



Give a Boy a Gun: A True Story of Law and Disorder in the American West

Jack Olsen

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Claude Dallas Jr. was raised in Upper Michigan and Ohio by a father whose philosophy was "give a boy a gun and you're makin' a man." After high school, the young man went to the rugged border area of Idaho, Oregon and Nevada and worked as a cow-puncher and handyman on several ranches. But his dream was evidently to become a 19th century style mountain man and so he turned to poaching, often killing animals even though he had no need for the meat. In 1981, he killed two game wardens in front of a witness. On the run for 15 months, he was eventually captured in a shootout and found guilty of manslaughter in a singularly bizarre trial.

Give a Boy a Gun: A True Story of Law and Disorder in the American West Details

Date : Published August 1st 1986 by Dell (first published 1985)

ISBN : 9780440131687

Author : Jack Olsen

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Crime, True Crime, Nonfiction, Mystery, Westerns, Audiobook

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From Reader Review Give a Boy a Gun: A True Story of Law and Disorder in the American West for online ebook

Carrie says

This was a highly readable book about the story of Claude Dallas, the culture of guns, hunting, and trapping in the rural American west, and the failings of our criminal justice system.

The author is a compelling storyteller, so the actual storyline about Claude Dallas's life, the murders, and the trial is easy to read and engaging. Additionally, the author interviewed so many people and painted such a vivid picture of the actors involved in the case that I felt as if I had a real glimpse of the culture in northern Nevada and southern Idaho.

This book was written awhile ago, but it is nonetheless relevant today, given the current situation with Cliven Bundy and his free-roaming cattle in Nevada. Claude Dallas held similar views about the government's role in land management, hunting, and trapping, and styled himself a live-off-the-land mountain man (who clung to this self-image despite the fact that he needed people to bring him provisions, including pudding, while he "wintered" "alone" in the wilderness). The most fascinating part of the book is the description of the juror deliberations and the "Dallas cheerleaders" who showed up in court to support a guy who gave less than compelling evidence of self defense. So many people rallied around Dallas, jurors included, because they believed that a guy with such a charming and folksy disposition had to be justified. I'd be curious to see if these same people, who liberally used racist language, would feel similarly if a non-white person had committed the same act. The book definitely exposes some of the enormous problems with juror bias.

One final note. I am giving the book four stars because the content is great, but I'd give it zero stars if I were judging it based on the Kindle formatting. I've read other older books that have clearly been converted into e-reader format, but this one is far and away the worst conversion I've ever seen. The formatting errors and typos make the book almost unreadable at some points, and one read-through by a semi-literate editor would've caught 99% of the errors.

Eric says

Like true Crime? Read Jack Olsen. Olsen takes actual criminal cases, and develops them so that they read like an intense novel rather than a dry biography or court report. "Give a Boy A Gun" is the true case of Claude Dallas, Jr., the trapper who murdered two Idaho Fish and Game officers in 1982. I find particular interest in this story because 1) This happened in the corner of the world where I now live, and 2) I remember seeing this on the news when I was an adolescent. The most interesting, and amusing, aspect of this story for me was the revelation that while the federal authorities were out in the cold, snowy, high desert country where Idaho, Oregon, and Nevada come together, searching high and low for the self-sufficient, wilderness-surviving Mountain Man, Dallas himself was hunkered down in a friend's single-wide trailer somewhere in north Nevada.

lisa h. says

It took me a while to get into the book. Once the trial started, I was hurrying to know what would happen and also so nervous about the the jury and judge. Some language and crude quotes to show the character of some of people.

Mel says

I found this book very interesting to read. Granted, the information about the murders was based on the account of Jim Stevens who eye-witnessed the account. With this in mind, one must remember that all accounts mentioned are from actual people and the information provided may not be wholly reliable. Regardless, I felt drawn into the story and felt it believable. As someone who has lived and/or visited almost all the places mentioned in the book where Dallas either hid or lived himself, I felt a connection to the story as I could picture it all. I was also extremely discontented with the outcome of the trial and felt completely mystified by the juror's viewpoints. It clearly set a precedent that peace officer's lives are not worth very much if you're a guy with a pleasing character who has a gun.

All in all, a good read. Too bad Dallas has been released from prison.

Dave O'Brien says

Incredible true story, well-written

One of the best true crime books I have ever read. Superbly researched and written to keep the tension up and the ending a surprise. A must-read for anyone interested in true crime and the modern American West.

Robin says

Much more interesting than I expected. Pleasantly surprised

Jeremy Johnston says

Buy the print version!!!

Well written book but the Kindle version is full of typos. An interesting read about how the myths and legends shape perceptions about, and within, the modern American West.

Patrica Rickaby says

Hero or Killer

The book was in need of much better proof reading(numbers in the middle of words, words split in parts and

at times words were misplaced completely). It was hard to believe this was written by Jack Olsen whose other books I have read and enjoyed. Other books by him I read quickly, learned from, enjoyed, and looked forward to reading more. This one took forever to read due to the many mistakes. The friends of this "hero" should have had legal charges against them for aiding and abetting him in his crimes. He was no hero or Wild West throwback. He used people.

Anthony Ambruso says

Frighteningly good story

But reading about this stuff leaves me sad for the victims and those who commit these crimes. Having served on jury myself, these stories leave me uneasy about a jury trial. They are a mess.

patricia says

An interesting non-fiction read. Reminiscent of a Zane Grey novel. This was an event in the 1970's that took place in Idaho, Oregon and Nevada. The story is incredible and leaves the reader with an OMG reaction. Recommend it for off the beaten path reading. Mr. Olsen has written other books that whet my interest.

Natascha says

I live in owyhee county idaho and I wish I had read this book sooner. The writer did a good job of telling the story from all angles. To my knowledge. I would recommend this book!

Cody VC says

as a rule i try to stay away from "true crime" books because there's usually an icky titillating element to them, but i picked this up as a free book from the library years ago (most likely because of the cover design) and was in search of something to read before bed. it's clear pretty early on that this is more fairly classed as journalism rather than tabloid (non-)fiction, due to an emphasis on documentary research and interviews, and that helped keep me reading. there is a discernible bias in the narrative voice, but because it was easily identified i could discount if i chose. when reconstructing events the prose has a tendency to aim for "hardboiled", which may or may not work for you (i found it unintentionally amusing). wrt reconstruction, i would have liked to see olsen be more explicit about his sources: we don't find out until later, for instance, that the account of the murders is based solely on one eyewitness. i have other reasons to believe that the judge's conclusion was an accurate reading of dallas&the facts, but this still bothered me; it's a dangerous blend of journalism and "pop history" tactics. (and how did he get all of that information about the jury proceedings, including that one disqualification? just interviews? more transparency about reporting methods would have been appreciated.)

three stars because i honestly could not put it down (so much for bedtime reading, oops) but with the

aforementioned caveats.

p.s. a couple of entertaining editorial failures, both on the same page: "pogue had taken away one of pogue's guns" and "indeed, faithfully, this would come to pass" (instead of fatefully). there were a couple more, but these were the most egregious.

Brett says

An interesting story that takes place in my neck of the woods, more or less. This is an engaging account of Claude Dallas's murder of two Idaho Fish and Game officers in the early 1980s, his time on the run, and his trial. As an attorney, the trial and sentencing is particularly interesting. Assuming that Olsen's account is more or less accurate, the Dallas trial is a sobering example of the flaws in our legal system, including the risks associated with a trial by one's "peers." Moreover, the debate over whether Dallas's actions were justified (a debate that continues today) is a reminder that this country--and the West in particular--is strangely diverse, particularly from ethical and intellectual perspectives. Here, on essentially undisputed facts, some folks see an instance of justifiable homicide while others see the premeditated murder of two law enforcement officers.

Jack Olsen is a solid writer, but the book could have used more aggressive editing. There are sections where he flogs the characters' backgrounds too heavily. But, overall, a good read.

Paul says

I don't usually review true crime books on Goodreads, but this one was exceptional. It shows that in the West, around the nexus of eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, and northern Nevada there still is a wild west. A complete sociopath wantonly murders two Fish and Game officers who are going to cite him for poaching and illegal trapping. But, as sociopaths often are, he's so demure and charming on the stand that he develops a coterie of groupies and is able to charm most of the courtroom and most of the jury that he's a law-abiding, sweet guy. (His last name is Dallas, so his groupies are called "The Dallas Cheerleaders.")

It sounds as if he committed two assassinations, but defense witnesses abound who say the officers were jerks and probably deserved it. The narrative of the killings gets horribly confused, even including the testimony of a friend of Dallas's who was there on the scene when it happened. An audience of hard-bitten, law-hating trappers and their wives try to get Dallas released on justifiable homicide, even though one of the F&G men only drew his sidearm as he was falling back after getting hit by Dallas.

The jury goes crazy, deliberating for a record number of days in that county. Only one woman holds out for first-degree homicide, and the jurors get her dismissed from the jury on some pretext. The ultimate verdict is manslaughter, but the judge essentially sets that aside and gives Dallas a lecture on what a criminal he is and gives him 30 years.

The most fascinating part of the book is the insight it gives into the frontier mentality even in this modern day, as well as the insight it gives into a slick sociopath almost getting off for two assassinations ("I had to shoot them in the head because that's what I always do to animals that I have leg-trapped.").

My only complaint about this book was how it was formatted on my Nook. It had random numbers popping up in the middle of words; it had letters pushed together so that you couldn't figure out the word. It was one of the sloppiest copy-edited books I've ever read. But it provides a lot of insight into the Western frontier mentality and the wiliness of sociopaths.

Ter says

Where do I begin? My parents read this book quite a few years ago and recommended it to me. I've been looking everywhere for it since it's out of print. They actually knew some people at the time that they read it who actually thought this Claude Dallas was some kind of hero or something. I personally think he was a cold blooded, calculated murderer. He should have been sentenced to death, and at the very least sentenced to life in prison. It's worth the read. I definitely recommend it.
