Little glamour in this gangster saga

Bonnie and Clyde
The Lives Behind the Legend
By Paul Schneider

Henry Holt. 320 pp. $25

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Ever since the 1967 premiere of Arthur Penn's movie, whenever we think of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow we see Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty. A poetic ode to the Great Depression, *Bonnie and Clyde* turned a pair of two-bit crooks into icons, drop-dead gorgeous, bumbling, brutal and yet innocent, each a mirror of the other's ambition to be a celebrity.

Freelance writer Paul Schneider, by contrast, is in hot pursuit of the "real lives" of the outlaw couple. The truth, however, is elusive. Schneider probably knows that his inclination to accept eyewitness accounts at face value will not sit well with professional historians. Perhaps that is why he feels compelled to say that in his *Bonnie and Clyde* "nothing has been created out of whole cloth, and everything has a reasonably acceptable pedigree as a 'fact.' "

Schneider uses several techniques to establish both verisimilitude and drama. He tells his story in the lovers' own voices, addresses them directly, steps back as an omniscient narrator, and supplies more BLAMs and POWs than a hundred Batman comic books.

The result at times approaches self-parody. "What the flying hell are the three of you doing back in Middletown, Ohio?" Schneider asks. "That's really the question. Jesus Christ!" And then again, when Clyde and his buddy burn a car to prevent the cops from tracing it: "Now you both stand back and flick that butt into the mess. Whoah. Ka-boom. Can you believe it? Har har har. Almost burn your eyebrows off, that will. . . . too bad you can't stick around and watch it go when whatever's left in the tank ignites."

Although *Bonnie and Clyde* is short on analysis, Schneider does capture the dreary existence of Depression-era gangsters. Between bank jobs, the Barrow gang spent long stretches of time in jail, lying low, and on the lam, "buying bandages, stealing doctors' bags out of cars, stealing cars, stealing money to buy gas and sandwiches to get them through to the next state."

Easily bored, Bonnie couldn't bear it when Clyde left her at home. She amused herself on the road by fixing up her hair, putting on makeup, wearing long dresses, high heels, and getting someone to take a picture of her pointing a shotgun at Clyde's stomach.

Bonnie was fatalistic. She knew that the cops would keep on coming. "Some day they'll go down together," she wrote, of herself and Clyde. "They'll bury them side by side / To a few it'll be grief / To the law a relief / Pa...
But it’s death for Bonnie and Clyde.” The last time she was in Dallas, Bonnie asked her mother not to have a wake but to let her rest peacefully in her own bed on the night before she was buried. "And another thing. When they kill us, don't ever say anything ugly about Clyde. Please promise me that."

Much as Arthur Penn scripted it, the end came on a bright Wednesday morning, May 23, 1934, eight miles south of Gibsland, La. Following a tip, six members of a posse lay in ambush. A few seconds after Bonnie and Clyde drove toward a friend's house and stopped with the motor running, the car, looking like a colander, rolled into a ditch. Lawman Frank Hamer reached in, turned off the ignition, and looked at the bodies of the two "despicable killers," nearly torn to pieces.

As a truck towed the car into town, and later, back home in Dallas, hundreds and then thousands gathered, reaching in to grab for souvenirs, one man using a penknife to lop off Clyde's ear. Fighting a losing battle against celebrity culture, Mama Parker, Schneider tells us, insisted "on separate funerals and separate graves in separate graveyards."

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