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Review of the book Adirondack Tragedy: The Gillette Murder Case of 1906, 3rd ed.

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Adirondack Tragedy: The Gillette Murder Case of 1906, 3rd ed.,
by Joseph W. Brownell and Patricia W. Enos. Utica, NY:
Nicholas K. Burns Publishing, 2003. 206 pp. Paper, \$16.95.

When writing *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser relied primarily on newspaper clippings from the *New York World* for details of Grace Brown's murder and the subsequent trial of Chester Gillette, the case that served as the basis for Clyde Griffith's murder of Roberta Alden in the novel. For the past 18 years, Dreiser scholars have been fortunate to have two book-length accounts of the case. Both Craig Brandon's *Murder in the Adirondacks: An American Tragedy Revisited* (Utica, NY: North Country Books; reviewed in *Dreiser Studies* 18.1) and Joseph W. Brownell and Patricia W. Enos's *Adirondack Tragedy: The Gillette Murder Case of 1906* were originally published in 1986. The publication in 2003 of a third edition of the Brownell and Enos book provides the occasion to look again at these resources and at the role of the Gillette case in the making of *An American Tragedy*.

Neither of these volumes is a work of literary scholarship. Rather, they are local histories telling the "true" story of the murder. All three authors have local connections: Brownell is a retired geographer who grew up in the Adirondacks, lived in Cortland, and worked at SUNY Cortland; his co-author Enos is on the faculty of the medical radiography program at SUNY Syracuse; Brandon is a journalist who lived for several years in Utica. In these two books, the authors set out to strip the Gillette case of myths created by folklore, Hollywood films, and one very famous novel.

Although written for a popular audience, both books do provide scholars with convenient access to facts of the case that would otherwise require reading through trial transcripts, newspaper reports, personal papers, and eyewitness accounts. The two books tell basically the same story with a slight difference in emphasis. Brandon's book, which is almost twice as long and provides more extensive notes, favors newspapers from Utica and Herkimer (where the trial took place), while Brownell and Enos's relies more heavily on the *Cortland Standard* (Chester and Grace met and lived in Cortland) and on personal papers and interviews.

The two books follow almost identical structures. Both start *in medias res*—Brownell and Enos with the story of Chester's July 4th outing with another woman a week before the murder, Brandon with the discovery of Grace Brown's body. They then go back to introduce the reader to Chester and Grace and tell the story of their relationship, their journey to the Adirondacks, the investigation, trial, and verdict. Both end by discussing the

many fictional accounts of the crime, including Dreiser's.

They begin by describing the history and travels of the Gillette family from New York to the West. Whereas Brandon gives greater detail about the family's involvement with the Salvation Army and the Dowieites, Brownell and Enos offer a more in-depth view of Chester's uncle, N. H. Gillette, the inspiration for Samuel Griffiths. Calling him "Cortland's Horatio Alger," they present him as the model for what Chester could have become—a young man who came back east and with the help of an uncle climbed to success. N. H. Gillette was a self-made man who owned a skirt factory. He was known for innovative business practices, such as giving responsibility and opportunity to his female employees. Chester, whose interest in women was of a different sort, never lived up to N. H. Gillette's example.

Grace Brown was, according to both accounts, an intelligent young woman with her own aspirations of success. She moved from the farm in South Ostelic to the city of Cortland to work in the Gillette factory. The parallel chapters on Grace are a good example of the difference between the two books. Brandon refers to local histories and newspaper accounts to flesh out the Brown family history in great detail. Brownell and Enos quote from Grace's own diary, giving a more intimate and personal feel to the text.

The use of different sources leads to some inconsistencies between the two books. For example, Grace originally moved to Cortland to help her sister. When her young nephew died and her sister moved away, she chose to stay in Cortland, in part to be with Chester. The books give different versions of the nephew's death. According to Brandon, who gets his information from the local newspaper, the child was staying with Grace's parents, fell ill, and died before the Browns realized they should call a doctor. Brownell and Enos offer a more vivid tale. According to a family story, the child was "running through the farmhouse with a curtain rod in his mouth," fell, lacerated his throat, and died when the wound became infected. Whether this story is true or family legend, it's an example of the kind of personal detail found in Brownell and Enos's book.

Perhaps the biggest contribution Brownell and Enos make in this edition of *Adirondack Tragedy* is the correct text of Grace Brown's last letter. Grace's letters to Chester were read aloud at the trial and parts of them were quoted almost verbatim in *An American Tragedy*. Previously, published versions of the letters were based on the court transcripts. As the authors explain in the postscript, the original letters were recently donated to Hamilton College, allowing them to transcribe the letter from the original. The book

also includes photographic reproductions of the original manuscript letter and envelope. The differences are mainly in spelling and punctuation. Unfortunately, the book does not include complete texts of all the letters.

Dreiser's use of Grace Brown's letters is just one point of comparison between *An American Tragedy* and the Gillette case. In chapter 17, "Dreiser—Fact and Fiction," Brownell and Enos offer Dreiser scholars a brief comparison of the novel and the historical facts. The authors conclude that "On first inspection, Dreiser made no changes in so far as the facts of the case are concerned. . . . He adhered so closely to the truth that in the final scenes, he merely paraphrased parts of the actual courtroom testimony." The charge that he had simply copied the Gillette case dogged Dreiser for years and led him to publish "I Find the Real American Tragedy" in 1935 (rpt. in *Resources for American Literary Study* 2 [1972]) to explain that he was not simply recounting a single case but exposing a pattern of crime caused by "dreadful economic, social, moral, and conventional pressures."

However, this pattern of motivation is not found in the Gillette case (nor, for that matter, in the other cases he cites). While Dreiser does incorporate many details of the Gillette case, he also makes two significant changes. The first is in the character of Clyde Griffiths, who is nothing like the self-assured young man from Cortland who hung pictures of pretty women on the walls of his cell, chewed gum during the trial, and displayed no remorse for the death of Grace Brown. The first half of the novel describing Clyde's impoverished early life and the dreams of wealth that lead him to murder bears little resemblance to the life of Chester Gillette.

Dreiser's second notable revision of history is in the character of Sondra Finchley, who has no parallel in the Gillette case. Harriet Benedict, the daughter of a local lawyer, had socialized with Chester, but there was no serious relationship, and Chester was seen with other women, including a dressmaker. Chester did not murder Grace to be with a rich girlfriend. The economic and social motivation for the crime that is so central to the novel is Dreiser's own creation.

For those interested in true crime stories, Brownell and Enos (as well as Brandon) provide an interesting and detailed account of a famous murder. Almost a century later, the Gillette case still captures the public's imagination with its combination of illicit sex, a sympathetic young victim, and a charming culprit who is not what he seems. It's not surprising that the case is featured in a collection like Court TV's Crime Library <www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/classics/chester_gillette/>, which relies heavily on these two books for facts of the case. The legend of Grace Brown also lives on in a recent children's book [*A Northern Light*, by Jenni-

fer Donnelly, reviewed in this issue], in which Grace's famous letters are given to the young female protagonist of the story.

For Dreiser scholars, *Murder in the Adirondacks* and *Adirondack Tragedy* provide a wealth of information to help understand the seeds of *An American Tragedy*. They also demonstrate the complex relationship between fact and fiction. Toward the end of their book, Brownell and Enos tell the story of Roy Higby. As a young boy, Higby was in the boat dragging the bottom of Big Moose Lake and was the first to spot Grace Brown's body underwater. This eyewitness was as close to the case as anyone, yet in his published version of the case "his memory was heavily influenced by *An American Tragedy*." For example, he wrote about Chester's background in Kansas City and his "rich girlfriend," details from the novel but not facts of the case. The authors note that the "Gillette background he related is what most people today think that they remember—and they do, but what they remember is the novel and the movies, not fact." Ironically, while Dreiser claimed that the Gillette case demonstrated a pattern of motivation that he had in fact imposed on it, his fictionalization has in turn influenced public memory and become an inextricable part of the history of the case.

—Kathryn M. Plank, The Ohio State University

Editor's note: As we approach the hundredth anniversary of the Gillette murder case, the inspiration for *An American Tragedy*, the reappearance of Grace Brown, her murder, and her letters in a novel aimed at young adults seemed to demand review in *Dreiser Studies*. But how? While not literary or historical scholarship, the book nevertheless couldn't help but be seen as commenting on or illuminating Dreiser's use of their shared materials; by the same token, as a specific type of fiction aimed at younger readers—a female coming-of-age story—it deserved to be read according to the conventions of its genre. Here, then, are two reviews, taking very different looks at the same novel.

A Northern Light, by Jennifer Donnelly. New York: Harcourt, 2003. 380 pp. Cloth, \$17.00. Paper, \$8.95.

Donnelly's *A Northern Light* and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* both take inspiration from Chester Gillette's 1906 murder of Grace Brown. While Dreiser relied most heavily on the records from the murder trial and sought to tell the story of Chester Gillette's rise and fall, Donnelly looks to the letters of Grace Brown as the motivation for her powerful coming-of-

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