

SEASON ONE · EPISODE ONE

The Perfect Crime

It doesn't take a monster to do something terrible.

THE CASE, IN BRIEF

In the spring of 1924, two young men from two of Chicago's wealthiest families set out to commit a crime so perfect it could never be solved. It came apart in roughly ten days.

This is the surface of the story, the version told from the outside, where the explanation holds and the shape stays clean. The episode lays it out first on purpose. The facts below are the ones the case turns on. Keep them close; later episodes will press on every one of them.

◇ THE VICTIM

Bobby Franks, 14. A neighbor and distant cousin of Loeb's; they had played tennis together.

◇ WHAT UNRAVELED IT

A dropped pair of glasses, a traced typewriter, and a chauffeur who told the truth about a parked car.

◇ THE DATE

Wednesday, May 21, 1924, on an ordinary walk home from school in Kenwood.

◇ THE DEFENSE

Clarence Darrow, who pleaded them guilty and argued for twelve hours against the death penalty.

◇ THE KILLERS

Nathan "Babe" Leopold, 19, and Richard "Dickie" Loeb, 18. Brilliant, privileged, inseparable.

◇ THE OUTCOME

Sentenced September 10, 1924 to life plus 99 years. Not death, which was the whole point of the defense.

The seven months they spent perfecting a method, and never once settled on a victim.

The newspapers had a phrase ready, and it stuck for a century: thrill killers. That is where the public account begins and, mostly, ends. The questions on the next page are where it starts to give.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 The newspapers called them “thrill killers,” and the phrase has lasted a century. How does naming someone shape the way we understand them? What does that particular phrase invite us to see, and what might it keep us from seeing?
- 2 Two extraordinarily intelligent young men planned this crime for seven months and still made simple, almost careless mistakes. What explanations can you imagine for that? Which feels most convincing to you, and why?
- 3 Held in separate rooms, each man quickly blamed the other. What do you make of that? Does it fit your image of who they were?
- 4 Much of what the public came to believe about why they did it emerged in a courtroom where a celebrated attorney was fighting to keep them alive. How should that context affect the way we weigh what was said there?
- 5 This episode spent a great deal of time on the two killers and very little on Bobby Franks. Did you notice that as you listened? Why do you think the story tends to be told that way?

There are no answers printed here, and that is deliberate. The show resolves no one. If your group lands somewhere certain, it is worth asking what the certainty is built on.

FURTHER READING

A short, opinionated list. The accounts disagree with each other in places, which is part of the point. Where they conflict, sit with the conflict rather than picking a winner.

Leopold and Loeb: The Crime of the Century

Hal Higdon · 1975, centenary edition 2024

The thorough, patient standard account. Higdon stays genuinely interested in the question the case never answers: which of the two actually killed Bobby Franks.

For the Thrill of It: Leopold, Loeb, and the Murder That Shocked Jazz Age Chicago

Simon Baatz · 2008

A vivid, narrative reconstruction that sets the crime against the speakeasies and excess of 1920s Chicago. A New York Times bestseller and Edgar Award finalist.

The Leopold and Loeb Files: An Intimate Look at One of America's Most Infamous Crimes

Nina Barrett · 2018

Built around primary documents, including confessions, letters, and psychiatric reports, letting the record speak with less narration between you and it.

Compulsion: A Novel

Meyer Levin · 1956

The famous semi-fictionalized telling, by a writer who knew Leopold at the University of Chicago. Useful precisely for the questions a novel can raise and a history cannot settle.

Clarence Darrow's closing argument

Cook County courtroom, August 1924

Widely reprinted and available in full online. The most significant piece of rhetoric the case produced, and worth reading knowing it was delivered by a man fighting to keep two clients alive.

Re:Examined is a podcast that examines historical crimes through psychological and social lenses. The host is not a medical, mental health, or legal professional, and nothing in this guide is professional advice. The historical record on this case is incomplete and sometimes contradictory; where the facts are murky, the show says so.