



## Summary

The multigenerational tale of three families whose paths collide one summer night in 1960 with the murder of a police officer.

Independence Day weekend, 1960: a young police officer is murdered, shocking his close-knit community in Stamford, Connecticut. The killer remains at large, his identity still unknown. But on a beach not far away, a young Army doctor, on leave from his post at a research lab in a maximum-security prison, faces a chilling realization. He knows who the shooter is. In fact, the man—a prisoner out on parole—had called him only days before. By helping his former charge and trainee, the doctor, a believer in second chances, may have inadvertently helped set the murder into motion. And that one phone call may have sealed a policeman's fate.

Alvin Tarlov, David Troy and Joseph DeSalvo were all born of the Great Depression, all with grandparents who'd left different homelands for the same American Dream. How did one become a doctor, one a police officer and one a convict? In *Genealogy of a Murder*, journalist Lisa Belkin traces the paths of each of these three men—one of them her stepfather. Her canvas is large, spanning the first half of the 20th century: immigration, the struggles of the working class, prison reform, medical experiments, politics and war, the nature/nurture debate, epigenetics, the infamous Leopold and Loeb case and the history of motorcycle racing.

Following these threads to their tragic outcome in July 1960, and beyond, Belkin examines the coincidences and choices that led to one fateful night. The result is a brilliantly researched, narratively ingenious story, which illuminates how we shape history even as we are shaped by it.



## About the Author

Known for tales that are deeply researched and artfully told, Lisa Belkin has spent a career covering American social issues as a daily journalist, a magazine writer, and a book author.

During nearly 30 years at The New York Times, she was variously a national correspondent (based in Houston), a medical reporter, a Contributing Writer for The New York Times Magazine, and the creator of the Life's Work column and the Motherlode blog. She has spent the past decade in the digital realm, in senior positions at HuffPost and Yahoo News.

Belkin is the author of four books, most recently *Genealogy of a Murder: Four Generations, Three Families, One Fateful Night*, which has received uniformly rave reviews including from such publications and The New York Times, NPR and The Wall Street Journal; it has been described as “riveting”, “magestically sweeping,” “hauntingly powerful,” and “a hell of a great read.”

Her previous books were *Life's Work*; *Confessions of an Unbalanced Mom*; *First, Do No Harm*; and *Show Me A Hero*, which was made into an HBO miniseries of the same name and nominated for, among other things: a Golden Globe, Satellite, Critics Choice and NAACP Image Award for acting; a Writers Guild and Scriptor Award for best writing; and a Critics Choice and Satellite award for best miniseries.

In other media, Belkin was the host of “Life's Work with Lisa Belkin”, on XM Radio, as well as a regular contributor to Public Radio's *The Takeaway* and NBC's *Today Show*. Since 2015 she has taught reporting, writing and narrative non-fiction at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

*Courtesy of Columbia Journalism School*

## Discussion Questions

1. How do the complex family histories of the three men involved in these events influence their actions? Do you think their choices were predetermined by their ancestry, or did they have the power to shape their own destinies?
2. The book explores the idea that seemingly minor decisions can have far-reaching consequences. How does Belkin illustrate this concept, and what does it suggest about the nature of responsibility?
3. How do the social and political events of the early 20th century, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the rise of the counterculture movement, shape the lives of the individuals in the book?
4. The author delves into the nature vs. nurture debate, particularly in the context of Joseph DeSalvo's troubled life. How does she balance the influence of genetics and environment in shaping an individual's behavior?
5. Dr. Alvin Tarlov plays a key role in the events leading up to the murder. How does the author portray his character? Is he a victim of circumstance, a well-intentioned man who makes a fatal mistake, or something else entirely?
6. How did the murder of Officer David Troy have long-range impact on the families involved? Does Belkin suggest that this tragedy has a lasting impact on the community and society as a whole?
7. The author utilizes genealogical research to uncover the intricate connections between the three families. How does this approach enhance our understanding of this story? Did you enjoy the narrative flow the author used to tell the story? Why or why not?

## Reviews

Journalist Lisa Belkin goes deep on a tragic 1960 shooting in this outstanding true crime saga. From primary sources including diaries, letters, autobiographies, and her own interviews, Belkin retraces the steps that led ex-convict Joseph DeSalvo to kill Stamford, Conn., beat cop David Troy during a bar holdup. At the time, DeSalvo was on parole from an armed robbery sentence, during which he became friendly with a doctor named Alvin Tarlov, who conducted experiments on inmates where DeSalvo was housed. Tarlov had faith that DeSalvo was rehabilitated and supported his release, paving the way for his deadly confrontation with Troy. After meticulously detailing the crime, Belkin flashes back to trace several generations of the Troy, Tarlov, and DeSalvo families, each of whom emigrated from Europe starting in 1906. She invites readers to wonder whether, had their ancestors taken different paths, the trio might have wound up in a less deadly place. Belkin's judicious research parlays into an engrossing, expansive narrative that reads like a real-life Greek tragedy. It will spur contemplation and debate in an audience far beyond just true crime diehards. (Publishers Weekly)

The entangled history of the people, incidents, and systems that led to the murder of a police officer in 1960. On July 7, 1960, a convict out on parole killed David Troy in a holdup gone wrong. Lisa Belkin begins her story decades before, tracing the twists and turns of four families to the moment they entwined in that tragic event. From the years before the Great Depression through the following decades of war and economic growth, we come to know not just Troy and his killer, Joseph DeSalvo, but also their ancestors and Dr. Alvin Tarlov, whose support led to DeSalvo's being granted a second chance. Obsessed with "how any of us become who we are," Belkin inspects the inflection points that push an individual—and their family tree—into one plot rather than another. As generational stories overlap, the author masterfully builds hand-wringing anticipation of the fateful evening despite having already revealed its shape. Wading into the details of characters' personal dispositions, successes and failures, and attempts to correct course, she creates a rich backdrop against which to probe the implications of punishment, rehabilitation, and recidivism in America's system of imprisonment and parole. She deftly manages the particularities of a wide catalog of individuals and their historical and cultural contexts, teasing out pertinent insights into how America treats its prisoners; the tenuous position of parolees and the system surrounding them; and the messy connections among fate, dispositions, and outcomes. If never decidedly answering some of her questions about the case, Belkin creates an impressive work of in-depth narrative journalism that artfully conveys the countless paths a life can follow and exposes the instinctual human desire for alternative endings. An absorbing, thought-provoking inquiry into what it means to change and defy the odds. (Kirkus Reviews)