

SEASON ONE · EPISODE TWO

The Pact

Two halves of something that only became dangerous once they were fitted together.

THE CASE, IN BRIEF

Last episode told the crime the way the world first heard it: two brilliant young men, a matched set. This episode goes inside the bond between them, where they stop looking like two of a kind.

The facts below are about the relationship, not the crime. Leopold described it in the language of love; the record we have was shaped by a courtroom and a press that could only call it a symptom or a scandal. Keep that fog in mind as you read.

◇ WHEN IT BEGAN

The friendship turned both sexual and criminal in early 1921. The two arrived together and stayed braided for three years.

◇ THE TRADE

Leopold went along with Loeb's crimes; Loeb gave Leopold the closeness he wanted. Each paid in the only currency he had.

◇ LOEB'S FANTASY

Since boyhood, to be a master criminal. Not for money, but for command, and for a witness who would confirm the performance was real.

◇ LEOPOLD'S PHILOSOPHY

A misread Nietzsche. He named Loeb the superman, exempt from ordinary rules, and cast himself as the one who served.

◇ THE TYPEWRITER

Stolen in a 1923 fraternity burglary that barely netted anything. The same machine later typed the ransom note.

◇ THE OPEN QUESTION

Who was actually in charge. Both men's private fantasies were fantasies of command. The record cannot settle which one was driving.

Break off the friendship, or kill him. Those were the options, in a letter about a friend.

The standard telling makes Loeb the engine and Leopold the lovesick follower. Watch how much work that version quietly does, and who it serves.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Loeb's central fantasy was one of command, being the one in control. What do you think a fantasy like that grows out of? Have you noticed the things people daydream about being often mirror something they feel they lack?
- 2 The relationship ran on a trade: Leopold went along with crime to get closeness; Loeb tolerated closeness to get a witness. Is what they had a relationship at all, in any sense you'd use the word? Where is the line between loving someone and using them?
- 3 The episode raises the possibility that neither man ever truly saw the other, that Leopold loved Loeb's performance and Loeb valued Leopold's usefulness. Have you ever loved, or been loved as, an image rather than a person? How would you even know?
- 4 We're usually told Leopold was the devoted follower and Loeb the mastermind. What complicates that here? Why do you think the tidy version has lasted so long, and whom does it serve?
- 5 The episode lays out a darker possibility: that Leopold may have recognized Loeb's hunger to be a perfect criminal and deliberately fed it, while letting Loeb believe it was his own idea. The same facts also support the opposite, that Leopold was swept along by love. Which reading do you find most convincing, and what does it say about you that you're drawn to it?
- 6 The episode suggests maybe neither man alone would have done this, that the relationship itself was driving. Do you find that convincing, or does it let both of them off the hook? Can two people together be responsible for something neither would have done apart?

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 on the case. 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.