



The Axeman of New Orleans: The True Story

Miriam C. Davis

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From 1910 to 1919, New Orleans suffered at the hands of its very own Jack the Ripper–style killer. The story has been the subject of websites, short stories, novels, a graphic novel, and most recently the FX television series *American Horror Story*. But the full story of gruesome murders, sympathetic victims, accused innocents, public panic, the New Orleans Mafia, and a mysterious killer has never been written. Until now.

The Axeman repeatedly broke into the homes of Italian grocers in the dead of night, leaving his victims in a pool of blood. Iorlando Jordano, an innocent Italian grocer, and his teenaged son Frank were wrongly accused of one of those murders; corrupt officials convicted them with coerced testimony. Miriam C. Davis here expertly tells the story of the search for the Axeman and of the eventual exoneration of the innocent Jordanos. She proves that the person mostly widely suspected of being the Axeman was not the killer. She also shows what few have suspected—that the Axeman continued killing after leaving New Orleans in 1919.

Only thirty years after Jack the Ripper stalked the streets of Whitechapel, the Axeman of New Orleans held an American city hostage. This book tells that story.

The Axeman of New Orleans: The True Story Details

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From Reader Review The Axeman of New Orleans: The True Story for online ebook

Lynn says

Today's nonfiction is on The Axeman of New Orleans: The True Story by Miriam C. Davis. It is 320 pages long and is published by Chicago Review Press. The cover is black and purple street view of New Orleans. The intended reader is someone who likes true crime, unsolved mysteries, and historical accounts. There is mild foul language, no sex, and descriptions of violence in this book. There Be Spoilers Ahead.

From the dust jacket- From 1910 to 1919, New Orleans suffered at the hands of its very own Jack the Ripper-style killer. The story has been the subject of websites, short stories, novels, a graphic novel, and most recently the FX television series American Horror Story. But the full story of gruesome murders, sympathetic victims, accused innocents, public panic, the New Orleans Mafia, and a mysterious killer has never been written. Until now.

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Review- This is a true crime book written by a historian. Davis comes into this story without any preconceptions, she just tells the story of the Axeman of New Orleans. She does not say who the Axeman was or even who she thinks he was. The story is very twisted with lots of confusion, bad police, and no leads. Davis tried her best to untwist the threads of this story and help the reader understand what happen almost 100 years ago. That said at the end of the book I have no idea who did these horrible murders. It can be a little dry reading but the over all narrative is very interesting.

I give this book Four out of Five stars. I get nothing for my review and I borrowed this book from my local library.

Liv says

Nothing great. Kind of a weak telling of this early 1900s event.

Julie says

The Axman of New Orleans: The True Story by Miriam C. Davis is a 2017 Chicago Review Press

publication.

I thought I had heard about most serial killers, recent, past or distant past, but I never heard about this case. I understand this story was even featured on 'American Horror Story', but I don't want much television, so I missed out on that.

This case is utterly fascinating and so absurdly strange, it's impossible to believe some of the things that happened back then.

Starting in 1910, a series of murders targeting Italian immigrants, who mainly operated grocery stores, began to occur with an uneven frequency.

The murders are very gruesome and harrowing, and there doesn't appear to be much a motive aside from the obvious one, which was a strong dislike toward the Italians.

The police, of course, had limited resources and New Orleans was especially under funded and inexperienced. Interviews with the victims and eyewitness accounts were often all they had to go on, other than suspicious behaviors. Often a suspect was held, only to be released due to a lack of evidence.

But, eventually, a couple of arrests were made, based on false testimony. A trial was held which ended with a couple of convictions, the details of which are detailed at length in this book and made for some pretty interesting courtroom drama.

But, the real killer was never brought to justice, and in fact continued to kill after leaving the New Orleans area.

It's a perplexing case, which caused hysteria, and frankly echoes the sentiments people still seem to hold against immigrants, or other races, no matter what era of time, or the circumstances. But, it is worth noting that New Orleans was packed with immigrants from a number of areas, so why Italians? There are several theories, but it is still very strange.

It was also sad, since several of the victims were young married couples, some with small children. Some of the cases were pinned on the 'Cleaver', that may not have been connected, and innocent people found themselves under suspicion. There were several odd incidents that turned out to be unconnected, but were very curious, indeed.

New Orleans is always an interesting locale, and despite the grim subject matter, I did enjoy reading many of the historical details of the period.

I'm thankful the author decided to tackle this case, which as far as I know hasn't garnered the mass media attention other serial killers from long ago did, and has remained relatively forgotten.

The book isn't very long, but it's packed with intrigue and drama and is very puzzling, as well as frustrating to think someone got away with so many murders, and people suffered who were innocent of any wrong doing.

This a quick and easy to read true crime story that definitely held my attention and has piqued my interest in this crime and the era it took place in.

True Crime readers and those who enjoy history or historical mysteries will not want to pass this one up.

4 stars

Vel Veeter says

For a book about someone killing people with axes, this isn't the most interesting book I've read....this week. This is the story of a New Orleans serial killer who targeted primarily Italian shopkeepers in the early 20th century.

This book is drenched with a time in the country in which anti-Italian sentiment was pretty strong, and this book investigates that aspect of these crimes. But it oversells the "racial" dynamic of these crimes. As weird and sad as these crimes are, the real miracle is that some poor black man wasn't falsely accused of them. In fact, the witnesses keep mentioning that their assailant was white.

Anyway, something is not great about this book. It barely hangs together as a cohesive story, and I think that's the real problem. There's not really enough evidence presented in this book to suggest that these crimes are all that connected. The author goes to some length to talk about what investigative approaches would have been different and what should have been done, but also spends a lot of time weighing in on the evidence, but doesn't actually have all the evidence available either and probably reaches too far out to make assertions about what it means. But the book has to hang on something. There anti-Italian sentiment is too sold in this one, the crimes are interesting but not necessarily connected, the would-bes and what-ifs are too forward, and ultimately this feels like a passion project that was built out of an article or a love of local lore instead of something substantive.

Lisa Williams says

Amazing and quick read. A must for lovers of New Orleans, true crime and history.

ElphaReads says

I had never heard of the Axeman of New Orleans until he was a character on AMERICAN HORROR STORY: COVEN (which I contend is by far the best AHS season of all time). I hadn't felt terribly compelled to check him out beyond that show, but when he was covered on MY FAVORITE MURDER I was intrigued again. And THEN my boss at work was ordering books and said 'hey, have you heard of these murders that took place in NEw Orleans?' and I was like 'YOU MEAN THE AXEMAN !?', no doubt living up to every perception she has of me and my interests. So she ordered THE AXEMAN OF NEW ORLEANS by Miriam C. Davis, and I got on the request list for first crack at it.

Background: in the early 20th Century a series of attacks/murders occurred in New Orleans in which Italian grocers were beaten/bludgeoned with an axe in their beds in the dead of night. A notorious letter left by "The Axeman" was published in the paper, saying that he was going to strike again on a certain night (St. Joseph's Day) and any house that wasn't playing jazz would be a target. Though some people went to trial for various attacks, the murderer was never caught, and Miriam Davis has reexamined the case in this book.

The good: Davis has no qualms dismissing the apocryphal and sensationalized aspect of this case, specifically the letter that was sent to the press. She says that it's very unlikely that the actual Axeman sent it, as a profile of him put together in modern times suggests this just wouldn't fit his style. I also liked that she wasn't willing to name anyone (or probably knew she couldn't), and therefore didn't speculate too much on identity. As far as anyone can know, he was probably a xenophobic, insecure loser who hated the fact that immigrants and first generation Italian Americans were more successful than he was. But then the not so good is that while she's very professional and very good at examining various clues, it did tend to make this read a bit dry at times. I found myself skimming here and there, because while I like that she was very respectful, the fact we know so little means that it really is a 'just the facts, ma'am' kind of story. And that can get a bit tedious.

THE AXEMAN OF NEW ORLEANS was a thorough and well researched book about a killer that we know very little about. If you're looking for something with more definitive answers, this may not be for you, but if you want to read a responsible and well studied account, this is probably a good bet.

Jeff Jellels says

"They have never caught me and they never will. They have never seen me, for I am invisible, even as the ether which surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a fell demon from hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the axman."

Miriam C. Davis's *The Axeman of New Orleans* is an engaging and thorough documentary of a series of murders and maimings that began in 1910 and continued for nine years by a serial killer who preyed upon the Big Easy's Italian grocer community, slipping in homes in the dead of night and hacking families to death while they slept in their beds. Davis's book is well-researched and she does a credible job of dispelling much of the hokum and mythology that surround the crimes – including debunking the axeman's famous note to the city's newspapers (excerpted above) which seems more likely penned by a predatory jazz promotor than the predatory killer.

While the fog of years (and the generally poor police procedurals of the era) left much of the exact details of the axeman's crimes sketchy, Davis expertly sifts through as much information as is available to fashion a well-written account of all the slayings connected (and a few that were connected, but probably shouldn't have been) to the madman's reign of terror. The real strength of the book, though, is Davis' gripping account of the fates of the three men who were implicated at various times as the axeman killer: Frank Jordano, Iorlando Jordano, and Joseph 'Doc' Mumfre. Davis excels at peeling fact from speculation here and, even though none turn out to be the titular killer, their final fates are hardly the less dramatic for it. Of course, as in most real-life mysteries, the full truth is unfortunately missing, but drawing upon modern criminal profiling, Davis offers an interesting dénouement on the final fate of the axeman and his motivation for the crimes making the book's finish certainly satisfying.

So if your interest in the axeman of New Orleans was at all piqued by shows like *American Horror Story: Coven* (as mine was), then Davis's *The Axeman of New Orleans* is a rather good place to turn for the 'true' story.

Bark says

I am DNFing this book. For a story about the axeman, it is so incredibly dull and lacking in focus. The author has clearly done her homework but she's included too many sidelines that have nothing to do with the murders. If I wanted to learn about the origins of the Italian Mafia in New Orleans I would've picked up a different book.

This story was also one of the subplots in American Horror Story's season of "Coven". The "axeman" is the guy Jessica Lange gets cozy with. The gals over at MY FAVORITE MURDER also covered the case in one of their many disturbingly amusing podcasts. I'd say listen to that instead. Life's too short and stressful so I'm picking up something else rather than struggling to stay awake during this one.

Sarah says

3.75*s

Oddly enough I've never heard of this particular serial killer in US history. This seems to be the USA's own Jack the Ripper style case, with just as much over the top detailing and even more of a kill count. Mrs. Davis does a great job of breaking down the case, and any murders/attacks related to it. She presents a fascinating and well researched challenge to the accepted conclusion as well, arguing her case well. This is one those true crime books that will settle under your skin, much like any Jack the Ripper story would, and make you wonder who did it and why.

Kim says

Well-researched and well-written book about a serial killer in New Orleans in the early 1900s.

Jeanne says

I've always loved reading different genres of books but lately everything I read is romance. The Axeman of New Orleans was a nice departure, taking me back to true crime.

Miriam Davis has done an amazing job researching this book. The amount of detail she provides for a century old crime is incredible. Using quotes from multiple newspapers, police reports and archive photos, Davis supplies more than enough evidence to support her premises on various murders. Some she is able to discount as work of the Axeman by reasoning through the circumstances and facts and others she makes sounds cases for assuming they were the same killer. She provides insight into the period; New Orleans life, politics, police practices and crime scene analysis techniques. At times she even adds humor to an otherwise grim topic.

Davis provides so much detail on the victims that we get to know them. They are real people, not just corpses in the coroner's office. We also get to know the police, politicians and neighbors in depth. Davis paints an accurate and detailed picture of the effect the murders had on the entire city especially the Italian immigrants and even more so the Sicilian grocers.

The Axeman of New Orleans is a very well written book about one of histories most baffling unsolved series of murders. It will be interesting to see if Davis's final statement comes true and at some point someone will relate murders in other locations or find some elusive evidence to answer the question of who the Axeman was.

Guera25 says

A waste of paper. No answers, just 262 pages of what-ifs and maybes and armchair psychology. Save your money.

Sean Chick says

This is a hard book to rate. Davis does some good research, debunking myths about the Axeman and making good suppositions about events, such as the Mumfre thesis as well as Besumer's status as victim. She is good as a straight historian. Her background information on New Orleans, the Mafia, Louis Marrero, and the rest is welcome. Her theory that the Axeman moved west has legs; her theory that he was "the Cleaver" of 1910 less so. Yet, the writing is sloppy. Davis sometimes tries to tell a story, but she is not very good at it. Furthermore, she is a bit too fast to make hard and fast judgements on a case with a lot of questions. At any rate, this book is worth it for the research even if it can be a slog to read.

Debra says

I was hoping this would be a page turner and have me on the edge of my seat. Ms. Davis is an academic and that shows in this book. It tends to come across a bit dry. Added to the fact that she leaves us without a finger to point at a real perpetrator, I could only give give it 3 stars. It is obvious that the book was well researched. Definitely worth a read if you are fan of unsolved murders and/or the history of New Orleans.

Jill Crosby says

Absolutely AWFUL. While the premise is promising, the author does very little to deliver. The Axeman? In New Orleans? How can you screw this up?

1. By writing two long and detailed chapters about the rise of the Mafia in New Orleans, and La Cosa Nostra doesn't even play a part in the actual narrative, so you basically get a 65-page footnote on organized crime in The Big Easy;
2. At least half of each chapter is devoted to the corruption in law enforcement and judicial system of 1910-1920 New Orleans
3. Interchangeable victims, none of whom we really get to know. The crimes read like a compilation of newspaper articles from the Times-Picayune

4. No speculation as to who the Axeman may have been, and just a few paragraphs on possible motivation tacked onto the last chapter, like the author suddenly came to in front of the microfiche machine and realized “I’m about done with this book, and I haven’t mentioned anything about the Axeman’s motives. Better add that now.”

5. No continuity, no uniting force or theme. Is it true crime in New Orleans? Grisly deaths of Italian Grocer families? Crooked cops? The trial of a father-son, unjustly tried and convicted? What’s going on here?

It’s difficult to write a true crime account that happened in the past, but a few authors (Larsen, Schechter, Cornwell) have managed to pull it off by painting a broad picture of the world at the time, then focusing on the crime and the victims. If an author has to write filler about outside details, like organized crime unrelated to the story at hand, or corrupted courts, again unrelated, maybe the author doesn’t understand the gist of the crime/killer she is trying to convey. Back off and immerse yourself in the story, then see if you have enough understanding to capture the essence of it—don’t attempt an expose on corruption in New Orleans courts and try to bill it as “The Axeman of New Orleans;” write a separate book about that, THEN come back to the murders. There’s waaaaay too much going on in this book to be successful at revealing the identity of the title character.
