

***Little Lindy Is Kidnapped: How the Media Covered the Crime of the Century*****Thomas Doherty****New York: Columbia University Press, 2020****276 pages****ISBN: 9780231198493****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.341>**

Despite the seemingly exhaustive literature on the abduction and murder of Charles and Anne Lindbergh's firstborn child, Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr., or "Little Lindy," Thomas Doherty provides a fresh, but decidedly not revisionist history of "the Crime of the Century." Although Doherty follows the well-known narrative of world-famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, he provides a new perspective as he masterfully synthesizes the historical advancements of media that coincided with the foremost events of Lindbergh's life. The book progresses chronologically, with chapters dedicated to moments where Lindbergh captivated public audiences, like his unforgettable solo traverse across the Atlantic Ocean and his moral deterioration into anti-Semitism. The crux of the book, however, centers upon the media frenzies, and the interdependent technological developments of the media, that amplified the story-arc of Little Lindy's kidnapping.

Aptly entitled for the media-influenced nickname of Lindbergh Jr., *Little Lindy Is Kidnapped* showcases numerous strengths of Doherty's scholarship as he aggregates and synthesizes the proliferation of media in the early 20th century. In this, Doherty is thorough and unapologetic as he historicizes and evaluates the rapid development of media that coincided with the Little Lindy story, from early paparazzi (13) to concealed radio transmitters being smuggled into courtrooms (188). Doherty graces his readers with a robust chronology of the technologies, corporations, legalities, and media icons that helped spawn, and were spawned by, "this particular dastardly crime" (108). One of the greatest strengths of the book is its attention to detail, particularly toward media industries that lack historical attention, like newsreels, and one, radio, that failed to realize the importance of "preserving its own heritage" (160). Doherty shines in his

ability to explore the minutiae of the understudied and scarcely archived, while also ensuring space for the moguls and celebrities that financed and narrated the unparalleled, for its time, media spectacle. As such, the book meticulously discusses how media industries were “revolutionizing the delivery and reception of news” (8), especially as early pundits, or radio-centric “news savants” (154) began, to a fault, airing “reenactments of dramatic testimony, and commentary and analysis” (152) – thus informing the contemporary approach to American news. Readers will undoubtedly admire the comprehensive labor required to weave this historical fabric.

For as much as there is to celebrate about this work, it is not without its faults. At times, the book strays from its main purpose as it gets preoccupied by various nuances of the greater Lindbergh narrative. Although interesting and historically accurate, these meanderings often make for abrupt reminders of the main purpose of the book, as it seems even an intentionally “streamlined” (x) version of the Lindbergh story-arc can prove distracting. As well, Doherty’s authorial voice often caves to the frenzy of the case and the precursory “amplified Jazz Age” (6) with an overzealous, if not obscure, descriptive brand. In this, Doherty’s expertly researched history sometimes reads with a sensationalism akin to that of the “florid age of yellow journalism” (32). For instance, as Doherty is describing radio’s 1930s encroachment on newspaper’s stronghold on the news industry, he contends that “in a business where minutes meant the difference between a hot scoop and a dead letter, newspapers were being left in the dust” (57). Although Doherty would be correct to generally conclude that the advent of radio, and to a larger extent audio and video media, informed the eventual decline of the newspaper industry, newspaper circulation and revenue steadily increased throughout the 20th century. Newsprint’s capacity to adapt to the changing media landscape, as Doherty attests, and thrive well beyond the advent of radio hardly warrants a “left in the dust” label. My main criticism here – and I maintain that even

the best outputs of expertise warrant healthy criticism – is that despite the wealth of knowledge in *Little Lindy Is Kidnapped*, Doherty often exhibits the same authorial style he critiques of certain era-specific novelists who “tended to overwrite and overthink” (124).

Criticisms aside, this book should command the attention of a variety of interested readers, particularly scholars of New Jersey history, media history, and the never dull Lindbergh saga. Indeed, the real strength of the book is Doherty’s scholarly restraint. Although Doherty rightly offers critiques of characters throughout the book, like obsessive media agents, incompetent government actors, revisionist conspiracy theorists, and even Lindbergh for his inexcusable post-trial life choices, Doherty upholds the book’s subtitle (*How the Media Covered the Crime of the Century*). Doherty does not advance a reductionist vision of media history by theorizing a genesis to the media circus that surrounded Lindbergh, and he refrains from speaking at length about the present, unending media spectacle that shares a genealogy with everything that engulfed the Lindbergh frenzy.

Despite Doherty’s thorough treatment of the content, he appropriately leaves some dots for readers to connect beyond the direct narrative. Like crime dramas, especially those with the publicity of the Lindbergh case, we tend to seek resolutions and closure for the complexities of our past and present. Doherty aptly recognizes that unlike crime dramas, complex histories, like that of 20th century media frenzies, rarely have a Bruno Richard Hauptmann to blame. Such spectacles manifest from a confluence of particulars, like profit-hungry corporations, power-hungry politicians, and inventive individuals who urge storytelling techniques and media technologies forward with their timely ingenuity. Doherty reminds us that we need not foolishly engage the genesis debate between great times and great people. While “sometimes a story makes a journalist’s career,” it is only with “temperament and timing, eloquence and grace under

pressure” that we can “capture the intensity of the moment and forever after associate the reporter with the news delivered” (213). Unlike the upstart “radio reporters” (58) of the 1930s, Doherty did not need this book to make his career, but he nonetheless delivered a narrative worth remembering in its own right.

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