



## **A Case for Solomon: Bobby Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation**

*Tal McThenia , Margaret Dunbar Cutright*

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**A Case for Solomon** tells the spellbinding story of one of the most celebrated kidnapping cases in American history, and a haunting family mystery that took almost a century to solve.

**A CASE FOR SOLOMON: BOBBY DUNBAR AND THE KIDNAPPING THAT HAUNTED A NATION** chronicles one of the most celebrated—and most misunderstood—kidnapping cases in American history. In 1912, four-year-old Bobby Dunbar, the son of an upper-middle-class Louisiana family, went missing in the swamps. After an eight-month search that electrified the country and destroyed Bobby's parents, the boy was found, filthy and hardly recognizable, in the pinewoods of southern Mississippi. A wandering piano tuner who had been shuttling the child throughout the region by wagon for months was arrested and charged with kidnapping—a crime that was punishable by death at the time. But when a destitute single mother came forward from North Carolina to claim the boy as *her* son, not Bobby Dunbar, the case became a high-pitched battle over custody—and identity—that divided the South.

Amid an ever-thickening tangle of suspicion and doubt, two mothers and a father struggled to assert their rightful parenthood over the child, both to the public and to themselves. For two years, lawyers dissected and newspapers sensationalized every aspect of the story. Psychiatrists, physicians, criminologists, and private detectives debated the piano tuner's guilt and the boy's identity. And all the while the boy himself remained peculiarly guarded on the question of who he was. It took nearly a century, a curiosity that had been passed down through generations, and the science of DNA to discover the truth.

*A Case for Solomon* is a gripping historical mystery, distilled from a trove of personal and archival research. The story of Bobby Dunbar, fought over by competing New Orleans tabloids, the courts, and the citizenry of two states, offers a case study in yellow journalism, emergent forensic science, and criminal justice in the turn-of-the-century American South. It is a drama of raw poverty and power and an exposé of how that era defined and defended motherhood, childhood, and community. First told in a stunning episode of National Public Radio's *This American Life*, *A Case for Solomon* chronicles the epic struggle to determine one child's identity, along the way probing unsettling questions about the formation of memory, family, and self.

## **A Case for Solomon: Bobby Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation Details**

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## **From Reader Review A Case for Solomon: Bobby Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation for online ebook**

### **Nicholas says**

It is rare that I find a book just completely and totally riveting. This one I had difficulty putting down; I found myself reading "just one more" page as I was wearing my coat and just about to head out the door, almost late for an appointment. Granted, that only happened twice because I finished the whole thing in under two days. I had heard the "This American Life" story, "The Ghost of Bobby Dunbar," so I ALREADY KNEW what was going to happen. And yet I still felt a little breathless reading this story of one boy who disappears in a Louisiana swamp in 1913, the search for him throughout the South, and his supposed finding about eight months later. But is it him or is it another boy altogether? The itinerant tinker (piano/organ tuner and clock fixer) with whom he's found claims the boy is the son of a sharecropper and caregiver, Julia Anderson, who lives with his parents in North Carolina. The boy had gone with him when Julia couldn't afford to keep him any longer. But the missing boy's parents claim he is their long-lost son. Who to believe? What happens to the tinker accused of kidnapping him? If this isn't Bobby, where is he? And if it is, where is Bruce Anderson, the other boy? And with whom does the boy end up: the middle-class Louisiana couple or the single poverty-stricken woman who had him out of wedlock? (I'm revealing my hand a little here.)

Written by journalist McThenia and the missing boy's granddaughter, Cutright, I will grant that sometimes there is a lot of detail (these people were enthralled with their evidence, and sometimes that's a bad thing) and I occasionally got confused about who some of the people were but the story is just so tragic, and so unlikely, and so intrinsically fascinating that I didn't care. I was hooked from the first chapter.

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### **Suzette says**

this one is near & dear to my heart... Julia Anderson was my great-grandmother, Bruce Anderson my great-uncle, and Bernice my beloved Grandma <3 thanks, Tal & Margaret, for telling this story!

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### **Katy says**

Fascinating topic; needed better execution. A story of a real-life kidnapping from 1912; a child disappears on a family camping trip in Louisiana and turns up 8 months later in the company of a traveling handyman, who swears that the boy is not the missing child, but was knowingly given to him by another woman, the boy's real mother. The boy was raised by the family who "lost" him, but for the rest of his life questions persist about his true identity.

A fascinating story about the nature of identity, and who decides who we are. I'm VERY glad I read it; it will stay with me for a while. But the book gets bogged down in the details of trials and body markings...would have benefited from more analysis of the role of the press in the story (wildly intrusive and not like ANYTHING that would be accepted as journalistically ethical today) and the role that class and perception played in how the story developed.

Fascinating. If you want a shorter version of the story, check out This American Life:

### **Janice says**

An interesting story.

A sad story.

I commend the authors for their extensive research, unfortunately, the tedious, tiresome, insignificant trivia tangled and confused the details. By mid-book, I was exhausted; worn to a raveling. Surely, the behemoth of biographic references could have been edited and presented in a sensible manner.

Two lost little boys.

My heart ached for Bruce... the horrific ordeal he had to endure to become the manifestation of Bobby. My heart broke for (the real) Bobby, the child for whom no one grieved. Yet, it was (the real) Bobby who in death rests in peace; where Bruce, in life, could never find peace. Such a paradox.

And Mr. & Mrs. Dunbar? Are they to be forgiven? Or can only God have mercy on their souls?

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### **Melinda says**

What happens when you make a mistake? What happens when you recognize that you've made a mistake? Do you own up to it? Or do you forge ahead and "will" yourself to believe that you didn't make a mistake? What happens to those around you as a result? What happens to your soul and heart? Do they expand in health and love? Or do they shrivel and shrink?

When Bobby Dunbar's son, Bobby Jr. confronted his father one day, he asked him, "Who are you? Do do you THINK you are?". Bobby Sr. answered "I know who I am, and I know who you are, and that's all that matters. It's how we live our life." Those words were said by a grown man who had struggled his entire life to know who he really was. He was raise believing he was Bobby Dunbar, oldest son of Lessie and Percy Dunbar. But in reality, his parents had made a mistake. He was really Bruce Anderson, son of Julia Anderson. And Bobby's words "it's how we live our life" are an appropriate lens through which to view those lives around his.

I don't know if you grew up hearing stories about family all the time, by in our family they are part of every get-together and every visit. Adults sitting around the table in the evening talking of family while the children are tired and ready for bed. Hearing snippets of family stories while playing on the porch or climbing trees. This story has a familiar feel to it, even though I had never heard of Bobby Dunbar until I read this book. The author, Bobby Dunbar's granddaughter Margaret Dunbar Cutright, tells the story well and with honesty. It no doubt was a hard story to tell.

In 1912, four year old Bobby Dunbar disappeared in the swamps just north of Opelousas, Louisiana. Search parties were sent out, circulars were printed with his picture and a description of him. Months were spent following up leads and searching everywhere for Bobby. Lessie Dunbar, Bobby's mother, was almost insane with grief and "not knowing". As a result of her preoccupation with the missing Bobby, her youngest son Alonzo "forgot her" when she was gone from home for over a month and then finally went back home to him. Her husband, Percy, was quoted as saying that he needed to find the boy to restore his wife's sanity and to make it possible for him to live with her again. After 8 months of searching, a young boy matching the

description of Bobby was found with a traveling tinker, William Cantwell Walters. Walters said that the boy was Bruce Anderson, son of Julia Anderson.

When Lessie Dunbar initially saw the young boy, there was no recognition between them. Lessie thought that the boys eyes were not quite as her Bobby's had been. But eventually the need to have a boy home again seemed to overshadow life without Bobby, so Lessie and Percy declared this boy their son. From that point the boy was put in the Dunbar's care, and was never removed, even though concerns about the true identity of the boy were raised immediately.

Julia Anderson had a very hard life. Married young, she was forced to flee an abusive marriage and then endure the death of her first baby. Eventually she had two other children by two other men as she worked in town and then with various families. Bruce was born the son of a traveling shoe salesman whom she never saw after the birth of her son. Bernice was born the daughter of Bunt Walters, son of the Walters family whom Julia worked for. When William Cantwell Walters, Bunt's brother, offered to take 3 year old Bruce to visit some of his sisters, Julia allowed him to take the boy on a trip. It is likely that Walters believed that Bruce was his nephew, fathered by his brother Bunt just like Bernice. Julia knew Bruce's real father, but did not contradict Walters thoughts about who his father really was. So when Walters took Bruce, it was likely that he was trying to find a better living situation for his nephew. Bad winter weather and Julia moving to work at different farms meant that Walters kept the boy for over a year. When Walters was arrested for kidnapping Bobby Dunbar, Julia wrote to tell the authorities that the boy with Walters was her son Bruce Anderson.

But by then the Dunbar's had returned to Opelousas with Bobby, and the community in Opelousas rallied around them and supported them in keeping Bobby. When Julia Anderson initially saw the boy, almost a year and a half after Walters had taken him, there also was no recognition between them. But unlike the Dunbar's, she was not allowed weeks with the boy to re-establish a relationship. The Dunbar's had been teaching Bobby little "tricks" he used to do, and mannerisms that he had had before he left. They had even been telling him what had happened to him.

During the year long trial of William Cantwell Walters for kidnapping, many Mississippi citizens came to Louisiana to testify on behalf of Walters and also for Julia Anderson. But the trial was held in Opelousas, the home-town of the Dunbar's. Lawyers came to the case not looking for justice, but for a way to prove others were lying when they said the boy was Bruce Anderson. Julia Anderson and the Mississippi witnesses didn't have a fair chance. Eventually Walters was convicted of kidnapping, not on strong evidence, but because if the boy WAS Bobby Dunbar (and he had to be) then Walters could only have gotten him by kidnapping him. The identity of the boy was never properly investigated. Walters escaped hanging only because the governor of Louisiana overturned his conviction on a technicality. It seems that Walters was never formally charged of kidnapping, and so he was released a free man. But Bobby remained with the Dunbar's.

So what was the result for the two families? For the Dunbar's, Percy seemed never to be able to return to live with Lessie in peace. He began an affair with Altrice A. McCoulough of Florida in 1920. Lessie sued for divorce when she discovered evidence of his infidelity. The ugly battle between the two alienated Bobby and Alonzo from both of their parents, as Lessie grew more and more bitter and as Percy withdrew into anger. They formally divorced in 1927 and Lessie moved to Virginia, tired of living under the scrutiny of the Opelousas community who had helped her claim and keep Bobby. Evidently voices within the community that disagreed that Bobby was really Bobby Dunbar made life unbearable for her. Lessie lived in Virginia, away from Bobby and Alonzo. After the boys married and had their own families, they tried to integrate Lessie into their families. But neither family could bear Lessie living with them. In fact Bobby's wife Marjorie said "her or me" when Lessie stayed with Bobby's family for several weeks. Lessie's grandchildren

did not ever really know her, and have no memories of love or kindness from her.

For Julia Anderson, she placed her daughter Bernice for adoption. She later married Ollie Rawls and had seven children with him. After her public humiliation about her earlier relationships and accusations of her poor motherhood, Julia swore to care for and nurture her children. She succeeded, and eventually became a pillar in the community, helping those who were ill or old. Her children and grandchildren remember her with love for the kindness and stability she provided for them. But they always knew they had an older brother, Bruce, who had been taken away from their mother when he was only 4 years old. Julia knew that Bruce was really her son, but it is possible that she decided not to continue to fight for him in the face of a unified community and in the face of the Dunbar family. She wanted Bruce to have an intact personality, and she knew that continued fighting would make him only more splintered in himself. So she backed away, for Bruce's sake.

And what of Bobby himself? It seems he struggled with his own memories. He had been told Walters beat him cruelly, but his memories were only of an old man who treated him with affection. How to reconcile what he knew with what he had been told? Bobby eventually seemed to understand that his parents had made a mistake and that he really was Bruce Anderson. After Percy's death he traveled to Mississippi and even met with two of Julia's children, his half-brother and half-sister. They did not realize the importance of his visit at the time, but in retrospect they realized he had "come back" to see the family that he had been taken away from. Bobby married and had a family that he devoted himself to. He provided them with the love and stability that he had not had growing up. Decades after Bobby died, his son Bobby Jr. agreed to have a DNA test alongside his cousin, David Dunbar. The DNA test revealed that the two men, who had grown up as cousins, were not related. Bobby Dunbar was really Bruce Anderson.

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### **Youshau says**

Amidst the sound of island life I had forgotten, which now involved the occasional boom of dynamite I read through this book absorbing every detail and trying to wrap my head around how something of this calibre could have happened, even in the early 1900s.

I've noticed that a lot of people tend to complain about how the book is written more of in the form of a report than a story and thus becomes dull and certain bits of it, redundant. Although the plot of Bobby Dunbar's case can be scribbled on a single page, writing the book in a report-esque format with all the details, does the case justice that it deserves.

Personally, I don't believe its right for me (or anyone) to judge either the Dunbar's or Julia Anderson. Yes, one party failed to recognize their own child and the other was reckless, maybe even neglectful. However, we can never truly know how far, how desperate a parent maybe to get their child back. Whether the Dunbar's made a honest mistake or purposefully identified Bruce Anderson as their child and told a lie to the point where it became a 'reality' is something that can never be answered. Whether Julia Anderson's actions regarding her son, given her situation can be justified is something that can be heavily debated on. In the end it's unfair to judge either the Dunbar's or Julia Anderson

It should be noted that there's no winner in the case of Bobby Dunbar's disappearance. A mother lost her child, an innocent man was convicted wrongly and a boy grew up under the public eye and doubted his own identity. A century later, we're left with an unanswered question but an unsolved mystery.

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### **Kathy says**

"A Case for Solomon: Bobby Dunbar and the Kidnapping That Haunted a Nation" is an excellent true story of a man who as a child was dragged through events mysterious, tragic, and harrowing who became someone most of us can simply admire. Tal McThenia and Margaret Dunbar Cutright spent years researching this incredible story of a child lost and a man self-made. It is also a book of a nation divided by a very personal story and the indictment the powerful use of the press to sway public opinion in an effort to sell their news. You will be stunned, confused, and drug through the mire that was the life of Bobby Dunbar and how it effected two mothers and other family members. Probably the best nonfiction book I have ever read.

I received this book free from a Goodreads First Reads from Free Press and Simon & Schuster, Inc. Thanks!

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### **Laura Zimmerman says**

First, I should note that I received this book for free from First Reads through Good Reads. In the spirit of First Reads I'll do my best to capture my thoughts about the book.

I commend the authors for the exhaustive research they did for this book. Prior to entering the drawing for the book I had never heard of this particular kidnapping and was interested to see how well such an event could be presented so long after the fact. The authors clearly spent a great deal of time doing research and interviewing people. They took advantage (in a good way) of their family connections and their possible family connections (read the book, you'll understand) and assembled a thorough, complex, and comprehensive account of the Bobby Dunbar kidnapping. I was impressed by the depth of their knowledge of the people and the events that took place and by their ability to present the information in a neutral way. They provided background information for the main players and some of the more minor players, piecing together a tapestry of lives that collided and, in some cases, stayed together despite the contentiousness of the events.

Without ruining anything, I have to admit that it was difficult for me to believe that no one was ever able to definitively determine identity. Given the amount of identifying information that was available, the fact that such conflicting accounts were given is bizarre to me. At the time the kidnapping took place, people had to rely on only what they could see with their own eyes...and not everyone saw the same things in the same way, leading to much confusion and questioning.

This is an interesting read written in an engaging style. There were times that I felt bogged down in details but overall, I would say the authors did an excellent job in their recounting of the story.

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### **Evelyn Switzer says**

I have no idea how I never heard this story before. This book reads like a dateline mystery and I am so glad for DNA testing that we finally find out after 100 years who this child is. This book is so worth a read.

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### **Alesha Leveritt says**

There are few stories the degree of compelling emotion than this one... two mothers, two little boys, both missing, only one is found. But who can claim the the prize?

Told with a reporter's eye for detail, this doesn't read like a novel - rather a Dateline episode, perhaps. Its portrayal of the characters reveals them to be not characters at all, but people. This is a painful story. As a mother, my heart broke for both women, having lost their sons. I was angry at the injustice, and I was torn by that anger, because there really were no villains. Only victims. Well-intentioned, but flawed.

Adding to my interest was a personal connection. My step-father is the grandson of Julia Anderson. If one can judge people by the lives they live, I would say that he and his great-uncle Bobby, having never met, still retain quite a lot in common.

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### **Lynette says**

Spoilers.

Incredibly thorough, well-written, and cited! As someone who has spent hundreds of hours poring over newspapers and documents to uncover every tiny piece of my own family history, I enjoyed the read, though the actual events - like the "trials" - were infuriating. For as screwed up as our courts are today, they used to be even worse. Knowing ahead of time that Bobby was in fact Bruce made me all the more incensed over the sloppy work they did back in 1913 - making up quotes, tricking poor Julia, etc.

I feel for Percy and Lessie and I don't think they were necessarily bad people, just consumed by grief and unable to make good judgements, but it does seem like they finally got what was coming to them.

As for the actual Bobby Dunbar, I think the most likely explanation for his disappearance was that he was eaten by an alligator.

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### **Molly says**

I won this book in a good reads giveaway.

I normally like books about true stories, but I like to enjoy books when I read them. This book seemed like I was reading a textbook and found myself re-reading paragraphs and pages to understand who people were and how they related to the story. It was obvious that the author did her research and that's why I gave this book 2 stars. I felt sorry for the little boy Bobby/Bruce on how he was displayed by his parents without thought to his traumatization. I felt myself asking "Why would you allow this?" alot. I liked the included pictures.

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### **Diane says**

In 1912, Bobby Dunbar, aged four, went camping and fishing with his parents, Percy and Lessie Dunbar, and his younger brother, Alonzo. They are a part of a group of people enjoying the fishing at Lake Swayze in Louisiana. Despite the large number of people present, Bobby vanishes without a trace. After an exhaustive eight month search, a boy answering to Bobby's description is found in the company of an old man named William Walters. Walters insists that the child is actually Bruce Anderson, illegitimate son of Julia Anderson and a traveling salesman. The ensuing quest over the child's true identity lasts almost a century before it was finally solved with a DNA test.

Tal McThenia co-wrote this book with Margaret Dunbar Cutright, who is the granddaughter of Bruce Anderson/Bobby Dunbar. Meticulously researched and detailed, but never dull, it paints a fascinating picture of its times. I was surprised by the negative reviews complaining about it being too long. I thought its length was just right. I appreciate the fact that the authors portrayed the people involved as that, **people** and not caricatures. I felt sorry for both families, especially the mothers, Lessie and Julia. I can't imagine what they went through. I am also glad that Bobby had a happy life after all, far away from the spotlight. After all he had been through, he certainly deserved it.

This is one book that I will keep and reread. Highly recommended.

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### **Linda says**

This is a real life story with roots in Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina. It is a story of love and need of two mothers who claim a child as theirs. Each mother had different backgrounds but each had love for the child, and each wanted and needed to be his mother. Life for the child, Bobby Dunbar, was a difficult journey in which he wondered who he was. The book follows Bobby from a child to a man with a family of his own. The choices he made and the man he became. There are three primary families involved in this story and instead of anger they have imbraced each other with support and love. They are now an extended family of caring individuals who have found a answer to a long asked question - Am I Bobby Dunbar or Bruce Anderson? I can only imagine the confusion this child went through and yet overcame to become a great husband, father and grandfather.

I had the honor of meeting Tal McThenia and Margaret Dunbar Cutright at the local book store in Waynesville, NC and spend the evening with them as well. They are both wonderful people and will read any further books either may have. I enjoyed this book and recommend it to all who are looking for real life drama.

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### **Madonna says**

I received this book from GoodReads in hardback.

It would have been much better with better editing. I feel that this book is too drawn out and repetitious for me to recommend it. I thought I would never get done and only finished it because I wanted to know which

mother this little boy belonged with; and I refuse to ever read the ending of a book before reading the rest. I could see that the proof and the trial were what the author apparently wanted to dwell on. However, I feel more attention should have been paid to the suffering of the little boy Bobby/Bruce.

It is a shame they did not have DNA testing. They could have had so simple an answer. However, if you look at today's situations in courts; the birth mother probably would have been denied custody anyway. The fact that she basically gave her child away to someone she did not know that well, who proceeded to abuse the child, would have caused the courts today to take the child and put him in foster care. Would this have been a better situation? Probably not!

We need to look at more than one part of this story to get a reasonable answer. I do feel sorry for Julia; but did she do her best? What should have happened?

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