



ONE DAY YOU'LL BE DEAD

College kids plot to steal rare books in the bizarre true-crime heist flick *American Animals*

In 1866, the legendary Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky released a vicious little novel called *Crime and Punishment*, about a poor college student, Raskolnikov, who brutally murders a crusty old pawnbroker.

Deeming himself a great man of the future, Raskolnikov rationalizes the murder: The pawnbroker is just a deplorable pariah of no good use to the world, he tells himself, whereas her money will free him to accomplish all the important things for which he's obviously destined. So he puts an ax in her skull.

In all four of his epic novels, including *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoyevsky — as with many 19th-century visionaries — depicted with relentless psychological precision his era's surging tide of nihilism. For devout Dostoyevsky, as for the anti-Christian existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche, the displacement of religion in the modern world was leading not to a rationalist utopia but, rather, to a vertiginous free-for-all in which truth and morality were undermined by a nauseating sense of cosmic despair, which would be followed by massive bloodlettings of unprecedented scale and scope.

Witness the 20th century. Enough said.

Now jump to the swirling chaos of the 21st century, and test the hypothesis again, as writer/director Bart Layton does in his new movie *American Animals*. Unlike Dostoyevsky's fictions, Layton's film about real-life crime and punishment is a rather bloodless and small-time affair,

though no less devastating in its implications. It tells the true story of four college students from Lexington, Kentucky, who in 2004 carried out a plot to steal rare books — including Audubon's *The Birds of America*, valued at \$12 million — from the ridiculously low-security library of Transylvania University.

American Animals is a heist film, containing all the elements of intricate planning and ratcheting suspense you've come to expect from that genre. And yet it is like no heist film in cinematic history. Not a shot is fired. Nobody dies. No grand chase ensues.

Brilliantly interspersing present-day interviews with the actual participants, Layton creates a chilling and kaleidoscopic portrait of evil masquerading as youthful arrogance and myopic adrenaline seeking. The result is the darkest of comedies, a drawn-from-reality slapstick that derives its absurdity not from the Chaplinesque booby-traps of fate but from the repugnant dynamo of pathological narcissism.

As the ringleader Warren Lipka, Evan Peters carries the film, bringing a raffish, low-rent charm to a role that is equal parts idiocy and charisma. Lipka, a kind of energized, velvet-tongued knucklehead who liberally quotes Tarantino films for inspiration, is the portrait of empty millennial rebellion, and Peters plays him like a lit fuse. Since his stunning appearance as a Kurt Cobain-style bad boy in season one of *American Horror Story*, I've been waiting for this actor to break out, and this might be the perfor-

mance that gets him the broader recognition he deserves.

The rest of the cast is equally excellent, especially Barry Keoghan (*The Killing of a Sacred Deer*) as Lipka's sidekick and strangled conscience, as well as the indefatigable Ann Dowd (*Hereditary*, *The Handmaid's Tale*) as the lone librarian the students must "neutralize" to carry out the caper — which, needless to say, doesn't go quite as planned.

For all its non-epic reach, *American Animals* is an emotionally wrenching film, and much deeper than its comedic coatings would suggest. Its multiple narrative threads interlace and knot up, creating a questionable reliability that reinforces the moral outrage surging at the film's core. Somehow, its zero body count and lack of violence elevates the impact of the crime — the pointlessness of it, the harm that ripples ever outward, the senseless waste of human life it both signifies and leaves in its wake.

For Dostoyevsky, the real punishment for Raskolnikov's crime comes not at the hands of the authorities but in the internal ravages of personal guilt he suffers, as his conscience confronts the undeniable horror of his actions. We see something similar in *American Animals*, which substitutes death with the living hell of remorse. The movie gives us a painful glimpse of four (very real) young men who, in the end, were carried away by a madness they had no moral capacity to resist. And the madness, they realize, was completely of their making. (*Broadway Metro*) ■

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 At a picturesque lakeside estate, a love triangle unfolds between the diva Irina, her lover Boris, and the ingenue Nina. Based on the play by Anton Chekhov.
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