Review: 'American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst,' by Jeffrey Toobin

NONFICTION: Jeffrey Toobin provides an often riveting account of the 1974 abduction of Patricia Hearst and her puzzling decision to join her kidnappers.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune  |  AUGUST 5, 2016 — 11:19AM

On Feb. 4, 1974, eight revolutionaries who called themselves the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnapped 19-year-old Patricia Hearst, granddaughter of fabled newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. In response to the kidnappers’ demands, Patricia’s parents announced a multimillion-dollar initiative to provide free food to poor people in Oakland and San Francisco. In April, the SLA released a videotape in which Patricia Hearst pledged allegiance to the SLA. Before long, the woman who now called herself Tania was photographed wielding a machine gun during a bank robbery.

In “The Heiress,” Jeffrey Toobin, a staff writer at the New Yorker, senior legal analyst at CNN and author of many books, provides an often riveting account of Hearst’s abduction, her “conversion,” her year as a fugitive, her arrest and her trial, set in the context of what he calls “America’s hallucinogenic moment.”

"American Heiress" contains sharply etched portraits of an extraordinary cast of characters. Donald DeFreeze (Ginque), the general field marshal of the SLA, Toobin writes, “was almost the opposite of a master criminal; he was most inventive in finding ways to get caught.” DeFreeze, Toobin writes, was a “junior varsity” George Jackson, not nearly as strong, smart, charismatic and competent as the author of “Soledad Brother.” Despite its occasional tactical proficiency, DeFreeze's SLA, which never exceeded nine members, was strategically inept.

Like everyone else who has written about Hearst, Toobin struggles to explain why she changed — or appeared to change — after she was kidnapped. During her captivity, he suggests, the SLA’s arguments — her father was a capitalist pig, while the SLA was fighting for a better world; the FBI posed the greatest danger to her safety, and feminism offered women equality, opportunity and justice — began to make sense to a spoiled young woman who had been “semi-suicidal” before she was abducted.

Most persuasively, Toobin maintains that before, during and after her time in captivity, Hearst was a rational actor: “Even in chaotic surroundings, she knew where her best interests lay.”

Hearst’s defenders, then and now, Toobin adds, have tended to be liberals with a view of people as “plastic, protean, moldable” products of their environment, who should not be held solely responsible for their actions; her critics have endorsed the conservative view that all individuals, rich or poor, should not be allowed to blame circumstances for their choices in life.

All that said, when Toobin reveals that Hearst “didn’t turn out to be a revolutionary; she turned out to be a mother,” you are still left to wonder what this young woman (who did not cooperate with the writing of this book) really thought about her captors, her parents, capitalism, communism — and herself.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

American Heiress
By: Jeffrey Toobin.