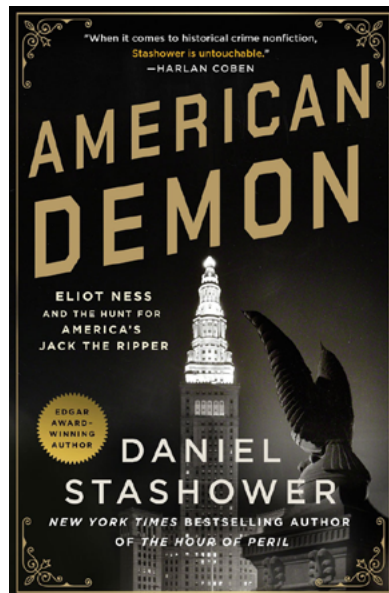# THE MAN THAT CLEVELAND KNEW

REMINGTON RUYLE

American Demon: Eliot Ness and the Hunt for America's Jack the Ripper by Daniel Stashower, winner of the Raymond Chandler Fulbright Fellowship in Detective and Crime Fiction Writing to the UK in 1992.

In 1934, a dark cloud began to form over the city of Cleveland as the body parts of a young woman were found floating along the shores of Lake Erie. At the same time, the lawman Eliot Ness was about to take the city's political scene by storm as the newly appointed Public Safety Director. In *American Demon: Eliot Ness and the Hunt for America's Jack the Ripper*, acclaimed biographer and historian Daniel Stashower explores the past of an icon of American justice and the investigation into a series of brutal murders that would haunt his career.

Stashower takes an honest look at the life of a man often shrouded in mysticism for his role as the leader of the "Untouchables," a group of prohibition officers who orchestrated raids on the bootleg liquor empire of notorious gangster Al Capone. Son of Norwegian immigrants, Ness developed an interest in law enforcement through his brother-in-law, an investigator at the US Department of Justice who "saw a potential in Ness, teaching him in turn to use his fists, drive a car, and handle a gun" (23). Stashower remarks, "[T]he decision to follow in his brother-in-law's footsteps would not have been an obvious one" (25) and that "Ness was notably vague" (26) about his

start in law enforcement. In his early years at the Prohibition Bureau, Ness struggled to make good impressions. Nevertheless, he set his sights high, proving that his lack of experience had no bearing on his commitment to the values that define the archetypal officer of the law.

As leader of the Capone Squad, Ness established himself as a lawman with upstanding ethics, a cop who could not be bought. But "Ness was really two men" as Oscar Farley, the co-author of the semi-autobiographical book *The Untouchables* points out (21). In his public position as Cleveland's Public Safety Director, Ness spearheaded several anti-corruption campaigns, rooting out dirty cops and the criminal enterprises that thrived on backroom deals. In his personal life, Ness enjoyed drinking and women, often going straight from his office to Cleveland's most elite nightclubs where he would stay all night before returning to work the next morning. On one occasion described by Stashower, Ness was involved in a car accident that quickly became a scandal after it was revealed that he had been drinking prior to entering his vehicle despite his many campaigns to punish citizens who drove while intoxicated.

As Public Safety Director, Ness went up against gangsters and special interests, never shying away from a powerful opponent, but a series of brutal murders proved that there just might be a crime that Ness could not solve. Beginning with the parts of the young woman that washed ashore in 1934, 12 other dismembered bodies would be found in Cleveland over the next half decade. These killings were attributed to the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, also known as the Cleveland Torso Killer. The gruesome nature of the crimes and identities of the victims—many of whom were homeless, sex workers, or transients—leads Stashower to brand the Mad Butcher as America's Jack the Ripper. As Stashower relates the investigation into the Mad Butcher, he delicately overlays Ness's tenure as Public Safety Director, the facts of the case, and the crimes of the Mad Butcher, connecting them to a vast web of individuals—including the Butcher's victims, the coroner, the case detectives, the Cuyahoga County sheriff, the press, the mayor, and other prominent political figures.

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The Butcher proved to be vastly different from the gangsters and crooked cops Ness had previously thwarted. Forensic science was still in its infancy, and police relied heavily on eyewitness testimony and other circumstantial evidence. Much like Jack the Ripper, the identity of the Cleveland torso killer has never been confirmed, and the murders remain unsolved. Stashower contends, however, that the crimes were indeed solved by Ness. Ness suspected Francis E. Sweeney, a disgraced surgeon with a history of alcohol and drug abuse, of committing the series of heinous acts. Ness's pursuit of Sweeney is equal parts thriller and exposé of the inner-workings of the Cleveland justice system. As Ness becomes further convinced of Sweeney's guilt, he compromises his hard-fought morals, at one point keeping Sweeney

sequestered in a hotel for days of interrogation and dirty tricks practiced by the same corrupt cops Ness had built his career arresting. Stashower comments, "Ness set his principles aside in this case, turning his back on due process. The investigation had brought him low" (219).

Despite evidence indicating Sweeney's involvement, he was never publicly named as a suspect or charged with any crimes, due, in large part, to the fact that he was the cousin of an Ohio Congressman and an outspoken critic of Ness.

Despite his failures in the Mad Butcher case, time has enshrined Eliot Ness as an example par excellence of ethical character. In 1961, reporter Bud Silverman noted that before the myth of Ness grows in grandeur, someone "ought to . . . describe the man as Cleveland knew him" (9). American Demon, beyond its contributions to the genre of American crime non-fiction, humanizes Ness and provides an honest portrayal of a complex man and the true stories that have cemented his place in history.

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BIOGRAPHY

Remington Ruyle was awarded a Fulbright-García Robles Graduate Degree Program Grant in 2020 to pursue her Master's in Sustainability Science at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. While Ruyle currently works in the field of climate change policy, she has interests in a wide variety of areas, including true crime.