

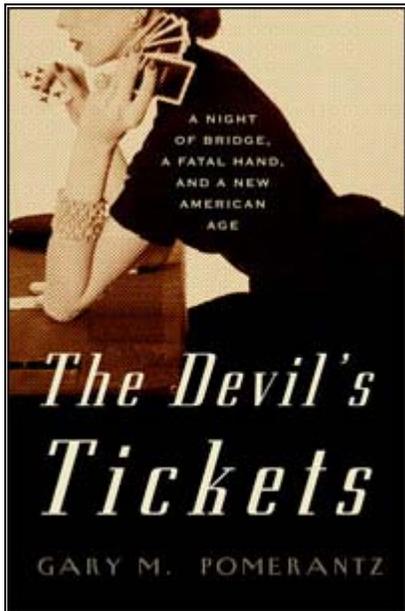
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July 9, 2009

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by Glenn C. Altschuler

'The Devil's Tickets': A Tale Of Murder, And Cards



The Devil's Tickets: A Night of Bridge, A Fatal Hand, And A New American Age

By Gary M. Pomerantz
Hardcover, 300 pages
Crown Publishers
List price: \$26

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Gary Pomerantz's previous books include *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn* and *Nine Minutes, Twenty Seconds*

[NPR.org](#), July 9, 2009 · A few weeks before the 1929 stock market crash, cosmetics salesman Jack Bennett overbid his hand, failed to finesse for the queen of spades and didn't make his contract. When Myrtle Bennett called her philandering husband a "bum bridge player," Jack smacked her across the face. Minutes later, she put two bullets in his back.

The infamous "bridge murder" is the centerpiece of *The Devil's Tickets*, Gary Pomerantz's deliciously detailed and splendidly written account of the emergence of bridge as America's No. 1 pastime.

Pomerantz shows how Romanian-born Ely Culbertson, the debonair, chain-smoking "colossus of cards," capitalized on the case to build a bridge empire in America. Part showman and part charlatan, Culbertson claimed that bridge was a metaphor for modern marriage and the "battle of the sexes." He became the game's patron saint by teaming up with Jo Dillon, his elegant, steady and cerebral wife, to famously defeat icons Sidney Lenz and Oswald Jacoby in the "Bridge Battle of the Century" in 1931.

Sensing that the relational question "Who's in charge?" was rising "like an evil moon" in the 1920s and '30s, Culbertson advised bridge players to adapt to bad players as well as bad cards by learning how to communicate amid uncertainties — and when to defer. But he wasn't afraid to contradict himself. Spats at the bridge table, he suggested, helped defuse the petty and not-so-petty tensions of married life.

In the depths of the Great Depression, Pomerantz points out, nearly one out of every four Americans played bridge regularly. Though money was scarce, they spent over \$100 million per year on lessons, books and supplies. The game appealed to them, he speculates, because every hand presented a new opportunity. If you kept your head in the game, nothing else existed: "no past, no future and no emotion."

Over time, of course, Americans found new distractions, including drive-in movies and television. In the computer age, Pomerantz concludes, "a game requiring study and patience dried up like an old riverbed." Nonetheless, about 25 million adults still play bridge. Older but not always mature, more than a few of them, no doubt, still fantasize, as they fall one spade short of making their contract, about "pulling a Myrtle Bennett."

Illuminating a crime and card game of passion, and the gentle gender-bending of the Roaring Twenties and Great Depression, Pomerantz weaves a compelling read even for people who don't know the difference between a trick and a trump.

Excerpt: 'The Devil's Tickets'

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List price: \$26[NPR.org](http://www.npr.org), July 6, 2009 · **ONE: Ely and Jo**

I.

New York City in the twenties was a melting pot of seven million, full of show, big and brawling, an industrial behemoth with enough smokestacks and skyscrapers to fill the skylines of a dozen cities. F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote of young love and glittery tea dances, as the twenties dawned, suggested New York City had "all the iridescence of the beginning of the world." Its streets swelled with noises of the Old World mixing with the New: gramophones, gangster gunfire, European accents, tinkling champagne glasses, backfiring Model Ts, and tabloid newsboys hawking the sensational. In these high times, New Yorkers could rush to Broadway to see Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor — known to their Eastern European parents as Asa Yoelson and Israel Iskowitz — or thrill to the last acts of the amazing Harry Houdini, born in Hungary as Erik Weisz. They could read a dozen and more local dailies, choose from among thirty thousand speakeasies, marvel as the big-bellied Babe Ruth launched home runs at Yankee Stadium, and see their Democratic governor, the derby-hatted Al Smith, passing through the five boroughs on his way (he hoped) to the White House. Alive and thrumming at street level, the city teemed with gangsters, ad agency pitchmen (selling sex, Sex, SEX!), Wall Street fat cats, socialists and garment district workers, cafe society personalities and cynical, self-absorbed writers sitting at the Algonquin Round Table thinking up laugh lines. A constellation of celebrities brightened the Prohibition-era night, from the brassy hostess Texas Guinan, who with her pancake makeup and jangling jewelry, greeted nightclub guests with "Hello, sucker!"; to the waiters at Small's Paradise in Harlem, who roller-skated the Charleston across the dance floor with trays overhead; to Jimmy (Beau James) Walker, the dapper mayor of the Tammany Hall machine, who so frequently courted his showgirl all over town that many New Yorkers — not including, of course, Walker's wife — assumed the two were married. In the spirit of the times, Walker later divorced his wife and married the showgirl.

In 1923 Ben Hecht, the writer and playwright, arrived in New York from Chicago and discovered an adventurous city running from the dark memory of war and hedonistically giving itself to the pleasures of the hour, including, he wrote, "the pleasure of not giving a damn." "It was a bold town," Hecht wrote, "indeed, sharp-tongued, and individualistic. Its credo had it that New Yorkers were a master race."

We busied ourselves putting up the only show possible against doom, which is to seize all the fun there is. Thus people sang louder, drank deeper, danced longer and squandered themselves in every direction. ... Its finest ladies, including happily married ones, engaged in promiscuous sex as if they were college boys on a spree. ... New York insisted all its idols wear a grin. It regarded all foreign events, including the first World War, as entertainment. It believed that any war could be won by writing the right songs for it, and not losing your sense of humor. Its patriotism consisted of admiring itself ardently.

In the daily frenzy of New York City, twin journalistic revolutions thundered like elephants down Forty second Street: the tabloids and Walter Winchell. *The New York Daily News*, America's first tabloid, or half sheet, wailed into existence like a colicky infant in June 1919 with bold headlines and an eye-catching array of photos and illustrations. Within five years, it claimed a readership of nearly one million, easily the largest circulation in the nation. Its success begat another tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, which arrived in 1922 promising "90

percent entertainment, 10 percent information"; a few years later came the next, the *New York Evening Graphic*. These tabloids took the bygone yellow journalism of Hearst and Pulitzer, Spanish-American War vintage, circa 1898, and ripened it. New York pulsed with a thousand wars in miniature — social, cultural, legal, and, best of all, marital — and the tabloids used them all to their advantage. They reveled in stories of debauchery, extramarital affairs, abortions, murders, union battles along the Bowery, mob violence, heroism, hedonism, mayhem, threats, controversies, and dynamic courtroom trials.

Winchell was an indefatigable, ink-stained gadfly who, as a columnist first for the *Evening Graphic* (a lowbrow daily ridiculed by competitors as the "Pornographic") and then for Hearst's *Daily Mirror*, seized upon gossip and turned it into his own high art of ballyhoo. Like the tabloids that launched him, Winchell was abrupt, catty, and always hustling. A night owl, he wrote about Broadway personalities and turned his flashlight upon their tangled, often secretive romances. He challenged the traditional standards of journalistic good taste, maddening competing newspapers and his own editors, who were often unsure whether to publish his latest unverified piece of gossip. Winchell finessed his way around potential libel suits by creating his own "slanguage," a vernacular of the streets, breezy and colloquial. He wrote of secret lovebirds who were "Adam-and-Eveing it" and of a man who felt "that way" about a woman as they awaited "the blessed event." A mention in Winchell's column was greatly coveted, and feared. The column had a chatty cadence, a rapid song-and-dance-man's beat. He dropped names, often of celebrity writers, when possible: "At the opening of a play recently Baird Leonard turned to Dorothy Parker and said, 'Are you Dorothy Parker?' and Dorothy replied, 'Yes—do you mind?'" Winchell reacted physically to gossip, and one observer noted that he "seemed to purr with delight when he had a particularly juicy item ... He was as fascinated and unself-conscious as a four-year-old making mudpies." Ben Hecht thought Winchell wrote "like a man honking in a traffic jam." There were other gossip artists at work in New York, but none so widely read, or so intensely despised. The actress Ethel Barrymore, who feuded with Winchell, would say, "It is a sad commentary on American manhood that Walter Winchell is allowed to exist."

Amid this cacophony was the Knickerbocker Whist Club, a noiseless oasis at 26 West Fortieth Street. Here the self-satisfied elites of American auction bridge, the reigning card game of the era, built and burnished their reputations. By requirement, the Knickerbocker's more than 250 members exhibited good temper and a strict adherence to an honor code of card play nearly two centuries old, as attendants, moving with stealth, placed fresh glasses of water at their elbows every half hour or so. Some of the club's older members had been wearing their eyeshades and stroking their chins, deep in thought, since the Cleveland and McKinley administrations. Women were not allowed as members — as bridge players, they were considered conservative and easily intimidated — though club rules permitted them in Thursday night games.

By 1915, auction bridge had forged two world capitals, London and New York, and the most prestigious gentlemen's bridge clubs in both became like fortresses, where wealthy members in evening attire shared stiff drinks with men of their own stature, and tried to take their money at cards. The Portland Club in London was the recognized rule maker of British bridge, a role held in America by the Whist Club of New York, at 38 East Thirty-ninth Street, with its small, exclusive membership (well heeled enough to play auction bridge at fifty cents a point), which included sportsman Harold S. Vanderbilt and club president Charles Schwab, the steel titan who was once Andrew Carnegie's right-hand man.

But for most of the East's leading players, the Knickerbocker was the bridge club of choice. Typically, its members were moneyed men of leisure who, if not natives, had migrated to the city from the Midwest, the South, and Europe. They shared intellectual gifts, competitive intensity, and an unswerving devotion to bridge.

Founded in 1891 by twenty enthusiasts of whist, the Knickerbocker started at the Broadway Central Hotel. It led a nomadic existence over the next three decades, migrating from whist to auction bridge, and moving, after the war, for the seventh time, to the brownstone on West Fortieth. When the New York dailies first devoted columns to card games after the turn of the century, Knickerbocker members became regular contributors, spreading the good name of the club: Robert F. Foster in *The Sun*, George Kling in *The Tribune*, and E. T. Baker in *The Evening Mail*. The club's top players wrote bridge books for posterity and one another, and sought to prove their cognitive superiority at the table. Between games, they gossiped about other members and boasted of success in business and with mistresses.

On the brownstone's fourth floor lived perhaps New York's most influential bridge authority, the Knickerbocker's president, Wilbur Whitehead. One floor below was the inner sanctum of the club's best players, entered by invitation only.

In that inner sanctum, in early 1922, Josephine Dillon made her startling breakthrough. Only twenty-three years old, tall and slender with bright Irish eyes, her reddish gold hair carefully marcelled, her eyebrows expertly penciled, "Jo," as she was known, played bridge with a growing confidence and tenacity. Her table presence and subtle movements were elegant and ladylike, her long, supple fingers dropping the cards softly, her cigarette holder cutting broad arcs, her voice, small as a hummingbird's, passing heartfelt compliments: "Nicely played, Whitey," and "That was magnificent, Sidney." Her women friends called her the Duchess for her regal coolness. Jo Dillon let no one close to her. She shielded her deepest thoughts and feelings. The men liked her immensely, and sought her attention with suggestive comments and furtive glances. Since the war years, she had been a part of their group on Thursday nights. Jo bullied no one at the table. She credited their brilliance, and the experts liked that, too.

Raised in the Bronx, the young Josephine Murphy was graduated from Morris High School (where she played the adolescent game of basketball in steel cages) and later served briefly as secretary to an executive in baseball's Federal League, Pat Powers, who turned to promoting six-day bicycle races. Then she worked as a stenographer for Whitehead. Whitey adored Jo (there were whispers that she had been his mistress) and offered her indoctrination in bridge. Jo admitted to him that she barely knew a heart from a spade, but while working for him she developed a keen interest in auction bridge. Since Whitey was club president, if he wanted Jo on the Knickerbocker's third floor, no one dared challenge him. There, Jo discovered bridge experts pitiless in applying the principles of scientific and practical accuracy in their bidding. They hoped their systems were much like the club's brownstone: built methodically, and solidly, to stand the test of time.

Jo proved a quick study and soon found herself among America's great players: Whitehead, Sidney Lenz, Winfield Liggett, P. Hal Sims, Waldemar von Zedtwitz. Here was a Murderer's Row of American bridge, an eclectic mix of sportsmen and Renaissance men: an amateur magician from Chicago (Lenz); an old soldier/Virginian (Liggett); a banker from Selma, Alabama, who once tried to irrigate the Congo (Sims); and a lexicographer who fought as a baron in the Kaiser's army and whose maternal great-grandfather ran for president of the United States against Abraham Lincoln (von Zedtwitz).

What these men shared was card-playing brilliance.

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