



# **The Death of Innocents: A True Story of Murder, Medicine, and High-Stake Science**

*Richard Firstman , Jamie Talan*

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Unraveling a twenty-five-year tale of multiple murder and medical deception, *The Death of Innocents* is a work of first-rate journalism told with the compelling narrative drive of a mystery novel. More than just a true-crime story, it is the stunning expose of spurious science that sent medical researchers in the wrong direction--and nearly allowed a murderer to go unpunished.

On July 28, 1971, a two-and-a-half-month-old baby named Noah Hoyt died in his trailer home in a rural hamlet of upstate New York. He was the fifth child of Waneta and Tim Hoyt to die suddenly in the space of seven years. People certainly talked, but Waneta spoke vaguely of "crib death," and over time the talk faded.

Nearly two decades later a district attorney in Syracuse, New York, was alerted to a landmark paper in the literature on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome--SIDS--that had been published in a prestigious medical journal back in 1972. Written by a prominent researcher at a Syracuse medical center, the article described a family in which five children had died suddenly without explanation. The D.A. was convinced that something about this account was very wrong. An intensive quest by a team of investigators came to a climax in the spring of 1995, in a dramatic multiple-murder trial that made headlines nationwide.

But this book is not only a vivid account of infanticide revealed; it is also a riveting medical detective story. That journal article had legitimized the deaths of the last two babies by theorizing a cause for the mystery of SIDS, suggesting it could be predicted and prevented, and fostering the presumption that SIDS runs in families. More than two decades of multimillion-dollar studies have failed to confirm any of these widely accepted premises. How all this happened--could have happened--is a compelling story of high-stakes medical research in action. And the enigma of familial SIDS has given rise to a special and terrible irony. There is today a maxim in forensic pathology: One unexplained infant death in a family is SIDS. Two is very suspicious. Three is homicide.

## The Death of Innocents: A True Story of Murder, Medicine, and High-Stake Science Details

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# **From Reader Review The Death of Innocents: A True Story of Murder, Medicine, and High-Stake Science for online ebook**

## **Pegeen says**

the investigation into SIDS and some of the scams and money grabbing quacks. One step at a time over into medical fraud masking murder.

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## **Ruby Spector says**

### **A lot of medical info**

A little too much medical info for the average person. More about the families would have been better. Interesting but I am a nurse.

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## **Jade Proffitt says**

This is an incredible story of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and the medical research that went into the classification of SIDS indelibly intertwined with the alleged murder of five young children, the oldest of which was two years and four months old. The two stories are interwoven with such skill that it is hard to determine where one leaves off and the other begins.

The New York Times writes, The Death of Innocents "...seamlessly weaves the tales of the earlier and later murder cases, separated by two decades, with the complicated scientific and social issues, the many disparate personalities, documents, interviews and dramatic moments. The book is paced like a thriller, and it will be read like one." And it does. Mostly.

The middle third of the book does get bogged down in the exquisite detail that the authors give about the research portion of the story. There is a lot of infighting in the medical community and there is a bunch of back and forth. There is a ton of interesting information if you can get through it all. This section frequently feels like a textbook, and I caught myself wondering if I would be tested on the information at one point. It reads like a required reading for a class. But it isn't for very long and isn't the majority of the book.

The opening third and the closing third of the book are written with suspense and a general feel of whodunit. The characters are well portrayed and evocative. Each one pulls feelings from the reader that she may not want to give out. Sometimes it's anger. Sometimes it's pride. Sometimes it's despair. Sometimes it's elation. The emotions run deep in this story.

I enjoyed this book tremendously and I was hooked from the beginning. If medical mysteries and true crime are genres you enjoy, please pick up a copy of this book ASAP. You won't be sorry.

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## **Michael Gerald says**

A riveting, shocking, true story of how a woman murdered 5 of her children and how a doctor unwittingly helped covered up the crime by coming up with a fraudulent science that masked the real cause of the children's deaths. A real page-turner and it was all real.

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## **Zella Kate says**

I remember coming across excerpts from this book in Reader's Digest when I was about 8 or 9. (I was a weird kid.) The story of Waneta Hoyt, a New York housewife who smothered all of her children over a period of several years and in the process directed SIDS research into a dangerous tangent for several years when her explanations of the deaths were unquestioningly accepted as medical evidence, haunted me for years. Whenever a story about people killing their own children popped up, I'd immediately think of Hoyt.

But I never got around to reading the complete book on the story until this past week. It's fascinating but grim reading. The authors painstakingly researched the story and interviewed pretty much every person connected to the case. Hoyt is front and center, but she's really not the focus of the story. Instead, her story is grounded within the context of the SIDS research she affected.

I thought the researchers did a good job of balancing their discussion of SIDS with infanticide. They're sensitive to the concerns of parents whose children really did die of SIDS while also pointing out the horrifying number of cases that were overlooked. They also talk extensively about how a lot of the research that Hoyt sparked was not properly vetted. I appreciated that the authors were able to talk about complex scientific studies and concepts but still keep it understandable for laypeople like myself.

This is an interesting, compelling tale of both medicine and crime.

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## **Tiffany says**

The topic itself is both fascinating & horrifying! And there is so much that we the public would never have known about the 'behind the scenes' reasons for the SIDS diagnosis. However, the bulk of the book drags with too much agonizing detail over the doctors' research & becomes mind-numbing in areas. A wonderful topic, an incredible portrayal of the parents committing infanticide, but a little less could have made this a better read.

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## **Linda says**

Astonishing and griping non-fiction. A Munchausen by proxy murderer of five of her own infants went undetected for two decades, in great part due to a single flawed medical journal article. The back-story of the relentlessly ambitious M.D. who turned a blind eye to the "unthinkable" notion that a mother could murder her babies, was as frightening as the infanticides themselves. Rather than investigate the obvious (and many were voicing their concerns) he chose to advance his own career by fostering the presumption that SIDS ran in families. Enter the money-hungry medical device industry, and soon anxious mothers were purchasing

expensive apnea monitors in the hopes that they could rescue infants from near-miss events. The authors did a meticulous job of research for this book. The chance event that started the investigation, the politics of academia, the frustration of the many investigators and observers, and finally the trial itself are documented in great detail. Those who remember the media focus on SIDS in the 70s and 80s will find this a jaw-dropping account. Forensic pathologists now accept that one unexplained infant death in a family is SIDS, two is suspicious, and three is homicide.

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## **Diane Parente62@gmail.com says**

This was an amazing, stranger than fiction, well-documented investigation into the intertwining stories of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and infanticide. The authors take us through a lengthy, complex, but very readable account of how one scientist mistakenly led medical and legal experts to believe in the theory that SIDS could be prevented by monitoring infants thought to be at risk. This unproved theory also led him to the mistaken belief that SIDS ran in families. He and the considerable part of the scientific community who "bought" his unproven theories led to child murder (of as many as five or more children in a family) to go undetected and unprosecuted.

The story begins with a father who was killing his children for insurance money under the guise of SIDS deaths. This case brought the "seminal" paper connecting SIDS with apnea to the attention of a Syracuse attorney who began a search for the names of the family with 5 SIDS deaths who were what the apnea theory of SIDS was based on. The lawyer's suspicion was deepened when he discovered one of the children was over 2 years, old, far beyond the age where SIDS would be a factor. Thus began the case of the more than 20 year old murders that finally led to....well, the result is not really the story but rather all the legal and medical maneuvering and research that ended in a blow by (interesting) blow account of the resultant trial.

The book is clearly the result of lengthy research and the intense literary effort required to weave the many strands into a cogent compelling story for which the authors won an Edgar award. The saga reveals much about the elusive causes of SIDS, how one scientist's ego propelled a false theory into "gospel truth, and spawned the profitable industry of baby monitors marketed to anxious, well meaning parents. The background of the family with five dead children is explored in depth as are the stories of many drawn into the legal and medical aspects of the case.

The book was published in 1997 so there has been much progress in differentiating SIDS deaths from homicide but the authors shine a light on the tightrope that must be walked in determining the cause of infant deaths. To their credit, the authors acknowledge the devastation caused by a SIDS death in the family while leaving some important insights into how sympathy and professional blindness cannot be allowed to leave some children's deaths unchallenged and the perpetrators brought to justice thus saving the lives of subsequent endangered babies.

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## **Paul says**

This is a very well-written but l-o-o-o-o-n-g book that narrates a historical situation in which Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) intersects with a psychological disorder called Munchausen by proxy to illuminate a curious slice of cultural history in the United States.

I think I can write this without spoiling the denouement, since it IS historical fact and a reader might likely read about it from news sources besides this book. To me, the fascinating thing is that it relates the story of a psychology researcher about SIDS when he writes a study that shows that, according to his experiments and observations, SIDS can be predicted by sleep apnea episodes in infants. The study makes the scientist the leading figure in SIDS research in the U.S., and his ego seems to rise in proportion to his fame to the point that if he hasn't been involved in a SIDS study, it's likely inaccurate or inauthentic. The problem that he has is that he's such a great salesman for his own idea that he starts to neglect the statistical basis for his thesis, which is that SIDS occurs in families and one death by SIDS is a likely predictor of another death in that family.

The huge irony of this viewpoint is that the clinical study on which the researcher bases his entire argument is one of a family who suffers five consecutive crib deaths. His deductions on how this could happen or how it could have been prevented is rendered moot when the issue turns out to be not one of bad luck, but intentional infanticide. One mother has four infants and one toddler die on her when no one else is there to witness the death, and from this story an entire theory is based on how crib deaths happen. But as it turns out, the mother turns out to have smothered her children because she has Munchausen by proxy syndrome, in which she injures or kills her children to draw more attention to herself, since she is greatly dependent of the attention of others for her own self-esteem.

So there are two conflicting themes here: The first is one of the increasing hubris of the researcher who thinks he is ultimately the single national authority on SIDS, and the increasingly flimsy case that represents his thesis--flimsy because the children have been murdered by their mother and don't represent SIDS cases at all.

The book is a long, long read, but it's very insightful both for the revelations of human nature as scientists fight with one another to be right, lawyers do the same thing, and the truth turns out to be totally different from what either group is projecting. The truth, however, is not discovered until the entire SIDS phenomenon turns out to be much different than first thought.

I'm not making this sound very exciting, but the book is actually fascinating as investigators disclose that the emperor's new clothes turn out not to exist.

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### **Anna says**

You will not put this book down and you will never forget it. Guaranteed.

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### **Michelle See says**

I would almost class this as a textbook - too long, convoluted & not an enjoyable read.

Certainly pin points the 'God ' syndrome that medical people can practice.

How many babies have we allowed to be misdiagnosed because doctors were 'god' personified?

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## jeff says

A fascinating, distressing, draining, frustrating, triumphant beast of a book. Sarah was warned that it got a little dense regarding the SIDS information (that she took that to be a good sign that i would enjoy it speaks to her deep understanding of me), and it does, but it is also a true crime story as well as a courtroom drama with one of the most intriguing (not to say deeply disturbing) antagonists i've encountered in quite a while. I got this book for xmas and i just finished it yesterday, so know that it's a slog, but one that rewards the mud.

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## j says

At least once, I was reading on the subway and missed my stop because I was so sucked-in that I forgot to look up! I haven't been this fascinated by a book in I couldn't tell you how long. I was expecting it to be, you know, interesting enough and all, but not anywhere near this enthralling. Most long-ish true crime books, I find myself about 100 pages in thinking "Are you serious? They are going to drag this out for 200 more pages when everyone already knows exactly how it turns out?" but this, I just wanted it to last forever.

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## The Pfaeffle Journal (Diane) says

Sometimes you just can't make this stuff up, truth is always stranger than fiction. There are two stories in *The Death of Innocents*:

The first is about Dr. Alfred Steinschneider who based his clinical research on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) on the actions of a serial murderer. In 1970 and 1971 Waneta Hoyt lost two children, Steinschneider used these deaths to base his SIDS Research on sleep apnea as a cause of those deaths, he also indicated that it could be inherited trait. In October of 1971 Steinschneider published a paper in the *Pediatrics Journal*.

For the next two decades, the scientific and medical industries built a multi-million business of diagnosing SIDS as sleep apnea. Clinics were established that received generous funding from both the government and private sources, private enterprise stepped up to manufacture the home infant monitors, everyone got rich and famous but the babies kept dying.

The second story is about a prosecutor that had dealt with another suspicious SIDS death that found and doggedly followed Waneta Hoyt until he was able to bring her to justice.

The husband and wife writing team, do an excellent job of weaving the two stories together. There is no judgment in their writing, it is presented in a factual but readable way. It is an outstanding piece of investigating journalism.

Additional Links:

[Wikipedia](#)

[Murderpedia](#)

This review was originally posted on The Pfaeffle Journal

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## SAM says

*"Years later, it seemed a perverse irony that the unearthing had begun with the conception of a baby"*

Although Waneta Hoyt is the headlining murderer in *The Death of Innocents* this fantastic book isn't just about her. Partly a study of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and partly an insight into a behavioural disorder called Munchausen by Proxy, this is one of the more hard hitting true crime books I've read.

In 1972 Dr Alfred Steinschneider published a paper that theorised a connection between sleep apnea and SIDS. He even designed a machine which supposedly alerted worried parents if their child was suffering a bout of sleep apnea thus preventing the cot or crib death. Before and even after the article was discredited Steinschneider accrued a great deal of fame and wealth. What wasn't realised until many years later was that these 'SIDS' cases could actually have been murder.

This introduces the book's other subject of Munchausen by Proxy (MSBP), which primarily is where the mother will fabricate or cause medical symptoms in their infant child in an attempt to seek sympathy. Simply put: hurting their child to seek attention. But as the authorities and indeed the nurses and doctors discover it's difficult to prove.

The book was an astonishing lesson in subjects I wouldn't have thought of reading into and just proves the world is a messed up and complex place. Mothers murdering their children isn't anything unique in history but when you add a complicated mental disorder like MSBP not only is it horrifying but at the same time it's pretty sad. I was left with a feeling of equal parts anger and melancholia.

For anyone who enjoys a long drawn out investigation with an infinite amount of scientific intrigue, involved detective work and emotional depth then I recommend this book.

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