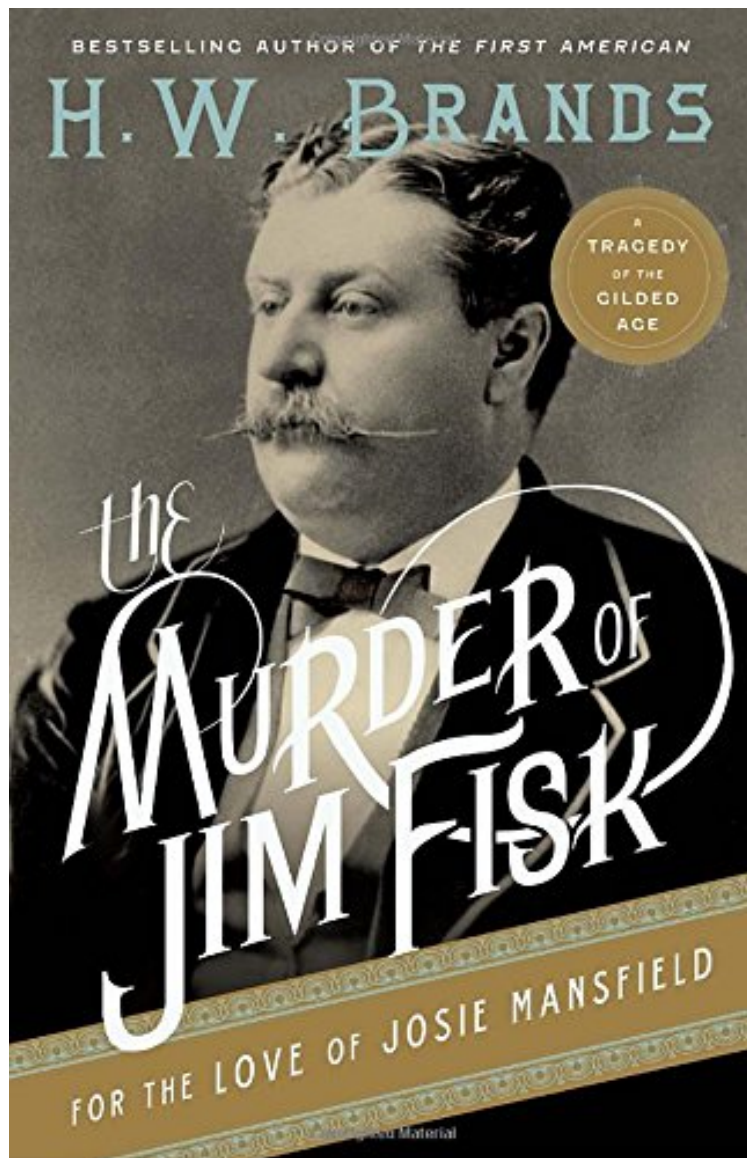


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(American Portraits (Anchor Books))

The Murder of Jim Fisk for the Love of Josie Mansfield: A Tragedy of the Gilded Age (American Portraits (Anchor Books))

H. W. Brands

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0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Not so Thrilling a MurderBy Sistah2Disappointing, plodding, characters poorly drawn, especially Josie and Jim. Except for the Stokes Trial, the events and relationships are dull. usually H.W. Brands writes with more style.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Short and superficialBy SoosReviewsLightweight tale of the life, times, and murder of a corrupt Gilded Age railway tycoon. Left a lot of unanswered questions and failed to flesh out the story and supposed allure of Josie Mansfield. I really wanted to like this book, but unfortunately I didn't - and I can't recommend it.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. 19th Century CorruptionBy Nathan H RetzlaffThe author provides an interesting story of the corruption, immorality and greed of a period of US history that may have been forgotten or is little known today. It is an enlightening read.

Even before he was shot dead on the stairway of the tony Grand Central Hotel in 1872, financier James Jubilee Jim Fisk, Jr., was a notorious New York City figure. From his audacious attempt to corner the gold market in 1869 to his battle for control of the geographically crucial Erie Railroad, Fisk was a flamboyant exemplar of a new financial era marked by volatile fortunes and unprecedented greed and corruption. But it was his scandalously open affair with a showgirl named Josie Mansfield that ultimately led to his demise. In this riveting short history, H. W. Brands traces Fisks extraordinary downfall, bringing to life New Yorks Gilded Age and some of its legendary players, including Boss William Tweed, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and the railroad tycoon Jay Gould.

Praise for H. W. BrandsH. W. Brands is a master at finding the essence of an important American life, telling its story grippingly and showing us why it is important to our own generation. Michael BeschlossBrands will change the way you see history. The Austin American-StatesmanA wonderfully skilled narrative historian. Los Angeles Times Brands is masterly. The EconomistFew historians can tell a tale better. The Dallas Morning NewsAbout the AuthorH. W. BRANDS holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin. ANew York Times bestselling author, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography forThe First AmericanandTraitor to His Class.Visit the author's website at www.hwbrands.com.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1A gray blanket cloaks the trees of Montparnasse on a late autumn morning. Smoke from the coal fires that heat the homes and shops along the narrow streets swirls upward to join the fog that congeals intermittently into drizzle. This part of Paris hides the signs of the Great Depression better than the blighted industrial districts, but the tattered storefronts, the shabby dress of men with nowhere to go, and the age of the few cars that ply the streets betray a community struggling to keep its soul together.An old, oddly configured vehicle lumbers slowly along the cobbles. The dispirited pedestrians pay it no mind. Nor do they heed the two women and one man who walk behind it. The women appear to be locals; the shawls around their shoulders and the scarves on their heads could have been taken from the woman selling apples on one of the corners they pass or from the grandmother dividing a thin baguette among her four little ones. (Or could she be their mother? Hard times play evil tricks on youth and beauty.)The man must be a foreigner. He dresses like an Englishman, one whom the Depression seems to have spared. His heavy wool coat and felt hat shield him from the damp; the coat's collar and the hat's brim hide his face from those around him. He might be an American; he walks more assertively than the average Englishman. He probably walked still more assertively when he was younger, although how many years have passed since that sprightly era is impossible to say.The two women speak quietly to each other. Neither addresses the man, nor he them. The vehicle-whether it is a car or a truck is as much a puzzle as most else about this small procession-slows almost to a stop, then turns onto the leaf-strewn lane of the cemetery that these days forms a principal raison d'tre of the neighborhood. It moves tentatively along the track, picking its way among the gravestones and mausoleums, beneath the connecting branches of trees left over from when the farm on this site began accepting plantings that didn't sprout, not in this existence. The driver finally locates what he has been looking for, and he stops beside a fresh pile of dirt that is gradually turning dark as the drizzle soaks in. Two men shrouded in long coats suddenly but silently appear, as if from the earth itself. They stand at the rear of the vehicle as the driver lowers the gate. They grasp handles on the sides of the bare wooden box the vehicle contains, and with a nonchalance just shy of disrespect they hoist it out and set it on the ground between the pile of dirt and the hole from which the dirt has come.They step aside, wordlessly letting the three mourners know that this is their last chance to commune with the deceased. One of the women produces, from a cloth bag, a small cluster of chrysanthemums and places it on the coffin. The man takes a rose from inside his coat and, with quiet tenderness, lays it beside the other flowers.The three step back and gaze down at the wooden box. The drizzle turns to rain. The gravediggers slip short loops of rope inside the handles and lower the coffin into the grave. They pull up the ropes and begin shoveling the dirt back into its hole.The hearse drives away, at a faster pace than before. The women walk off together. The man lingers. He looks at the grave, then at the city in the distance, then back at the grave. Finally he too departs.2Another day, another decade, another funeral. And such a funeral. Lifelong New Yorkers cannot remember larger crowds, even to mark the Union victory in the Civil War. Many of those present today attended the victory celebration, but it is the nature of life in the great city, and the strength of the city's appeal to outsiders, that a large part of the population has

turned over in the seven years since the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. Today the newcomers crane to see what the fuss is about. The funeral begins at the Grand Opera House on Twenty-third Street, where the body has lain for viewing. No one thinks the choice of venue odd-or at least none thinks it odder than that the Opera House is also home to one of America's great railroads, the Erie, of which the deceased was a director and to which he, as owner of the Opera House, rented office space. The lavish interior of the house-the sweeping grand staircase, the twenty-foot mahogany doors embellished with the company initials "E. R.," the bronze horses pawing the air furiously with their forehooves, the two-story mirror with the bust of Shakespeare on top, the sumptuous wall hangings, the carved and gilt columns, the cherubs disporting about the ceiling, the fountains spewing water into the air-has been rendered somewhat more somber for the sad occasion by the addition of black muslin tied up with black and white satin rosettes, to cover the cherubs and hide the gilt. The visitors have been gathering since dawn; by eleven, when the doors open, they number ten thousand. They file slowly in, some entering by the door on the Twenty-third Street side, the others from Eighth Avenue. They approach the rosewood casket with its gold-plated handles. They see the deceased in his uniform as colonel of New York's Ninth Regiment of militia. His cap and sword rest on his chest; his strawberry curls grace his forehead and temples. His face appears composed, albeit understandably pale; to some this seems strange, given the circumstances of the death. Flowers of various kinds- tuberoses, camellias, lilies-cover the lower portion of the body and surround the casket. Their scent fills the gallery. An honor guard of the Ninth Regiment stands at attention. First to view the body are the other directors of the Erie Railroad and certain members of the New York bar and judiciary. When the general public is let in, several women professionally associated with the opera-of which the deceased was a prominent patron-burst into tears. His barber stops at the head of the casket and, with one hand, rearranges the curls while, with the other, he twists the tips of the dead man's moustache. As the last of the visitors depart, the funeral service commences. The chaplain of the regiment reads from the Episcopal prayer book. The wife, mother, and sister of the deceased, all veiled and dressed in black, sit quietly for the most part, only now and then airing a sigh or an audible sob. At the end of the reading, each of the women approaches the casket and kisses the dead man. The rank and file of the regiment march slowly past their fallen comrade and commander, paying silent tribute. The casket is closed and covered with an American flag. The honor guard carries the casket to a waiting hearse. The regiment's band, backed by musicians from one of New York's German associations, tolls a dirge. The funeral procession forms up. One hundred New York policemen take the lead, followed by the band, which has segued into "The Dead March in Saul." A contingent of employees of the Erie Railroad come next, un-uniformed except for the black crape that adorns their arms. The full regiment, in parade dress, marches in triple file behind the Erie men. The hearse, pulled by four caparisoned black horses, rolls at a stately pace. A Negro groomsmen guides the colonel's favorite horse, a snorting black charger. The saddle is empty; reversed boots fill the stirrups. Officers of New York's other regiments trail the stallion. Distinguished civilians, in handsome carriages, bring up the rear. The procession moves slowly east on Twenty-third Street. Businesses have closed out of respect for the dead man's passing; curtains and shades have been drawn on the private residences. Onlookers pack the sidewalks and spill into the streets. Others stand in the doorways and open windows of the buildings and on every balcony and stoop. Most are respectfully silent, but children shout and strangers who don't know why the city has come to a midday halt insistently ask. More than a few of those familiar with the irreverence of the deceased talk and laugh in a different form of respect. The procession turns north at Fifth Avenue. The regiment corners smartly, the others at their whim. Two blocks bring them to the New Haven depot, where a locomotive and train stand waiting. The pallbearers transfer the casket to a special car, draped in black, attached to the rear of the train. The family and close friends climb aboard the car to accompany their loved one to his final resting place in his native Vermont. The locomotive puts on steam and slowly pulls the train out of the station. No one departs until the train has gone. "And thus passed from sight the mortal remains of one who might have been a vast power for good, had he made use of the glorious opportunities vouchsafed to him," an eyewitness, more knowledgeable and literary than most, remarks. "Doubtless he had noble qualities, but they were hidden from the eyes of men, while his vices seemed to be on every man's lips." Yet another day, another decade, another spectacle. Of course, every day with Jim Fisk is a spectacle. Or so Josie Mansfield often observes. Josie knows as much about Fisk as anyone does, and more than most people do. She knows he comes from Vermont, where he mastered the arts of persuasion while peddling tools and trinkets to the closed-fisted farmers of the Green Mountain State, whose wives loved Fisk for bringing the civilized world to their doorsteps and whose children thought of him as Santa Claus. She knows that he moved from Vermont to Boston in search of wealthier customers and fatter profits, and from Boston to New York for the same reason, amplified. She knows-or at least has heard-how he made a fortune smuggling Southern cotton to Northern mills during the Civil War. She knows he loves a spectacle, and that the spectacles he loves best put him at center stage. He perfumes his hair and waxes his moustache; he wears velvet coats of peacock colors, tailored low in front to reveal the diamond studs in his silk shirts. More diamonds, much larger, adorn his fingers and sparkle when he twirls the fat cigars he employs to punctuate his florid sentences. Josie knows Fisk runs with a fast crowd on Wall Street. He is Dan Drew's protégé and Jay Gould's partner; the three speculators have joined forces to fight the formidable Cornelius Vanderbilt for control of the Erie Railroad. Drew's domed forehead and beetled brow hide secrets of market manipulation vouchsafed to few in the financial world; his starched collar and tight cravat cover a

heart that can merely be presumed to exist. Many on Wall Street swear Drew invented the double cross; more reliable authorities make him the pioneer of stock watering, which he is said to have adapted from the days when, as a cattle drover, he herded beeves down Broadway and swelled their bellies with water before unloading them on nave purchasers. Now he simply dilutes the value of corporate stock by issuing new, sometimes bogus shares. The Erie is Drew's special plaything, his favored vehicle for manipulation. Josie can recite the Wall Street triplet: "Daniel says up, Erie goes up / Daniel says down, Erie goes down / Daniel says wiggle-waggle, it bobs both ways." Yet Drew combines conscienceless weekday practice with weekend piety; he never misses Sunday service at the Fourth Street Meth?odist Church and is endowing a divinity school to propagate the Gospel and bolster the Golden Rule- to repair the damage he does it during the week, Drew watchers suggest. She knows less about Jay Gould, in part because Gould cultivates mystery. He hides his comparative youth-he is not quite thirty-two- behind a bushy black beard and in public defers to Drew and Fisk. But his dark eyes flash when speculation is afoot, and his unconscious habit of tearing paper to shreds while reckoning risks and rewards tells Josie, whose biography has taught her to read men, that he might be the one to watch out for. Cornelius Vanderbilt is the titan of Wall Street-full of ambition, even at seventy-three years of age; full of money, as the wealthiest man in America; full of himself, with flowing white hair and sideburns that suit his imperious manner. He won his fortune by strength of will and often of arm; broken jaws and black eyes among the competition marked his rise to the top of the world of steam transport. He built a fleet of passenger ships and still insists on being called "Commodore"; lately he has diversified into trains. He drives the fanciest coach in Manhattan, pulled by the fastest horses and filled with the prettiest young women. His wrath is legendary and his wealth gives him the power to wield it. "Gentlemen," he famously wrote to a cabal who crossed him, "you have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for the law is too slow. I'll ruin you." And of course he did. He similarly aims to ruin Drew, Fisk, and Gould, who stand between him and control of the Erie Railroad. Josie knows that if Vanderbilt joins the Erie to his New York Central Railroad he will possess a monopoly of freight and passenger traffic between New York City and the Great Lakes and will become even wealthier, more prideful, and more powerful than he already is. The city and much of the Eastern Seaboard will be in his grasp; millions will pay whatever charges he deigns to dictate. If he fails to gain the Erie, he will gnash his teeth in the frustration he always feels at being bested and likely will launch a counterattack that could rock the railroad industry to its roots. With the economy as a whole coming to depend on railroads-these days hardly anything or anyone moves more than a few miles without riding a train- the fate of the country may rest on the outcome of the battle for the Erie. Josie and New York watch as the strategies of the two sides unfold in early 1868. Vanderbilt's assault is characteristically frontal: he orders his brokers to buy all the Erie shares they can. Like many frontal assaults, Vanderbilt's attack is expensive: each round of purchases drives up the share price. But Vanderbilt's great wealth almost guarantees success, and he intends to recoup his investment by hiking the Erie's rates and fares after he captures the road. Drew's defensive strategy is likewise characteristic, in his case deviously so. Drew currently commands a controlling interest in the Erie, and he has lately added Fisk and Gould to the board of directors, which authorizes the issue of \$10 million in bonds convertible to stock. The function of the bonds, Drew tells the board, is to fund improvements to the road; in reality he plans to use them against Vanderbilt. Together with some stock shares authorized by the board but not yet issued, the bonds give Drew potential access to some 100,000 shares that the market-meaning, at this point, primarily Vanderbilt-knows nothing about. Vanderbilt's ignorance is crucial to Drew's plan, for the fate of the Erie turns on the question of whether Vanderbilt will run out of money before Drew and his comrades run out of stock. The share price continues to mount as the Commodore presses his purchasing, but Vanderbilt, allowing for the shares known to exist, calculates that he can absorb the rising price and still reach his goal.