

SEASON ONE · EPISODE THREE

The Collector

Before Loeb, before Bobby Franks, before any of it, there were birds.

THE CASE, IN BRIEF

This episode goes back to a single boy in a big house in Kenwood: Nathan Leopold, before the crime that defined him. A childhood of isolation, brilliance, and a love of birds that began at age six.

The facts below trace the shape of his early life. The episode holds two things at once: the boy who spent hours alone in marshland watching for something rare, and the young man who helped kill a child. They are one person, and the episode refuses to let either cancel the other.

◇ BORN

Chicago, 1904, youngest of three sons in a wealthy German Jewish family in Kenwood. His mother never fully recovered from the pregnancy.

◇ CALLED FLEA

Mocked in his own school yearbook as the “crazy bird of the school.” Bullied for his size, his manner, his refusal to be a boy’s boy.

◇ THE BIRDS

A love that began at age six in a room of taxidermy. By his teens, 3,000 specimens filled the third floor of the family home.

◇ THE EXPERT

By 19, the country’s foremost authority on the rare Kirtland’s Warbler. He had published research, though he collected some specimens illegally.

◇ HIS MOTHER’S DEATH

Florence died in 1921, when Nathan was seventeen. His father responded with indulgence and little engagement.

◇ THE MISREADING

Leopold took Nietzsche’s Übermensch as permission rather than labor, and assigned the title not to himself but to Loeb.

An intellectual machine going without balance and without a governor.

The same patient, precise attention that made him an exceptional ornithologist was present in the planning of the murder. The episode asks whether a person’s gifts can really be separated from what they do with them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Nathan Leopold spent his childhood largely without peers, excelling in institutions that consistently separated him from children his age. How much does isolation shape the way a person learns to relate to others, and does that shaping ever fully reverse?
- 2 The Kirtland's Warbler obsession, the taxidermy museum, the volunteer bird classes: Leopold's ornithology was both solitary and generous. He wanted to share what he knew. What does that tell us, if anything, about who he was?
- 3 Leopold's own writings reveal that the superman, the figure exempt from ordinary rules, wasn't himself. It was Loeb. What does it mean to build a philosophical framework that places another person above morality, then place yourself in service of that exemption? Is that still a philosophy, or something else wearing its clothes?
- 4 We tend to assume that extraordinary capability means extraordinary self-awareness and self-control. Leopold was one of the most intellectually capable people of his generation. Does that assumption hold? What do we miss when we make it?
- 5 The episode raises the question of whether Leopold led Loeb, rather than followed him. Does it change anything for you to consider that possibility? Why or why not?
- 6 Leopold's capacity for careful, patient attention, the same quality that made him an exceptional ornithologist, was also present in the planning of the murder. We tend to treat someone's gifts as separate from what they do with them. Is that separation real?

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.