examinations. This kind of credibility, depth, and accuracy of insight is one of the many outstanding features of *Compulsion*.

But the most fascinating aspect of this story is the *folie à deux* that allowed this crime to happen in the first place. Alone, neither Leopold nor Loeb would likely have committed this murder. Even Loeb—who, it would be discovered, might have killed others before this crime, and who fits most clearly the present-day definition of a sociopath—would not have conceived of a crime as complex or bizarre without Leopold's twisted input. And Leopold, though a darkly tortured soul, almost certainly would never have committed any crime at all—let alone murder—

Foreword for *Compulsion* by Marcia Clark

had he not met Loeb. This rare complementary coupling of damaged psyches that resulted in the commission of an atrocity neither one would likely have committed alone is captured beautifully by Meyer Levin.

In the second half of the book, which is devoted to the trial, the author distinguishes himself with his ability to draw courtroom scenes that are both dramatic *and* realistic. Ordinarily, courtroom scenes, in both fiction and nonfiction, are either irritatingly inaccurate or incredibly dull. These scenes can be exciting on the screen—and occasionally, though not often, in real life—but generally not on the page. As a consequence, authors too often take artistic license, sacrificing all semblance of credibility in the service of drama.

However, in *Compulsion*, the courtroom scenes are both riveting and unfailingly authentic. The bruising clashes of personality between Jonathan Wilk—the fictional name given to the legendary Clarence Darrow, who represented Leopold and Loeb (and later defended John Scopes in the Scopes “Monkey Trial”), the prosecutor, and the judge are so vivid, so real, that at times I felt as though I were listening to them arguing, rather than reading the words. And the author does a brilliant job of taking us behind the curtain to show the maneuvering and strategizing that began from the moment the defendants were charged.

This brings me to another aspect of *Compulsion* that explains its ongoing importance and makes it so much more than just an interesting crime story or period piece. Though this trial took place in 1924, the book raises issues pertaining to society and our justice system—such as popular biases, groupthink, and the inherent, perhaps unfixable, flaws in our legal system—that are as much in evidence today as they were back then.

Today, every practicing trial lawyer knows that the media holds sway over the court of public opinion. And the court of public opinion influences every aspect of the case. It affects how the lawyers strategize, how the judge rules, how the witnesses testify (or refuse to), and how the jury decides.

Compulsion shows us that this was every bit as true in 1924 as it is today. Meyer Levin graphically depicts how the pretrial publicity so tainted public opinion that it was a virtual certainty that any jury would vote to put the defendants to death. And so the lawyers went to great—and creative—lengths to have the case tried by a judge instead of a jury. But even that

Foreword for *Compulsion* by Marcia Clark

move did not keep public sentiment from infecting the proceedings. In the most shocking moment of the entire trial, the prosecutor effectively threatened the judge with mob reprisal if he dared to spare the defendants' lives. For me, that moment, rendered in breathtakingly vivid detail, encapsulates the corrupting force of media coverage that to this day plagues our system of justice. In this way as in so many others, *Compulsion* raises profound issues that resonate today and will continue to do so for many years to come.