



# Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America

*Paula S. Fass*

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## **Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America** Paula S. Fass

Few crimes capture our imagination as completely as child kidnapping. We are both fascinated and revolted, seeing in each victim our own child, in each bereaved parent ourselves, and in each kidnapper a monster striking straight at the heart of the family and our society. Kidnapping is a modern morality play, the innocence of the child in stark contrast to the corruption of the criminal, all played out by a media industry eager to feed the worst fears of every parent. In this pathbreaking book, Paula S. Fass explores how our fear has evolved from its first chilling realization in 1874, when Americans were startled and horrified to discover that their children could be held for ransom, until today, when sexual predators seem to threaten our children at every turn.

*Kidnapped* is a mesmerizing look at some of the great kidnapping cases in American history, the stories that have haunted parents over the past 125 years. Fass describes the kidnapping of Charley Ross in 1874, the first of a series of kidnappings to be called "the crime of the century"; the notorious case of Leopold and Loeb, two rich young men who murdered a younger cousin simply to see if they could get away with it; the abduction of Gloria Vanderbilt, the "poor little rich girl" taken by her own aunt at the start of a vicious custody battle; and the most famous case of all, the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. More importantly, *Kidnapped* presents, in a series of brilliant narratives, a window into the American mind, providing us with new insights into parenting and the American family, the media and our fascination with celebrity, policing and law enforcement, gender and sexuality, mental health, and much more. She shows, for instance, how the Leopold and Loeb case revolutionized the insanity plea, how the abduction of Gloria Vanderbilt brought the problems of divorce and child custody into the public eye, how the case of Stephanie Bryan was shaped by the gender assumptions of the 1950s, and how the Lindbergh tragedy was defined by the ever-present media. Turning from these historic cases, she takes us back to crimes that have only recently fallen out of the headlines, such as the disappearance of Etan Patz in New York or Jacob Wetterling in Minnesota, and the growing industry revolving around missing children, from not-for-profit foundations publicizing missing children to for-profit businesses offering to insure children against kidnapping.

In this sharp, vivid book, Fass skillfully illuminates our national obsession with child abduction in a society which both values and exploits its youngest members. The loss of each child is a unique and devastating tragedy. But how we respond as a community and as a nation to these crimes speaks volumes about who we are. In confronting how we have treated the children stolen from our lives, Fass shows, we confront ourselves.

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