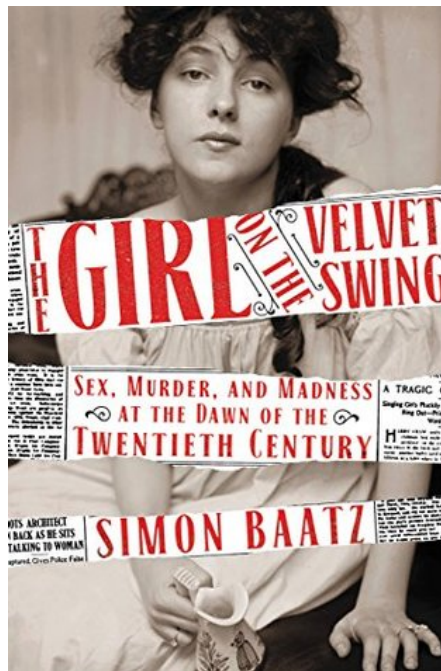




The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

Simon Baatz

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Simon Baatz, the first comprehensive account of the murder that shocked the world.

In 1901 Evelyn Nesbit, a chorus girl in the musical *Florodora*, dined alone with the architect Stanford White in his townhouse on 24th Street in New York. Nesbit, just sixteen years old, had recently moved to the city. White was forty-seven and a principal in the prominent architectural firm McKim, Mead & White. As the foremost architect of his day, he was a celebrity, responsible for designing countless landmark buildings in Manhattan. That evening, after drinking champagne, Nesbit lost consciousness and awoke to find herself naked in bed with White. Telltale spots of blood on the bed sheets told her that White had raped her.

She told no one about the rape until, several years later, she confided in Harry Thaw, the millionaire playboy who would later become her husband. Thaw, thirsting for revenge, shot and killed White in 1906 before hundreds of theatergoers during a performance in Madison Square Garden, a building that White had designed.

The trial was a sensation that gripped the nation. Most Americans agreed with Thaw that he had been justified in killing White, but the district attorney expected to send him to the electric chair. Evelyn Nesbit's testimony was so explicit and shocking that Theodore Roosevelt himself called on the newspapers not to print it verbatim. The murder of White cast a long shadow: Harry Thaw later attempted suicide, and Evelyn Nesbit struggled for many years to escape an addiction to cocaine. *The Girl on the Velvet Swing*, a tale of glamour, excess, and danger, is an immersive, fascinating look at an America dominated by men of outsize fortunes and by the women who were their victims.

The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century Details

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Dawn of the Twentieth Century Simon Baatz**

From Reader Review The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century for online ebook

Ella says

Funny that we call this era "the Progressive Era" of US history -- clearly that word means something very different these days.

This book has long dry spells where all manner of excess are just listed, I suppose to be impressive, but I found it incredibly boring to read list after list of party attendance and net worth of each man in every scene. In the first few chapters, we're bombarded with name after name and place after place, many of which are meaningless to the story. Partly I'm just not interested in sensational celebrity scandals, so I suppose I should have known better than to be overly excited about a true crime novel based on exactly that a hundred years ago.

I've just read an entire book ostensibly about "the girl on the velvet swing," yet I don't feel like I know Evelyn Nesbit well at all. I know her husband, Harry Thaw too well. I know some of the men in her life, especially Stanford White (the perpetrator) and I know a lot about the social circuit in the early 1900s, but I don't know the woman about whom I wanted to learn. The writing focused on a woman through the lens of all of the men surrounding her. She was a person with a life, and if you plaster her picture on the cover and title it as such, you build a certain expectation in my mind at least. I could write a report on the husband, his trials, his treatment in jail, mental health in the early twentieth century justice system, wealthy people and the things they owned during the 1910s, but not on the main character.

I was also dismayed that in the epilogue, we get a peek of the author's (somewhat conflicting) view of "the truth." Here he denies her account of rape, though she had also done something akin to this in her own autobiography. But Simon Baatz wonders if the rape even happened, because ... wait for it... she continued to talk to the man who paid for her education and on whom her entire family was financially reliant. Well, gee. A family full of women in early 20th century New York City (expensive always) was financially dependent and rape is a violent act known to cause severe shame for the victim, so victims often continue dependance and that requires a facade of friendliness or even love. This girl of sixteen didn't have the benefit of public awareness campaigns or self-help groups to lead her down the path of self-actualization after a rape. She hadn't told her mother, so how exactly would that have worked?

And I'm not surprised that a woman who had the life she had in the era she lived it played down a long-ago rape that caused a murder which caused the rest of her life to fall apart in many ways. She had grandchildren and a son still alive. She had focused on that one event for years in public. Why would we think her shame had lessened after losing everything so many times over?

I'm glad to know some of the story. I'm not sure I know the truth, or that anyone ever will. But in future, as well as listing every wealthy socialite and their net worth, it might be worth it to interview just one rape counselor to get an understanding of the psychology at work in victim's behavior. Or hell, just read a book.

Kelli says

I found the first half of this book fascinating and timely, especially given what is happening with the #Metoo

movement. The next section of the book dragged as it focuses more on Nesbit's husband and his many legal hearings. It felt repetitive. At times, it even felt that Evelyn Nesbit was being used by the author to sell a book that was much more focused on her husband and his crime. In the end, the author brought it back to Evelyn and showed the significance of the story and the ways that powerful men use and abuse women. If the book had focused primarily on Nesbit, I would have been much happier.

Halley Sutton says

Meticulously researched but misguided--really, the author's note is going to question the validity of a naive young girl's rape because she continued to spend time with the millionaire bankrolling her family after? Ugh.

LAPL Reads says

The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century by Simon Baatz examines the murder of New York's premier architect of the Gilded Age, Stanford White by Harry Kendall Thaw. Baatz, an Associate Professor of History at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, examines the events surrounding the murder with a legal historian's eye, paying particular attention to the trial and its aftermath. Baatz provides a fascinating and provocative analysis of an event that has been largely purged from popular consciousness.

Today, the name Evelyn Nesbit has been largely forgotten by the public, but over a century ago she was at the center of the nation's attention. At the turn of the 20th century, Nesbit's face was everywhere: calendars, magazines, newspapers, artwork and even tourist souvenirs; she was immortalized as the embodiment of Charles Dana Gibson's 'Gibson Girl,' and effectively stood as America's very first supermodel. In 1900, Nesbit's beauty had commanded the attention of photographers, artists, theatrical producers, and notably, New York's most famous architect, Stanford White.

Stanford White was the architect of the original Madison Square Garden building and was regularly commissioned by New York's Gilded Age aristocracy to design their dream homes. White's professional credentials were irreproachable and his status within New York society was assured, but he also had a dark side. White was a hedonist and an ephebophile, with a fondness for teenage girls. When they were introduced, White was 47 years old and Evelyn Nesbit was only 16 years old. Nesbit would eventually recount that Stanford White invited her to dine with him alone at his apartment one evening, then proceeded to drug and sexually assault her. She kept this revelation a secret for a number of years until she was romantically pursued by Harry Kendall Thaw, an heir to a railroad and coal fortune. Nesbit confessed the assault for the first time to Thaw while the pair were touring Europe.

Thaw was known to be irreverent, eccentric and unpredictable, yet despite Nesbit's reservations, she married him in April 1905. Thaw's growing obsession with White to exact revenge for his wife's lost honor came to a head on June 25, 1906 when Thaw confronted White during a theatrical performance at Madison Square Garden. Thaw shot and killed White in full view of New York's theater-going elite. The New York Press would designate the ensuing murder trial and the unfolding drama behind it as "the trial of the century."

Nesbit typically has been a focal point in books, but much of it seems to focus on her as a caricature rather than an actual person: the beautiful, tragic victim in a twisted and sordid tale. Baatz acknowledges her reality as a young girl placed in the position of designated breadwinner for her family. Nesbit was performing on stage and modeling at an age when most of her peers were probably in school. Social expectations placed on

young women at the time, and inexperience, allowed Evelyn to remain incredibly naive as she was thrust into some of New York's most lecherous and nefarious circles. Her mother, Florence, was her only guardian but was frequently absent or sidelined from her daughter's life, and rarely questioned the generosity of men who chose to fund the family's expenses, and that included Stanford White. When Florence became aware that Stanford White had assaulted her daughter, she refused to believe it. She felt White's motives could have been only altruistic, and shockingly, she cooperated with the prosecution to help undermine Nesbit's credibility on the witness stand.

Despite being the titular 'girl,' Nesbit's story takes a backseat to her husband in the latter half of the book. Thaw's trial and what happened to him are quite astonishing: not one, but two criminal trials; questions regarding his sanity; a D.A. who actively placed a known perjurer on the stand in an attempt to discredit Thaw; an elaborate escape from a mental institution; an international manhunt; revelations about his sadomasochistic interests; his wealthy family's attempt to purchase Thaw's freedom while systematically trying to destroy the credibility of the Matteawan state hospital; legal considerations regarding both state-to-state and international extradition; and some incredibly complex legal conundrums. It is clear that Baatz is in his element when looking at the legal ramifications of the case, making the second half of the book both fascinating and thought-provoking. Baatz also raises questions about the veracity of certain aspects of the narrative that have gone unchallenged for decades. Moreover, he shows that, while the White-Thaw-Nesbit affair was certainly the same sensational tale portrayed in the press, it also was one that managed to raise some genuine questions about the law that are quite astonishing when considered today.

Reviewed by Nicholas Beyelia, Librarian, History and Genealogy Department,

Rhiannon Johnson says

I would recommend this to anyone who is looking to read about freedom of the press, the Comstock laws, the intricacies and problems of an early 1900s trial, and a decadent era in United States history that was far from boring.

Read my full review here:

<http://ivoryowlreviews.blogspot.com/2...>

Disclaimer: I was given a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. I received no additional compensation.

First of all, let's judge this book by its cover. Ripped headlines of "sex, murder, and madness at the dawn of the twentieth century" pasted over a black and white photo of a beautiful girl. Well, this definitely has my attention! After a little reading into the summary I learned that in 1901, sixteen year old chorus girl, Evelyn Nesbit, dined alone with 47 year old architect Stanford White, the foremost architect of the day. After drinking a glass of champagne, Evelyn lost consciousness and awoke to find that White had raped her. She told no one about what had happened and even continued to spend time with White. She later confided in her husband, Harry Thaw. In 1906, at a performance in Madison Square Garden (a building designed by White) Thaw shot White as an act of revenge. Shocking! But the story doesn't end there! That maybe covers what the first 1/3 of the book consists of. The remaining 2/3 of the book gets totally wild with Thaw's multiple trials. Evelyn Nesbit's testimony was so shocking that Anthony Comstock and Teddy Roosevelt tried to get the newspapers not to print it! Add to this state hospitals, payoffs, prisons, and a game of hot potato between several states and Canada with who was in charge of holding Harry Thaw! This book was fascinating in giving its glimpse into a time when New York was booming and massive fortunes were able to buy *almost* anything. I would recommend this to anyone who is looking to read about freedom of the press, the

Comstock laws, the intricacies and problems of an early 1900s trial, and a decadent era in United States history that was far from boring.

Sam (Clues and Reviews) says

I am a bit of a history nerd, so, when #cjsreads decided to delve into a true crime/historical crime novel as one of our picks to kick off the New Year, I was intrigued. *The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder, and Madness at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*, the non-fiction novel by Simon Baatz, followed the scandalous case of love, murder and betrayal by Evelyn Nesbit (the victim), Stanford White (the perpetrator) and Harry Thaw (the murderer).

I am always surprised when I read nonfiction how socially and culturally relevant many of the issues still are today. Evelyn Nesbit is raped by an older man (White) and is afraid to tell anyone based on social stigma and backlash. White seems to be untouchable due to his status and wealth. Truly, what else could be more socially relevant? Evelyn eventually marries Thaw and he, in revenge, murders White.

For the most part, the work focuses on the backstory and then Thaw's trial after the murder was committed. While I did find this incredibly interesting, in theory, the delivery was a little confusing and dry for me at times. Lots of legislation and legal jargon was used that felt a little bit over my head and, in turn, pushed me out of the moment.

For lovers of true crime and legal non-fiction, I think this book would be a no-brainer. However, if you are looking for an on-the-edge of your seat suspense, then this would not be the case.

Bronwyn says

This was pretty interesting. Not quite what the title and subtitle make it sound like though. I think I preferred *American Eve* by Paula Uruburu overall.

Brittany Bernardi says

I really loved this book. The twists of this story are unbelievably, and I felt like I ended every chapter thinking surely that is the craziest thing that would happen. Even the epilogue left me shocked. This is such a well written piece of non-fiction, and so much fun to read.

Everydayreader1 says

In 1901, Evelyn Nesbit, at age sixteen, moved to New York, with her mother, and became a chorus girl in the musical *Florodora*. She met and became involved with famous architect, Stanford White. More than twice her age, he drugged her, and after she was unconscious, raped her. Thereafter, they had a complicated relationship, and she told no one what had happened to her until she became involved with

Harry Thaw, millionaire playboy who would later become her husband.

Years later, in June, 1906, Harry Thaw shot and killed Stanford White at a theatrical performance in Madison Square Garden. He was taken into custody, arrested, and tried twice for the murder. And the scandal didn't end there.

As a girl, I saw a movie about this crime and was captivated by it. Naturally, I wanted to read this account, as soon as it was published. It did not disappoint. This is one of those cases where the truth is stranger than fiction. This true story is a thriller.

Chaitra says

It's supposed to be lurid tabloid-y material. It's not written well however, making everything extremely dry. It is also repetitive, because the same things are rehashed in each of Harry Thaw's trials. None of it makes me understand why the poor girl had to testify at all. I checked wikipedia midway through the book, mostly for the John Barrymore connection, but I went ahead and checked everything because the book was boring me at the time. The data is mostly in the book, but it wasn't completely presented in the order that it should have and that made me wonder about it all.

This is timely, and pretty much why I bothered to pick this book. I have no doubt Evelyn Nesbit was jerked around pretty terribly. I think she deserved a better life, and a better career. But this wasn't a good book. I should have read Rose Byrne's *Brave* instead.

Chandra Claypool (wherethereadergrows) says

Delving into history and true crime is always an interesting feat for me. I'm not usually into history OR nonfiction but true crime usually tickles my curiosity bone and in this case I couldn't pass it up. As I was reading this, I realized I had read about this story before.. or watched a true crime show... or SOMETHING because it was SO eerily familiar!

An intriguing story for sure. In that era, and unfortunately still so today, when a girl is raped, molested and otherwise taken advantage of, she is the one that usually feels shameful and embarrassed to tell anyone. In this case, her own mother left her in the care of the man that took advantage of her... and yet we come to find out there are different variations to the story and really no one knows for sure what actually happened. So this story is told as best as it can be based on court documents.

While the story is based on Evelyn Nesbit and what she went through, I almost felt it was more geared toward Harry Thaw, the man who murdered the man who raped Evelyn. I was more engaged to what he had to go through. Evelyn was young, easily manipulated and unreliable as a witness, wife or reasonable person it almost seemed.

Mostly the book seemed to be about the history leading up to the main incident and the court cases that followed. Sex, Murder and Madness seemed more background to this main line. Which is fine in itself, but I think I was expecting a little more fleshing out of the details in the "backstory" of the trials - more sex, more murder, more madness please!

A decent read, but one that felt more like a history lesson for my taste.

Thank you to Mulholland Books for this copy in return for my honest review :)

Jessica says

Thank you to Mulholland Books for the advanced copy in exchange for my honest review.

When it comes to true crime books I'm always so excited to dive into them. THE GIRL ON THE VELVET SWING was no different. I didn't know anything about Evelyn Nesbit going into the novel and I think that made it an even more interesting read.

In 1901, Evelyn Nesbit, who was 16 years old at the time, met with 47 year old architect Stanford White. White was a prominent figure and seen as a celebrity - he designed many landmark buildings throughout Manhattan and was highly respected in his field. After dining at his townhouse, Evelyn enjoyed some champagne with him and then woke up the next day without any memory of the night before. She was naked in bed with White and there was blood on the sheets - clear signs that she had been raped.

Now the story doesn't end there. Several years go by and she told her future husband, Harry Thaw, about the rape. Thaw was determined to get revenge on White for what he did to Evelyn. In 1906, he got his revenge when he gunned down White in front of hundreds of witnesses. The trial that follows kept the nation captive. Was he justified in killing White? Will he be sentenced to the electric chair?

When I saw in the synopsis, "Evelyn Nesbit's testimony was so explicit and shocking that Theodore Roosevelt himself called on the newspapers not to print it verbatim" I was immediately intrigued. I completely understand why. This topic is so relevant to the issues we are seeing today. High profile men in prominent positions that are taking advantage of younger women and unfortunately its something that's been happening for centuries.

If you want a true crime novel with an eye-opening trial and relevant topic, then I'd highly recommend picking up THE GIRL ON THE VELVET SWING. I know that this is a subject that is not for everyone - so if you want to stay away from depictions of rape then I would recommend against reading this one.

I give this one a solid 4/5 stars!

Rachel McMillan says

I will literally read anything about Evelyn Nesbit. Her story fascinates me — as does her role as a catalyst in shifting women's beauty ideals. This concentrated more on the trial and aftermath of Thaw's murder of White and its scandalous ramifications rather than on Nesbit. While I appreciated the broader perspective, she's what fascinates me, so I continue to most highly recommend American Eve by Paula Uruburu which delves deeply into Nesbit's life but also pans out to the sociocultural constructs that saw her victim and held her in their clutches

Julie says

The Girl on the Velvet Swing: Sex, Murder and Madness at the turn of the Twentieth Century by Simon

Baatz is a 2018 Mulholland publication.

What an incredible true story!

‘These crimes, worse than murder, must be avenged. That there are men of large wealth in this city who have made it a business to degrade womanhood- backing plays and players and using art studios to procure poor young girls... is a new revelation to the public: a new story that wealth has turned its rotting force to the corruption of innocent girlhood, whose misfortune is poverty.’

Sounds eerily familiar to current events, but this story for all intents and purposes begins in 1901, when sixteen-year old actress, Evelyn Nesbit, finds herself wine and dined by one of New York’s premiere architects, Stanford White, a much older man.

One night, Stanford finally got the young beauty alone, plied her with alcohol, possibly adding something extra to her champagne.

Evelyn woke up in White’s bed, naked, obviously having been taken advantage of. She never spoke of it, and even continued what appeared to be a mutual friendship with White.

But, when Evelyn caught wealthy Harry Thaw’s attention, the two became inseparable, despite the dark rumors surrounding Harry. However, when Harry proposed, Evelyn demurred until he finally coaxed her into confessing that Stanford White had raped her.

Harry and Evelyn did marry, but Harry became obsessed with White, and what he had done to Evelyn. Fuming with rage, Harry shot and killed Stanford White in front of a crowd of theatre goers.

Thus, began a long legal battle where Evelyn was forced to publicly testify to what happened that fateful night with Stanford White, which was so shocking even Theodore Roosevelt implored the press to refrain from printing her testimony verbatim.

However, the bulk of the book is centered around the long legal battle Harry Thaw waged in the attempt to avoid both prison and the mental institution.

I was completely unaware of this case. I can see how it captivated the public as I too was absolutely amazed at the many shocking twist and turns the case took, before Harry Thaw's final verdict was announced, years later. It was the ‘crime of the century’ of its time and morphed into the ‘trial of the century’. It was eventually the basis for a movie made in 1955 starring Joan Collins.

While the details of the case caused a huge sensation, and understandably held the public spellbound, the lurid rumors about Harry were not common knowledge at the time. The public seemed very sympathetic towards Harry, who as they saw it, killed the man who raped his wife.

But, for me, what I found so interesting was all the legal wrangling that decided Harry’s fate, and how that decision caused even more complications years later. Harry was really an enigma, a man who did indeed appear to be demented, but was also crazy like a fox. Some may find the legalities and trials dull by comparison to all the other shocking elements of the crime, but I’ve always enjoyed the legal dramas, which is something we rarely these days.

Evelyn’s story is equally compelling, and there is much mystery surrounding her, as well. What was the truth? I believe her story was sincere, not something made up to cover for Harry, which has been suggested.

Although there are large chunks of this book dedicated to the trials, mental stability, apprehension, and future of Harry Thaw, it was Evelyn and all that she endured, and the way her life played out post trial that haunted me.

There are a few issues I feel could hamper the reading experience with this book. Sadly, the author had to piece events together in an unconventional way, which had direct consequences when it came to the organization of facts and the fluidity of the writing.

Many readers have become spoiled to true crime stories that read more like a novel. Unfortunately, this book does not have that smooth quality, and as a result some readers will no doubt find areas of the book tedious, as though reading dry history from a text book.

However, because I was completely unfamiliar with these events, the book held my interest from start to finish. I thought it was a pretty wild ride and the outcome left me shaking my head.

Naturally, I couldn't help but notice that despite the era of time in which these events took place, there are stunning parallels to current headlines, concerning men of wealth and power, taking advantage of women, which is disturbing on so many levels!!

I didn't search this book out due to recommendations or promotions. I simply stumbled across it in my Overdrive library, thought it sounded interesting and checked it out on impulse. I'm glad now that I did!

If you enjoy reading history or true crime you will want to check this book out.

4 stars

Alissa Haley says

Thank you NetGalley and the publisher for providing me with a digital ARC of this book! Review is now up on Diva Reads!
