



The Onion Field

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This is the frighteningly true story of two young cops and two young robbers whose separate destinies fatally cross one March night in a bizarre execution in a deserted Los Angeles field.

The Onion Field Details

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Author : Joseph Wambaugh

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From Reader Review The Onion Field for online ebook

Robert S says

The Onion Field by Joseph Wambaugh

The Onion Field tells the true-life story of two young Los Angeles Police Department detectives who are kidnapped by two robbers in 1963, and the subsequent ordeal of all four men.

The book is structured like an episode of television's Law and Order - the first half of the book focuses on the crime, while the second half focuses on the numerous, protracted criminal prosecutions that follow the incident.

Wambaugh raises important questions about the purpose of the criminal justice system (punishment, retribution, rehabilitation?), the criminal legal process and disparity between official policy and actual police practice.

Wambaugh illustrates how our system of laws exist to protect the criminals and police departments exist to protect the 'integrity' of those institutions per se, but there is no system or institution that protects with similar zeal and diligence the rights of police officers, victims, or prosecutors, i.e., the three parties most intimately associated with the crime (besides the criminal).

The Onion Field makes it understandable why police protect one another when faced with allegations of misconduct by civilians - they have to protect themselves because the system is not there to protect them.

SAM says

This is a book of two halves and writing styles. The first part is an In Cold Blood-esque non-fiction novel. Beautifully written and in my opinion preferable to the former mentioned book. It follows the background stories of the four main characters leading up to the night of the onion field. The second half is the long and complex legal aftermath, which is written in the standard true crime narrative with court transcripts.

The first half is an easy five stars. The writing is pure excellence, oozing emotion and foreshadowing the imminent tragedy. There's a scene with bagpiper playing 'flowers of the forest' and I challenge you not to be overwhelmed with sadness after reading it. The second part did lose my interest in places but this is through no fault of the author. The legal case goes on forever with a great deal of repetition.

Lanie says

I couldn't make it through this book due to its poor pacing and rampant homophobia. The character development is excruciatingly focused on one character's bisexuality and how that is a major influence of his criminal behaviors. The author's perspective on this disgusted me and the pacing of the book was so poor that when I thought about those two factors, I just put the book down instead of continuing. The story is disjointed and very sluggish.

Ed says

First published in 1973, *The Onion Field* covers the story of the brutal encounter between two LAPD cops and two career criminals in, well, an onion field. I won't go into the outcome except to say the criminals got the best end of the deal, especially when the death penalty was struck down in California. Compelling reading, even the tedious courtroom scenes unraveling with their own grim, ironic dramas. Wambaugh's early writing, such as this nonfiction title, is generally regarded as his better output. I hope to read more of his nonfiction somewhere downstream.

Nancy says

I tried reading this once when I was in high school and ended up donating it.

I'll try again now that it's only \$1.99 on Amazon.

Rebecca McNutt says

An odd and mysterious story taking place in the heat and dust of Los Angeles during the early Sixties, *The Onion Field* is a completely unforgettable crime novel.

Stephen McQuiggan says

Two police officers are brought to an onion field where one is executed. The trial becomes the longest in Californian history as the question of just who fired four bullets into Officer Campbell is dissected in the minutest of detail. Written in the form of a novel, it contains all the pathos you'd expect from fiction - although fiction may well have been kinder. That fateful night in the onion field destroyed the lives of all involved - Ian's murder, Karl's gradual sink into depression and petty crime as the trial dragged forever on, and Jimmy and Greg's battle, at all costs, to escape the gas chamber. It is a testament to Wambaugh's writing that even a sociopath like Powell can be rendered sympathetic at times. A powerful, complicated story with no easy answers - least of all who fired those four shots; the smell of onions may well make you weep.

Rusty says

A true story, this tale as told by Wambaugh finds two young robbers encountering two young policemen, in an onion field. The fatal shootings evolve into one of the longest and most convoluted trials in California history. It is a fascinating and tragic story - a real parody of crime and punishment. An excellent read.

Bonnie E. says

I read this many years ago but I still remember how vividly the story unfolded, and how the pages drew me in and ultimately wrung me dry. It is a harrowing recounting of a true event. The author's experiences as a police officer lends credibility to the book, and Wambaugh's writing style is powerful and gritty. This was the first of many of his books that I read over time. Joseph Wambaugh quote: "The Onion Field made me a real writer. And then I knew it was over, I couldn't be a cop anymore."

Doug Cummings says

I read this as a young cop and again after I had been a crime reporter for a good long time. Each reading gave me chills. Having attended many police survival courses and pulled many car stops, I can relate to the experiences of the officers. Working a one-man unit in the middle of the night when you're twenty-three and carefree is one thing. Looking back on it from an adult's perspective many years ago, I'm surprised I never visited an Onion Field of my own.

Dierdra McGill says

This was a true crime book where a police officer got killed. The book was very well written and never boring (as a few true crime books I've read over the years can be) some parts were very hard to read, as in gave me a strong emotional response, but then again those are some of the best books that can do that. I really don't want to give any of the book away, if you enjoy true crime books I recommend this one!

Mary Ronan Drew says

Joseph Wambaugh was a young officer in the Los Angeles Police Department when the 1963 incident occurred that he later turned into a nonfiction novel called *The Onion Field*. Two young plain clothes cops on patrol, Karl Hettinger and Ian Campbell, made a routine traffic stop. The young men in the vehicle kidnapped them and took them to an onion field in San Bernadino and murdered Campbell. Hettinger ran for his life across the field and only his happening on a man out working in the dark saved his life.

This part of the book is gripping, but it's not ultimately the most riveting story. Hettinger, clearly suffering from survivor's guilt and what we would now call PTSD, found himself sharply criticized by the department for giving up his gun although one of the men had a gun pointed at his partner. A training video was produced emphasizing that this was the wrong thing to do. The impact of the official criticism, despite the understanding and support of many fellow cops, sent Hettinger spinning into a life of nightmares and depression. This historically honorable and conscientious man began shoplifting and was forced off the police force.

This is the story that eventually led LAPD and other law enforcement to recognize the formidable damage such an experience has on officers and to establish routine psychological interviews after traumatic events.

Wambaugh's 1973 book is dated. But the story it tells is engrossing and the book is still worthwhile reading.

Adam says

Just a devastating book. Just so sad. There's so much about this book that just defies explanation. All at once it examines America's sometimes defunct legal system, psychological effects of traumatic events that go unexamined or forced down, men who feel they are "institutional men," the inner workings to two sociopaths, and so much more. Hard to believe this all actually happened, and I think after reading this I wish it was a fictional novel. I'd rather believe that events like these don't happen every day in our country. This is one I'll definitely be thinking about far into the future...

Jessica says

Not my favorite True Crime book. It felt like it dragged on longer than the story had steam, partly because the trial was so long and crazy. The author does a great job of outlining the characters and overall it was a fairly interesting and terrible tale of the abduction and execution of police officers in Los Angeles in the 60s. But parts of the way the book was structured and paced bothered me, with little interludes from an unnamed (until the end) character and often important revelations in the trial were buried in paragraphs of tedium. Lastly, maybe a product of its time, but the author is homophobic and that features heavily due to one of the criminal's bisexuality. I'd look elsewhere if you want a good true crime book.

Katherine Addison says

This book does, in fact, deserve to be a classic. Like *In Cold Blood*, it's something between true crime and a novel; like *In Cold Blood*, it's an account of a vicious and senseless murder; unlike *In Cold Blood*, one of the victims survived. That, in fact, is what sets *The Onion Field* apart from almost all the true crime I've read: just as much as Wambaugh is telling the story of the murder and the story of the ghastly *theatre de l'absurde* that was the endless trial-and-appeal, trial-and-appeal, of the aftermath, he's telling the story of the survivor, Karl Hettinger.

In so doing, Wambaugh presents a vivid portrait of PTSD (seven years before it was added to DSM-III, so without the terminology, but from 2017 I recognize 100% what Wambaugh describes) and a vivid portrait of the absolute fucking mess the LAPD made of its reaction to Hettinger's survival. Wambaugh is very careful, and he lays out with considerable sympathy and understanding the **reasons** the LAPD failed Hettinger so abysmally (making the survivor go to department roll-calls and describe what happened--being abducted by a pair of two-bit hoods, driven from Hollywood to Bakersfield, watching one of them shoot his partner, and then being chased across the onion fields in the dark--and ***let his brother police officers Monday-morning quarterback everything he did or didn't do*** is basically what you're going to find next to "contra-indicated" in the dictionary), and I thought Wambaugh's observations about the police definition of masculinity and the very brutal limitations of that definition (a police officer, being a "real" man, would never surrender his gun to anyone, no matter what the circumstances were; a police officer, being a "real" man and therefore a man

of action--what Wambaugh calls a "dynamic" man--would always be able to find some positive action to take. *Surrender is no guarantee of safety*, as a memorandum written after Officer Campbell's murder said, a memorandum that stopped just barely short of explicitly condemning Hettinger for his actions and inactions--stopped just barely short of explicitly blaming **Hettinger** for Campbell's death--and the worldview encapsulated in that statement (the implicit corollary that because surrender does not guarantee safety, it is the wrong (unmanly) response), a worldview that Wambaugh understands at the same time he rejects it, is about half of what caused Hettinger's slow nervous breakdown, to use an old-fashioned term. Untreated PTSD, plus believing (half paranoia and half accurate observation) that he was being blamed for Campbell's death, plus Hettinger's own **staggering** lack of self-awareness making him so extremely vulnerable to the erosion of his self-worth . . . it really is no wonder that he ended up compulsively shoplifting until he was finally caught and forced/allowed to resign from the LAPD. These assumptions (unexamined by Hettinger, very carefully examined by Wambaugh) about "real" manhood and "real" men (and "real" policemen) are a beautiful demonstration of the proper use of the term "toxic masculinity." Because this is a definition of masculinity, a set of rules about how masculinity ought to be performed, that is manifestly toxic. It came within about an inch of being lethal to Karl Hettinger, that inch being the movement of his trigger finger that would have put a suicidal bullet in his brain.

On that count alone, *The Onion Field* is a remarkable accomplishment, but Wambaugh also pays the same careful, compassionate attention to Gregory Ulas Powell and Jimmy Lee Smith, the two-bit hoods who murdered Ian Campbell. Powell (who died in prison in 2012, the last survivor of the men who walked into the onion field in 1963) and Smith were both sociopathic (to varying degrees: Powell was the complete remorseless shark-in-human-form, Smith, at least as presented by Wambaugh, was more complicated, but since he said that he thought "conscience" was something made up by white people to oppress black people and didn't really exist . . . yeah, survey still says sociopath), but Wambaugh teases out bits and pieces of how they got that way, how what they did was both completely their fault, made up of a series of choices they made with complete free will, but also how it grew organically from who they were, what their world had shaped them into.

Wambaugh does a brilliant job in the first part of the book with a foreshadowing device that was effective even though I knew exactly what he was doing. He started on the night of the abduction, and then--a perfectly standard narrative technique--cut back along each man's timeline to explain how he got there. But with Smith in particular, as he jumped back along Smith's relationship with Powell, you could see the pieces of the disaster being assembled: the acquisition of the clothes they're wearing, the acquisition of the guns, the acquisition of the car. I first encountered this device in Stephen R. Donaldson's Thomas Covenant books--an irony, because I find it completely ineffective there, but Wambaugh shows how it's supposed to work, the intense feeling of Greek tragedy, of a catastrophe that cannot be averted because it's already happened (particularly effective because Jimmy keeps trying to find the right moment to leave Powell, and you end up mentally shouting at him to just cut his fucking losses and run . . . and he doesn't).

The only aspect of the book I found less than brilliant was Wambaugh's attempt to reconstruct Ian Campbell's subject position. There seems to have been something essentially unknowable about Campbell, something that he kept back from everyone who knew him, so while I understand why Wambaugh had to try, it's just not really successful, pretentious instead of portentous. But, otherwise, yeah. This is an amazing book.

Shirley Revill says

A true story that sent shivers down my spine. I read this book ages ago and I ought to read again to see what I make of this book today. Thought provoking.

Nick says

This book was a bit of a surprise. It was a recommendation from years ago and on a whim decided to listen to the audio version. I didn't even know it was a true crime story. The story as told is much more than just a crime novel. There is a tremendous amount of backstory about each of the primary participants. Joe Wambaugh writes a superb account of the trials and overturned rulings. It's really amazing how the system was manipulated by the two felons. The story is heartbreaking - that it took almost ten years to finally get this case through the system. For those that like crime I highly recommend this. For those that like drama or just a really good story you too would enjoy.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"But he still dreamed of it, could feel the cold night wind in his face, could smell the onions in the field."

Jimmy Smith is on the left, and Gregory Powell is on the right. The detective to the far right needs to try not to look so gobsmacked at historic moments like this.

It was a routine traffic stop; a 1946 Ford coupe with the tag light out was pulled over by Officers Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger. If the occupants of the vehicle had just played it cool and not let their guilt from their past crimes take the wheel of their roller coaster emotions, The Onion Field murder would have never happened.

Gregory Powell was just smart enough to be really stupid. When he pulled that gun on Officer Ian Campbell and forced Officer Karl Hettinger to give up his gun and both officers to get in the car, he thought he had already committed a capital crime. This assumption would lead to disastrous circumstances.

"And Gregory Powell raised his arm and shot Ian in the mouth.

For a few white-hot seconds the three watched him being lifted up by the blinding fireball and slammed down on his back, eyes open, watching the stars, moaning quietly, a long plaintive moan, and he was not dead nor even beginning to die during these seconds--only shocked, and half conscious. Perhaps his heart thundered in his ears almost drowning out the skirl of bagpipes. Perhaps he was confused because instead of tar he smelled onions at the last. He probably never saw the shadow in the leather jacket looming over him, and never really felt the four bullets flaming down into his chest."

It just happened. Just like that. One moment there were four men standing in a field outside of Bakersfield having a conversation, and the next moment someone was dying.

Officer Karl Hettinger ran.

He kept running for the rest of his life. He didn't die in that field, but he might as well have. He never really lived after that. Gregory Ulas Powell and Jimmy Lee Smith should have been on trial for two cold, blooded murders.

Joseph Wambaugh takes the reader through the lives of these four men leading up to this moment and then continues to share the lives of the three remaining men after the murder. Most of us are deluded about who we really are to some extent, but Gregory Powell was definitely suffering from the eight feet tall and bulletproof delusion, almost as if he was on a steady drip of whiskey and speed. In some ways, Smith was even more dangerous than Powell because he was lacking in self-confidence to the point of cowardice, and cowards are unreliable and unpredictable. They can make a bad situation worse, and certainly Smith made that situation in the onion fields in 1963 much worse.

The trial was, frankly, infuriating. District Attorney Phil Halpin was quoted as saying: **"I would've made any deal with Powell and Smith if I'd had the power. I would've let them go. Dropped all charges. Released them. If only I could've put their two lawyers in the gas chamber."**

By the time I got through the trial segment of the book, I couldn't have agreed more. I actually groaned when I read that Irving Kanarek was joining the defense team. I first met him in the book *Helter Skelter*. He represented Charlie Manson. Now how this guy ended up knee deep in two of the most notorious California murders of the 1960s is beyond me. He was so annoying during the Manson Murder Trial, objecting to everything, that Manson actually attacked him in court. Vincent Bugliosi, the prosecuting attorney in that case, referred to him as the Toscanini of Tedium.

Kanarek made a simple case into a complex case and cost the taxpayers an incalculable amount of money. Was he after justice? After the truth? If he was, he had a convoluted way of showing it.

The real victim of this trial was Karl Hettinger, who kept having to come back time and time again to testify for appeal after appeal. It was like he was experiencing Bill Murray's version of *Groundhog Day*, only he was stuck in an even worse nightmare of experiencing March 9th, 1963, over and over again.

Joseph Wambaugh

The Onion Field shows up on every list of Best True Crime books ever written, along with *Helter Skelter* by Vincent Bugliosi, *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, and *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule. The Ann Rule is the only one of this group I haven't read. I have a copy sitting in my pile of books to be read very soon, so sometime this year I will spend time with Ted Bundy. *Shudder* I just can't wait.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com> I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Brendan Reid says

This book takes place back in 1963. The first half of the book goes describes the four main people. It describes where they grew up, their parents, sisters, brothers, and what kind of personality each of them has

as well. It makes you feel like you know all four people really well by the time you get half way through the book.

Two of the main men are petty thieves trying to make it day to day by robbing and scamming. The other two men are police officers. The two thieves driving around town looking for trouble looking like they were up to no good. The two police officers noticed them sticking out like a sore thumb and pulled them over. They were kidnapped and taken out to the country next to an onion field. Once they were there something shocking and terrible happens.

The rest of the book talks about trials of the two thieves. The trials last for way to long and are drawn out with the thieves and lawyers making everything as hard as they can and make a mockery of the system.

Carol Storm says

True crime classic about two small-time punks who manage to get the drop on a couple of tough LA cops. The tragic aftermath sees the surviving cop spiral into guilt-ridden addiction and despair, while the two hoods actually thrive on Death Row, outsmarting the system through patience and persistent legal maneuvering and ultimately drawing life imprisonment instead of execution.

Watch for the movie featuring a very young James Woods as the creepy cop killer. It was his debut performance and it sparked a legendary film career!
