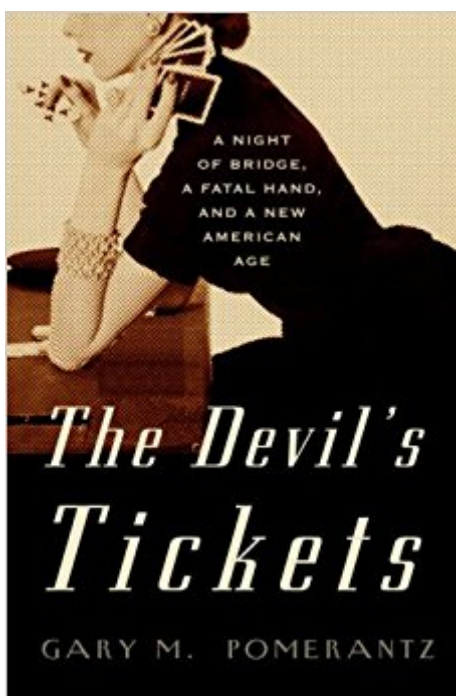


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# The Devil's Tickets: A Night Of Bridge, A Fatal Hand, And A New American Age



## Synopsis

Kansas City, 1929: Myrtle and Jack Bennett sit down with another couple for an evening of bridge. As the game intensifies, Myrtle complains that Jack is a “bum bridge player.” For such insubordination, he slaps her hard in front of their stunned guests and announces he is leaving. Moments later, sobbing, with a Colt .32 pistol in hand, Myrtle fires four shots, killing her husband. The Roaring 1920s inspired nationwide fads—flagpole sitting, marathon dancing, swimming-pool endurance floating. But of all the mad games that cheered Americans between the wars, the least likely was contract bridge. As the Barnum of the bridge craze, Ely Culbertson, a tuxedoed boulevardier with a Russian accent, used mystique, brilliance, and a certain madness to transform bridge from a social pastime into a cultural movement that made him rich and famous. In writings, in lectures, and on the radio, he used the Bennett killing to dramatize bridge as the battle of the sexes. Indeed, Myrtle Bennett’s murder trial became a sensation because it brought a beautiful housewife—and hints of her husband’s infidelity—from the bridge table into the national spotlight. James A. Reed, Myrtle’s high-powered lawyer and onetime Democratic presidential candidate, delivered soaring, tear-filled courtroom orations. As Reed waxed on about the sanctity of womanhood, he was secretly conducting an extramarital romance with a feminist trailblazer who lived next door. To the public, bridge symbolized tossing aside the ideals of the Puritans—who referred derisively to playing cards as “the Devil’s tickets”—and embracing the modern age. In a time when such fearless women as Amelia Earhart, Dorothy Parker, and Marlene Dietrich were exalted for their boldness, Culbertson positioned his game as a challenge to all housebound women. At the bridge table, he insisted, a woman could be her husband’s equal, and more. In the gathering darkness of the Depression, Culbertson leveraged his own ballyhoo and naughty innuendo for all it was worth, maneuvering himself and his brilliant wife, Jo, his favorite bridge partner, into a media spectacle dubbed the Bridge Battle of the Century. Through these larger-than-life characters and the timeless partnership game they played, *The Devil’s Tickets* captures a uniquely colorful age and a tension in marriage that is eternal.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Crown (June 9, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1400051622

ISBN-13: 978-1400051625

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.1 x 9.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 47 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #694,309 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #204 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Bridge #2624 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > True Crime > Murder & Mayhem #5511 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > United States

## Customer Reviews

The innocuous game of bridge turned deadly in Kansas City, Mo., in 1929 when Myrtle Bennett apparently shot her husband dead in a dispute over a game. In recounting this tale, Pomerantz introduces an ensemble of 1920s characters ranging from Ely Culbertson, who helped fuel the new bridge craze, to Fightin' Jim Reed, the U.S. senator from Kansas City who successfully defended the gorgeous Myrtle Bennett at trial. As promoted by Culbertson, bridge was a zone of equality between men and women "and the stage on which marital spats could escalate; it was, said Culbertson, a way to defuse the petty inhibitions and tensions of daily married life. Pomerantz (Wilt, 1962) offers a thoroughly researched historical tapestry with a mass of amusing anecdotes. But toward the book's end, he swerves into his own fascination with Myrtle Bennett as leading to his historical inquiry into these events. The most eloquent explanation of the similarities between a bridge partnership and marriage comes not from Pomerantz but from family therapist/bridge addict Frank Bessing, quoted in the book: the main conflict is often, 'Who is in charge?' (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

• "Bridge and murder, two of mankind's most engrossing pursuits" in *The Devil's Tickets* Gary Pomerantz intermingles both to create a crackling portrait of a vibrant past age and a singular moment when a bullet trumped all. • "Erik Larson, author of the New York Times bestseller *The Devil in the White City* "A great story, a real drama, a perfect window on American culture" and best of all, beautifully written with the lightest touch. • "Susan Orlean, author of the New York Times bestseller *The Orchid Thief* "Nowadays people tend to think of the game of bridge as old and somewhat fuddy-duddy, but once upon a time it was young and sexy. What a delight to read Gary M. Pomerantz's engaging account of how all this got started. • "Louis Sachar, author of the National Book Award winning *Holes* "This remarkably entertaining tale reveals important truths about bridge, such as that the best players must check their egos at the door and that mental endurance and intimidation can be pivotal. But it also reveals truths about life, such as that women

need a venue where they can compete with men and that a rare confluence of social factors can create men like Ely Culbertson, who was only too happy to be Johnny-on-the-spot when there was money to be made or fame to be won. Anyone who's played bridge, or ever been the least bit curious about the game's appeal, will love this book. • "Bob Hamman, eleven-time bridge world champion" Masterfully reported, beautifully written, and all but impossible to put down. • "Jonathan Eig, author of the New York Times bestseller Luckiest Man

I read Gary W. Pomerantz's book THEIR LIFE'S WORK about the Steelers. Loved it. Bought this one, THE DEVILS TICKET, A Vengeful Wife, A Fatal Hand, And A New American Age, loved it too. The 1920's was a special time in American History, so much fun, but several sensational trials, among these, The Bridge Murder Trail. This book addresses both the trial and the rise of the card game bridge in the USA. Interesting and with great detail. Pomerantz takes us step by step through this little chapter in history. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

A terrific and enthralling story beautifully and seamlessly intertwining related tales: the rise of contract bridge and its mesmerizing promoters Ely (and Jo) Culbertson; a fatal bridge game and the ensuing trial in Kansas; an aging senator and litigator; and, most important, the changing pace and mores of America herself. The author's presentation is riveting and the prose is pellucid and pleasant to read. Pacing is excellent, one finds oneself writing a screenplay for this almost subconsciously. Not since Doctorow's Ragtime have so many threads of early twentieth century U.S. been woven together so elegantly. Knowledge of bridge is not necessary at all to enjoy; I don't play but found the primer at the back enough to follow. There were two minor weaknesses. First, there was perhaps a bit of a dearth of reproductions of primary sources. I'd have liked to have seen reproductions of the full text and images of many of the newspaper and magazine articles discussed. Of course, the book would then be six hundred pages but the material is so interesting, it would be worth it. Arguably, a section on the role of evidence law and in the trial, and how it changed as well, would have been interesting. Second, the epilogue section, following the predictable entropic demise and fading of the main players, went on a bit too long and was a bit slow for my taste. Anyway, this book seems to me likely to become a classic.

I like reading history and stories about interesting people, and so really enjoyed this book. Tells parallel stories of the major booster for contract bridge (and for himself) and of a woman who fatally shot her husband after a acrimonious bridge game. Ely Culbertson decided to become the world's

foremost expert on contract bridge and thus make his fortune. And, he did so, only to fall into a pathological megalomania later. Myrtle Bennett was a formidable woman who got slapped once too often by his trigger-tempered husband. She shot him after he repeatedly slapped her in front of guests, after a badly-played bridge hand during which she had called him a "bridge bum." I won't reveal the results of her salaciously covered trial here. However, the author does an amazing job in tracking her history down (years after her death) and filling in some blanks left in her life after the trial. Underlying all this, the book goes over the history of bridge in America....I think we forget how popular this game was at one time. This book was well-written and fast-paced. I do not play bridge and was afraid that he would digress in boring card-by-card details of historic bridge hands, but he covers major "matches" that Culbertson set up without resorting to such.

Great book.

The book is a good read for those who want to know more about Culbertson (weirdo) and the bridge craze that swept the world. The mystery/murder part is also interesting. I enjoyed the politics that touched on Truman's early career. Overall, for me, the book was a little slow. I think bridge players would enjoy it the most. We are circulating it among our couples bridge group and my wife's bridge group. Yes, I would recommend it.

I liked this non-fiction book. I think one would like it much better with a knowledge of bridge playing but its not required to enjoy it. Having lived in Kansas City, I recognized some of the places mentioned. It gave a goo history of the people who were impacting in the development of the game of contract bridge. It was interesting, giving a good overview of life in early in the 20th century, especially the 1920's and during the depression. A good story of murder and the trial afterwards with its surprise ending.

Gruesome tale. Sure glad my brothers warned me beforehand that there were some unbelievably awful parts in the book. There was plenty of interesting history as well. Glad I read this book.

I don't enjoy cards and have never played bridge. My lack of any understanding of even the fundamentals of bridge made me hesitate before I bought this book. However, you really don't need to undertand or appreciate the game to find this an engaging social history of America in the 30s.(If you do want to learn about contract bridge, the author does provide the basics.)I was reminded a

little of Larsen, who takes a larger social story and juxtaposes a crime story, as he did in Thunderstruck and Devil in the White City.

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