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An Infamous Crime Revisited

Bruno Hauptmann was the only person arrested (and convicted) in the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, but investigators were certain that he didn't act alone. In "Cemetery John," Robert Zorn says he knows who the mastermind was.

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

H.L. Mencken called it "the greatest story since the Resurrection." Damon Runyon anointed it "the crime of the century." Eighty years after the golden child of the world-famous aviator Charles Lindbergh was snatched from his crib, the case is more a historical curiosity than a sensation, overtaken by the Kennedy assassination, the O.J. Simpson murders and other tabloid marvels. Yet the fascination endures because, incredibly enough, the crime was never fully solved.

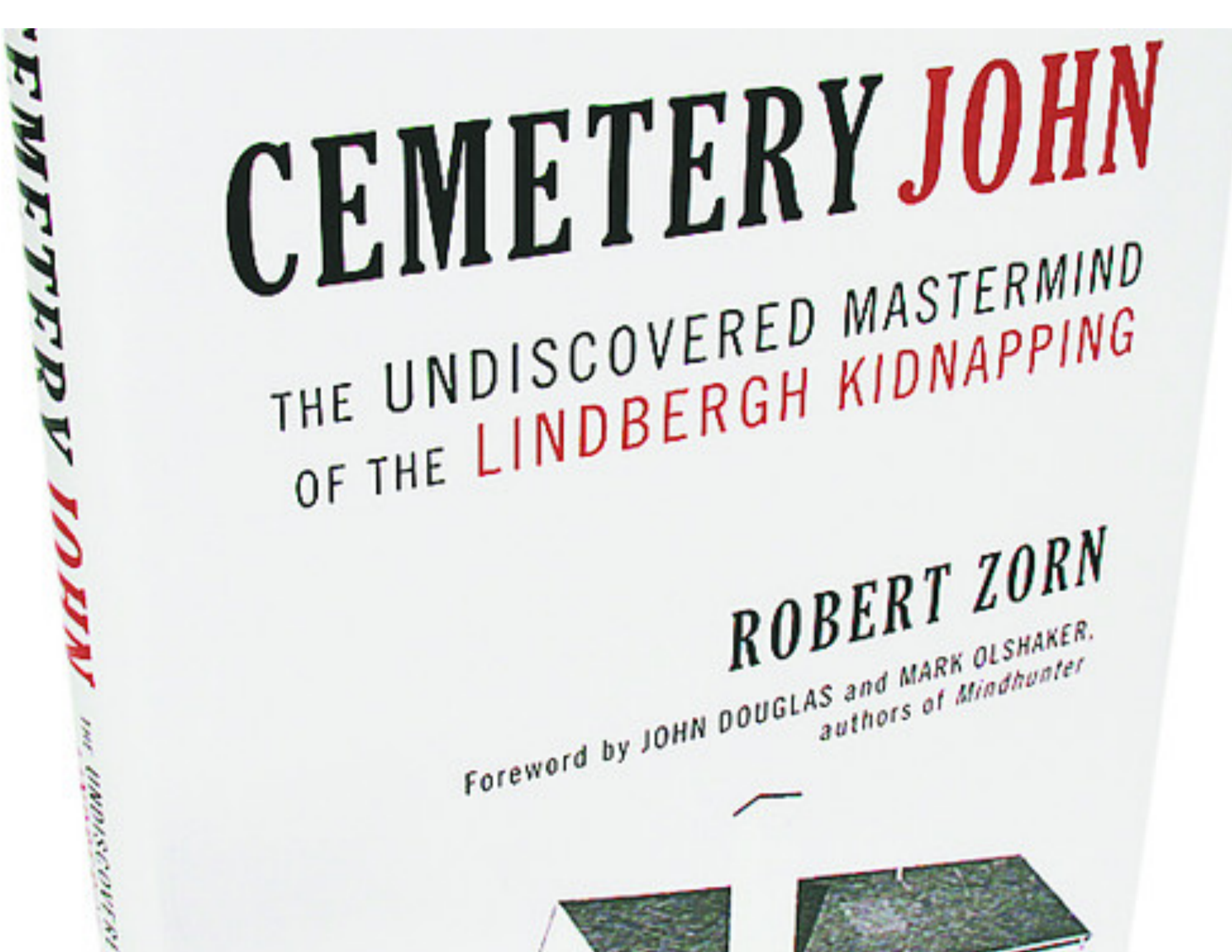
Prompted by his father's belief in a boyhood brush with history, Robert Zorn is now offering a fresh take on the cold case, plausibly arguing in "Cemetery John" that, despite the execution of the odious Bruno Richard Hauptmann, the real mastermind of the crime escaped unpunished.

Like the magical "single bullet" that passed through JFK and wounded Texas Gov. John Connally, an anomaly nestles in the heart of the Lindbergh case.

On Tuesday, March 1, 1932, the 20-month-old boy, named for his celebrated father, was taken from a second-floor bedroom and carried down a rickety ladder propped against the wall of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh's country retreat in Hopewell, N.J. Two months later, the child's body was found abandoned to the animals in a nearby wood.

From the start, investigators assumed that a gang had to be involved: one to hand the baby out the window to an accomplice on the ladder and at least a third to brace the ladder from below. Later, when the \$50,000 ransom money was going to be handed over in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, at least one lookout checked the scene before the bagman accepted the box of cash. But only Hauptmann was arrested, convicted and executed in the electric chair for the crime.

The case had generated so much hysteria, Mr. Zorn writes, that the authorities decided to "simplify" the prosecution by focusing on the German carpenter they had captured and not even bothering to pursue his confederates.



CEMETERY JOHN

By Robert Zorn
(Overlook, 317 pages, \$26.95)

Who were the other kidnapers? Mr. Zorn's father, an economist who grew up in a German-immigrant section of the South Bronx in the 1920s, had a theory about that. As a shy teenager, he had been befriended by a delicatessen clerk who lived in a \$10-a-month room in a house on his block. One summer day in 1931, this man, John Knoll, took young Gene Zorn to the Palisades amusement park in New Jersey, close to the town of Englewood, where the Lindberghs lived with baby Charles Jr. before going to Hopewell. At the amusement park, Knoll and Zorn met two other Germans; Knoll called one of them "Bruno." Zorn didn't understand German, but heard the men talking about "Englewood."

From this cluelet, first Gene Zorn and then his son constructed a fascinating, circumstantial case that John Knoll was, in fact, the dubious brains behind the crime of the century—or, at least, of the first half of the century—and the mysterious "Cemetery John" who penned the gang's baroque ransom notes and actually accepted the money.

At the heart of Robert Zorn's theory of the case is Dr. John F. Condon, a retired Bronx educator and notorious blowhard who injected himself into the affair by becoming the kidnapers' contact with Lindbergh. On the night of March 12, 1932, Condon met at the cemetery with a man who said his name was John. Condon later gave police a detailed description of the man—between 158 and 165 pounds, 5-foot-8 to 5-foot-10, with a high forehead and a pointed chin. On John's left thumb Condon noticed a large, fleshy growth. From Condon's description, the police produced a sketch of Cemetery John.

Early in the investigation, Condon ruled out Hauptmann as the kidnapper in the cemetery. The carpenter was bigger than John, his voice was different, and his left thumb looked nothing like John's. Yet, as the circus trial gained momentum, Condon suddenly identified Hauptmann as Cemetery John. That sealed his fate. Concern with Hauptmann's accomplices faded away. Over time, others tried to spark interest in the hunt for the conspirators, but it was left to Robert Zorn to reopen the mystery.

He marshals a persuasive case that John Knoll must be Cemetery John. For one thing, photos of Knoll are remarkable matches to the police sketch based on Condon's description; one even shows the deformed thumb. For another, after the kidnapping, Knoll showered his father with expensive stamps, including a Lindbergh commemorative airmail issue. Money found at Hauptmann's house accounted for only a third of the ransom. And just as Bruno was going on trial, Knoll booked first-class passage to Hamburg for himself and his wife on the luxurious S.S. Manhattan for \$700—70 times his monthly rent in the depths of the Depression. After Hauptmann was convicted, Knoll sailed back, and later opened three delicatessens of his own.

Mr. Zorn offers much more detail, and he consults FBI profilers, psychologists, high-tech handwriting experts and others to establish that Knoll almost certainly wrote the ransom letters and had the borderline psychopathic personality to hatch the scheme. The author even concocts a revisionist scenario for the crime in which Hauptmann's role was to supply the ladder and creep into the house, snatch the baby and hand him out the window to Knoll, while Knoll's younger brother held the ladder below.

Mr. Zorn embeds his theory in a deft narrative that borrows gracefully and with credit from many previous books about the Lindberghs and the kidnapping, especially A. Scott Berg's 1998 "Lindbergh," and from the Lone Eagle's own autobiography and works by his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. "Cemetery John" conjures up all the characters who turned the case into a carnival, including a manic Walter Winchell crowing after the verdict: "I predicted he'd be guilty. Oh, that's another big one for me!"

Lindy, himself, emerges from the book as admirably disciplined and stoic—a true American hero whose perfection would only later be tarnished by his crush on Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering.

Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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