



# Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for Modern New Orleans

*Gary Krist*

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**Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for Modern New Orleans** Gary Krist  
From bestselling author Gary Krist, a vibrant and immersive account of New Orleans' *other* civil war, at a time when commercialized vice, jazz culture, and endemic crime defined the battlegrounds of the Crescent City

*Empire of Sin* re-creates the remarkable story of New Orleans' thirty-years war against itself, pitting the city's elite "better half" against its powerful and long-entrenched underworld of vice, perversity, and crime. This early-20th-century battle centers on one man: Tom Anderson, the undisputed czar of the city's Storyville vice district, who fights desperately to keep his empire intact as it faces onslaughts from all sides. Surrounding him are the stories of flamboyant prostitutes, crusading moral reformers, dissolute jazzmen, ruthless Mafiosi, venal politicians, and one extremely violent serial killer, all battling for primacy in a wild and wicked city unlike any other in the world.

## Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for Modern New Orleans Details

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## **From Reader Review Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for Modern New Orleans for online ebook**

### **Sue says**

I had a hard time with this book. It's really 3 books in one. A brief history of the birth of jazz. A series of murders. And the politics of New Orleans in the early 20th century. The author tries to connect those three arenas, but in the end the only connection I felt was that they all occurred during the same time period. The information was interesting, but the attempt to weave it all together fell flat.

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### **Bonnie says**

A better title would have been "Three New Orleans Stories under One Cover: Murder, Reform and Some Jazz Players," as the book begins with a sensational and gory crime, skips into an almost entirely related account of legalized prostitution, tell us in way more detail that I needed to know about a vice reform movement, and finally throws in some anecdotes about jazz players, including Buddy Bolden, Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong. Yes, there are some threads to tie these subjects together -- the musicians played in Storyville saloons, and the reformers targeted the saloon owners and railed against organized crime - but not enough to justify treating them all in one book without the reader feeling jerked around from one topic to the other. Another way to view the book is as a history of three aspects of New Orleans from the 1890s to the 1920s, but that doesn't seem quite right either, as the narrative jumps around chronologically as well. My other quibble with the book is that it's not about the how and why of jazz or jazz musicians. Rather, they just happen to be bit players. There's no attempt to explain why jazz arose from these circumstances or times. I also didn't get a feeling that the author was a passionate jazz fan until I got to the playlist at the end. I enjoy learning more about Italian immigrants in New Orleans. Overall, an interesting but unsatisfying read.

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### **Coleen (The Book Ramblings) says**

As someone who is interested in New Orleans, especially the history within the city, I could not wait to read this novel. Upon reading, I discovered quite a lot about the history, including a lot of tragedy, and just anguish. However, it is a remarkable city that holds its strength, and the history that has made New Orleans what it is today. This is actually a variety of content, so quite a bit to absorb, but nonetheless intriguing. This is a riveting, well-written novel that I could not put down, and thoroughly enjoyed. Gary Krist is an outstanding author, and I look forward to reading his novel, City of Scoundrels.

I received this book through Blogging for Books for reviewing purposes.

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### **Pamela says**

I've been completely and utterly spoiled by Erik Larson when it comes to narrative nonfiction. Well, and then there's Steve Sheinkin, who does the same thing for kids and teen nonfiction. For some odd reason, the

only nonfiction I really enjoy reading is about crime, but it has to be historical crime. Or some sort of disaster. But yes: morbid, I know. I swear I'm not a degenerate. It just looks that way when you see my nonfiction shelf.

I especially like books that discuss the nastiness of the past that was hidden under the lie of the "good old days" and the veneer of respectability. While perhaps fewer people committed truly heinous crimes a hundred or two hundred years ago, said crimes still occurred. And it wasn't that people didn't cheat on each other or have multiple spouses or take drugs--they did, it was just very hush-hush. I find all of this fascinating, particularly in light of the social climate that shaped how people hid and then reacted to the discovery of their crimes.

So to tide me over until I could get my grabby paws on *Dead Wake*, Larson's newest book about the Lusitania, I requested *Empire of Sin* by Gary Krist. First of all, the cover is pure Golden Age decadence. Hubba.

It promises sex! Murder! Jazz! And, while Krist does discuss those elements, the story never coalesces into one lusciously decadent and sinful whole.

Because there's no real plot, but just a chronological progression from then to now, it's rather hard for me to review nonfiction. I'm not a New Orleans scholar, or an expert on brothels, or the origins of jazz, but I would hope that Krist portrayed things accurately-ish (which is really all one can expect about any "true story," since the "truth" belongs to those who tell it).

Here's how I'll grade it: a good nonfiction writer doesn't make stuff up. Krist falls into this category. He dutifully records murders, madams, and the origins of Louis Armstrong. A great nonfiction writer takes the drama inherent in every story and presents it in a way that grabs the modern reader. He or she ties everything together at the end.

The stories Krist tells about the people of New Orleans are much more interesting than the actual book as a whole. Krist tries to tackle a lot at once--even throwing in an axe murderer, for Pete's sake. Yet, oddly enough for a book about the original Sin City, the narration comes off as prudish. Krist talks about the Blue Book and how various brothels offered many services to their clientele, but doesn't tell us why they would be so shocking. I'm no fiend, but what makes these situations fascinating is how they are completely at odds with the morals of the times. If I don't know what the women were doing, how am I supposed to figure out why people were so scandalized?

Once I hit the halfway point of the book, I kept hoping it would all be over soon. Even a rushed return back to the axe murderer storyline didn't help any. Imagine my relief when I realized how much of the book was actually endnotes!

Not a necessary read by any stretch of the imagination. Krist fails to capture the spirit of New Orleans because he's too busy trying to juggle several disparate storylines.

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## **Marti says**

I am automatically interested in any book about my favorite city in the U.S. This one focuses on the years

1890 through 1920, at which time reformers declared war on lawless and immoral behavior and, after 30 years, it looked like they had succeeded.

The mayhem started in the 1890's after Police Chief Hennessy was assassinated by The Black Hand, a loosely organized group of Italian gangsters. The acquittal of the killers ignited mob violence against all Italians for several years. Around the same time, the vice-district Storyville was established to keep prostitution away from most inhabitants of the city. It was there that Jazz flourished and became a menace to white Protestants, who fought even harder to ban the music and to establish Jim Crow laws which, though firmly in place in the rest of the South, were new to New Orleans which had been relatively tolerant of integration.

By 1917 Storyville had closed and along with it Jazz musicians, finding jobs scarce, also left for places like Chicago and Los Angeles. Hard as it is to believe, 1920s New Orleans was about riotous as Salt Lake City. Only during the Depression did the city fathers promote the city's notorious past as a selling point.

This is no dry history book as the author tries to bring the era to life. 1890s New Orleans is particularly interesting to me because it my Italian great grandparents left there for Chicago shortly after the Hennessy assassination. No one really knows the exact reasons they left, but it's pretty clear life would have been difficult for anyone with an Italian last name around that time.

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## **J Tea says**

Thank you to First Reads for a fantastic book that was devoured as quickly as time allowed. The key to appreciating this book, I believe, is in the part of the subtitle that says "and the battle for modern New Orleans". Gary Krist performs something of a tightrope act by weaving together a wide variety of subjects to tell the tale of a city through a half century of tremendous growing pains. Through the stories of some of the city's most colorful characters and happenings Krist deftly tells the tale of the birth of modern New Orleans. The only problem I felt was that at times there was so many names floating around it became difficult to keep my eye on the ball. I gave it 5 stars because there is no way to give it 4 1/2 stars and I felt this would push the average to where I thought it should be. The tale is fast paced and very interesting if a bit scattered. Some may feel that one area or another of the story deserved more attention but I think that would have only bogged down the overall goal. I believe Krist accomplishes what he set out to do as stated in his title very well.

P.S. 7/9/14 Just read in the news that the Mayor of New Orleans was sentenced to 10 yrs. prison time for corruption and taking bribes. Whats old is new it seems.

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## **Julie says**

Empire of Sin: A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder and the Battle for Modern New Orleans by Gary Krist is a 2014 Crown publishing release. I was provided a copy of this book by the publisher, edelweiss, and blogging for books in exchange for an honest review.

New Orleans- What a city! We all know the reputation this city has for being steeped in rich history and of course wild and crazy parties every single night on Bourbon street. Gambling, prostitution, corruption, and crime are still as synonymous with the city as it was back in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

It seems New Orleans was simply destined to define the phrase “Sin City” , giving Vegas a run for it's money.

But, there was much more the city than it's vices. The age of jazz was also as much of a part of New Orleans as it's other aspects. The city was a mess of contradictions at times, was always on the brink of reform, but fought it tooth and nail until the 1920's.

“Who is the axman, and what is his motive? Is the fiend who committed the Gretna butchery the same man who executed the Maggio and Ramano murders and who made similar attempts on other families? If so, is he madman, robber, vendetta agent, or sadist? - New Orleans Daily States- March 11,1919-

But, the very serious tone New Orleans dealt with was the axman. A serial killer responsible for killing his victims with an ax and in an incredibly brutal, bloody fashion. The Italians and the mafia faction had been laying low for a time but it was speculated it was related to that faction, but the records were not kept up so you will have to decide if the suspect is indeed the real killer.

This book takes the period between 1890 and 1920 and leads the reader though New Orleans incredible history of sex, violence, jazz and all manner of vices. The Storyville years, Basin Street , famous madams, and politics, jazz musicians - The Buddy Bolden Band, Jelly Roll Morton, and of course Louis Armstrong- shootouts, mixed race relationships, lynchings, mob rule.. anything goes almost. The reign of vice and sin was a long one, open and unapologetic for the most part. The 1920's bringing reform which actually took hold for the first time.

Absolutely fascinating account of New Orleans! Spine tingling murders, and outrageous characters kept me glued to the pages, shaking my head at the antics of all the major players covered in the book.

The author did a great job of weaving the elements of the serial killer story through out the other more colorful events which took place in this period of time.

I love New Orleans and have visited there and would go back in a heartbeat!! But, I really didn't know anything about this period of time in the city's history. If you like true crime and history or just want to read about real people living unconventional lives in a time and place where people usually swept these issues under the rug, you simply must pick this book up.

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## **Susan says**

Subtitled “A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder and the Battle for Modern New Orleans,” this is a history of the city from 1890 – 1920. However, this is certainly not a dry book of facts; it is as vibrant and fascinating as the city itself. Acting very much as a link, the book begins with the murders, in 1918, of Italian grocers Joseph and Catherine Maggio. These were the work of the infamous Axman and, in order to explain what led up to these events, we are then taken back to the beginning of 1890.

The author skilfully weaves both a history of New Orleans and the battle the city had with crime and lawlessness. In 1890 New Orleans was seen as distressingly exotic, morally corrupt and with intense racial divides. We follow the stories of certain characters, such as Josie Lobrano, a brothel owner who craved respectability and did all she could to shield her young niece Anna from discovering the reality of how she made her money, Tom Anderson the unofficial ‘mayor of Storyville,’ and musicians such as Buddy Bolden and Louis Armstrong. Through their stories, and many others, we learn of the battle with the mafia, kidnappings, racial segregation, vice and the beginnings of jazz. However, this is not a judgemental book in

any way – we sympathise with those whose livelihood was reliant on the sinful side of the city as well as the reformers.

The book ends with the infamous spate of murders by the Axman, with families attacked as they slept and bringing fear to the city. I found this a wonderful read, totally engrossing and full of fascinating characters and some truly shocking stories. If you like this book, you may well also enjoy the excellent novel, “The Axeman’s Jazz,” by Ray Celestin, which is a mystery set around the time of the Axman murders discussed in “Empire of Sin.”

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## **Therin Knite says**

[NOTE: First time reviewing nonfiction.]

When I first read the synopsis of this book, I thought it would make for a good departure from my usual read -- some creative nonfiction. And while Empire of Sin definitely delivered on that front, I thought it had a few weaknesses that really hampered how effective it was as an interesting history of New Orleans.

But let's start with the good: the variety of content.

Krist manages to cover a significant number of topics key to the development of New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From the birth of jazz and black-white race relations to New Orleans' reputation as a city of sin and vice -- this book paints the numerous threads that were gradually woven together over the course of several decades post-Reconstruction to create the very colorful city of New Orleans at the turn of the 20th century. I was impressed at the breadth of topics discussed in this book and how each connected to all others to form a fairly cohesive picture of the city. One that I was totally unaware of -- I've had very, very little exposure to the history of New Orleans prior to reading this book.

So, on that front, this was an interesting read. It gave me some fairly good insight into the development of New Orleans, and I learned quite a bit. Always fun.

However (and here's the bad), this book suffers from a number of structural issues that weakens its overall execution. While the topics discussed always kept my attention, the chapters often abruptly jumped from one topic to the other. The transitions between themes were almost nonexistent, and because this book includes so many historical figures, I frequently found myself confused -- mixing up names and the like -- because by the time the book got back around to continuing on a previous theme, I'd long forgotten most of the people involved. There were simply too many people to keep track of for me to effectively do so with the book jumping around like it did.

I also thought the opening emphasis on crime added little to the overall book. It frames the book as if everything would connect to the mentioned crimes in some way, but most of the topics were almost wholly unrelated, and when the book finally got back around to discussing the crimes, I'd long stopped caring (and almost totally forgotten) about them. Had the focus on the crime not been there, I wouldn't have had the expectations I did going into the rest of my book, and I might have enjoyed it slightly more.

Finally, I found the ending of the book VERY weak. Everything winds down suddenly and without much

detail, which I thought was strange given how much detail went into everything else. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate succinct writing as much as the next reader, but in this case, the ending jumped right over succinct and hit awkwardly abrupt territory. Instead of a big finale, the book just sort of fizzled out.

Overall, I think *Empire of Sin* made for an interesting history of New Orleans, but it suffered quite a bit from its jumbled structure.

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### **Rating**

3/5

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### **...// Disclosure**

I received a free copy of this title from the publisher via Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Shakeia says**

I read *The Axeman's Jazz* earlier this year and when I first opened this, I had a moment of *deja vu*, but it didn't last long. This book was lengthy, though it didn't feel that way, and compelling. Each part of the story is interconnected in such a way you don't really feel as if the book is divided into parts. Enjoyable read.

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### **Scott Rhee says**

New Orleans is a city with its fair share of tragedy and despair throughout its history, and yet it continues to stand back up, brush the dust off, and go on. We can learn a lot from New Orleans.

Historian Gary Krist's fascinating book "*Empire of Sin*" is a rollicking, exciting, and moving account of the Crescent City, a colorful history summed up in Krist's subtitle: "A Story of Sex, Jazz, Murder, and the Battle for New Orleans".

"*Empire of Sin*" highlights the years 1890 to 1920 and focuses on the legendary Storyville, the bustling business district of New Orleans notorious for its brothels, bars, and being the birthplace of jazz music. Sadly, Storyville met its demise in 1917, during the First World War, but its memories---good and bad---live on.

At the heart of the book are several significant figures in New Orleans history, some familiar, some forgotten.

**\*Police Superintendent Frank T. Mooney:** His efforts to put a stop to the violence perpetrated by the Black Hand, an organization of criminals---mostly comprised of Italian and Sicilian immigrants---that was considered by some to be the embryonic form of the contemporary Mafia, made him both a hero and a target.



His final case---the mysterious serial killer known as “The Axman”---would prove to be his undoing as Superintendent. Unable to solve the killings (The Axman murders are still one of New Orleans’ most notorious unsolved cases), Mooney retired in late 1920 and spent his final days happily running a railroad in Honduras until his death in 1923.

\***Josie Lobrano:** One of the more famous madams in Storyville, Lobrano “remade” herself into a wealthy brothel-owner with high connections and a clientele of some of the city’s richest and most powerful.

\***Louis Armstrong:** The world-famous jazz musician with the distinct voice was born and raised in New Orleans. His life and his rise to fame was a rocky one, as he experienced personal tragedies and a rampant racism by a White upper- to middle-class that hypocritically denigrated jazz as “nigger music” associated with the worst vices that the city offered and yet secretly couldn’t get enough of the unique sound.

\***Tom Anderson:** Perhaps the most powerful man in New Orleans during the years described in the book, this boisterous and fun-loving redhead was a savvy businessman who knew how to cultivate the right connections. Referred to by most New Orleanians as the unofficial “Mayor” of Storyville, Anderson owned some of the most successful bars and brothels in the district. He eventually used his money and power to get elected as a State Representative, creating an almost unstoppable political machine. His tumultuous love life (he was married numerous times, all to former prostitutes) and his complete faith in people’s demand for sin would, unfortunately, be his downfall, as Prohibition swept across the land along with a more vocal and politically powerful anti-sin movement.

\***the Axman:** One of New Orleans’ most vicious and elusive criminals, the Axman got his name for his weapon of choice. Nearly a dozen victims---mostly Italian grocers and their spouses, inexplicably---were attributed to the Axman, who would sneak in unannounced into people’s bedrooms and kill them during their slumber. There were never witnesses, and the killer rarely left any hard evidence, so the identity of the Axman was never found. Today, historians and forensic experts suspect that it was likely that two or more perpetrators committed the heinous crimes. Also, some of the murders originally attributed to the Axman are now thought to be the work of copy-cat killers and/or crimes of passion that were staged to look like Axman killings after the fact.

Fans of Erik Larson’s “The Devil in the White City” and Karen Abbot’s “Sin in the Second City” will enjoy Krist’s addition to the growing compendium of historical nonfiction about the sinful pasts of our nation’s cities.

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## **Harold says**

ok...really 3 1/2. It lost points with me because it ended rather abruptly after an exploration of the post Storyville era, but it was a very good history of the city and some of the more important things that occurred there. Thus we get a good picture of the changing sociology of the city, and excellent accounts of the 1891 lynchings, the development of the vice district "Storyville", the axman murders, early mafia and Black Hand activities, etc. The chapters on Jazz are rather generic and there is absolutely NO mention of the city's seminal R&B scene from the 40s through the 70s. That surprised me and it cost the book a star.

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## **Darcia Helle says**

New Orleans has a fascinating history and Gary Krist captures much of it here. In just 30 years, from 1890 to 1920, New Orleans attempted to and almost succeeded in transitioning from a city of vice to a city of virtue. A once racially diverse and tolerant city was turned into a racist, intolerant city. Storyville was created, music floated in the air, and jazz was born.

This book is an easy and enjoyable read. I have never been to New Orleans and was not around in the early 1900s, yet I felt like I was there in the city, at that time, getting to know all these people. The sights and sounds, the people and the politics, all of it came to life as I read.

Krist covers a broad scope of material. He touches on everything from the early development of the city, to its cultural diversity, to Reconstruction, music, crime, political corruption, racism, and the emerging prohibition. We see how all these issues intertwined to spark changes, some good and some disastrous.

While Krist takes on a lot of subject matter, I never felt he overreached or lacked focus. In fact, the wide array of information is what allowed me to immerse myself fully in the era.

The amount of research done for this book had to be overwhelming. Yet it never felt that way as I read. There is no forcing of information or recitation of facts. The content flows smoothly. Only after I closed the book did I realize how much I'd learned.

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## **Lisa B. says**

### **My Thoughts**

This story starts in the 1890s, when a decision was made to create a legalized vice district. The idea was to sequester things like prostitution, gambling, alcohol and music into one area, with the intent that this would make the rest of New Orleans safe and appealing to Northern investors. As you can imagine, there was a lot of politics involved, both for and against the concept. In its heyday, this vice district was the place to go for anyone looking for action. It saw the beginning of jazz music and allowed interracial mingling. And it was these very same issues that brought about its demise in the 1920s.

This was so well written. The author seamlessly writes about this very interesting time period in the history of New Orleans. This was not just a statement of facts and statistics. Mr. Krist chose certain main characters to follow - well know brothel madams, astute businessmen, politicians and jazz musicians. By following along with them, we get the little nuances and side bar stories that make a historical piece so much more interesting. I really did find this to be an intriguing piece of New Orleans's past and enjoyed the book from beginning to end.

My thanks to Crown Publishing, via Netgalley, for allowing me to read this in exchange for an unbiased review.

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## **Bob Schnell says**

Advanced Reading Copy review

Gary Krist's limited history of the city of New Orleans really only spans from about 1890 to the end of prohibition. There are brief nods to the city's early history and current post-Katrina rebuilding, but the emphasis is on the era of that neighborhood of vice known as Storyville. Much like red-light districts throughout the world, New Orleans progressive reformers thought that by limiting certain "sinful" activities to a defined area, the rest of the city would be shielded from their influence. Sex for sale and the jazz music that attracted customers to the saloons and brothels are famous pieces of the heritage of New Orleans that attracts tourists today. The murder part is less well-known, but, as with all serial killers and Mafia-style rub-outs, it makes for engrossing reading.

All the famous names you'd expect are represented along with some surprises. Though I wanted some more details for some of the background stories, this book will serve well as both a beginner's guide to New Orleans history and a jazz lover's ode to the birth of a truly American sound.

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