



The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of Nellie May Madison (Women in the West)

Kathleen A. Cairns

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“Crack shot.” “Enigma woman.” “Good with ponies and pistols.” “A much-married woman.”

What if such an unconventional woman—and the press unanimously agreed that Nellie May Madison was indeed unconventional—were to get away with murder? Shortly after her husband’s bullet-riddled body was found in the couple’s Burbank apartment, police issued an all-points bulletin for the “beautiful, dark-haired widow.” The ensuing drama unfolded with all the twists and turns of a noir crime novel.

In this intriguing cultural history, Kathleen A. Cairns tells the tale of Nellie May Madison, the first woman on Death Row in California. Her story offers a glimpse into law and disorder in 1930s Los Angeles while bringing to life a remarkable character whose plight reflects on the status of women, the workings of the media and the judiciary system, and the stratification of society in her time. Cairns’s re-creation of the case from murder to trial to aftermath also casts an eye forward to our own love-hate affair with celebrity crimes and our abiding ambivalence about domestic violence as a defense for murder.

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