

David Grann

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About this Person

Born: March 10, 1967 in New York, New York, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Journalist
Other Names: Grann, David Elliot
 Updated: May 18, 2018

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born March 10, 1967; married Kyra Darnton (a television producer), 2000; children: two. **Education:** Graduated from Connecticut College, 1989; Tufts University, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, M.A. (international relations); Boston University, M.A. (creative writing). **Addresses:** Home: New York, NY. Office: New Yorker, 4 Times Sq., New York, NY10036.

CAREER:

New Republic, Washington, DC, senior editor; *The Hill*, Washington, DC, executive editor, 1995-96; *New Yorker*, New York, NY, staff writer, 2003--.

AWARDS:

Thomas Watson Fellowship, 1989; finalist, Michael Kelly Award, 2005; George Polk Award, 2009; Samuel Johnson Prize shortlist, 2009; finalist, National Magazine Awards, 2010; Best Fact Crime Book Prize, Edgar Awards, 2018, for *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2009.
- *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2010.
- *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 2016.

Contributor to anthologies, including *What We Saw: The Events of September 11, 2001*; *The Best American Crime Writing* (2004 and 2005 editions), and *The Best American Sports Writing* (2003 and 2006 editions). Contributor to periodicals, including the *Atlantic*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Weekly Standard*, and *New York Times* magazine.

Sidelights

David Grann graduated from Connecticut College and then attended Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, where he earned a master's degree in international relations. Grann also holds a master's degree in creative writing from Boston University. Following his academic career, Grann joined the *New Republic* as senior editor. He then served as an executive editor at *The Hill* newspaper. In 2003, he became a staff writer at *New Yorker*. Grann's book *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon* was released in 2009. The volume examines the life and disappearance of Percy H. Fawcett. Indeed, as Grann notes in the book, Fawcett believed that a lost city, "Z," existed in the Amazon jungle. He set out in 1925 to find it, only to disappear.

Discussing the book in an online *World Hum* interview with Frank Bures, Grann remarked: "I had always considered myself a disinterested reporter and at least at the outset I intended to simply write a biography about Fawcett and all the people who disappeared and died looking for this ancient city in the Amazon. But after I uncovered a chest full of Fawcett's diaries and logbooks, which held unprecedented clues to what happened to him and the location of the City of Z, I became much more consumed by the mystery and its romantic nature." In another interview for the *Afterword* website, Grann told Mark Medley that "the fascination with lost cities seems eternal. I suspect that part of it, like the earlier searches for mythical kingdoms ... reflects a longing to find some place that is better or richer or more fabulous than the one we inhabit." Grann continued: "I also think there is a deep curiosity about how real civilizations, such as the Incas or Mayans, once flourished and eventually died out." He also commented that Fawcett is one of the more colorful early twentieth-century explorers. "I am not sure if explorers will ever hold the same place in the popular imagination," he observed, "Fawcett's legend once contributed to radio plays, novels ..., poems, documentaries, movies, stamps, children's stories, comic books, ballads, stage

plays, graphic novels, and museum exhibits. ... [N]ot only geographical circumstances ... made these figures legends; there was an array of cultural forces as well." Notably, Grann's book includes a great deal of his own impressions as he researches Fawcett, and he told *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Pete Croatto: "I became much more part of the story in a way I never expected, in that the more research I did the more I found myself becoming consumed by it."

Writing about *The Lost City of Z* for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Michael Kroner, noted that "Grann alternates the story of his own research with Fawcett's adventures, chapter by chapter." Kroner added: "By linking himself to Fawcett, the author puts himself into history, emphasizing that not much more is known about the region now than when Fawcett tromped through a century ago." Michiko Kakutani observed in the *New York Times Book Review* that Grann "ends his narrative with a fascinating visit with the archaeologist Michael Heckenberger, who has been excavating what Mr. Grann describes as 'a vast ancient settlement' in the very region where Fawcett is believed to have vanished." Kakutani concluded, "As for Mr. Grann's book, it reads with all the pace and excitement of a movie thriller and all the verisimilitude and detail of firsthand reportage."

A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called the book "a colorful tale of true adventure, marked by satisfyingly unexpected twists, turns and plenty of dark portents." Lev Grossman, writing in *Time*, commended Grann's narrative pacing. The reviewer stated: "What keeps you going is the backstory. The theory that the Amazon basin conceals the capital of an advanced civilization has a long history--it's one of those ideas that's just too romantic to die." Mick Herron, in *Geographical*, described the narrative as "all great fun, enhanced by Grann's ... tendency to fictionalise--the passages set in Victorian London are full of jolly clichés about brothels, blacking factories and newspaper boys crying 'Orrible murder!'" he commented. "This does rather compromise any claim the book--by virtue of its detailed research--might have to being a work of scholarship, but getting on Fawcett's trail is the main business," Herron added, and concluded, "It's a cracking read."

In *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, Grann investigates "a tale of murder, betrayal, heroism and a nation's struggle to leave its frontier culture behind and enter the modern world," explained Sean Woods in *Rolling Stone*. "At the beginning of the last century, during the oil boom, massive oil reserves were discovered on the Osage Indian Reservation in Oklahoma. In a short period of time, the impoverished Indians became some of the wealthiest people in the country. And then they started getting murdered. Men and women were poisoned, blown up and shot at a horrific rate, and the corrupt and incompetent local law enforcement proved useless at stopping the bloodshed." "But Grann's book is not about generalities; it is principally about one matriarchal Osage family, and the devilish plot to murder its womenfolk one by one, in a coldly calculated order, as would gradually bequeath their riches to white speculators in the end by the only viable means: inheritance," declared Ed Vulliamy in the London *Guardian*. "And here lies the macabre intimacy that marks this out from other stories of mass killing of American Indians: inheritance, of course, entailed marrying Native women, raising children with them while knowing the plan's murderous outcome." "The Osage case is almost one hundred years old, but Grann says the reporting and writing was some of the most intense of his career," Woods declared. "This is as close a story to good and evil as I ever came across," Grann says. "I spent so much time with the evil that it was very disconcerting. But I really was determined not to just catalog the victims. I wanted to find the descendants who could help try to give the dead some voice."

Grann points out that the Osage murders were important for another reason; it marked the rise of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to prominence, under its young leader J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover and the FBI were tasked with solving the problem of the Osage murders, but "it was the detective work of agent and former Texas Ranger Tom White," said Priscilla Kipp in *BookPage*, "that helped Hoover transform the formerly inept and ridiculed FBI into a powerful agency." In addition, "Grann's own dogged detective work," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, "reveals another layer to the case that Hoover's men had never exposed." "His riveting reckoning of a devastating episode in American history," concluded Annie Bostrom in *Booklist*, "deservedly captivates." "This page-turner surges forward with the pacing of a true-crime thriller," stated a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, "elevated by Grann's crisp and evocative prose and enhanced by dozens of period photographs." "*Killers of the Flower Moon* is a gripping tale, masterfully told," said Dean Jobb in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. "When murderers escape justice, Grann notes, 'history can often provide at least some final accounting.' While it's too late to identify, let alone punish, all those who preyed on the Osage, this book ensures these brutal crimes will never again be forgotten."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *AARP: The Magazine*, April-May, 2017, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, p. 16.
- *Archaeology*, May-June, 2009, "Lost in the Land of Z," p. 14.
- *Booklist*, November 1, 2008, Keir Graff, review of *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*, p. 4; February 15, 2010, Connie Fletcher, review of *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession*, p. 7; February 15, 2017, Annie Bostrom, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, p. 20.
- *BookPage*, March 1, 2010, Edward Morris, review of *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes*; May, 2017, Priscilla Kipp, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, p. 25.
- *Book World*, March 8, 2009, Marie Arana, "Lost in the Jungle," p. B7.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, February 26, 2009, Jeremy Kutner, review of *The Lost City of Z*, p. 25.
- *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, March 5, 2009, Michael Kroner, review of *The Lost City of Z*.
- *Details*, January-February, 2009, Timothy Hodler, "Travel Writers Gone Wild," p. 33.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, February 27, 2009, Thom Geier, review of *The Lost City of Z*, p. 61.
- *Geographical*, March, 2009, Mick Herron, "Missing, Presumed Crazy," p. 61.
- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), May 12, 2017, Dean Jobb, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon*.
- *Guardian* (London, England), May 1, 2017, Ed Vulliamy, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 1, 2008, review of *The Lost City of Z*; February 15, 2017, review of *Killers of the Flower Moon*.
- *Library Journal*, November 1, 2008, review of *The Lost City of Z*, p. 86; June 1, 2009, Risa Getman, review of *The Lost City of Z*, p. 59; March 15, 2010, Stephen L. Hupp, review of *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes*, p. 110; February 1, 2017, Deirdre Bray Root,

What does the title *Killers of the Flower Moon* mean?

Expert Answers

David Alberts, Ph.D. [Ⓔ] | Certified Educator

On the first page of Chapter 1, "The Vanishing," in *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*, author David Gann explains the story behind the title of the book.

In April, millions of tiny flowers spread over the blackjack hills and vast prairies in the Osage territory of Oklahoma. There are Johnny-jump-ups and spring beauties and little bluets. The Osage writer John Joseph Mathews observed that the galaxy of petals makes it look as if the "gods had left confetti." In May, when coyotes howl beneath an unnervingly large moon, taller plants, such as spiderworts and black-eyed Susans, begin to creep over the tinier blooms, stealing their light and water. The necks of the smaller flowers break and their petals flutter away, and before long they are buried underground. This is why the Osage Indians refer to May as the time of the flower-killing moon.

In the late 1800s, the Osage Indians were driven from their ancestral home in Kansas to land in northeastern Oklahoma—land that was considered essentially worthless.

The Osage negotiated with the United States government for the oil, gas, coal and mineral rights to the land, and in the early 1920s, one of the largest oil deposits in the United States was discovered under the Osage land. This meant that oil companies and oil prospectors had to pay the Osage for drilling rights, and as a result, the Osage became the wealthiest people *per capita* in the world at the time.

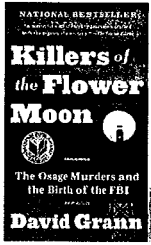
By 1925, when the FBI stepped in to investigate corruption associated with the mismanagement of the Osage oil rights, over 20 Osage had died under questionable circumstances.

The story of the taller plants overgrowing and choking off the light and water of the smaller spring flowers and eventually killing them at the time of the flower-killing moon is a metaphor for how the Osage Indians were overrun, victimized, and killed by people who swarmed over their land in ruthless pursuit of power and wealth.

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SEARCH



Killers of the Flower Moon Reader's Guide

BY DAVID GRANN

Category: Native American History |
20th Century U.S. History

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READERS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and suggestions for further reading that follow are designed to enhance your group's discussion of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the *New York Times* bestseller that delves into a dark and haunted corner of American history.

Introduction

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Osage Indians were driven onto a presumed worthless expanse of land in northeastern Oklahoma. But their territory turned out to be atop one of the largest oil deposits in the United States; to obtain that oil, prospectors were required to pay the tribe for leases and royalties. By the 1920s, the members of Osage Nation had become the wealthiest people per capita in the world. And then the Osage began to die under mysterious circumstances.

As the death toll climbed to more than twenty-four and local law enforcement made little progress, the fledgling Federal Bureau of Investigation was called in. Headed by agent Tom White, the investigation was closely overseen in Washington by the Bureau's ambitious newly appointed director, J. Edgar Hoover.

Exposing the turbulent history of the relations between whites and the Osage Nation over the course of more than a century, *Killers of the Flower Moon* provides a disturbing look at the deep-seated prejudices that continue to cast a shadow over our country.

Cast of Characters

The Family

Mollie Burkhart, a wealthy Osage woman whose family was targeted

Anna Brown, Mollie's oldest sister, a divorcee who spent a lot of time in the reservation's rowdy boomtowns

Lizzie, Mollie's mother, deeply attached to Osage traditions even as the world around her changed; she suffered a slow, inexplicable death

Rita, Mollie's sister, and her husband, Bill Smith

Ernest Burkhart, Mollie's white husband, the father of her three children, and her official financial guardian

Bryan Burkhart, Ernest's younger brother

William Hale, Ernest's uncle, a self-made man of great wealth and staggering power; revered by many people as "King of the Osage Hills"

Margie Burkhart, the granddaughter of Mollie and Ernest Burkhart; she shared her father's memories of the "Reign of Terror" with Grann as well as stories about Mollie's and Ernest's lives in later years

The Bureau of Investigation



J. Edgar Hoover, the twenty-nine-year-old newly appointed director of the Bureau of Investigation; he saw the Osage cases as a way to redeem the bureau's bad reputation and advance his own career

Tom White, an old-style frontier lawman and former Texas Ranger who was put in charge of the investigation

John Wren, recruited by White, he was then one of the few American Indians (perhaps the only one) in the bureau

Other Characters

Barney McBride, a white oilman who sought help for the Osage

W.W. Vaughan, a lawyer who worked closely with private detectives trying to solve the Osage cases

James and David Shoun, local doctors (and brothers)

Scott Mathis, owner of the Big Hill Trading Company and a close friend of both Mollie Burkhart and William Hale; he managed Lizzie's and Anna's financial affairs and administered Anna's estate

James Bighart, the legendary chief of the Osage who negotiated the prescient treaty with the government to retain mineral rights for the tribe George Bighart, James's nephew who gave information to W.W. Vaughan

Henry Roan, briefly married to Mollie when they were young; he borrowed heavily from William Hale and made Hale the beneficiary of his insurance policy

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What do the contemporary media reports on the wealth and lifestyle of the Osage reflect about white perceptions of Native Americans (pp. 6–7; pp. 76–77)? In what way do they lay a foundation for the way the murders and mysterious deaths were treated by law enforcement?
2. What was your first impression of William Hale (p. 17)? How does Grann bring to life his strengths and appeal, as well as the darker side of his nature? What qualities does he share with people who achieve power and influence today?
3. How did you respond to the description of law enforcement in America during the 1920s (p. 19)? What elements most shocked or surprised you? What made the situation in Osage County particularly chaotic? What effect did this have on the investigations into the deaths of Anna Brown and Charles Whitehorn?
4. What does Grann's account of the relationship between the United States government and Native Americans contribute to your understanding of the country's history (pp. 37–44)? How did government policies affect individuals like Mollie and her family? What does Grann capture in his description of Lizzie's death: "Lizzie's spirit had been claimed by Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior, and by Wah'Kon-Tah, the Great Mystery" (p. 36)?
5. Discuss the circumstances that distinguished the Osage from other Native American tribes, including the actions taken by tribal leaders early in the century; the influx of white settlers and oil prospectors; the granting of headrights; and the guardianship system (pp. 78–80).
6. What is the significance of the murder of Barney McBride, the oilman who went to Washington to seek help for the Osage (p. 68) and of W.W. Vaughan, the attorney who worked with private detectives investigating the murders (p. 93–4)?
7. What does Grann's portrait convey about J. Edgar Hoover (p. 107)? What traits stand out and what do they foretell about Hoover's future as director of the FBI?
8. In what ways does Tom White combine the qualities of the Old West and of the modern bureaucratic system Hoover is trying to create? How does this influence the steps he takes in investigating the murders? How do the various views of White, including the stories of his childhood and his work as a Texas Ranger (pp. 137–153), shape your impressions of him? Would you define him as the hero of the book?
9. How were manufactured evidence, suborned testimony, and false confessions used to divert the FBI investigation? What role did independently hired private eyes and informants play in the search for the truth?



10. The crimes in Osage County involved many levels of deception and betrayal. In addition to the actual conspirators, who else either directly profited from the crimes or was silently complicit in them? In what ways did accepted mores encourage the corruption that plagued the investigation?

11. What role did new methods of criminal investigation play in uncovering the guilty parties? In addition to introducing up-to-date forensic science, how did Hoover use the case to transform the Bureau of Investigation and simultaneously enhance his own image?

12. During Hale's trial, a member of the Osage tribe said, "It is a question in my mind whether this jury is considering a murder case or not. The question for them to decide is whether a white man killing an Osage is murder—or merely cruelty to animals" (p. 215). Why does this observation resonate beyond the immediate circumstances?

13. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of *Killers of the Flower Moon* is the marital and familial connections between murderers and their victims. What explains Ernest Burkhart's actions even as he remained married to and had children with Mollie? How does Grann bring to life the particular horror of crimes committed within a family and a close-knit community?

14. What does the evidence Grann uncovered when he visited Osage County in 2012 reveal about the lasting legacy of the "Reign of Terror"?

15. *Killers of the Flower Moon* combines the fast pace of a true-life murder mystery with the scope and detail of a narrative history. How does Grann integrate these different aspects of the book?

16. We are familiar with many American crimes and criminals during the early twentieth century from movies, books, and television shows. Why do you think the story of the Osage murders hasn't received similar attention?

17. Are there recent examples of racial prejudice and injustice that parallel those described in *Killers of the Flower Moon*? What has changed about the approach taken by law enforcement? About the attitudes expressed by the white community in the face of racial or religious discrimination? In what ways have things remained the same?

About this Author

David Grann is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the bestselling author of *The Lost City of Z*, which was chosen as one of the best books of the year by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications and has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. He is also the author of *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes*. His work has garnered several honors for outstanding journalism, including a George Polk Award.

Suggested Reading

Peter Cozzens, *The Earth Is Weeping*;

Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*;

Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., *Bloodland: A Family Story of Oil, Greed and Murder on the Osage Reservation*;

Daniel J. Sharfstein, *Thunder in the Mountains*;

Tim Weiner, *Enemies: A History of the FBI*;

John Joseph Matthews, *Sundown*.

Killers of the Flower Moon (Grann)

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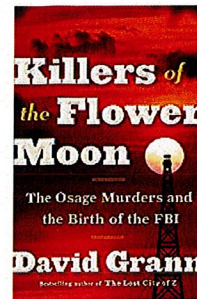
Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI

David Grann, 2017

Knopf Doubleday

352 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780385534246



[Purchase Book Here](#)

Summary

From best-selling author of The Lost City of Z, a twisting, haunting true-life murder mystery about one of the most monstrous crimes in American history

In the 1920s, the richest people per capita in the world were members of the Osage Indian Nation in Oklahoma. After oil was discovered beneath their land, the Osage rode in chauffeured automobiles, built mansions, and sent their children to study in Europe.

Then, one by one, they began to be killed off. One Osage woman, Mollie Burkhart, watched as her family was murdered. Her older sister was shot. Her mother was then slowly poisoned. And it was just the beginning, as more Osage began to die under mysterious circumstances.

In this last remnant of the Wild West—where oilmen like J. P. Getty made their fortunes and where desperadoes such as Al Spencer, “the Phantom Terror,” roamed — virtually anyone who dared to investigate the killings were themselves murdered. As the death toll surpassed more than twenty-four Osage, the newly created F.B.I. took up the case, in what became one of the organization’s first major homicide investigations.

But the bureau was then notoriously corrupt and initially bungled the case. Eventually the young director, J. Edgar Hoover, turned to a former Texas Ranger named Tom White to try unravel the mystery. White put together an undercover team, including one of the only Native American agents in the bureau. They infiltrated the region, struggling to adopt the latest modern techniques of detection. Together with the Osage they began to expose one of the most sinister conspiracies in American history.

In Killers of the Flower Moon, David Grann revisits a shocking series of crimes in which dozens of people were murdered in cold blood. The book is a masterpiece of narrative nonfiction, as each step in the investigation reveals a series of sinister secrets and reversals.

But more than that, it is a searing indictment of the callousness and prejudice

toward Native Americans that allowed the murderers to operate with impunity for so long. *Killers of the Flower Moon* is utterly riveting, but also emotionally devastating. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—March 10, 1967
- Where—New York, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., Connecticut College; M.A., Tufts University; M.A., Boston University
- Currently—lives in New York, New York

David Grann is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Grann's first book, *The Lost City of Z*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize, England's most prestigious nonfiction award, *The Lost City of Z* was chosen as one of the best books of 2009 by countless newspapers and magazines, including *the New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Bloomberg*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. The book was adapted to film in 2016.

Killers of the Flower Moon, about the murder of the Osage Indians during the 1920s and the birth of the modern F.B.I. under J. Edgar Hoover.

At *The New Yorker*, Grann has written about everything from the mysterious death of the world's greatest Sherlock Holmes expert to the hunt for the giant squid, from the perilous maze of water tunnels under New York to a Polish writer who may have left clues to a real murder in his postmodern novel. Grann is also author of a 2010 collection of stories, *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession*.

Grann's stories have also appeared in *The Best American Crime Writing* (2004, 2005, and 2009), *The Best American Sports Writing* (2003 and 2006) and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* (2009). As a finalist for the Michael Kelly award for the "fearless pursuit and expression of truth," Grann has also written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Weekly Standard*, and *New Republic*.

Before joining *The New Yorker* in 2003, Grann was a senior editor at *The New Republic*, and, from 1995 until 1996, the executive editor of the newspaper *The Hill*. He holds master's degrees in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy as well as in creative writing from Boston University. After graduating from Connecticut College in 1989, he received a Thomas Watson Fellowship and did research in Mexico, where he began his career in journalism. He currently lives in New York with his wife and two children. (From the [author's website](#).)

Book Reviews

[*Killers of the Flower Moon*]...is close to impeccable. It's confident, fluid in its dynamics, light on its feet...the crime story it tells is appalling, and stocked with authentic heroes and villains. It will make you cringe at man's inhumanity to man. About America's native people, Saul Bellow wrote in a 1957 essay, "They have left their bones, their flints and pots, their place names and tribal names and little besides except a stain, seldom vivid, on the consciousness of their white successors." The best thing about Grann's book is that it stares, hard, at that stain,

and makes it vivid indeed.

Dwight Garner - New York Times

A master of the detective form...*Killers* is something rather deep and not easily forgotten.

Wall St. Journal

A shocking whodunit...What more could fans of true-crime thrillers ask?

USA Today

A marvel of detective-like research and narrative verve.

Financial Times

Extraordinary

Time

Best book of the year, so far.

Entertainment Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Grann burnishes his reputation as a brilliant storyteller in this gripping true-crime narrative.... [He] demonstrates how the Osage Murders inquiry helped Hoover to make the case for a "national, more professional, scientifically skilled" police force.

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) A spellbinding book about the largest serial murder investigation you've never heard of, which will be enjoyed by fans of the Old West as well as true crime aficionados. —*Deirdre Bray Root, MidPointe Lib. Syst., OH*

Library Journal

(*Starred review.*) Grann employs you-are-there narrative effects to set readers right in the action, and he relays the humanity, evil, and heroism of the people involved. His riveting reckoning of a devastating episode in American history deservedly captivates. —*Annie Bostrom*

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) This page-turner surges forward with the pacing of a true-crime thriller, elevated by Grann's crisp and evocative prose and enhanced by dozens of period photographs. Dogged original research and superb narrative skills come together in this gripping account of pitiless evil.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion ... then take off on your own:

1. Trace the "path" by which the Osage Indians eventually landed on the swatch of land in what would become the state of Oklahoma. Talk about their treatment at the hands of the U.S. government and others over the years. What angered or shocked you most?
2. Describe the early days of the Bureau of Investigation, its founding under Theodore Roosevelt, its original purpose, structure and operation, as well as its corruption, ineptness and bungled investigation of the Osage murders.
3. What made young J. Edgar Hoover an unlikely choice to head the Bureau of Investigation? What was his vision for the bureau—why, for instance, a nationalized police force rather than the existing patchwork structure?
4. How would you describe Tom White? Talk about how he approached the investigation into the Osage murders? When he solved the crime, were you surprised by the identity of the mastermind? Or had you figured it out along the way.
5. Grann writes that "history is a merciless judge." What does he mean by that?
6. Talk about the last 70 pages of the book, in which Grann writes about working with current tribal members to uncover an even deeper conspiracy. By the book's end, what were your feelings about the Osage nation, its history, and its people?
7. What is the significance of the book's title?
8. Does this story have relevance to current events? Are there parallels regarding the Standing Rock Lakota nation and the Keystone pipeline?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)

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Osage Indian murders

The **Osage Indian murders** were a series of murders of Osage people in Osage County, Oklahoma during the 1910s–1930s; newspapers described the increasing number of unsolved murders as the "Reign of Terror," lasting from 1921–1926. The estimated Osage death toll is in the hundreds, though reported numbers are much less and investigated deaths are least of all. Some sources report that 60 or more wealthy, full-blood Osage Native Americans were killed from 1918 to 1931.^[1] However, newer investigations indicate that many more suspicious deaths during this time could have potentially been misreported or covered up murders, including the deaths of heirs to future fortune.^[2] The murders appear to have been committed by people intent on taking over the great wealth of the Osage, whose land was producing valuable oil, and who each had headrights that earned lucrative annual royalties. Investigation by law enforcement, including the predecessor to the FBI, also revealed extensive corruption among local officials involved in the Osage guardian program. Most of the murders were never prosecuted, but some men were convicted and sentenced.

Congress changed the law to prohibit non-Osage from inheriting headrights from Osage with half or more Native American ancestry. The US government continued to manage the leases and royalties from oil-producing lands, and the tribe became concerned about these assets. In 2000 the Osage Nation filed a suit against the Department of the Interior, alleging that it had not adequately managed the assets and paid people the royalties they were due. The suit was settled in 2011 for \$380 million and commitments to improve program management.^{[3][4]}

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Notes

Further reading

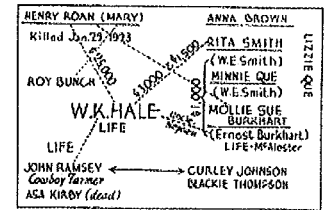
References

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Overview

In 1907 each tribal member received an allotment of 657 acres (266 ha), and they and their legal heirs, whether or not Osage, earned royalties on the "headrights" from their portion of oil-producing land. The tribe held the mineral rights communally, and paid its members by a percentage related to their holdings. By a law of 1921, Congress required most Osage of half or more Native American ancestry to have court-appointed guardians until they demonstrated "competency"; all minors were required to have guardians appointed by the court, whether or not they had living parents. The guardians were generally local white lawyers and businessmen, who made money off their fees and sometimes set up criminal means to defraud the Osage of their wealth. The Osage wealth attracted many other opportunists, some of whom had criminal intent.

In 1925 the tribal elders, with the help of James Monroe Pyle, a local law officer, sought assistance from the Bureau of Investigation (which later developed as the FBI) when local and state officials could not solve the rising number of murders. Pyle presented his evidence of murder and conspiracy and requested an investigation. The Bureau sent Tom White to lead the undercover investigation. Due to the number of murder leads, and the perception that the police was corrupt, White decided he would be the public face of the investigation while most of the agents would work undercover. The other agents recruited were: a former New Mexico sheriff, a former Texas Ranger, John Burger (who had worked on the previous investigation and now worked openly with White), Frank Smith and John Wren (an American Indian of the Ute tribe who had been a spy for the revolutionary leaders in Mexico).^[5]



Document in the "Hale–Ramsey Murder Case", from the Oklahoma Collection at the Oklahoma Historical Society Photo Archives.

In its undercover investigation, the Bureau found that several murders in one family were found to have been committed by a gang led by William "King of Osage Hills" Hale. His goal was to gain the oil royalty headrights and wealth of several tribe members, including his nephew's Osage wife, the last survivor of her family. Three men were convicted and sentenced in this case, but most murders went officially unsolved. A late twentieth-century investigation by the journalist Dennis McAuliffe revealed deep corruption among white officials in the county at the time. Incidents included failure of law enforcement to conduct post-mortem exams, falsified death certificates issued by the coroner's office, and other activities among white officials to cover up the murders.

Osage County officials sought revenge against Pyle for his role in bringing the murders to light. Fearing for his life, Pyle and his wife fled to Arizona, where he again served as an officer of the law. He died there in 1942.

In 1925, Congress passed a law prohibiting inheritance of headrights by non-natives from Osage of half or more Native American ancestry, to reduce the threat to the Osage. From 1926–1929, Hale and an associate were convicted of the murders, with one nephew pleading guilty. They were sentenced to life in prison, but later received parole, although the Osage objected.

Background

In 1897 oil was first discovered in Osage County. The United States federal government's Department of the Interior managed leases for oil exploration and production on land owned by the Osage Nation through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and later managed royalties, paying individual allottees. As part of the process of preparing Oklahoma for statehood, the federal government allotted 657 acres (266 ha) to each Osage on the tribal rolls in 1907; thereafter, they and their legal heirs, whether Osage or not, had "headrights" to royalties in oil production, based on their allotments of lands.^[6] The headrights could be inherited by legal heirs, including non-Osage.

By 1920 the market for oil had grown dramatically and the Osage were wealthy. In 1923 alone "the tribe took in more than thirty million dollars, the equivalent today of more than four hundred million dollars."^[7]

People all across the United States read about the Osage, called "the richest nation, clan or social group of any race on earth, including the whites, man for man."^[1] Some Osage used their royalties to send their children to private schools; others bought fancy cars, clothes and jewelry, and traveled in Europe; and newspapers across the country covered their activities.^[1] Along with tens of thousands of oil workers, the oil wealth attracted many white opportunists to Osage County; as the writer Robert Allen Warrior characterized them, some were entrepreneurial, while others were criminal, seeking to separate the Osage from their wealth, by murder if necessary.^[8]

Believing the Osage would not be able to manage their new wealth, or lobbied by whites who wanted a piece of the action, by 1921 the United States Congress passed a law requiring that courts appoint guardians for each Osage of half-blood or more in ancestry, who would manage their royalties and financial affairs until they demonstrated "competency". Under the system, even minors who had less than half-Osage blood had to have guardians appointed, regardless of whether the minors had living parents. The courts appointed the guardians from local white lawyers or businessmen. The incentives for criminality were overwhelming; such guardians often maneuvered legally to steal Osage land, their headrights or royalties; others were suspected of murdering their charges to gain the headrights.^{[6][8]}

At that time, 80 lawyers were working in Pawhuska, the Osage County seat, which had 8,000 residents; the number of lawyers was said to be as great as in the state capital, which had 140,000 residents.^[9] In 1924 the Department of Interior charged two dozen guardians of Osage with corruption in the administration of their duties related to their charges, but all avoided punishment by settling out of court. They were believed to have swindled their charges out of millions of dollars. In 1929 \$27 million was reported as still being held by the "Guardian System", the organization set up to protect the financial interests of 883 Osage families in Osage County.^[10]

Murders in Osage County

In the early 1920s, the Western United States was shaken by the reported murders of eighteen Osage Indians and three non-natives in Osage County, Oklahoma within a short period of time. Regional Colorado newspapers reported the murders as the "Reign of Terror" on the Osage reservation. Some murders seemed associated with several members of one family.

On May 27, 1921, local hunters discovered the decomposing body of 25-year-old Anna Brown in a remote ravine of Osage County. Unable to find the killer, local authorities ruled her death as accidental, due to alcohol poisoning, and put the case aside.^{[11][a]} Brown was divorced, so probate awarded her estate to her mother, Lizzie Q. Kyle.^[12] A petty criminal, Kelsie Morrison, admitted to murdering Anna Brown and testified that William "King" Hale had asked him to do so.^{[13][b]} Along with his admission, Morrison implicated that William Hale's nephew and Anna Brown's ex-boyfriend Bryan Burkhart^[14] was also involved in her murder.^[15] After meeting Anna Brown earlier that night at her sister Mollie's home, Burkhart and Morrison took a heavily intoxicated Anna Brown to Three Mile Creek where Morrison shot and killed her.^[14]

The body of another Osage, Charles Whitehorn (also known as Charles Williamson), was discovered near Pawhuska on the same day. Whitehorn, a cousin of Anna Brown, had been shot to death.^[12] Two months later, Brown's mother, Lizzie Q. Kyle, was killed as well.^[c] By that time, Lizzie had headrights for herself, and had inherited the headrights from her late husband and two daughters. Her heirs became fabulously wealthy.

On February 6, 1923, Henry Roan, also known as Henry Roan Horse, a cousin of Anna Brown, was found in his car on the Osage Reservation, dead from a shot in the head.^[11] Roan also had a financial connection with William Hale. Roan had borrowed \$1,200 from Hale, who fraudulently arranged make himself the beneficiary of a \$25,000 life insurance policy.^[17]

On March 10, 1923, a bomb demolished the Fairfax, Oklahoma house of Anna's sister Rita Smith and her husband Bill. The blast instantly killed Rita Smith and her servant, Nettie Brookshire. On March 14, Bill Smith died of massive injuries from the blast. Shortly before his death, he gave a statement implicating his suspected murderers and appointed his wife's estate. Later investigations revealed that the bomb contained 5 US gallons (19 L) of nitroglycerine.^[12]

George Bigheart (1876–1923) was suffering at home, on June 28, 1923, when he was put on a train and taken to a hospital in Oklahoma City by William "King" Hale and his nephew Ernest Burkhart.^{[d][e]} At the hospital, doctors suspected that Bigheart had ingested poisoned whiskey. Bigheart called attorney William "W.W." Watkins Vaughan^[f] of Pawhuska, asking him to come to the hospital as soon as possible for an urgent meeting. Vaughan complied, and the two men met that night. Bigheart had said he had suspicions about who was behind the murders and had implicating documents to support his accusations. Bigheart died the next morning. "W.W." Vaughan boarded a train that night to return to Pawhuska.^[19] The next morning, when the Pullman porter went to awaken him, Vaughan was missing from his railroad car, and his berth on the train had not been used. The attorney's body was found later with his skull crushed beside the railroad tracks near Pershing, Oklahoma, about five miles south of Pawhuska.^{[16][g]}

Thirteen other deaths of full-blooded Osage men and women, who had guardians appointed by the courts, were reported between 1921 and 1923. By 1925, at least 60 wealthy Osage had been killed, and their land had been inherited or deeded to their guardians: local white lawyers and businessmen.^[1] The FBI found a low-level market in murderers for hire to kill the Osage for their wealth.^[1] In 1995, the writer Robert Allen Warrior wrote about walking through an Osage cemetery and seeing "the inordinate number of young people who died during that time."^[8]

In 1925, tribal elders of the Osage Nation sought the assistance of the infant organization Bureau of Investigation, (in 1935, the Bureau of Investigation became the Federal Bureau of Investigation) at the Department of Justice, under its director J. Edgar Hoover.^[20] Bureau of Indian Affairs police from the US Department of Interior had not solved the murders.

Murder investigation and trials

The Osage Tribal Council suspected that rancher William Hale was responsible for many of the deaths. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior sent four agents to act as undercover investigators. Working undercover for two years, the agents discovered a crime ring of petty criminals led by Hale, known in Osage County as the "King of the Osage Hills". He and his nephews, Ernest and Bryan Burkhart, had migrated from Texas to Osage County to find jobs in the oil fields. Once there, they discovered the immense wealth of members of the Osage Nation from royalties being paid from leases on oil-producing lands.

To gain part of the wealth, Hale persuaded Ernest to marry Mollie Kyle, a full-blooded Osage.^[21] Hale then arranged for the murders of Mollie's sisters, her brother-in-law, her mother, and her cousin, Henry Roan, to cash in on the insurance policies and oil headrights of each family member.^[21] Other witnesses and participants were murdered as investigation of the conspiracy expanded. Mollie and Ernest Burkhart inherited all of the headrights from her family. Investigators found when they opened the case that Mollie was already being poisoned.^[13]

Charges and trials

Due to the investigation of the FBI, Hale, his nephews, and one of the ranch hands they hired were charged with the murder of Mollie's family. Hale was formally charged with the murder of Henry Roan, who had been killed on the Osage Reservation land, making it a federal crime.^[11] Two of his accomplices had died before the FBI investigation was completed. Hale and his associates were finally convicted in state and federal trials from 1926 to 1929, which had changes of venue, hung juries, appeals, and overturned verdicts. In 1926, Ernest Burkhart pleaded guilty to being part of the conspiracy.

Finally, Hale and his accomplice, John Ramsey, were convicted. Ramsey was described as a "cowboy-farmer". Ramsey confessed to participation in the murder of Roan as soon as he was arrested. He said that Hale had promised him five hundred dollars and a new car for killing Roan. Ramsey met Roan on a road outside of Fairfax, and they drank whiskey together. Then Ramsey shot Roan in the head. Subsequently, Ramsey changed his story, claiming that the actual killer was Curly Johnson. His accomplice, Bryan Burkhart, another nephew, had turned state's evidence. The trials, with their deadlocked juries, appeals, and overturned verdicts, received national newspaper and magazine coverage. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Hale, Ramsey, and Ernest Burkhart later received parole despite protests from the Osage.^[13]

Various residents of Pawhuska petitioned Oklahoma Governor Jack C. Walton to conduct a full investigation of the deaths of Charles Bigheart and Bigheart's attorney, Vaughan. Walton assigned Herman Fox Davis to the investigation. Shortly after the assignment, Davis was convicted of bribery. Although Walton later pardoned Davis, the investigation of Bigheart and Vaughan was never completed.^{[17][h]}

In the case of the Smith murders, Ernest Burkhart was soon convinced that even his wife's money and his uncle's political influence could not save him. He changed his plea to guilty and asked to be sentenced to life imprisonment rather than receive the death penalty. He turned state's evidence, naming his uncle as responsible for the murder conspiracy. Ernest said that he had used a person named Henry Grammer as a go-between to hire a professional criminal named Ace Kirby to perform the killings. Both Grammer and Kirby were killed before they could testify.^[19]

Ernest Burkhart's attempt to kill his wife failed. Mollie, a devout Catholic, had told her priest that she feared she was being poisoned at home. The priest told her not to touch liquor under any circumstances. He also alerted one of the FBI agents. Mollie recovered from the poison she had already consumed and (after the trials) divorced Ernest. Mollie Burkhart Cobb died of unrelated causes on June 16, 1937. Her children inherited all of her estate.^[12]

In the early 1990s, journalist Dennis McAuliffe of *The Washington Post* investigated the suspicious death of his grandmother Sybil Beekman Bolton, an Osage with headrights who died at the age of 21 in 1925, during the "Reign of Terror." As a youth he had been told she died of kidney disease, then as a suicide. His doubts arose from a variety of conflicting evidence. In his investigation, McAuliffe found that the FBI of the time believed that the murders of several Osage women "had been committed or ordered by their husbands."^[6] Most murders of the Osage during the early 1920s went unsolved.^[6] McAuliffe found that when Sybil was a minor, the court had appointed her white stepfather, attorney Arthur "A.T." Woodward, as her guardian. Woodward also served as the federally appointed (?) Tribal Counsel,^[22] and he had guardianship of four other Osage charges, each of whom had died by 1923.^[1] McAuliffe learned that his grandmother's murder had been covered up by a false death certificate. He came to believe that Woodward was responsible for her death.^[6] His book about his investigation, *Bloodland: A Family Story of Oil, Greed and Murder on the Osage Reservation* (1994), presents an account of the corruption and murders during this period.^[1]

Change in law

To try to prevent further criminality and to protect the Osage, in 1925 Congress passed a law prohibiting non-Osage from inheriting headrights from Osage who had half or more Native American ancestry.^{[13][23]}

Trust management lawsuit

The Department of Interior continued to manage the trust lands and pay fees to Osage with headrights. In 2000, the tribe filed a lawsuit against the department, alleging that federal government management of the trust assets had resulted in historical losses to its trust funds and interest income.^{[3][4]} This was after a major class-action suit had been filed against the departments of Interior and Treasury in 1996 by Elouise Cobell (Blackfeet) on behalf of other Native Americans, for similar reasons.

In 2011, the US government settled with the Osage for \$380 million. The settlement also strengthened management of the tribe's trust assets and improved communications between the Department of Interior and the tribe.^[3] The law firm representing the Osage said it was the largest trust settlement with one tribe in US history.^[4]

Popular culture

- John Joseph Mathews (Osage) based his novel *Sundown* (1934) in the period of the murders.^[8]
- "The Osage Indian Murders", a dramatization of the case first broadcast on August 3, 1935, was the third episode of the radio series *G-Men*, created and produced by Phillips Lord with cooperation of the FBI. *G-Men* lasted 13 episodes before leaving the air in October 1935. A retooled version, *Gang Busters*, which dramatized cases from a number of different American law enforcement agencies rather than just the FBI, debuted the following January.
- Award-winning western novelist Fred Grove, part Osage on his mother's side, was 10 years old when he was an "ear" witness to the bombing murders of Bill and Rita Smith and Nettie Brookshire. This incident haunted him. Several of his novels were based on aspects of the case: his first novel, *Flame of the Osage* (1958), two written in roughly the middle of his career: *Warrior Road* (1974) and *Drums Without Warriors* (1976), and one of his last, *The Years of Fear* (2002).
- The Kyle family murders were featured as a dramatic part of the 1959 film, *The FBI Story*.^[17]
- John Hunt portrayed this period in his novel *The Grey Horse Legacy* (1968).^[24]
- Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* (1990) explores a fictionalized version of the murders.
- Tom Holm's novel *The Osage Rose* (2008) is a fictionalized account of murders on Osage Territory intended to strip Osage members of their royalties and land.
- American journalist David Grann investigated the case in his 2017 book *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*.

See also

- Osage Nation#Natural resources and headrights
- William Hale

J. Edgar Hoover

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About this Person

Born: 1895 in Washington, District of Columbia, United States

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Nationality: American

Occupation: Federal government official

Other Names: Hoover, John Edgar

Full Text:

When J. Edgar Hoover died in 1972, the *New York Times* wrote of him, "For nearly a half century, J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were indistinguishable. That was at once his strength and its weakness." Hoover was a strong personality, fiercely patriotic, highly organized, and controlling. As head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from the presidency of Calvin Coolidge until the presidency of Richard Nixon, he transformed the face of the U.S. Justice Department and became the definition of law enforcement in America, for better or worse.

Early Life and Career

Hoover was born into a solidly middle-class neighborhood in Washington, D.C. His father was in the coast guard and later worked as a low-level employee of the federal government. Brought up to the exacting standards of his strict mother, Hoover determined that he would surpass his unambitious father. He remained devoted to his mother, living with her in the house in which he was born until her death in 1938.

Hoover received both a bachelor's and a master's of law degree at George Washington University and went to work for the government. He worked at the Library of Congress until the advent of World War I. In 1917, seeking to avoid the draft, which would force him to leave his aging parents, he obtained a clerical job at the Department of Justice, from which he moved up quickly. An extremely moralistic man, Hoover was virulently anticommunist and antiradical, and he gained prestige in the Justice Department by overseeing its wartime campaign against American radicals. In 1924 he took over as director of the Bureau of Investigation of the Justice Department (renamed Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935).

When Hoover took over as director, the Bureau of Investigation was a slack organization, largely made up of political appointees and "hacks" who were not law enforcement professionals. He immediately began to revamp the organization, firing much of the staff and retraining those who remained. He eliminated the seniority system of promotions and instituted a merit system, with regular performance reviews. Over the course of his almost fifty-year directorship, he succeeded in turning the FBI into one of the world's most efficient crime-fighting organizations, with a state-of-the-art criminal lab, an ingenious fingerprint filing system designed by Hoover himself, and a prestigious training school for law enforcement agents.

Achievements and Legacy

Hoover is perhaps most famous for his success against the gangsters of the Prohibition era, arresting renowned crime figures such as Al Capone and John Dillinger, and for his post-World War II activity against the Communist Party and the Ku Klux Klan. He was infamous for abusing the power of his agency and exceeding its jurisdiction. If he turned the FBI into a crack crime-fighting force, he also turned it into an internal secret surveillance tool.

Hoover's FBI employed tactics of infiltration, provocation, illegal wiretapping, and even burglary to amass volumes of damaging information about public figures and private citizens. Even presidents and their families were not exempt from FBI scrutiny. This information was kept by the director in secret files that were allegedly used to control the activities of government officials, influence the outcome of elections, and quash public dissent. In the 1960s, with the support of President Lyndon Johnson, Hoover created counterintelligence programs (COINTELPROs) to infiltrate and disrupt the activities of many leftist organizations, including the Black Panthers and Students for a Democratic Society.

Hoover and his G-men were hailed as heroes during the gangster-fighting days of Prohibition. Although they garnered much popular support during the anticommunist 1950s, with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, more people began to question the authority of the FBI. On March 8, 1971, a small group calling itself the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI broke into the agency's offices in the town of Media, Pennsylvania. They found and publicized files proving the illegal activities involved in the FBI's COINTELPROs, changing the public image of Hoover's FBI from dashing G-men to secret police.

Personal Life

Throughout his life Hoover was dogged by rumors of homosexuality. He was a dandified dresser who was never romantically associated with women but who did form intimate attachments with men, notably Clyde Tolson, his second in command at the FBI, with whom he

had a long, close friendship that some compared to marriage. Hoover violently denied any allegations that he had sexual relations with men, and his strict moral code would have certainly forbidden either the relations themselves or the acknowledgment of them. In the 1993 biography *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, Anthony Summers argues that Hoover was unquestionably homosexual, but historians generally agree that there is no firm evidence for this claim; Richard Hack's 2004 biography *Puppetmaster: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* actively refutes it. In the 2011 film *J. Edgar*, directed by Clint Eastwood, Hoover's relationship with Tolson has a strong element of eroticism, but the film does not suggest that the two men ever consummated their affections.

Hoover died suddenly in 1972 of undiagnosed heart disease. He had been a religious man, an unbending moralist, obsessed with details and with eradicating any threats to the American way of life as he defined it. Though Hoover had used his agency to enforce Johnson's civil rights legislation and to root out the Ku Klux Klan, he was personally a racial bigot, and the FBI had a poor record of hiring minorities. While Hoover transformed the FBI into an effective and efficient government agency, the criticism he received later in his life and after his death for extending the powers of the FBI made many wary of giving one man so much power. Because of Hoover's long tenure, FBI directors are now limited to a single ten-year term.

Tina Gianoulis

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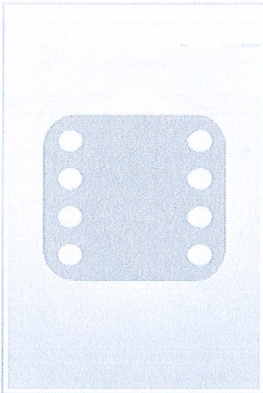
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1 VIDEO

Pre-production
Expected 2021

Members of the Osage tribe in the United States are murdered under mysterious circumstances in the 1920s sparking a major F.B.I. investigation involving J. Edgar Hoover.

Director: [Martin Scorsese](#)
Writers: [David Grann](#) (book), [Eric Roth](#)
Stars: [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), [Robert De Niro](#)

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