

Starring...John Dillinger

Bill Walker

Brian Anthony

DeLarge Books (Nov 11, 2021)

Softcover \$17.95 (352pp)

978-1-73587-964-2

A rough-and-tumble reformed criminal experiences the glitz and glamour of 1930s Hollywood in the charming novel Starring...John Dillinger.

In Bill Walker and Brian Anthony's alternative history novel *Starring...John Dillinger*, the notorious criminal surrenders to the FBI and sets off down a surprising new path to become a movie star.

The record shows that John Dillinger evaded capture for a year after his string of robberies; FBI agents shot and killed him outside of the Biograph Theater in 1934. In this imaginative twist on those events: the week before that fateful encounter, Dillinger calls on a trusted journalist, Robert, to help him surrender. Robert brings his eleven-year-old daughter, Lizzie, along to the meeting; she is the one who recounts Dillinger's story later.

Bookended by Dillinger's appearances at the Biograph Theater, this alternative history tale plays with variations on past events to sustain interest. Here, the surrender goes off without an issue, and Dillinger begins a jail sentence. In an attempt at penance, and to prevent young people from glorifying him, Dillinger offers to film a public service announcement that shows him suffering in jail. His performance stuns Hollywood executives and audiences alike, and studio heads petition J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI to release Dillinger before his sentence is complete. Hoover sees an opportunity to use Dillinger to hype the FBI, so he agrees. Dillinger becomes one of the studio's most popular stars, though his successes are tainted by his past, and an assassin follows his every step.

Lizzie's narration merges her childlike adoration of Dillinger with a retrospective humanization of him. She portrays Dillinger first as a suave gentleman thief who stole, but who wasn't malicious in doing so. As he transitions from being a criminal to being a movie star, she recounts his clashes with uptight Hollywood elites, most often because of his brash personality. These showdowns inject fun into the story. And when Dillinger's old girlfriend appears, Lizzie discusses the stark differences between his past and present selves. Their relationship is an engaging distraction from the sinister events brewing beneath the surface. Throughout it all, Dillinger's determination to escape his past is a compelling narrative force.

Between day-to-day activities on movie sets, the book's scenes concentrate on Dillinger's intense personal dilemmas. He evades his enemies; some become allies; some FBI agents even become script writers. And a friendship blooms between Dillinger and a retired agent that's based on mutual respect. But some secondary character development leans too much on repeating information, as of James Cagney's swagger and drunken demeanor.

With the flavor of classic films, *Starring...John Dillinger* is a charming novel set among the glitz and glamour of 1930s Hollywood, which is experienced by a rough-and-tumble reformed criminal.

JOHN M. MURRAY (October 21, 2021)

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