Book review: "Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI" by David Grann

- By Glenn C. Altschuler
- Apr 23, 2017

In 1921, a boy hunting squirrels near Fairfax, Oklahoma, found the body of Anna Brown. She had been shot in the back of the head. At about the same time, an oil worker stumbled on the corpse of Charles Whitehorn. That summer, Lizzie Burkhart, Anna’s mother, stopped breathing. Her relatives suspected that she had been poisoned. And then dozens more Osage Indians — who had become the richest people per capita in the world after oil was discovered beneath their land — began to die under suspicious circumstances.

In “Killers of the Flower Moon,” David Grann, a staff writer at the New Yorker and author of “The Devil and Sherlock Holmes,” revisits one of the most dastardly conspiracies in American history — and does his own sleuthing to solve the remaining 85-year-old crimes. A suspenseful and scintillating who-done-it, his book is a tale of greed, racism and the callous indifference of duly constituted authorities.

Grann, who will appear at 7 p.m. May 1 at OSU-Tulsa, 700 N. Greenwood Ave., provides vivid portraits of the villains and heroes. Tom White, a former Texas Ranger and agent of J. Edgar Hoover’s fledgling Bureau of Investigation, uncovers layers of corruption among white guardians and administrators; charged to protect members of the tribe, several of them were willing to do just about anything to acquire “headrights” (shares in the mineral trust). Quoting Mollie Burkhart, Anna’s surviving sister, Grann indicates that the worst of the bad guys was the best man you “ever saw until after you found him out and knowed him.”

Most important, Grann illuminates the injustices done to members of the Osage tribe. Forced to conform to the ways of the whites, Grann writes, Mollie’s parents were told that if they refused to send her to a Catholic boarding school, the government would withhold annuity payments. Even as adults, moreover, Osage tribe members did not control the money they received from drilling on their land. “The whites had bunched us down here in the backwoods,” an Osage chief told a congressional committee. When the pile of rocks turned out to be worth millions of dollars, “everybody wants to get in here and get some of this money.”
More than a few of them, Grann demonstrates, were willing to commit murder to do so. And, alas, although a far greater number of Americans were willing to punish a white man for killing a Native American, they would not hang him for it.

“History is a merciless judge,” Grann reminds us. Wielding the power of hindsight, “it lays bare our tragic blunders and foolish missteps and exposes our most intimate secrets.” In the 1920s, it’s clear, doctors, bankers, guardians, government bureaucrats, politicians, lawyers, prosecutors and judges were complicit with the reign of terror against the Osage.

The murders, which Grann believes may number in the hundreds, moreover, were so well concealed that families of the victims still have no sense of resolution. One can only hope that “Killers of the Flower Moon” will help them — and help us come to terms with a part of our history that in some sense lives on.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University