



## *Hauptmann*

Study Guide/Lobby Packett

Prepared by Jennifer Shook, dramaturg

“Fame is a kind of death.” –Anne Morrow Lindbergh

“What Bruno needs is a second act.”—Jack Benny

### **Dramaturg’s Note:**

Maurice Sendak, creator of the children’s classic *Where the Wild Things Are*, claims that every monster he’s drawn springs from early fears instilled in him by the kidnapping of Charlie Lindbergh in 1932. Sendak’s stories achieve what we can only seek—an ending, that final scene where children nestle snug in bed, safe as houses.

We look to the architecture of our homes as tangible stand-ins for the security of our nation. After the shootings at Columbine High School, Littleton ADT reported a rise in sales of home security systems. In 1932 the newspapers of a society helpless in the throes of a depression depicted monstrous hands menacing houses where children slept. The Lindbergh house became symbolic of every family, and every parent needed an answer, an end.

For a complete ending, we need to believe that only a monster could harm our children. At Richard Hauptmann’s trial in 1935, prosecutor David Wilentz asked, “What type of man would murder the child of Charles and Anne Lindbergh? He wouldn’t be an American. No American gangster ... ever sank to the level of killing babies.” We find it comforting to make the strangers with candy as strange as possible. They are Arabs, paramilitary extremists, “sexual deviants,” in Susan Smith’s case a “black man in a knit cap” ... or, in 1935, a German immigrant.

This search for a monster leads to a death penalty inequitably enforced upon people of color and the poor. Hauptmann’s wife Anna, for the rest of her life, refused to say “with liberty and justice for all” in the Pledge of Allegiance. Our justice system intends to protect the innocent from the “lynching crowd” Lindbergh described outside the Flemington, NJ courthouse—but we’re afraid to doubt the tale we want to hear. Having reached an era beyond shining heroes, we take the narrative/protection of our community into our own hands. John Logan’s play gives the force of memory to Richard Hauptmann, but more importantly gives it to *us*, so that we must determine for ourselves our struggle for justice. We have yet to reach the end.

## **Background:**

**The Kidnapping:** On March 2, 1932, the world-renowned aviator Charles Lindbergh (arguably the first great celebrity idolized for his solo flight from New York to Paris in 1927) made world headlines again. The Lindberghs' twenty-month old baby had been kidnapped from their home near Hopewell, NJ. Although the "snatch racket" has been common since the twenties, the Lindberghs' public profile made the Lone Eagle's "Eaglet" the most famous kidnap victim since Charley Ross in 1874. Unlike the Rosses, the Lindberghs had every resource at their disposal, and were immediately swamped by press, police, and hordes of hoax leads.

The original ransom note left on the nursery window bore a secret symbol, to weed out the real communications. A letter with the matching symbol reached Lindbergh through Dr. John F. Condon, a retired Bronx schoolteacher and volunteer intermediary. Over a month followed of messages passed through coded ads in the paper. Finally the ransom drop, complete with latenight cemetery rendezvous and messages under flowerpots, brought Condon a note with the baby's whereabouts—but the directions yielded nothing. In May, the body was found about 4 miles from the Lindbergh house.

**The Investigation:** The investigation of the kidnapping has been held up as both the pinnacle of modern forensics and as the epitome of sloppy police work. The New Jersey, New York, and federal agents often didn't cooperate. Fingerprinting failed to find useable prints. Though many pictures are taken, no casts were made of the footprints found below the nursery window; some say there were 3 sets, some say 2; some say one set was Anne Lindbergh's from earlier in the day, while others disagree. Meanwhile Arthur Koehler, the federal "Sherlock Holmes of wood" devoted himself fulltime to the analysis of the three-piece collapsible ladder found near the house, tracking the wood by type and sawmark to a mill, then back to a Bronx store by Nov. 1933. His biggest puzzle was "Rail 16," which has nail holes suggesting a previous use.

The police found Mrs. Morrow's maid Violet Sharpe to be "high-strung" and vague about the details of her date on Mar. 1 (possibly because of the romantic relationship with the Morrrows' butler). A search of her room yielded nothing except a bankbook with a high balance. The baby's nurse Betty Gow's Norwegian boyfriend, Red Johnson, was also investigated, as was one of the Morrrows' chauffeur. Many conspiracy theories revolve around these staff members from the Lindbergh and Morrow households, especially Violet Sharpe, who committed suicide after several interrogations.

**Money:** The average per capita income in 1932 was under \$1500. Although the press reported the Lindberghs to be worth \$2-\$3 million, much of that was in nearly worthless aviation stocks. Unwilling to continue a bad history of money with Anne's mother (who had just inherited over \$2 million from her deceased banker-diplomat husband) Charles borrowed from J.P. Morgan & Co.

In 1932, the U.S. operated on the gold bullion standard. Legislation in 1933-34 moved away from dependence on gold, giving greenback currency a certain, fixed value. Anticipating this move, the Lindbergh advisors prepared the ransom money in gold notes, which will be easier to trace.

**The Suspect:** Although many of the gold bills from the ransom were collected, the case “broke” on Sept. 15, 1934, when a gas station attendant on the Upper East side, suspicious of a \$10 gold note for 98-cents’ worth of gas, penciled the customer’s license number on the margin of the bill. The 1930 blue Dodge was registered to Richard Hauptmann in the Bronx. On Sept. 19, 1934, police arrested Hauptmann and found a \$20 ransom note on his person. At Hauptmann’s refusal to confess, he was charged with extortion. Handwriting analysts compared Hauptmann’s writing to the ransom notes. Investigators found \$13,760 in ransom bills in Hauptmann’s garage. Meanwhile Hauptmann stuck steadfastly to the story that he found the money in some boxes he was storing for his friend Isidor Fisch, who had since died in Germany.

**The Trial:** The “Trial of the Century” began on Jan. 2, 1935, under Judge William Trenchard, and an estimated 70,000-1000,000 people descended upon Flemington. Locals sold toy ladders and “genuine locks of Baby Lindy’s hair” on the street. The sheriff made a “gentleman’s agreement” with five newsreel companies to secretly film the trial. Long lines vied for entry, including many celebrities.

The version of the kidnapping (a single perpetrator through a second-story window) put forward by the prosecution arose from political necessity—kidnapping was not a capital crime, but murder-felony was—and a single member of a conspiracy could not be tried alone. Hauptmann was convicted, and executed after several appeals in April 1936. NJ Gov. Harold Hoffman killed his career lobbying for Hauptmann. Anna Hauptmann continued to fight to clear her husband’s name until her death. Her surety and others’ lingering doubts (like those of Clarence Darrow and Eleanor Roosevelt) have brought about some releases of evidence and inspired a host of commentaries, including books accusing family, servants, Fisch, and various gangsters—or claiming that the crisis was faked to distract the public from the Depression. More recent commentaries have focused on the inadequacies of the trial itself. By modern standards, Hauptmann’s treatment, the prepping of the witnesses, and the secrecy with evidence would hardly be tolerated. At this point, however, it seems unlikely that anyone will be able to prove either Hauptmann’s guilt or innocence.

**The Death Penalty:** In 1977, the UN passes resolutions urging all nations to abolish or limit the death penalty. Several states find executions to be more expensive than life imprisonment, prejudicially applied, and not a deterrent to violent crime. The Stanford Law Review finds that 350 innocent persons were mistakenly convicted of capital crimes between 1900 and 1985, 23 of which were executed.

**Anti-German Sentiment:** In the buildup to WWI, the U.S. government launched a publicity machine which, through *Red, white, and blue* pamphlets and Four Minute Men speeches at movie intermissions, brought anti-“blond beast” sentiment into every American community. During WWI, sauerkraut was dubbed “liberty cabbage,” and hamburgers “liberty sandwich.” After their harsh defeat in WWI, Germany’s new democratic and centralized Weimar constitution took a beating from economic crises, which led to extreme and violent nationalist groups. One such group, the German Workers’ Party, became the National Socialist party under the leadership of Adolf Hitler in 1920. His rabid anti-Semitic, anti-Communist approach might have lost power with Germany’s slow economic recovery, but the world depression in 1929 sent Germany back to mass unemployment and political chaos. The rising tides of war in Europe reinvigorated American distaste for all things Teutonic in the mid-1930s.

**The Lindberghs:** Charles Lindbergh, ironically, made himself one of the strongest isolationist voices opposing the U.S. entry into WWII, plummeting him from hero to villain, especially for his friendships with the German air staff and with the controversial anti-Semitic scientist Dr. Carrel. Not allowed to fly officially, he trained flyers in the Pacific. After the war he turned his public work to environmental advocacy. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, meanwhile, published several bestsellers, including *Gift from the Sea*.

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