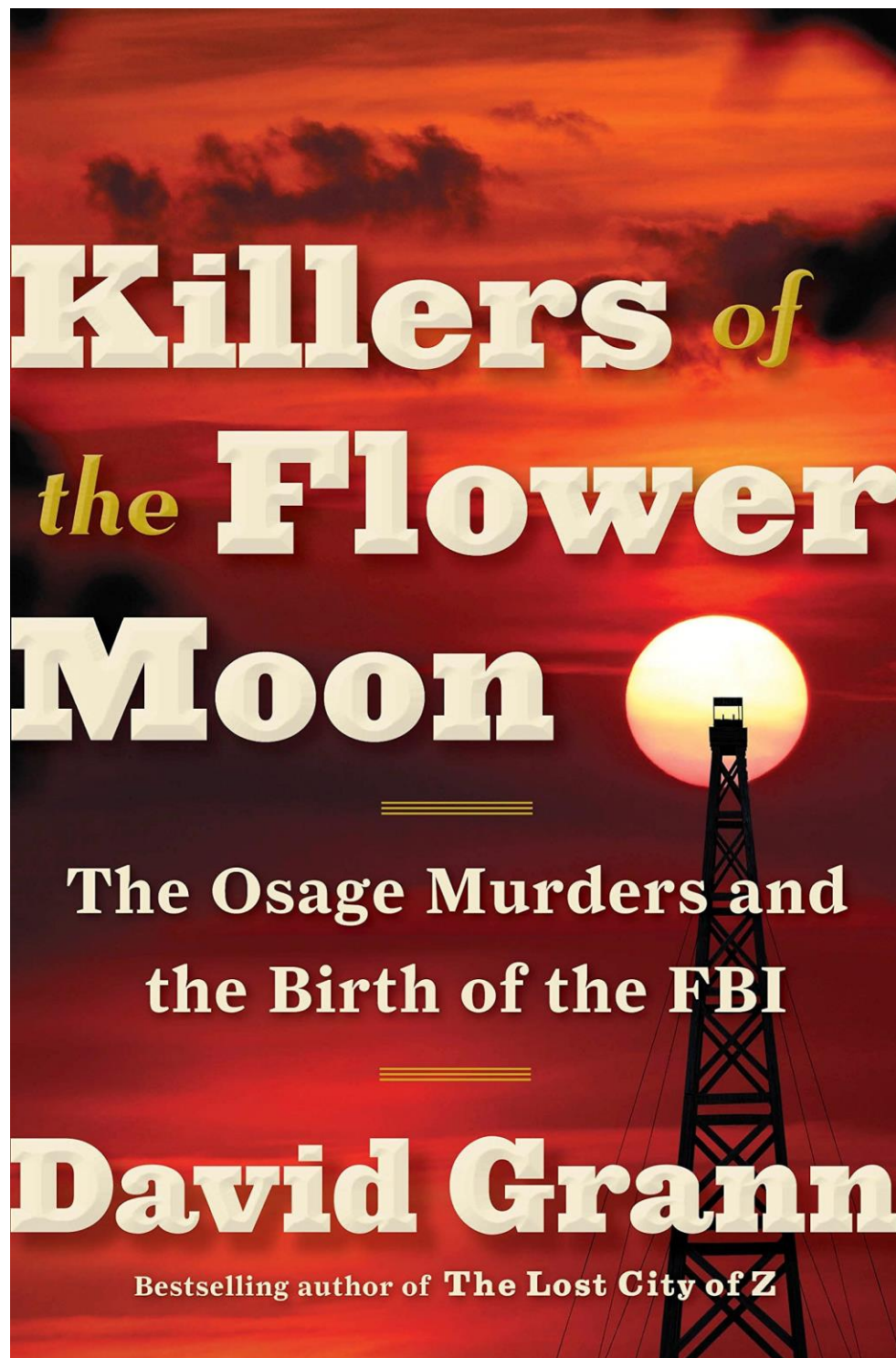


# Killers of the Flower Moon

by David Grann



# Book Summary:

from Penguin Random House

In the 1920s, the richest people per capita in the world were members of the Osage 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, the Osage began to be killed off. The family of an Osage woman, Mollie Burkhart, became a prime target. One of her relatives was shot. Another was poisoned. And it was just the beginning, as more and more Osage were dying under mysterious circumstances, and many of those who dared to investigate the killings were themselves murdered.

As the death toll rose, the newly created FBI took up the case, and the young director, J. Edgar Hoover, turned to a former Texas Ranger named Tom White to try to unravel the mystery. White put together an undercover team, including a Native American agent who infiltrated the region, and together with the Osage began to expose one of the most chilling conspiracies in American history.

# Author Biography:

from Penguin Random House

DAVID GRANN is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the bestselling author of *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes* and *The Lost City of Z*, which has been translated into more than twenty languages. His stories have appeared in many anthologies of the best American writing, and he has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New Republic*.

# Review #1: *New York Times*

["Killers of the Flower Moon"](#) by Dave Eggers, April 28, 2017  
(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

*In 1804, President Thomas Jefferson hosted a delegation of Osage chiefs who had traveled from their ancestral land, which Jefferson had recently acquired — from the French, not the Osage — in the Louisiana Purchase. The Osage representatives were tall, many of them over six feet, and they towered over most of their White House hosts. Jefferson was impressed, calling them the "finest men we have ever seen." He promised to treat their tribe fairly, telling them that from then on, "they shall know our nation only as friends and benefactors."*

*Over the next 20 years, the Osage were stripped of their land, ceding almost 100 million acres, and were forced onto a parcel in southeastern Kansas that measured about 50 by 125 miles (four million acres). This land would be theirs forever, the United States government told them.*

*And then — as David Grann details early in his disturbing and riveting new book, "Killers of the Flower Moon" — this promise, too, was broken. White settlers began squatting on Osage territory, skirmishes ensued and eventually the tribe had to sell the land for \$1.25 an acre. Looking for a new home, the Osage found an area of what was to become Oklahoma that no one else wanted. It was hilly and unsuited to cultivation. The Osage bought the parcel for roughly a million dollars, later adding a provision that the land's "oil, gas, coal or other minerals" would be owned by the Osage, too. Thus they owned the land above and whatever was below, as well.*

*No one argued the point at the time. No one but the Osage knew there was oil under that rocky soil. The Osage leased the land to prospectors and made a fortune. "In 1923 alone," Grann writes, "the tribe took in more than \$30 million, the equivalent today of more than \$400 million. The Osage were considered the wealthiest people per capita in the world." They built mansions and bought fleets of cars. A magazine writer at the time wrote: "Every time a new well is drilled the Indians are that much richer. ... The Osage Indians are becoming so rich that something will have to be done about it."*

## Review #2: *The Guardian*

[“Family Murder, Oil, and The FBI”](#) by R.O. Kwon, Aug. 3, 2017

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

*While this newfound wealth attracted a host of known outlaws – gang members, fugitives, bank robbers and the like – the more insidious thefts were facilitated by the US government, which claimed that many Osage were incapable of handling their own money. These tribe members were then forced to have “guardians,” “usually drawn from the ranks of the most prominent white citizens in Osage County,” to supervise and authorise their spending. Guardians often grossly swindled their wards by purchasing items from their own stores at inflated prices, directing business to associates for kickbacks, and outright stealing. It was, as the Indian Rights Association protested, “an orgy of graft and exploitation.” Still, the headrights, or mineral rights to the oil-rich land, were less easily stolen. They couldn’t be bought, only inherited. Thus, headrights remained in the tribe – unless, that is, someone who wasn’t Osage happened to be next in line to inherit.*

*This is where the terrible story of the US’s original sin, the systematic oppression and killing of its first people, becomes, if possible, even more grim. For if white people hoped to inherit the headrights, they had to marry into the tribe, then to wish their rich spouse would die. Or cause them to die, often after having lived for years with the Osage husband or wife. Headright inheritance, as a fledgling FBI eventually proved, helped explain the deaths of Minnie, Anna, Lizzie, Rita and Bill. In time, three of the white men behind the Kyle family murders were apprehended, found guilty, and put in prison. The FBI counted this a great success, “a showcase for the modern bureau” that let the agency’s director, J Edgar Hoover, demonstrate to the rest of the country the need for a national police force.*

*But, as Grann carefully shows, the FBI’s victory declaration obscured the scope of headright-related killings. The US’s official death count for the Reign of Terror topped out at 24, but scholars who delved into the historical evidence believed the real death toll to be in the hundreds. Most of the murders weren’t solved. Instead, Grann says, the victims’ “descendants carry out their own private investigations, which have no end. They live with doubts, suspecting dead relatives or old family friends or guardians.”*

## Author Interview: *Guernica Magazine*

[“The Devil Was Standing Right There”](#) by Dan Sinykin, May 8, 2017

(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

*Killers of the Flower Moon is sharply focused yet sweeping in scope. Told in three “chronicles,” centered, respectively, on Mollie Burkhart, Tom White, who was the chief investigator, and Grann himself, the book details the United States in a period of transition, witnessing the final years of frontier life, the formalization of criminology as a discipline, and the institutionalization of law enforcement. It depicts lawlessness from small-town Oklahoma to Washington, DC, and the struggles of J. Edgar Hoover’s fledgling Bureau of Investigation. And it considers the limits of historiography, wondering how to narrate a past whose archives have been fragmented into illegibility by an obscurantist web of white complicity.*

**Guernica:** *You’ve said before that one of the things you look for in a story is high intellectual stakes. What first tipped you off to the Osage murders, and what are the intellectual stakes, for you, of this story? And did your sense of the stakes change over time?*

**David Grann:** *I first heard about the story back in 2011. I knew nothing about it before I started—some cursory research told me the Osage were the wealthiest people in the world in the 1920s. They began to be serially murdered and it became one of the FBI’s major homicide cases. I had a sense of the murders as a racial injustice that had not been fully documented. I went out to visit the Osage—this was pretty early in the process—to get a better sense of the story and what materials might exist, and to try to find descendants. At the Osage museum, there was a panoramic photograph on the wall that showed the white settlers and the Osage. It was taken in 1924. But I noticed that a panel was missing, and I asked the museum director why. She pointed to the empty panel and said the devil was standing right there. She then showed me the missing panel, this very creepy picture of a Norman Rockwell-looking killer peering out from the edge, and that, for me, was a turning point. I wanted to know who this figure was, I wanted to know why it was so painful that the Osage had removed this picture—why they couldn’t forget and why so many people, including myself, had forgotten. This story had certain stakes that I felt pretty early on, then, but my understanding of the story changed over time as I got the sense of the breadth of these murders, and of the levels of complicity. It became less of a story of who did it than a story of who didn’t do it.*

**Guernica:** *Something that struck me about this book is that the facts underneath are a mess. We don't learn till the end why the facts are such a mess, that it's because of the complicity of this enormous network of white folks. Could you say a bit about how you structured the book, how you ordered this mess, the decision to divide it into three "chronicles," each centered on a different figure: Mollie Burkhart, Tom White, and you?*

**David Grann:** *I spent a good year where I was not yet committed to the project, where I was just writing to every institution I could think of: the FBI, the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, every sheriff's office, every police department, FOIAing—more than a year of seeing what materials came in and what the trails of evidence would be. And for the first year and more of the process, I was very bewildered about how to tell the story, and very overwhelmed. Because it sprawled so many years, there were so many murders, there were so many perpetrators (as it turns out), there were so many victims, and there were different investigations. I was struggling to find an organizing principle. Often, when you're reading documents about cases, or reports or newspaper accounts, there's a dry cataloging of the dead, and there's never a sense of who these people were, of the experience of what they felt. I wanted to find a way, as best I could, based on the available historical record, to rectify that.*

## Non-Fiction Materials: [www.firstpeople.us](http://www.firstpeople.us)

Three Osage Indian Folktales:

[THE SPIDER AND THE PEOPLE](#) (Click Title to View)

[THE WISDOM OF THE WILLOW TREE](#) (Click Title to View)

[THE FATAL SWING](#) (Click Title to View)

# Supplementary Work: *The New Yorker*

[“Retracing The Antarctic Journey of Henry Worsley”](#) by David Grann, Oct. 31, 2018

Excerpt:

*...The eight-hundred-mile journey was Rudd's baptism into polar exploration, and Worsley, who had previously led an expedition to the South Pole, patiently taught him how to survive in temperatures that fell to minus sixty degrees Fahrenheit, and amid winds that blew at gale force. He showed Rudd how to navigate through blinding whiteouts and how to identify scars in the ice sheet that marked crevasses: one misstep, Worsley warned, and Rudd would plunge into a bottomless chasm.*

*Rudd thought about the time when he made a slight mistake that nearly cost him his life. Pausing for a drink, he poured some water into a cup; suddenly, a gust of wind sprayed the liquid, soaking his gloved hand. In an instant, his fingertips froze. Worsley helped him to quickly dry them and restore circulation, and he shared with Rudd some advice that he'd learned from another polar explorer: “Get wet, you die.”*

## Discussion Questions:

Prepared by Jack Saari for Portland Public Library

1. How did your impression of William Hale shift over the course of the book? What were his “positive” characteristics? How about negative? Does William Hale remind you of any people in power today?
2. Many readers find this story shocking. Comparatively, many of the white people who lived with the Osage didn't seem shocked at all. How does this reflect what people thought of Native Americans at the time?
3. David Grann devotes much of the first chapter to primary sources describing the Osage wealth, including a section about the Osage hiring white men to do “all the menial tasks about the house to which no Osage will stoop.” How does David Grann use this material to set the stage, to show why these murders were ignored for years?



4. What do you consider the contributing factors that lead to the lackluster justice in the Osage murders? America's youth and difficulty taming the west? The fact that any justice in the "wild west" was hard won? Was it racism through and through? A little mixture of both?
5. How does Tom White bridge the gap between old-school, western-style justice and Hoover's image of a modern police force? What do you think drove Tom White to seek justice in a situation few others cared about?
6. What did you think of Grann's portrayal of a young and ambitious Hoover? Did it contrast or enhance our modern image of Hoover as a perfectionist autocrat?
7. Perhaps the most challenging part of the murders is that they happened within family. David Grann points out that throughout the trial of her husband, Ernest Burkhart, the press never spoke to her or asked her how she felt. Without a primary source on how she felt, what do you think would have been going through her mind? How do you think she handled it? Did she have much of a choice?
8. Toward the end of the book David Grann turns to the modern Osage Nation, where the story of the unaccounted murders takes its final twist. Do you think there could ever be justice for the Osage people? Is this book an attempt at justice?
9. How did this novel change your opinion on early American history? Were you well aware of the Osage murders? Why do you think they are less well known than other historical tragedies (that is, before this book)?
10. Martin Scorsese has recently purchased the film option rights for this book. Rumors are already abounding about casting. Do you think this will make a good movie? What do you think attracted Martin Scorsese to this story? What would your dream cast look like? What do you think would be the most important lesson from the book to include in the movie?