



Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin: Madness, Vengeance, and the Campaign of 1912

Gerard Helferich

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A New York Times Bestseller!

John Flammang Schrank—a lonely Manhattan saloonkeeper—was obsessed with the 1912 presidential election and Theodore Roosevelt. The ex-president's extremism and third-term campaign were downright un-American.

Convinced that TR would ignite civil war and leave the nation open to foreign invasion, Schrank answered what he believed to be a divine summons, buying a gun and stalking Roosevelt across seven Southern and Midwestern states, blending into throngs of supporters. In Chattanooga and Chicago, he failed to act. In Milwaukee, on October 14, Schrank crossed TR's path again—BANG!

Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin is the dynamic unfolding account of the audacious attempt on Roosevelt's life by a lone and fanatical assailant. Based on original sources including police interrogations, eyewitness testimony, and newspaper reports, the book is above all a fast-paced, suspenseful narrative.

Drawing from Schrank's own statements and writings, it also provides a chilling glimpse into the mind of a political assassin. Rich with local color and period detail, it transports the reader to the American heartland during a pivotal moment in our history, when the forces of progressivism and conservatism were battling for the nation's soul—and the most revered man in America traveled across the country campaigning relentlessly against Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Socialist Eugene V. Debs in what historians agree was the first modern American presidential contest.

Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin: Madness, Vengeance, and the Campaign of 1912 Details

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From Reader Review Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin: Madness, Vengeance, and the Campaign of 1912 for online ebook

Rachel says

This book does not claim to be a comprehensive historical profile of Roosevelt and Schrank, rather a narrative retelling of the events leading and after Schrank's assassination attempt in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It is a compelling read and captures the characters and settings well. As a Milwaukeean, I'm pleased to know that this historic event hasn't fallen completely out of memory.

I'd prefer more detailed footnotes/endnotes so that I can better follow the sources and the historical record. I am slightly disappointed that the author admits to performing some of his research remotely, using digital historic newspaper collections, especially since Milwaukee Public Library owns the court transcripts of Schrank's appearances in Milwaukee Municipal Court. Serious T. R. scholars will explore more dense material, but this is a good addition to T. R. lore for generalists.

Matt says

This depicts one of the great episodes in the Teddy Roosevelt legend: the time he gave a speech after being shot. The work reads quickly and provides alternate stories of Roosevelt and his would be assassin. Somewhat similar in set up to Devil in the White City.

Carol says

Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin: Madness, Vengeance, and the Campaign of 1912 is an amazingly well written and researched book. I have read about President Roosevelt and read his famous book The Rough Riders. I am very familiar with his early life as invalid and his urge to be a man in the west. But this is a chapter in his life that I knew zilch about.

Theodore Roosevelt was a larger than life character, who I would have loved to meet if I had lived in his times. This book brings out his unique personality with all its flaws and brilliance. From this book, I also formed a picture of his assailant, the loner, John Flammings Schrank. He spent a great deal of his time reading newspapers that had a political bent and drinking in bars. John Schrank thought of TR as being a power mad villain who wants to be King. A man who thought shooting TR would be good for the country and that people would eventually thank him.

At first, I thought that this book would be mostly about the man who tried to kill TR but it was a much more in depth picture. The author sets you back in history and the places that the men were. It also gives you a detailed but succinct history of the four men who ran in this unusual presidential race and why they ran.

The research makes us vividly aware of John Schrank's disturbing dream of President McKinley rising from his coffin and directing Mr. Schrank to kill TR. We learn about President Theodore Roosevelt's reaction to being shot, how bad it was and the effect on his family. We learn about the rift between President Taft and him and about the Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party. We learn about President Woodrow Wilson.

This book was better than I expected besides the tremendous amount of research about the assassin and the people running for election, we also have insight into their personalities.

I highly recommend this book to all people interested in United States history and especially President Theodore Roosevelt.

I received this book as a win from FirstReads but that in no way influenced my thoughts and feelings in this review.

Aaron Million says

Helferich tells an interesting, though not particularly contextual, story of the attempted assassination of ex-President Theodore Roosevelt during the latter stages of the 1912 presidential campaign. This is an episode that has received surprisingly little attention over the years (somewhat similar to the attempted assassination of FDR in Florida while he was President-elect in early 1933). Even Patricia O'Toole, who wrote a very good book about TR's life after the White House *When Trumpets Call*, devotes only four pages to the entire assassination and its aftermath. Kudos to Helferich for researching this fascinating event.

While Helferich tells the story well, it seems to be more from the angle of how a reporter would write it - a step-by-step retracing of John Flammang Schrank's (the would-be assassin) moves leading up to when he shot TR in Milwaukee. Schrank was a Bavarian immigrant who had migrated to the U.S. at the age of 13, and by 1912 had no living family here and no friends. Supposedly, he had a vivid dream shortly after the assassination of William McKinley, with McKinley sitting up in his casket and pointing out Roosevelt as the mastermind behind the plot, and imploring Schrank to avenge his death. Schrank does nothing about this until Roosevelt attempts to run for a then-unprecedented third term in 1912. Schrank, with the image of the McKinley dream serving as some kind of bizarre impetus, decides that nobody should be president for more than two terms, and thus he will kill Roosevelt to prevent this from happening. Helferich then alternately follows Schrank and Roosevelt throughout September and October 1912, the former stalking the Bull Moose in the South and then up into the Midwest before seizing his chance in Milwaukee, the latter as he campaigns exhaustively across the country, running on the newly-founded Progressive Party.

While Helferich kept the story interesting, he seems to lack the vividness and panache displayed by someone such as Erik Larson or David McCullough. It was not riveting; the build-up the event seemed somehow anti-climactic. Schrank shoots Roosevelt once, the bullet going into the right side of his chest, breaking a rib, and lodging next to his right lung, but fortunately not puncturing it. Roosevelt's stenographer, Elbert Martin, vaulted over the car door and jumped on Schrank before he could apparently fire a second shot. I am left wondering how Martin would have been able to do that before Schrank could have gotten his second shot off from his .38 caliber revolver. Did Schrank hesitate after the first shot? Helferich does not say. Was Schrank ever asked about this? We do not know as Helferich never mentions it. A second shot may very well have killed Roosevelt; the first shot most likely would have (or at least caused serious internal damage) if not for being partially stopped by Roosevelt's thick speech manuscript wrapped up in his suit coat pocket, and his metal spectacles case.

Incredibly, Roosevelt went on to give an 80 minute speech at the Milwaukee Auditorium right after the shooting! Strangely, Roosevelt did not seem to ever have much of a reaction to being shot; in fact he earlier had all but assumed that someone would try to kill him at some point. Even his daughter Alice seemed

surprised that it had taken so long for someone to try to assassinate him. Schrank is ultimately found insane and thus incompetent to stand trial. This was determined based on a five person panel's report of psychiatric and psychological examinations done on Schrank. Helferich does not venture an opinion as to what exactly was asked of Schrank in the interviews conducted by the mental health experts (back then they were called "alienists"). He also does not say if he thinks that Schrank truly was insane, or delusional, or both.

Obviously, someone stalking someone such as Schrank did, and coming up with the supposed dream/vision of the dead McKinley ordering him to avenge his death, was not thinking rationally. Yet, Schrank bided his time over a period of several weeks, and put quite a bit of thought into trying to position himself in the best possible space so as to accomplish his mission. Roosevelt himself said that he did not think that Schrank was crazy as he shot him in Wisconsin, a state that did not have the death penalty, versus some of the Southern states where he probably would have been killed by the citizens immediately after firing at Roosevelt.

Grade: B-

Francesca Salerno says

I recently finished TR's autobiography (downloaded from Project Gutenberg onto my Kindle -- anyone who has not explored Project Gutenberg is missing a treasure trove of tens of thousands of free books, all of them with copyrights that expired before 1922 and that are now in the public domain).

Of course TR has been much in the news of late because of Doris Goodwins fabulous exploration of his relationship with William Howard Taft, but that leaves plenty of room in "book space" for lesser known writers like Gerard Helferich to explore smaller, more tightly defined episodes in the great president's life.

Helferich's book succeeds so well because he is able to add the tension of a murder mystery (the creepy stalking of TR by his would-be assassin, John Shrank).

Most interesting of all to me were the putative reasons the deranged Shrank used to justify his presidential murder -- many of them, such as TR's overweening desire to declare war on any nation that gave affront, in his view, to the United States, eminently sensible. This book teaches us that TR is more fun to live with as an historical figure than as a sitting president.

This book will appeal to TR fans, but as a standalone book for someone who knows little or nothing about our 26th president, it may require a bit of additional background context to make it clearly understood.

Ashton says

Helferich's *Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassain* follows the exciting presidential campaign of 1912 between incumbent Republican William Howard Taft, Democrat Woodrow Wilson, former president and creator of the Progressive party Theodore Roosevelt, and Socialist Eugene Debs.

The book focuses primarily on the campaign trail of Roosevelt in the weeks leading up to his assassination attempt by New Yorker John Flammang Schrank. Angered by Roosevelt's desire to seek a third term as president, Schrank embarks on what he believes to be a holy mission to intervene.

With borrowed money and an illegally purchased gun, Schrank follows Roosevelt's route through the Southern and Midwestern parts of the country before finally shooting the candidate outside of the Gilpatrick Hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

From his calls to keep gun wielding Schrank safe from the outraged crowd, to his determination to deliver a 90 minute speech complete with a bleeding chest wound, to his banter with the hospital nurses, Helferich captures the Bull Moose's dynamic and robust personality with ease.

Helferich weaves a gripping narrative full of in-depth period detail. Several black and white photographs and a map following the travel routes of both Roosevelt and Schrank complement the writing and really pull the reader into the story.

This book is a must-read for anyone interested in one of the most exciting election years in the history of the United States.

*I received a copy of this book for free through the Goodreads First Reads program.

John Walker says

Very well written non-fiction account of John Schrank's obsessed chase of third part candidate Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, in order to stop him from winning a third term to the Presidency. The finale of Roosevelt's shooting in Milwaukee on October 14 of that year possibly ruined his chances for the third term. The story carries on to what happened to all the candidates and Schrank's survival to see FDR get a third term. Great story, well done.

Phil says

Excellent narrative and compelling read on this almost forgotten piece in American history. A true leader in which he will always be known for, Teddy Roosevelt, always put his causes before himself, something very lacking in today's political environment. This narrative will take you across America in the quest of John Schrank to halt "the third term" in what he believed was the coming of another Civil War and Kingship if Teddy Roosevelt succeeded. One will be inside each character viewing and learning the principles of their causes that shaped the true story so eloquently penned.

The Election of 1912 impact is still felt today, heralded as the main factor that shaped life in America in its present sense. The battle between TR, Woodrow Wilson, Howard Taft and the Socialist from Terre Haute, Indiana; Eugene V Debs is so powerfully written by Gerald Helferich. The drama includes the battle of the "haves" and "have nots," Women suffrage, equality between the races, workers rights vs Big Corporations, child labor and so much more that propels every American to read this great work. Teddy Roosevelt was one of a kind and such a marvel was he and the gifts he gave to our country that no other political figure has even come close to match.

Marcy Graybill says

If you like non-fiction books that read like fiction you will like this book. An excellent narrative about the man who attempted to kill Roosevelt when running for his third term as president. I think Helferich did a nice job of setting the scene and telling the story. I do think if you have read no other books about T. Roosevelt, you might feel a little lost.

Last Ranger says

Rough Rider's Last Crusade:

This engrossing little book reads like a Tom Clancy thriller, filled with twists and turns as a deranged young man stalks TR across multiple states for one purpose: to kill him. Convinced that TR had a hand in former President William McKinley's assassination in 1901 and that God was sending him on "Divine Mission", John Flammang Schrank would stop at nothing to avenge the death of a man he had never met and to make sure that TR had no chance of ever becoming a "third term" president. TR had always been an outdoorsman, soldier and hunter, but now, unbeknown to himself, he was the hunted. In "Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin" author Gerard Helferich has written a fast moving chronicle of a pivotal moment in U.S. history and in TR's life as well. At just under 250 pages, on my Kindle, this was a relatively quick read that kept me engrossed the whole time--a real page turner! I also enjoyed seeing the numerous archival photos that illustrate the book. With the 1912 Election Day only months away TR hit the campaign trail. Making stops at major cities throughout the north-east and southern states he would meet with state governors and city fathers, attend large political functions and give rousing speeches to packed convention halls. Between the cities he would make numerous whistle-stops at small towns along the way. Thanks to the press TR's itinerary was well publicized and in this way Schrank was able to follow his every move. Well, almost every move. For most of his adult life TR had been an avid outdoorsman and hunter, but now he was the one being hunted. And, while TR's instincts as a hunter were always in the back of his mind, he had no experience with being the prey and refused to take any special precautions when meeting a new crowd. While following the hunter and the hunted on their fateful journey, the author makes numerous side trips to explore the history of other individuals and institutions that are prominent in the story. This book is not a biography or a in depth history of a point in time but more of a "historical narrative" based on news paper reports, published documents and family records. Be sure to read the Author's Note, Acknowledgement and Sources at the end of the book for insight on Helferich's work. Anyone who has also read "The Destiny of the Republic" by Candice Millard may spot an interesting bit of medical history. In 1880 physicians probed President Garfield's wound with their unsterilized fingers and, 20 years later, physicians in 1901 did the same thing with McKinley's wound. Not much progress there. But in 1912 doctors took a little more care with TR's injury and seemed to be well aware of possible infection. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this well written book and may check out some of Gerard Helferich's other works as well. I had no technical or formatting problems with this Kindle edition.

Last Ranger

Kevin Topolovec says

Teddy Roosevelt, making all presidents that came after him look lame by comparison.

Tim Baze says

Theodore Roosevelt is my favorite president. Hands down. There is not even a close second. I have read the biographies of him by Miller and Morris. They are very good mostly because their subject is simply fascinating.

Roosevelt served two terms and then chose not to run for a consecutive third term. His friend, Taft became the next president. Four years later, Roosevelt then decided to run against him as part of the Bull Moose party in 1912. He split the Republican vote and Woodrow Wilson was elected as a democrat that year.

This book follows Roosevelt through the last month or so of his campaign by train through the United States. It also follows the path of another man who would also travel thousands of miles to eventually get close enough to Roosevelt to shoot him two weeks before election day.

It seems hard to imagine today a presidential candidate being shot and then insisting on delivering his speech scheduled for that evening. But this is exactly what Roosevelt did. He stood at a podium before thousands of people and spoke for eighty incredible minutes in what was mostly progressive campaign rhetoric, but also a few jokes about being wounded an hour before.

Quite a different time in our history, and quite a different type of man who wanted to be our president.

Ethan says

Highly readable narrative of the epic 1912 Presidential campaign, largely through the eyes of Theodore Roosevelt's stalker - and of course climaxing with the famous assassination attempt. It's one of the great stories - Roosevelt was shot in the late afternoon, but went on to deliver a rousing ninety minute speech with the bullet still in his chest - and Helferich gives it wonderful political and cultural context.

Roosevelt is a favorite President of mine, but since I'm familiar mostly with the Morris biography, I can't say whether this ground has been covered better elsewhere. The historical detail and research ring true, and the speculative "in the head of the assassin" bits don't annoy like they could if overdone.

An enjoyable, fast-paced read about one of the most fascinating events in American history.

Todd says

I won this book through Goodreads Giveaways.

Theodore Roosevelt and the Assassin is a good narrative history of the momentous 1912 presidential election. It is a highly readable history that anyone, from general reader to scholar, interested in the Progressive Era and the election of 1912 should find enjoyable.

The author Gerard Helferich follows the paths of Teddy Roosevelt and his campaign and his would be assassin, John Schrank, to their fateful day in Milwaukee. Schrank believed he was chosen to be the man to prevent Roosevelt from becoming a "third-term". Schrank believed that if Roosevelt once again became president Roosevelt would more-or-less abolish the constitution, appoint himself king, cause civil war, and destroy the United States. Schrank developed this premise during the years after the assassination of President McKinley and Roosevelt's announcement to run for a third term. Once the Bull Moose Party was formed Schrank began stalking the ex-president with the intent to kill Roosevelt thus saving America. Schrank's plan to save America by killing Roosevelt was thwarted in Milwaukee because of Roosevelt's folded speech and eyeglass case slowing the bullet enough to only wound. Schrank would be committed to an insane asylum in Wisconsin where he lived out his days.

The book also follows the other candidates of the 1912 election giving the reader a useful history of the politics and issues of the era. In addition, the epilogue nicely wraps up what happened to Schrank and the other presidential candidates of the race; Wilson, Roosevelt, Debs, and Taft.

John says

I won a copy from a goodreads giveaway.

Before reading this, my knowledge of Theodore Roosevelt was limited. I had not read too much about him other than from several years ago in school. After reading this book about his third time running for the office of the president, I want to read more about him.

The book follows the campaign of 1912 mostly from Roosevelt's perspective. Roosevelt's campaign stops, travel, speeches are covered. We also learn about the other politicians that ran for office that year including Taft, Wilson, and Debs.

While we hear of Roosevelt's campaigning, we see what John Schrank, the man who would attempt to assassinate Roosevelt, is up to during the same time. We read where he is traveling, how he plans to shoot Roosevelt, and where. Reading the section of the assassination attempt, I couldn't put the book down. The story was very well told throughout the book, but this section was the best.

As someone who was not well versed in Roosevelt history, this was a good introduction for me. I would be curious to see what others who have read a lot on the former president think of the book. I would definitely suggest this book to others.
