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## Grann's "Killers of the flower moon: The Osage murders and the birth of the FBI" (Book Review)

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# Book Reviews

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Grann, D. (2017). *Killers of the flower moon: The Osage murders and the birth of the FBI*. New York: Doubleday. 338 pp. \$28.95.

For a time in the 1920s, the Osage of Oklahoma were thought to be the wealthiest people on earth per capita. They might abandon a touring car and buy a new one, simply on the account of a flat tire. Yet they kept some of their traditional ways, circling their magnificent vehicles while meat roasted in the ancestral way in the center. But the very nearly unprecedented wealth attracted all manner of nefarious souls, intent on the big swindle: separating the Osage from their oil wealth.

Truman Capote saw a news clipping about the Kansas slaying of the Clutter family in 1959, and the novel, *In Cold Blood*, resulted. In a similar manner, David Grann, staff writer of *The New Yorker*, was piqued by an odd reference to the Osage murders. This engrossing narrative, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, is the fruit. The film version, bought for a reputed \$5M, will soon appear. One wonders how the director may handle the gorier parts of Grann's book, for example the house explosion murdering the sleeping innocent.

Less than one dozen murders from the 1921-1926 Reign of Terror are investigated in anything like detail in Grann's usually fast-moving account. William K. Hale, one-time "King of the Osage," was linked to many, but not all, of these, and served twenty years in prison. Texas lawman Tom White led the FBI charge to render justice. Later, White was warden of the Leavenworth penitentiary in Kansas.

However, death rates for the Osage were dramatically higher than the norm during the Reign of Terror. Grann suspects, plausibly, that hundreds of Osage were killed by whites, who were seeking to steal their headrights. Violence was perpetrated blatantly, through firearms, and stealthily, through the administration of poisons. Sometimes the poisoning strategy was discovered in time to avoid death. Occasionally, even physicians were complicit, for example the Shoun brothers. To his credit, Grann does not sensationalize these tawdry episodes, and refrains from moralizing. The foul acts speak for themselves. Some readers, as the current reviewer, may be more attracted to learning how the Osage lived. Where was Wah'Kon-Tah, pervasive life force, during these dire deeds? Were the Osage simply too trusting of the enemy in their

midst? Probably. Other readers may be more drawn to the legal and investigative aspects of the story. “The Birth of the FBI” seems a bit of an oversell. Were there not other precipitating events that spurred and stirred the early growth of the FBI? Grann does not really say, but the reader suspects so. *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a highly satisfying book on many essentials fronts.

If Grann’s objectives are more modest than an entire referendum on Native and white relations, the attentive reader may continue down this path long after the cover is closed.

**Reviewer**

Roderick T. Leupp, Indiana Wesleyan University