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Review of *Kansas Charley: The Story of a Nineteenth-Century Boy Murderer* By Joan Jacobs Brumberg

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Kansas Charley: The Story of a Nineteenth-Century Boy Murderer. By Joan Jacobs Brumberg. New York: Viking, 2003. xii + 273 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth, \$15.00 paper.

In *Kansas Charley: The Story of a Nineteenth-Century Boy Murderer*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg analyzes the issues involved in capital punishment of juvenile offenders through the case study of Charley Miller, a teenager who committed a double murder and was executed in Wyoming in 1892. Brumberg portrays Miller as the pitiable product of a consumerist society that drew harsh distinctions between haves and have-nots. The media, fascinated by violence resulting from the abuse of alcohol and weapons, helped shape public perceptions of how to punish youthful offenders. While Miller's case was far from typical, it still reflects problems with juvenile justice in America from the nineteenth century to the present.

Orphaned at age six, Miller spent his adolescence at the Children's Aid Society of New York where he was frequently punished because of continuing bedwetting. He eagerly absorbed dime novels promoting violence and masculinity and, after an unsuccessful placement with a Minnesota farm family, began to crisscross the country on the rails. Gang-raped by a group of hobos in a boxcar near Omaha, Miller was so scared he bought a gun for protection. Soon after, when a couple of middle-class young men tramping on a lark rejected his overtures of friendship, a destitute and intoxicated Miller shot them in the head as they slept and stole some of their valuables. After a sensational three-day trial in Cheyenne, Wyoming, whose media coverage garnered him

national attention, Miller was convicted of first-degree murder. A year and a half later, the seventeen-year-old was hanged despite repeated pleas for clemency from various groups.

Brumberg effectively contextualizes Miller's story within the history of the state, region, and country. His case reveals the anxieties over industrialization and growing class divisions that affected all Americans, even those in rural areas. For instance, in the same year that Miller perpetrated his crime, persistent disputes between big operators and small-scale cattle ranchers erupted into armed conflict in Wyoming in what's come to be known as the Johnson County War. This event created larger political issues for both the courts and the governor of Wyoming, and ultimately affected Miller's fate.

Brumberg makes her stance on the practice of executing juveniles obvious and often seems to attribute Miller's crimes more to societal evils than his own personal agency. Despite this shortcoming, her narrative is compelling and provides an intriguing historical context for a contemporarily relevant topic.

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