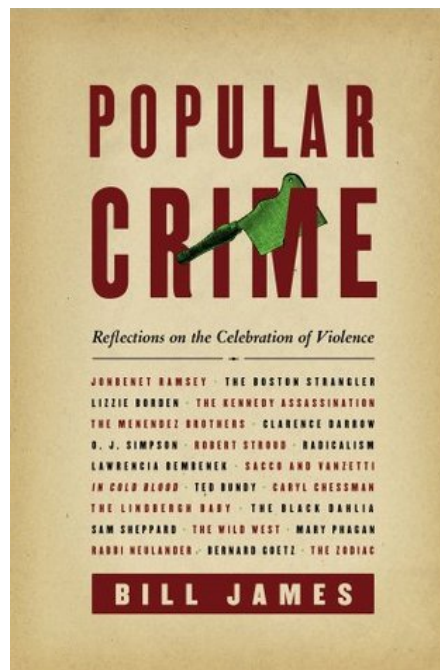




Popular Crime: Reflections on the Celebration of Violence

Bill James

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Popular Crime: Reflections on the Celebration of Violence Bill James

The man who revolutionized the way we think about baseball now examines our cultural obsession with murder—delivering a unique, engrossing, brilliant history of tabloid crime in America.

Celebrated writer and contrarian Bill James has voraciously read true crime throughout his life and has been interested in writing a book on the topic for decades. Now, with *Popular Crime*, James takes readers on an epic journey from Lizzie Borden to the Lindbergh baby, from the Black Dahlia to O. J. Simpson, explaining how crimes have been committed, investigated, prosecuted and written about, and how that has profoundly influenced our culture over the last few centuries— even if we haven't always taken notice.

Exploring such phenomena as serial murder, the fluctuation of crime rates, the value of evidence, radicalism and crime, prison reform and the hidden ways in which crimes have shaped, or reflected, our society, James chronicles murder and misdeeds from the 1600s to the present day. James pays particular attention to crimes that were sensations during their time but have faded into obscurity, as well as still-famous cases, some that have never been solved, including the Lindbergh kidnapping, the Boston Strangler and JonBenet Ramsey. Satisfyingly sprawling and tremendously entertaining, *Popular Crime* is a professed amateur's powerful examination of the incredible impact crime stories have on our society, culture and history.

Popular Crime: Reflections on the Celebration of Violence Details

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Author : Bill James

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Em says

I adored this book. Bill James has the kind of dry, witty writing style that makes everything interesting. His take on how popular crime has affected our lives and history is amazing and I cannot say enough good things about it. If you've ever felt guilty reading true crime books, this will make you feel so much better as it teaches you things you never thought you'd learn.

Lori says

Very interesting.....made me Google a lot. But the repeated uses of Wikipedia as a source caused me anxiety.

VictoriaNickers says

Sometimes you just need that non-fiction read to shake things up in your reading life. This was that book for me. I actually enjoyed it. I have always had an interest and read many books on the theories of crime. This was a slow read. I spent a lot of time googling different cases that he brought up in the book, just to get more background.

Don't pick up this book thinking it will magically provide you with some fascinating insight on crime and the media. In fact, he actually admits himself in the book that he's just some guy who's read a lot of crime books. It reads more like an annotated bibliography of crime throughout the 20th century than anything else. He actually recommends and doesn't recommend particular books throughout. Up until the very last chapter I was wondering if the book actually had a point (or rather a thesis). But he pretty much lays it all out in the last chapter, clear as day. If I had to read it all over again for the first time, I would read that last chapter first.

This should not be your first read about the social science of crime. You definitely need to have a solid background in some sort of social theory involving crime to full appreciate this book. The stories are very fragmented and he assumes his reader has a mastery over the knowledge of all the popular crimes throughout the 20th century, particularly in the later part of the 60s, 70s and 80s and has widely read on the subject. I can only think of maybe 4 people to whom I would personally recommend this book in real life.

Slagle Rock says

Oustanding book. As much about popular crime itself as it is the literature of popular crime. I like Bill James' approach to the subject: He's not a credentialed expert on the subject, just a guy who's read a hell of a lot of True Crime books and formed some interesting opinions on them (and how society copes with violent crime). I understand James mostly writes about baseball and I think there is evidence of that in the way he

uses statistics, metrics and logic to write about crime literature. Does this approach make complete sense to me? No, but it does to him and that gave him a strong framework for approaching his subject. Some of the criticisms I read said it was a sprawling book. Honestly, I didn't have any problem with its scope or execution. One of my faves for 2017.

Nate Johnson says

I am seldom compelled to write reviews on this site - but I just finished a book that cannot think to describe other than something that includes the phrase "written by an asshole." James:

1. goes on distracting asides attacking forms of literature he doesn't like
2. evaluates books as good or bad while giving no support for his arguments
3. speculates endlessly on the "real events" of crimes while lambasting others for doing so
4. offers solid reader advice like, "I won't mention it here; you know where the internet is."
5. Develops a point system for determining guilt beyond a reasonable doubt - a dubious system at best, but one he also abandons midway through.
6. Offers a sporadic thesis about the faults of the justice system that is entirely unstructured / obtuse.
7. Adds snide and often sexist comments about the competency of female writers or the attractiveness of murder victims
8. Engages in the worst kind of armchair popular culture criticism that relies on about as much rigor as friggin' wet spaghetti noodle.
9. Etc., etc., etc.

The crime stories are entertaining, so I'll give this book a second star. But James is beyond obnoxious, hypocritical and otherwise the epitome of a non-qualified blowhard. He wrote this over twenty years; it's a classic vanity project, one which he has failed to execute well. His populist torch-carrying of the common man is utterly embarrassing, and his arch thesis about the benefits of media attention to popular crime utterly unconvincing. By far my favorite portion of the book - insert sarcasm-o-meter here - is when, within the course of three paragraphs, he simultaneously offers that popular crime is dangerous because it engenders imitation murders and beneficial because it crafts a safety net. He's just shooting from the hip, a very, very strange action coming from someone known as a sort of grandfather of quantitative analysis in baseball.

All of this might have been acceptable enough had he not come across as much of a get-off-my-lawn, I-know-and-you-don't asshole. The fact that he has the gall to declare that other books are well-researched or well-written is hilarious. This book makes clear the worthlessness of an opinionated vanity project, and as a dedicated fan of James's baseball work, I wished he had stuck to his proverbial day-job.

Ugh.

Gabe Perna says

If the name of the guy who wrote this piece of crap was James Bill, not only would it have not gotten published, but the publisher would have laughed him out of the building. At no point in this book did the author write anything but a series of rambling, opinionated jags on popular crime stories. Most of what he had an opinion on was pure speculation. He then had the gall to criticize other people's work. People who, unlike James, actually did real research and work. I hate to say "stick to what you know," because that's such a cliché. But in this case, I urge you to stick to what you know Bill James.

(Checks last year's baseball standings, sees the Red Sox in last place)

Hmmm...maybe not.

Curtis Edmonds says

Bill James has spent most of the last few years in Boston. I do not know if he spent any or all of that time sitting on a barstool in some Beacon Street bar, dispensing wisdom and nonsense co-mingled in the way of the barroom know-it-all. But if he did, and if you were there to hear it, and if you wrote all of it down, you would come up with a book like "Popular Crime." It is breezy, self-assured, all over the map in every direction, and told with the absolute certainty of the taproom blowhard. It is the perfect book to read in fits and starts, in little bite-size pieces. James is deft when he capsulizes the various forgotten and remembered crimes of the last couple of hundred years, but the deftness collapses in places into arm-waving speculation. Fans of James's baseball prose will not be surprised by the lack of organization and the occasional ramble down a rabbit hole. Those not on board with James's style may be confused or irritated. It largely depends on your appetite for gossip and your willingness to see James as endearing rather than irritating, and you might want to have a beer handy.

Carin says

In my interview for this job, my now-boss brought up the subject of the genre of True Crime, and how it probably needs to be rebranded. I agree wholeheartedly. But I think that it needs to be broken in half, and that's what needs to be rebranded. In the year and a half since then, I've thought of this a lot. My Mother-in-law reads a lot of true crime, and I read a modest amount, but until this book, the Venn Diagram of our true crime reads had no overlap at all. She tends to read the ripped-from-the-headlines, commercial, tabloid-esque variety (not that there's anything wrong with that!) such as Jaycee Dugard's tell-all and books co-written by People Magazine journalists (really, no judgment. I subscribe to People and I love it.) Whereas the books I read that fall within the True Crime genre are more like *The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science*, about a nineteenth-century French serial killer. My boss was discussing this because the more literary side of this genre has been on a big upswing, but the books can be hard to sell as the phrase "true crime" has a salacious ring to it that doesn't resonate with literary readers, even if they're missing out.

A few months ago I was at one of my accounts and I mentioned my MIL's birthday was coming up and she liked True Crime, and the buyer immediately went to this title. I knew who Bill James was instantly, having eaten up *Moneyball* when it was first published. I jumped on it and bought it for her right away. Then I thought, this looks so fascinating, I ought to get one for myself. And when I went to add it to Goodreads, I saw that I already had added it. Hm. (This is why I am religious about my Goodreads or I would own dozens of duplicate copies of books.) And I thought, this could be interesting if my MIL and I both like it. We could actually finally have a book in the middle of the Venn Diagram! So I sat down and read it.

Chunkster as it is, I read it very quickly. James is making the argument that while the intelligentsia looks down on true crime aficionados as exploitative and low-brow, this fascination has been going on for centuries, has been beloved by plenty of the high-brow, and actually has a purpose or two. It helps us to NOT become inured to the horrific goings-on around us, it can actually be a welcome distraction from awful news

that is more difficult to mentally and emotionally deal with, and heck, publicizing serial crimes can often lead to arrests and heightened public awareness. He goes back and looks at dozens of "crimes of the century" over the last 200 years in America. He looks at patterns in the coverage of crimes. He looks at how in a few cases like JonBenet Ramsey, the public scrutiny of course screwed up the way the case was handled by the police, irreparably. He does give his opinion of who committed certain "unsolved" murders. He shows how American culture has been influenced by crime, and how crime has influence American culture. He gives his opinions on how and what could help reduce crime and in what ways we're actually exacerbating it. If you are a pop culture junky like I am, and have even a passing interest in the O.J. Simpson case or any of the classics like The Boston Strangler or Ted Bundy, this is a must-read. It is a few years old (2011) so don't expect the high-profile crimes of the last few years to be included. Personally, I was annoyed by a sprinkling of typos throughout, but it happens. And it didn't take away from the masterful synthesis of two centuries of "popular crime" in America.

Mark says

I probably never give this book the time of day if it were not written by Bill James (and the book wouldn't exist without him ... as you might realize), the arguable godfather of modern baseball analytics and the proprietor of the before-their-time Baseball Abstracts.

1. James, I think, is very intelligent but Popular Crime comes off as a candidate for self-publishing. As noted, James has created a career out of writing about baseball statistics. However, baseball is as much a passion turned career as this book is a passion turned a true-crime nonfiction. He is not a lawyer, criminologist, law student, paralegal police officer, prison warden or any background to suggest he's more qualified to talk about crime as you or I.

His book comes off as sophomoric (literally using vulgarity and referencing flatulence as he provides commentary). It's the work of a fanboy. He's smart and he loves true crime. So he decided to write a book and his fame as a front office member of the Boston Red Sox probably played a huge part in him getting this published.

2. There's no real focus here. Content varies from chapter to chapter. Generally, James picks major crimes (rape, kidnapping, murder) starting from what he considers the genesis of modern law enforcement and detective work (around the late 1800s no matter how primitive and ineffective). The retelling includes the details of the crime (or supposed crime) and the outcome including media coverage, the court case and how either one went awry.

Another third of the book is an extended book report. As noted, James has read A LOT of true crime books and he culls a lot of his summaries from these texts (with citation) and often provides suggestions for further reading and even reviewing films that depict the different crimes. Of course, you don't need a book to suggest books and movies; a Facebook account will suffice.

Finally, James takes extreme liberty in telling the reader how HE THINKS the criminal justice system should work among other thoughts. Although he ignores other crimes akin to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, he provides a whole chapter concerning his theory (that Secret Service agent George Hickey "accidentally" shot the president while retrieving his gun after Oswald's shots).

He writes extensively about tearing down the prison system and instead housing 20-30 prisoners in smaller prisons around the country with 10 levels of security. He lets us know how corrupt and misguided the legal system is, which is akin to me reading 10,000 Leagues Under The Sea and claiming I'm a marine biologist.

At several points, James puts on his deerstalker and takes a stab at solving crimes. He retells of living in Boston and retracing the crimes of the Boston Strangler (he suggests that Albert DeSalvo is mentally deranged and did not commit all the crimes he confessed to). He then puts together a criminal profile straight out of the TV shows of the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, a serial murderer that terrorized Cleveland in the 1930s. Although he states that someone with time can find the murderer (who is most likely long dead) although I wonder why he doesn't do it himself.

Like I said, James is a smart guy who got too excited to write a book about something he really loves and it comes off poorly.

Veleda says

I had a hard time deciding what to rate this book. On the one hand, it was a genuinely entertaining read. On the other hand, I grew so weary of James' bluster. James has no problem admitting that he's an amateur in the field of crime. However, this fails to stop him from firmly declaring that he has all (or at least a good many) of the solutions to the American criminal justice system that those lawyers are just too lawyer-like to understand. (Nor does this confidence extend only to the subject of criminal law.) Some of James' ideas are actually interesting and may have merit. Others are the uneducated ramblings of a blowhard. The book is also entirely unsourced and disorganized.

Most of the time I enjoyed reading *Popular Crime*. But there were simply too many times I had to pause and grimace, or sigh, or smack my forehead. From the title I expected something much more rigorous and thoughtful. It's not the book's fault that it wasn't what I expected, but it could at least have been better at being what it was.

Mary Ronan Drew says

Bill James is an unusual writer. He is best known for sabermetrics, a new way of collecting baseball statistics that better reflects the performance of players. But during all the years that he has been writing his baseball books and advising teams he has also been reading books about crime. Not mysteries or thrillers, true crime. He estimates he has read about 1,000 of these books, about murders ranging from Lizzie Borden to Jon Benet Ramsey.

James approaches any subject in an almost entirely unbiased manner and with as little emotional input as he can manage. Using a detailed timeline, he makes a pretty convincing case, for example, that Lizzie Borden could not have killed her father, given the time it would have taken her to clean up all the blood from attacking him with an axe. She was neat as a pin five minutes later. Of course, anyone else's having done it is almost as unlikely. And whether you like Lizzie Borden or not, what the neighbors thought about it, and the moralizing of various law enforcement and judicial figures are not part of the equation.

Popular Crime touches on almost all the famous cases of American murder including the Lindberg kidnapping, the Scottsboro Boys, the Boston Strangler, the O J Simpson case, and a hundred others. I don't always agree with him but I have respect for his arguments and every page of the book fascinated me. One of the top 10 books I've read in the last two years.

2011 No 78 Coming soon: Ann Veronica, by H G Wells

Stringy says

This is a fascinating book, although it's a bit odd in places. James' writing style is all over the place, he's opinionated but not tactful, he pulls numbers and facts out of unnamed places (maybe his arse, maybe somewhere legit... there are no footnotes or references in my Kindle version). I really enjoyed reading it :) It's like having a meandering conversation with someone who alternately makes you yell "Whaaat?! No way, dude!" and "Yeah! Well said, spot on!".

I liked his categorisation of crime-notoriety, but thought his evidence-points system could use more support. I'd like to apply both to some local 'famous' crimes and see how they hold up.

His summaries of famous cases are interesting and mercifully free from conspiracy theories. His book reviews are brutally honest and just a little bit hypocritical in places. I'd happily subscribe to his blog if he wanted to write up more of both.

But the real attraction of the book is that he considers the place of books and news about crime in society. It's often considered coarse and unhealthy to take an interest in true crime, but social pressure based on well-known crimes has affected history by changing our justice system and exercising a necessary curb on the excesses of lawyers. It's affected the history of newspapers, spurred the professionalisation of police forces, spawned the detective fiction genre, and often popular cases are the basis of brand new laws. It's foolish to ignore such a powerful influence on us all.

True crime readers should definitely give this book a try. Historians might like to give it a whirl too.

Hugh Hunter says

I really enjoyed this book but could definitely see how it may not appeal to everyone. It moves between discussion of theory surrounding popular crime and a pseudo-history of popular crime in the US. I found out about this book from a podcast called "the last podcast on the left" and the podcast is simply a must listen for anyone interested in conspiracies and popular crime.

Mark Desrosiers says

I think Bill James is misusing his obvious and potent powers here. As a baseball expert, his outside-the-box, everydude, quantitative methods of looking at baseball have transformed the game, instilled strategic wisdom in some managers, emboldened the mathemagicians, caused the Red Sox to win two world series, etc. And he writes that way too -- lots of "look, I don't know much about this, but..." asides, as if he's sitting on the next barstool, bouncing another brilliant earth-shaking insight off you.

Unfortunately there ain't much mathematical "sabermetrics" you can apply to popular crime (popular *American* crime, I should add -- after the prehistory and the Ripper, he never strays outside our borders until Andrew Luster bolts for Mexico). But he tries anyway, proposing an alphanumeric coding system in Chapter X that categorizes the crime and adds a 1-to-10 scale for the degree of popular interest. So, the Beltway Snipers are "CBT 5", and Bernie Madoff is "F\$ 7", etc. This is just a steel-cabinet filing system: insular and

time-bound, a waste of his energy and our attention. There are other moments in the book where he uses his baseball schtick to analyze cases, assigning his own "points" to various clues and evidence, then saying well, this person was convicted even though 35 of 100 points necessary were found to convict this person. I find this very misleading and sloppy, though I know that's how his mind works and, hey, guess what some of what he says really adds up, in an intuitive-sherlock sense.

But the big problem with this book is that it's a long-ass literature review -- damn near all of the cases he discusses involve his citing the relevant true-crime paperbacks, and telling us which he likes, which he hates, which he digs despite their flaws, etc. It's not like Bill James himself was going out and collecting clues -- this is all third-hand reviewing and theorizing.

So when he decides to chat about the JFK assassination, he cites the books he found most convincing (Posner and Donahue), and agrees that Oswald was acting alone and secret service agent George Hickey accidentally killed the President. Basically a terrible accident involving one nutcase and one person entrusted with the job of preventing the President's death. James dismisses all the other Cuba/Mafia/Soviet theories for the very valid reason that surely someone would have come forward to drop docs after all these years. But surely the same holds if a secret service agent accidentally killed him? Bill does not convince me at all...

On the other hand, he is very sane and convincing about the Lindbergh kidnapping, the Mary Phagan case, Sacco & Vanzetti, even the O.J. carnival. Hell, the ubiquitous JonBenet Ramsey gets a fair and thorough analysis (though his theory -- that someone was out to fuck over John Ramsey through sheer resentment -- suggests there should be some obvious known suspects by now). Again, he's the guy gathering us round at the bar, telling it like it is, you just gotta wake up the next morning and try to verify shit through your "Bill James hangover".

Throughout the book he frosts the crime anecdotes with his own theories about how "popular crime" is actually a good thing for the world (very convincing here), decent explanations why only pretty white girls get media attention when they're kidnapped or murdered, how the Warren court fucked everything up by trying to hasten what should have been a natural anti-death-penalty progression (this theory requires more evidence than he provides), how murder confessions are almost always false etc. These are righteous insights, outside the box and relevant to how politics is conceived in 2011: well worth gifting this book to your reactionary baseball-fanatic uncle as a subtle way to shift his thinking.

James's blokey wisdom sometimes fails utterly. For example, he ends a riveting chapter thus: "The alliance between Jewish and African-American leaders began to crumble in the late 1960s, for reasons beyond my understanding." Seriously? Any rational person -- a sabermetrician-type armed with numbers -- can show you why blacks and Jews split ways, and it's entirely a result of class antagonism, urban migration patterns, how most Americans perceived Jews versus blacks, no Jews ever rioted in the cities, etc.

Similarly, he's perplexed about why the anarchist/labor bombings ceased in 1921, just after the Palmer raids and just before J. Edgar Hoover entered history. "I wish I could tell you what happened to America in 1921, but the truth is that I do not understand it." Normally, when Bill James doesn't understand something, he investigates -- here, he just leaves us with a question begging for his insights. If you paid for this book, you'd want a refund after that quip.

Also, there are many pages wasted here where he just recounts a "popular crime" without giving his opinion or analysis of it, mostly at the beginning and the end. This is padding, and no ordinary writer would get away with it. Later, when he declares that Michael Jackson "was never at any point in his life one of the 100 most famous people in the world," I knew Bill James had lost the plot, living in his own world, probably thinking Vida Blue and Steve Carlton counted among that hundred.

In the lengthy Chapter XXXIII (zzzzzz), he gives us a Utopian proposal about many small prisons of various

security levels, with prisoners "graduating" from one to the other, something like that. Really, what he would like is dispersed, categorized prisoners, and a more humane treatment of same, but he never once suggests that the privatization and the profit motive may be a big problem. And, y'know, overcrowding as a result of pointless drug laws. None of this crosses his mind, or his pen.

For which I dock this entertaining and sometimes misleading book one star.

Richard Finney says

I was looking forward to reading this book because I grew up reading his books on baseball statistics, which completely changed the way most serious fans look at the sport.

This book on crime was a solid triple... most of the times totally illuminating, passionately written and completely absorbing if you are interested in reading about some of the most famous violent crimes in the last hundred years. The chapters on Lizzie Borden and the Boston Strangler are real stand outs. I especially love that Bill cites the books he read that covered the crimes... even if he didn't think the authors did a good job covering the subject.

Why this was not a "home run" for me is because Bill tries to establish a "point system" a couple times throughout the book to explain certain philosophical concepts... and it's kinda... boring. Exactly the opposite of what he did with baseball statistics over the years.

But he is such an engaging writer... so I just ended up skimming those parts until Bill got back to summarizing another crime story and telling me with his big brain who he thought did it.

Bill also hints at doing another book dealing with a specific case because he says he knows who did it... I sure hope he follows through!!!!

Dara says

I found this difficult to rate. The good: fascinating subject (if you're into it, which presumably if you buy a book called "Popular Crime" you are), very readable summaries and writing style, and it's great for someone like me, who will never ever read a book all about Jon Benet Ramsey, but will happily read a ten-page lit review of those books about Jon Benet Ramsey.

The bad: sometimes his style gets a bit too colloquial and entirely disorganized (dozens of pages will go by rattling off crime after crime in one-paragraph summaries, with no links between) -- I feel like this could have used a heavier-handed editor. And the biggie: whenever James starts to editorialize (about the Warren court or prison reform, for example), it is near-unreadable. His analysis of crime, while not always convincing, is interesting and often sharp. His thoughts on legal analysis are painfully, painfully dumb. But with judicious skimming when he strays from his strong suit, it's a very fun read.

Tim Basuino says

Way back when I was 15 I ran across something called a Baseball Abstract at the mall Waldenbooks. Intrigued, I read the first couple of pages, which was enough to inspire me to save up my paperboy money and eventually purchase a copy. One of the best investments I've made – that book still graces our bookshelf. As time went on and I acquired more access to spending money I'd acquire most of James' baseball works, of which pretty much all of them are worth reading multiple times.

At a certain point in time James pretty much stopped producing written material. Yes, he has his website, but it's a pay-for, and not quite the same. So it was with some glee that I noticed that Bill has started to write again, but in a somewhat different genre.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that James uses a lot of the same type of logic to analyze crime as he does what it takes a baseball team to win games. He has schematics to gauge population interest, how likely it is that a suspect committed a crime, and so forth. I don't know if anyone else has done that, and it does suggest that the same level of entertaining writing could be employed in any number of fields.

The book focuses on most of America's significant crimes, at least in terms of media coverage. Like his abstracts, James often goes on a tangent, which are often useful, and always entertaining. Occasionally he essentially gives off a questionable one (i.e. when talking about the smoothness of Obama, he blurts "Sorry Joe!"). Huh? But by and large this was a very interesting read.

Groucho says

One of the blurbs on the cover describes the book as "sabermetrics meets the Coen Brothers." That is a bizarre combination, but given that Bill James is the author a reader could be forgiven for believing the hype.

If only.

In truth, I don't understand what the point of this book was. The subtitle is "Reflections on the Celebration of Violence," which again—like sabermetrics meeting the Coen Brothers—seems like an interesting topic. But the bulk of the book is devoted only to given brief summaries of different high-profile American murder cases since the end of the 18th Century. On a few of the summaries involving unsolved cases, James shares with us his theories.

As for the "reflections" portion of the book? Well, it's true that he spends time looking at the different crime books written about the cases he is summarizing. He "reviews" the books, grading the writing of the authors (usually they fail—the only books I can think of that James seems to have no criticisms of are *In Cold Blood* and *The Onion Fields*). He also criticizes the authors' (supposed) biases, as well as their research ability.

*as a side note, someone should tell James that if he wants to be taken seriously when he criticizes someone's research ability, he should avoid citing Wikipedia in his own book.

But most of the "reflecting" that occurs doesn't focus so much on the celebration of violence as on what James perceives as troubles inherent in the American criminal justice system. An important topic? Possibly. But it's certainly not what was advertised.

James is, I think, attempting to come off as a lovable, curmudgeonly contrarian. But with his pedantic,

supercilious tone, he kind of comes off as a pretentious dick.

My recommendation would be to skip to the end of the book, where James includes a list of what he considers the best crime books available. Then throw this book away, and read those books instead.

KC says

I got about 150 pages in, skimmed the rest, and gave up. At first, I found the short anecdotes and sidebars to be interesting, even if the writing read more like punditry than exposition. After a while, though, I found myself annoyed by the author's tendency to draw sweeping conclusions without any effort to corroborate his personal opinions. His disdain for the law and lawyers prevents him from engaging in a meaningful and comprehensive critique of either (and we need those critiques, believe me) and keeps this book from being more than an egotistical indulgence. I had much higher hopes for this book

Amber says

This is a strange book. I mean that not in a bad way, but in a very literal sense--different from anything else I've read. Granted, I've not read James' Historical Abstracts, which probably would have given me a better idea what this is like.

Anyway, I was a little bit disappointed, because based on my love for baseball statistics and more than passing interest in crime and the criminal justice system, I thought I would love this book, and instead merely liked it. James is definitely not a great narrative storyteller, but at the same time, there are several ideas and passages in this book that I thought were superb:

- that motive, means, and opportunity are useful in identifying suspects, but nowhere near enough to convict someone
- that the professionalization of the police force has led juries to trust them more; potentially a bad thing given that "professionals lie just as often as amateurs, only more skillfully."
- that we assume murderers are smarter than they are; the main reason we don't catch them is that it's "extremely difficult to identify an assailant who kills someone he's never met before."
- that both abortion limits and the death penalty had been in rapid decline into the 1970s and would have died out completely without Supreme Court intervention
- suggesting a tiered prison system, in which prisons are very small and criminals are grouped by violence level, including a promotion/relegation system not unlike European soccer leagues. Much better incentive structure than the current setup, where non-violent offenders have to become violent because that's who rules the prison. Also would be quite useful in preparing those about to be released for civilian life.

The book also contains pseudo-reviews of dozens of crime books and movies, many of which I've added to my Netflix/Amazon lists. In the course of writing this review, I changed my rating from three to four stars--I think this is one of those books that's great to have read more than it is enjoyable to read.
