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Reading Log, August 6, 2009 Public Enemies

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To be human, it seems, is to be fascinated with crime. This simple fact explains why so much of our popular entertainment is driven by narratives and plots dealing with crime, crimefighters, criminals, and the police. News about crime and criminals often takes the top position in the newspaper and leads the nightly news.

From a Christian worldview perspective, this is actually quite understandable. Our Creator gifted us with a moral sense and the capacity of conscience. At some very early age, sin becomes an active part of our consciousness. As we grow older, we grow more and more aware of our own capacity for wrongdoing. The spectacular evil represented by notorious criminals becomes a fascination hard to resist. This can be healthy if a closer look at crime and criminality brings greater moral discernment and deeper insight into the reality of human depravity. On the other hand, a preoccupation with criminality can reflect a fascination with evil that must never be granted.

Millions of Americans have gone to see the movie "Public Enemies," starring Johnny Depp as John Dillinger and Christian Bale as Melvin Purvis of the FBI. In the course of the movie, viewers are reminded of the gangster era of the 1930s and notorious characters including Machine Gun Kelly, Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd, and a host of others. But, whereas the movie reduces the story of this era to only a handful of its most famous personalities, the book upon which the movie is based offers far more.



The movie is based on *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933-34* by Bryan Burrough. I put the book in my stack for summer reading and, once I had begun reading the book I could hardly put it down.

Burrough drew his research directly from the records of the FBI. He takes his reader right to the scene of the crime, so to speak, tracing the rise of these infamous gangsters and placing the era within its own fascinating historical context. By the time the reader finishes the book, *Public Enemies* has offered a short course in America during the Great Depression, the rise of America's most famous gangsters, and the emergence of the FBI as a respected law enforcement agency.

"When one looks back across a chasm of 70 years, through a prism of pulp fiction and bad gangster movies, there is a tendency to view the events of 1933-34 as mythic, as folkloric," Burrough writes. An entire generation of Americans knew these gangsters as contemporaries, but the passage of time has obscured their history. As Burrough writes, "After decades spent in the washing machine of popular culture, their stories have been bled of all reality, to an extent that few Americans today know who these people actually were, much less that they all rose to national prominence *at the same time.*"

The cultural and historical context of the gangster era is truly interesting. Before the rise of these criminals, Americans associated organized crime with immigrants and cities. But the stereotypical gangster of the 1930s was raised on a farm with what most Americans had assumed to be typical American values. They had names like Barker, Floyd, Nelson, and Dillinger. They were home-grown criminals.

Burrough also points to the context of the Great Depression and the fact that so many Americans blamed the banks for their own economic distress. When the gangsters started robbing banks, many Americans saw them as modern versions of Robin Hood. But when the scene turned ugly, with bodies strewn from one crime scene to another, Americans demanded action.

At this point J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI enter the picture. Burrough traces the rise of the FBI during the “war on crime” declared by Hoover. As his careful telling of the story makes clear, the emergence of the FBI as a credible national law enforcement agency was anything but inevitable. The states did not want a national police agency and the structure of American law made the formation and functioning of a national law enforcement agency extremely difficult. When FBI agents first began investigating the gangsters, they were not even allowed to carry guns. As Burrough demonstrates, it was the gangsters who made the FBI what it is today. The FBI owes much of its current stature to these early years when its first agents transformed themselves from incompetent investigators into skilled crimefighters.

Burrough tells the story in such a way that the reader will understand why these infamous gangsters appeared as such glamorous figures to the public. Yet, as the story unfolds the gangsters lose their glamour as the evil and murderous violence of their crime spree shocked Americans into understanding evil in a whole new context.



Bryan Burrough tells the story well and documents his account with care. Readers will be fascinated with the twists and turns of the story and with the sheer audacity of figures on both sides of the “war on crime.” Beyond this, the details reveal just how far this story reaches into our history. I was fascinated to learn that J. Frank Norris, one of the best-known fundamentalist preachers of Baptist history, had once sought to negotiate the surrender of pretty boy Floyd to the FBI. Similar surprises abound within the book.

An excerpt:

The spread of bank robberies was the result of technology outstripping the legal system. Faster, more powerful weapons, especially the 800-bullet-per-minute Thompson submachine gun introduced after World War I, allowed yeggs (gangsters) to outgun all but the best-armed urban policeman. But the greatest impetus was the automobile, especially new models with reliable, powerful V-8 engines. While a county sheriff was still hand-cranking his old Model A, a modern yegg could speed away untouched. A Frenchman may have been the first to use a car to escape a bank robbery, in 1915; one of the first Americans to try it was an aging Oklahoma yegg, Henry Starr, who used a Nash to rob a bank in Harrison, Arkansas, in 1921. The practice caught on.

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