

BOOKSHELF

'Tiger Girl and the Candy Kid' Review: Mr. & Mrs. Mayhem

He was dapper, ruthless, fearless. She was the flapper's flapper. Together they went on a crime spree that thrilled America's Jazz Age.

By Edward Kosner

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Nearly everyone has heard of Bonnie and Clyde, the Depression-era desperados enduringly incarnated by Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in Arthur Penn's classic 1967 movie. But Tiger Girl and the Candy Kid? They sound like a low-rent rock duo, but they were actually a Jazz Age crime couple notorious in their time.

Long forgotten, they have been resurrected by Glenn Stout in an entertaining new book named for them. It's reasonable to ask why anybody should bother to disinter these century-old characters and chronicle their heedless exploits. But Mr. Stout, who specializes in sports histories, has embedded their story in a deft social history of the 1920s—the days of flappers and bootleggers, hot jazz and hot stocks, bloodthirsty thugs and corrupt cops and pils all careening toward the Great Crash. The reader gets taken along for the ride.

Mr. Stout, an old pro, acknowledges that most of the official records of the couple's crime spree are gone and that he has relied mainly on contemporary newspaper accounts. Anyone who has ever worked on a paper, especially a crime-happy tabloid, knows how often such stories could be embroidered by enterprising street reporters and imaginative rewrite men. But even allowing for embellishments, "Tiger Girl and the Candy Kid" is a hell of a yarn—worthy of an HBO hoodlum epic like "Boardwalk Empire."

The Candy Kid—né Richard Reese "Dick" Whittemore—seems born to be bad. He came from a respectable Baltimore family, but, still in short pants, he swiped eight silver spoons and some glasses from an oyster supper at his mother's church. At 10, he fired a gun in the street. A hardened truant, he soon found himself in a special school for incorrigibles and then St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys, the same reformatory that Babe Ruth survived. By the time he was 20, he had served time in a Navy brig (for larceny while a sailor), New York's Dickensian Elmira Reformatory (for car theft and burglary) and the Maryland State Penitentiary (for another burglary). He was also a married man.

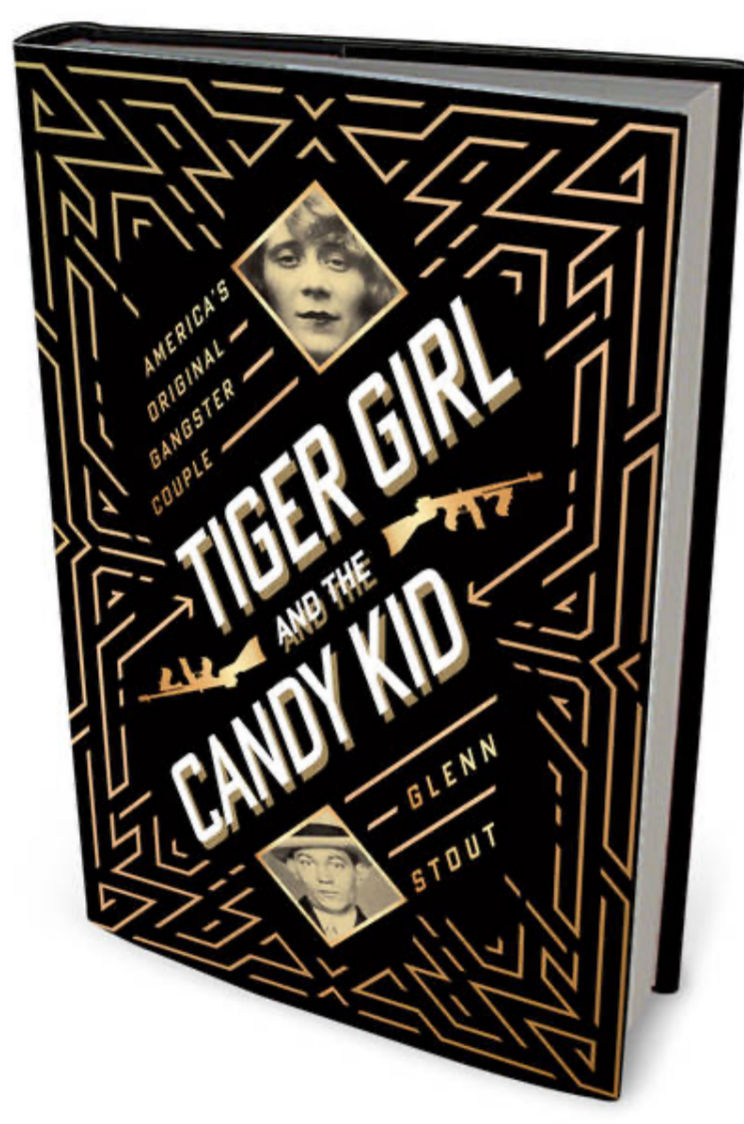


PHOTO: WSJ

TIGER GIRL AND THE CANDY KID

By Glenn Stout
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 368 pages, \$27

Tiger Girl, the love of his short, brutish life, was born Margaret Messler, the lively daughter of German immigrants. Their families lived near each other in a rundown neighborhood, and Margaret had had a crush on Reese, as she called him, ever since they'd gone to the same school. Both longed for the seductive Jazz Age life they'd glimpsed on their brief honeymoon in New York. "They came of age," Mr. Stout writes, "just as a twisted pathway to a new warped version of the American Dream first came into focus, one built not on morality but on money, not on personal freedom but on personal indulgence, not on the promise of the future but on a mouthwatering appetite for the present."

Reform schools and state pens had been Whittemore's crime colleges, but the inflection point of his life came in prison in Maryland when he met the Kraemer brothers—Jake and Leon—veteran safe-crackers waiting for parole. They'd perfected the "can opener," a way of robbing safes by prying off the back panel, but now wanted to move on to elaborately planned jewelry-store heists and bank jobs by thieves dressed like rich customers. The dapper, ruthless and fearless Whittemore, who had

escaped from prison by killing a guard, would provide any needed muscle and eventually run the show. Other members would have assigned roles—reconnaissance, lookout, driver—and the jobs would go off in minutes. A fence would be lined up in advance, the loot would be cashed out, and the gang would scatter and skip town until the next job.

Mr. Stout's meticulous re-creations of those robberies are among the pleasures of the book, especially a brazen daylight mugging of two diamond dealers walking along West 48th Street in Manhattan that netted perhaps \$500,000 worth of stones. Margaret had a key role—retrieving guns and masks stashed in train-station lockers and delivering them to the gang members before each job. With their share of the takings, Reese and Margaret lived the dream, splurging on Cadillacs, custom-made clothes, fancy Manhattan apartments and endless nights at an insider's Midtown cabaret called the Chantee. Her blond hair stylishly bobbed, Margaret decked herself out in flapper finery, and Whittemore, passing himself off as a bootlegger, duked the waiters and cigarette girls with \$100 tips as if there were no tomorrow.

And there wasn't. Working on a tip about a minor member of the gang, police grabbed Whittemore, who by now was known as the "Candy Kid" for the gems and drugs he craved. Margaret was "Tiger Girl," a pop label for any gorgeous, sexually adventurous flapper. For all their supposed finesse, the jobs the Candy Kid pulled off had left a bloody trail. Besides the prison guard he bludgeoned to death in Maryland, two bank employees had been shot dead in a Buffalo robbery, a confederate in Maryland, and a private detective peripheral to the diamond theft turned up drowned.

The pair became famous as the Candy Kid's two circus trials. With the glib aplomb of a sociopath, Whittemore spun endless lies to police and the press and proclaimed his love for Tiger Girl. Turned out like a movie star, she blubbered and fainted on cue as reporters filled their notebooks and the flash powder flared. Thousands of adoring fans thronged the courthouses, first in Buffalo, where Whittemore got a hung jury on the bank deaths, then in Baltimore, where he was convicted in the murder of the prison guard.

On Friday, Aug. 13, 1926, chained and trussed in a black shroud, the Candy Kid, not yet 25, was led to the gallows. With the noose around his neck and a thin smile on his face he told the witnesses, "I wish to say goodbye. That's the best I can wish anyone." Then the trapdoor dropped him into oblivion. Old news now, Tiger Girl lived on until 90. Their spirits can thank Mr. Stout for stylishly rescuing them from obscurity.

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

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Margaret Messler ("Tiger Girl") and Richard Whittemore (the "Candy Kid"). BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (2)

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