

**A
TALENT
TO
DECEIVE**

**The Search for the Real Killer
of the Lindbergh Baby**

WILLIAM NORRIS

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ALSO BY WILLIAM NORRIS

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Willful Misconduct

Fiction:

The Badger Game

Make Mad the Guilty

A Grave Too Many

O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!

— SIR WALTER SCOTT, *MARMION*, 1808

On doit des égards aux vivants; on ne doit
aux morts que la vérité.

*We owe respect to the living; to the dead we
owe only truth.*

— VOLTAIRE, *OEUVRES*, 1785

INTRODUCTION

On the night of March 1, 1932, a small child was taken from his bedroom in a lonely house near Hopewell, New Jersey. A ransom note was discovered, and a demand of \$50,000 paid by the distraught parents. But the little boy never came home. His body was later found some two miles away, decomposed almost beyond recognition.

There was nothing terribly unusual about this tragedy. Kidnapping was rife in America at the time. In the three years prior to 1932, there had been at least 2,500 such cases. Only the identity of the parents transformed this event from the banal to the sensational: They were Charles A. Lindbergh and his wife, the former Anne Morrow. Hence, it became labelled the Crime of the Century in the popular press, to be followed in due course by the Trial of the Century. It also became The Case That Will Never Die.

Charles Lindbergh, as every child knows, was the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic in May 1927 at the age of 28. He was the Great American Hero, lauded wherever he went. Young, handsome, shy, and reserved, Lindbergh was the epitome of everything America wanted to be (but rarely was). If it had been

in the power of his countrymen to award him sainthood, he would have been beatified in an instant. As it was, they worshipped him and touched the hem of his garment whenever they could. Even now, to suggest that this idol might have had feet of clay verges on blasphemy in some quarters.

Lindbergh had met his future wife, Anne Morrow, when he accepted an invitation to travel to Mexico City for Christmas 1927. She was the second daughter of Senator Dwight W. Morrow, then U.S. ambassador to Mexico, who was being widely tipped as the next U.S. president. He was also enormously wealthy, a brilliant lawyer who had made his fortune as a partner in the banking firm of J.P. Morgan. It was a slow-burning romance—though she claimed to have fallen in love with him at first sight—but Lindbergh finally descended from the clouds to pursue the courtship, and the couple were formally engaged on February 12, 1929. The public adulation and media frenzy, which had followed Lindbergh ever since his flight to Paris, now engulfed them both. They were married privately in front of a few close friends and relatives at the Morrows' new home in Englewood on May 27 of that year.

There was one notable absentee from the wedding: Anne's only brother, twenty-one-year-old Dwight Jr. The two had always been close—she was his favorite sister—but her engagement to Lindbergh had brought to a head an affliction that had begun in Dwight Jr.'s teenage years. He suffered from schizophrenia and was destined to have recurring bouts of the mental disease for the rest of his life. On hearing of Lindbergh's engagement to his sister, he is said to have flown into a jealous rage and become quite uncontrollable. This upstart airman had not only stolen his favorite sister but also threatened to become the male head of the Morrow family should his father die. Dwight Jr. was sent away for psychiatric treatment, and it was judged unsafe to permit him to attend the wedding ceremony.

The newlywed couple were to be given no peace. They were hounded by the press on their honeymoon, spent on board a cabin cruiser off the coast of Maine, and pestered incessantly as they later flew together on trips all over the United States and the Caribbean. Anne became pregnant in October 1929, but the constant flights continued unabated until Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr. was born, at the Englewood house on June 22, 1930.

The need for privacy now became paramount, and by the end of September the couple had bought 500 acres of remote woodland in the Sourland Mountains of New Jersey and started to build themselves a house. They had begun to live there, though only at weekends, when the kidnapping occurred.

The events that followed were quite extraordinary. Suffice for the moment to say that, more than two years later, an illegal German immigrant named Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested and charged with kidnapping and murder after some \$14,600 of the ransom money was found in his garage. After a sensational trial lasting more than six weeks, he was convicted, sentenced to death, and finally executed in the electric chair at the State Prison in Trenton, New Jersey, on April 3, 1936.

Hauptmann protested his innocence to the last. To this day, intense controversy rages over the case. A plethora of books have been written, some affirming his guilt, others equally passionate in claiming that his conviction was a travesty of justice. The problem with the latter has been that not one, so far as I am aware, has identified the true culprit with any degree of certainty or any supporting evidence. Some have blamed “the mob;” others have even suggested that Charles Lindbergh himself killed his son by accident or even murdered him because he had a slight genetic defect. Many claim that he obstructed the police investigation. The last, at least, is certainly true—as we shall see. But the motive for Lindbergh’s

actions may have been entirely different from those ascribed to him.

The basis for all investigative journalism is the five Ws: *Who? Why? What? When? and Where?* The *When* and the *Where* and the *What*, we know. This book is an attempt to answer the *Who* and the *Why*.

A MALICIOUS PRANK

IT WAS, to quote a famous phrase, a dark and stormy night in the Sourland Mountains of New Jersey on March 1, 1932. It had rained heavily in the afternoon. By evening the rain had ceased, but there was a cold and blustery east wind. In the newly built Lindbergh house, still uncurtained, there were five people in addition to the baby: Charles and Anne Lindbergh; Ollie and Elsie Whately, the English butler and maid; and Betty Gow, the child's nursemaid. There was also a young fox terrier named Whagoosh, a notoriously noisy dog, whose name means "fox" in the Chippewa language.

Much of what happened that evening is open to doubt, but what follows—for what it is worth—is the officially accepted version.

Anne and Betty Gow began preparing the baby for bed at about 6:15 p.m. Young Charlie was recovering from a cold, but they rubbed his chest with Vicks VapoRub and decided to make him a flannelette shirt to wear beneath his night clothes. This was quickly sewn up by Betty, an accomplished seamstress, from a piece of scrap material. Over this the baby wore a sleeveless woollen shirt, which was pinned to his nappies under a pair of

rubber pants. And on top of it all, Charlie wore a grey sleeping suit—size two, manufactured by the Dr. Denton company. His bedcovers were fastened to the mattress of his cot by two large safety pins, and on his hands he wore two shiny metal “thumb guards” to stop him sucking his thumbs. Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr. was not going anywhere or doing anything, at least, not under his own volition. One of the thumb guards, which were attached to the baby’s wrists by lengths of half-inch tape, was later to pose one of the unexplained puzzles of the kidnapping. It was discovered, still bright and shining, at the entrance to the property some twenty-nine days after the crime. The thumb guard lay in full view in the middle of the road; somewhat flattened—possibly run over—but not trodden into the mud. And yet none of the hundreds of people who had passed that way over the previous four weeks had noticed it until Betty Gow and Elsie Whateley picked it up. It was, to say the least, curious. Had it lain there all that time? Or had the perpetrator, finding it in his possession, casually dropped it when making a later visit to Hopewell? If the latter were true, a totally different list of suspects would be opened up. But the lead was never explored.

The two women tried to close the shutters of the window in the east wall, which lay directly over the window of Lindbergh’s study, but they were warped and refused to latch. There was a second window in the south wall, away from the wind, and they left this slightly open to let in some air. The whole putting-to-bed process took more than an hour, and it was 7:30 before Anne left the room and went into the living room to await her husband’s return. He had telephoned earlier to say he would be a little late. (In fact, he should have been much later because he was supposed to be speaking at a dinner given by New York University at the Waldorf-Astoria that night, but there had been a secretarial mix-up over his calendar and he forgot the appointment.) Betty Gow stayed a few minutes longer; then she, too, put

out the light and left the nursery. The baby was sleeping. If the accepted accounts of those in the house that night are correct, this was the last time any of them saw him alive.

Charles Lindbergh arrived home at about 8:25, parked his car in the large garage that lay beneath the Whateleys' quarters in the west wing, and entered the house through the connecting door into the kitchen. He joined his wife for dinner ten minutes later. A little after nine o'clock, while they were sitting by the fire in the ground-floor living room, Charles heard a sharp crack that he later described, rather oddly, as "like the top slats of an orange box falling off a chair." He thought the noise came from the kitchen. It has since been assumed that what Lindbergh said he heard was the kidnapper's ladder breaking outside the nursery window, but the kitchen was in the opposite direction. Anne apparently heard nothing. In any case, as we shall learn later, Lindbergh's hearing was not something to be relied upon.

The couple decided to have a bath before going to bed. Charles went first, using the upstairs bathroom, which was directly adjacent to the child's nursery. It was then about 9:15. He dressed again and went downstairs to the library to read, sitting next to the uncurtained window that was directly beneath the southeast window in the nursery. Anne drew her own bath, then discovered she had left her tooth powder in the baby's bathroom. She went in without turning on the light, retrieved the powder, and returned to the main bathroom. Then she rang for Elsie Whateley and requested a hot lemonade. It was almost ten o'clock.

Betty Gow and the Whateleys, meanwhile, were in the servants' sitting room, which was on the ground floor at the western end of the house. Whagoosh the terrier, who had shown no sign of hearing the odd noise Lindbergh said he heard earlier, was with them. Ten o'clock was the regular hour when the baby would be lifted and invited to use his potty, and Betty

Gow went upstairs, passing through the kitchen, the pantry, and the foyer en route and apparently noting nothing amiss. She thought of getting Anne Lindbergh to join her, but Anne was still in the bath, so she entered the nursery alone, first turning on the light in the adjacent bathroom.

Betty Gow, according to her own account, first went to close the south window, which had been left partly open when they put the child to bed. Then she turned on the electric heater before moving toward the cot. She could not hear the child breathing. "I thought that something had happened to him," she said later. "That perhaps the clothes were over his head. In the half light I saw that he wasn't there and felt all over the bed for him."

Panicking, the nursemaid ran down the corridor to the Lindberghs' bedroom and found Anne leaving the bathroom. "Do you have the baby, Mrs. Lindbergh?" she asked. Anne Lindbergh was puzzled. "No," she said, and went to look in the child's room while Betty Gow raced downstairs to the library to see, if by any chance, Lindbergh had him. The answer, of course, was no.

Ever the man of action, Lindbergh ran upstairs to the main bedroom, opened the closet, and loaded the rifle he kept there. Then he told his wife that the baby had been kidnapped. In the nursery, he discovered that the southeast corner window was open a crack, that the cold wind blowing through it, and that on top of the radiator case forming the sill was a white envelope. Assuming that it contained a ransom note and might bear fingerprints, he did not touch it. Instead, he took his rifle and ran out into the night, having first told Whateley, the butler, to telephone the sheriff at Hopewell.

Lacking a flashlight, Lindbergh could see nothing but the woods around the house. Whateley, having made the telephone call, brought the car round and shone the headlights on either side of the road. But it was clear that the kidnappers were long

gone. Whateley was instructed to drive into Hopewell to buy a flashlight (though where he would find one at that hour was unclear), while Lindbergh returned to the house and telephoned the New Jersey State Police in Trenton and his lawyer, Colonel Henry Breckinridge, in New York.

The call to the State Police was made at 10:25 p.m. The delay of almost half an hour is interesting. The call was answered by Lieutenant Daniel Dunn, who was surprised to hear the voice at the other end say: "This is Charles Lindbergh. My son has just been kidnapped." Startled, Dunn asked what time the child had been taken. "Some time between 7:30 and 10 o'clock," Lindbergh replied. "He's twenty months old and wearing a one-piece sleeping suit." Then he hung up. This had to be a hoax call, thought Dunn, but on the advice of a colleague, he telephoned the Lindbergh house. The same voice answered him. "This is Lieutenant Dunn, sir," the policeman replied quickly. "Men are on their way."

The State Police reacted swiftly. At 10:46, a teletype alarm was sent out across the state, requesting that all cars be investigated by police patrols. By 11 o'clock, checkpoints had been established at the Holland Tunnel, the George Washington Bridge, and all ferry ports along the Hudson River. New Jersey streets had road blocks, and hospitals were alerted to report the admission of any children matching the Lindbergh baby's description. Police were notified in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Connecticut.

The first police to arrive on the scene at the Lindbergh house were Harry Wolfe and Charles Williamson of the Hopewell force, who turned up at 10:35, ten minutes after the alarm had been raised. They made a quick inspection of the nursery, where they found small particles of yellow clay on the carpet and on a leather suitcase beneath the southeast window. The window itself was closed, the left-hand shutter also closed, and the right

one open. Lindbergh, asserting an authority he was never to relinquish, ordered them not to touch anything. The policemen then went outside and discovered holes in the mud on the right-hand side of the study where a ladder had evidently been placed, and the ladder itself some seventy-five feet from the house. They left everything where it was and went back to the house.

The police were now beginning to gather in droves. There were State Troopers Wolf and Cain from Lambertville; State Troopers de Gaetano and Bornmann from the Training School at Wilburtha; State Trooper Kelly, the fingerprint expert from Morristown Barracks; Captain Lamb and Lieutenant Keaten; Major Schoeffel, deputy to Colonel Schwartzkopf, head of the New Jersey State Police, and, a little later, Col. Schwartzkopf himself. Wolf, who was one of the first to arrive, went out to look for footprints. And found some. "The kidnapers consisted apparently of a party of at least two or more persons," he reported. "Apparently two members of the party proceeded on foot to the east side of the Lindbergh residence and assembled a three-piece home-made extension ladder. . . . Two sets of fresh footprints led off in a south-east direction. . . . Kidnapers arrived in a car which was left parked some distance from the house, either in Lindbergh's private lane or in a rough road known as Featherbed Lane." Trooper de Gaetano reported: "We traced rubber boots or overshoe impressions from the ladder down an old road towards the chicken coop. The footprints went across the road and appeared to stop alongside impressions from an auto." There was one very clear print in the dirt beneath the nursery window, which measured 12 to 12-1/2 inches long by 4 to 4-1/2 inches wide. This discovery was never mentioned at the trial because, inconveniently, these measurements did not match the shoes of Bruno Richard Hauptmann. Nor, of course, did the existence of *two* sets of footprints conform to the prose-

cution theory that Hauptmann had acted alone. These were details best forgotten. More favorable for the ultimate prosecution was another find by the police: a Buck's chisel, about thirty years old, with a three-quarter-inch blade and a wooden handle, lying near the ladder. That was all right because Hauptmann was a carpenter.

At this time, kidnapping was not a federal crime but was dealt with at the state level (things were to change as a direct result of the Lindbergh case). This meant that the FBI, which had immense experience in the solving of complex crimes, had no authority in the case, though they could have been called in. Colonel Norman Schwartzkopf, on the other hand, had no experience in this field whatever. Nevertheless, persuaded by Lindbergh, he was determined to keep the FBI out of it. And did.

Schwartzkopf—the father of “Stormin’ Norman” of first Gulf War fame—was thirty-seven years old at the time, a handsome man with a crewcut hairstyle and a waxed blond moustache. He was a veteran of the First World War and a graduate of West Point, who had once worked as a “floor walker” at Bamberger’s department store in Newark. This meant that he was supposed to be watching out for shoplifters. He had never patrolled a beat or arrested a criminal in his life, but he was determined not to let this deter him. Besides, he worshipped the ground Lindbergh walked on and was once quoted as saying that he would “break any oath for that man.” In retrospect, he may have done just that. At all events, there was no doubt about who was in charge of the investigation from very outset: It was not Colonel Norman Schwartzkopf; it was Charles Lindbergh.

With the arrival of fingerprint expert Trooper Frank Kelly soon after midnight, the ransom note could at last be opened. “I put on a pair of gloves,” said Kelly later, “picked the letter up by the edges, and brought it over to a small table in the centre of the room where I conducted a latent print examination of the

outside surface of the envelope. Black powder was used in an effort to obtain any possible prints, but without results. I then opened the letter with a nail file and powdered the note and the inside of the envelope for possible prints, but none were obtained.”

The ransom note was written in pencil in a clearly disguised hand. It read:

Dear Sir!

Have 50.000 \$ reddy 25.000 \$ in 20 \$ bills
1.5000 \$ in 10 \$ bills and 1000 \$ in 5 \$
bills. After 204 days we will inform you
were to deliver the Mony. We warn you for
making anyding public or for notify the
Police the chld is in gute care.
Indication for all letters are Singnature
And 3 holds.

There was a symbol consisting of two interlocking circles, and within the interlock an oval. The circles were colored blue, the oval red, and at the centre of each in a horizontal line were square holes. What did it mean? This symbol has remained an unsolved mystery in this case. Was it intended to identify the kidnapper to Lindbergh? If so, he never disclosed the fact. Was it the recognition symbol of some secret society? This raises a possibility; no more. For it is known that certain college fraternities, rather like the Masons, employed such symbols on their correspondence. One such was Beta Theta Pi, which had (but no longer has) a chapter at Amherst College. Dwight W. Morrow was a member of Beta Theta Pi at Amherst. More to the point, so was his son, Dwight Jr., in 1932. The archivist at Beta Theta Pi's headquarters confirmed to the author that the fraternity

employed a secret recognition symbol at the time of the kidnapping and still did so today. Asked to confirm or deny whether it matched the symbol found on the ransom note, he declined. "That's a secret," he said.

Not only did Trooper Kelly fail to find any fingerprints on the ransom note, he failed to detect any prints whatever in the entire nursery. Nothing on the window sill, nothing on the cot, nothing on the various objects in the room. This seems rather extraordinary. It might be reasonably supposed that the kidnapper would be wearing gloves, but the nursery was frequented by Betty Gow, Anne Lindbergh, the Whateleys, possibly Lindbergh himself, and certainly the child. And it is unlikely that *they* were wearing gloves. How could it be possible that none of them, not one, had left a single fingerprint inside the nursery? Unless, of course, someone had wiped it clean before the police arrived. And who could that be? Not the kidnapper, in my opinion. He was working in the dark and under great stress, and would hardly have taken the time, with so many people in the house, to risk discovery by spending ten minutes or more to wipe off every single surface in the room. Besides, if he was wearing gloves, there would have been no need. I cannot come up with an answer other than this: The room was wiped clean by Lindbergh himself or by someone acting under his orders.

So why was it done? Did Lindbergh know the identity of the kidnapper perfectly well, or at least suspect it? Did he wish to prevent his or her identification in order to avoid scandal? And if that were so, who could that person possibly be? The most obvious candidate had to be a member of the prestigious and enormously wealthy Morrow family into which Lindbergh had married. I'd be hard pressed to think of any stranger who would inspire Lindbergh into launching an instant cover-up operation. Perhaps he thought that this was no more than a malicious

prank, that the child would be returned unharmed very soon by the person he suspected. Perhaps he reasoned that to blurt out his suspicions now would bring needless shame on the family of which he had recently become the male head. It may well be that in the ensuing days and weeks, when the child was not returned, Lindbergh regretted his actions. But by then it was too late. He would have had to face some very awkward questions and possibly prosecution for obstruction of justice. The absence of fingerprints in that room remains one of the most mysterious and most significant aspects of the whole case. Even odder, perhaps, is the fact that, as far as is known, Charles Lindbergh was never questioned about it.

Perhaps Trooper Kelly had merely been incompetent? This was the thought of a former justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, James F. Minturn, when he heard the news. Minturn contacted his friend Dr. Erastus Mead Hudson, an amateur fingerprint specialist who had been experimenting for years with a silver nitrate process that had proved very successful. Hudson was invited down to Hopewell to use his method and did succeed in revealing several of the child's fingerprints on his books and toys. But as far as adult prints were concerned, the room remained clean as a whistle. This was all the more extraordinary because Betty Gow had rubbed the child's chest with a vapor rub when putting him to bed and her fingers would have been greasy when she closed the window. Yet there were no prints on the window frame.

Hudson then inspected the ladder, on which Kelly had also failed to reveal prints, and found between thirty and forty examples other than those of the policemen known to have handled it. Ultimately, none of these proved to belong to Hauptmann. Hudson suggested that the prints should be sent to Washington for comparison with the FBI's huge fingerprint collection of known criminals, which was the most comprehensive in the

country. Remarkably, Schwartzkopf refused to permit such a move. He also refused Hudson's offer to subject the ransom note to a special iodine-gas process he had invented.

Why should the New Jersey police chief turn down such an opportunity to clear up the case? Was he merely protective of his turf, or was he, as so often in later stages of the investigation, acting under the instructions of Charles Lindbergh?

The ladder turned out to be an extraordinary construction, crudely made in three sections and composed, according to one police report, of "old, nondescript lumber which has been lying around for some time." One officer suggested that it might have been made from timber left over from the building of Lindbergh's house, but this possibility was never explored. Perhaps it should have been.

Fully extended, the ladder was twenty feet long, tapering from a width of fourteen inches at the bottom to eleven inches at the top, with each section being joined by dowel pins. The rungs, which were merely nailed across the side pieces, were eighteen to nineteen inches apart, as opposed to the standard twelve inches, which would have made it much more difficult to climb and descend—especially when carrying a thirty-pound baby in a sack. When found, only the bottom two sections of the ladder were joined together, suggesting that only these had been used, and one of the lower rails was broken near the joint.

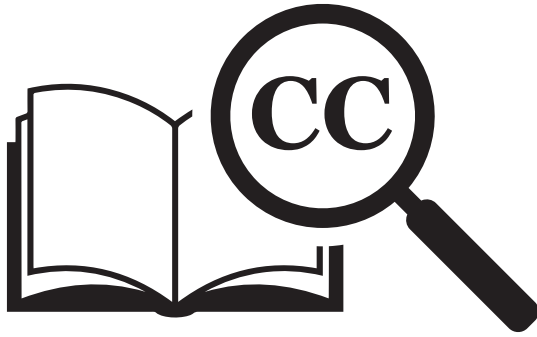
If the theory that the ladder was employed in the kidnapping is correct, the kidnapper must have had considerable athletic prowess. Placed as it was to the right of Lindbergh's study window—presumably to avoid being seen—the ladder would have been well to the side of the nursery window above, and, if only the bottom two sections were employed, some thirty inches below it. The kidnapper would have had to stand on the topmost rung, bridge the gap, balance on the narrow sill somehow as he manipulated the shutters and opened the

window, and then climb through an opening which measured, at most, 30-1/2 by 26 inches. He would then have had to repeat the process in reverse, carrying a heavy and possibly struggling load, and contrive to close the window behind him. All of this in a howling gale—which, curiously, failed to dislodge the ransom note left propped upright on the interior windowsill. If, as was alleged at his trial, Hauptmann had managed to do all this single-handed (despite the evidence of dual foot marks), he must have had the nerve of a steeplejack, the agility of a circus performer, and the strength of a weightlifter. Tests on a duplicate ladder constructed by the New Jersey Police showed that it would not bear a weight of more than 155 pounds. The actual ladder was so flimsy that this is probably a very generous estimate. Hauptmann weighed rather more.

It was the contention of the prosecution that the ladder broke as the kidnapper descended, causing him to fall and/or drop the baby, which caused the latter's death. There was no sign of such a fall on the muddy ground, however; at least, none that was mentioned in the official reports. There is a much more likely explanation of what happened.

As anyone who has ever tried to erect a long ladder will know, it is an unwieldy object, and the high wind would have added greatly to the difficulty of putting it against the wall. This may have been why only two sections were used. Having put it up, however, the kidnapper(s) must then have seen that getting through the window was a near-impossible task and changed their plan. This would explain why the ladder was found some distance away (why bother to move it if the objective was to make a rapid getaway?). There was a much easier way to get in and snatch the baby: through the front door. This theory is supported by another oddity about the ladder: In spite of the mud that must have been adhering to the shoes of the kidnapper, there were no traces of mud on the rungs.

There was a staircase leading from the front foyer straight up to the child's nursery. It would have taken no more than a couple of minutes for the kidnapper to remove his boots, tiptoe up the stairs, pick up the sleeping baby, and escape by the same route. Assuming that the sound heard by Lindbergh was the ladder breaking as it was being taken down, this would put the time of the kidnapping at around 9:15, when Lindbergh was running his bath. Perfect (if fortuitous) cover for any strange noises. Even if the kidnapper had not been in the house before—which he may have been, even if he were not a family member who had been there before, because the Whateleys were in the habit of giving impromptu guided tours while the Lindberghs were not present. Also, the plans had been widely published in several newspapers.



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NO ONE IS INNOCENT WHEN A MYSTERY IS UNSOLVED.

Charles Lindbergh was known for many things during his lifetime. He was a famous aviator, the first person to fly nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean, winner of the Orteig Prize, and a young American hero. But his name will forever be associated with one of the most controversial criminal cases of the 20th century. The Lindbergh Kidnapping.

On a dreary March night in 1932, Charles Lindbergh's 20-month-old son was abducted from his crib. Everyone was a suspect in this investigation, even the Lindberghs. After a six-week trial, Bruno Richard Hauptmann was named the ultimate culprit, but he claimed he was innocent even up to his execution day.

A Talent to Deceive dives into evidence ignored by previous investigators in search of the truth. Who really committed the crime? What really happened the night of March 1, 1932? What was the motive to kidnap and murder the Lindbergh baby?

Follow investigative journalist William Norris in this history-meets-mystery tale as he reexamines *The Case That Will Never Die*.



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