



THE LOEBERS BEAR WITNESS TO GENERATIONS OF KIDS SWEPT AWAY BY TROUBLED TIMES

BY JOE MIKSCH

CRIME SCENES

Rolf Loeber and Magda Stouthamer-Loeber seem naturally inclined to take the long view.

They have been married for 40 years. The Pittsburgh Youth Study, their investigation into the causes of juvenile delinquency, has consumed two of those decades. The study has produced 138 papers involving 50 authors, as well as a handful of books.

In 1991, Magda, a PhD associate professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, developed an itch to read as much 19th-century Irish fiction as she could find—"I'm always reading. I like almost any book. I'm not a picky reader," she says.

PHOTOGRAPHY | JIM JUDKIS

Rolf—who, like Magda, is Dutch—has an affinity for things Irish. (While pursuing a master's degree in psychology in the Netherlands, he published a book of Irish stories he translated into Dutch. After getting his PhD in clinical psychology at Ontario's Queen's University, he published a biographical dictionary of 17th-century Irish architects.)

So he prepared a four-page reading list for Magda.

By 2006, that list had grown into a four-and-a-half-pound, 1,500-page book titled *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650-1900*, which, according to the London *Times Literary Supplement*, is "set to become the text on which subsequent studies of written and printed fictions in Ireland will inevitably, and gratefully, be based."

Their motivation to assemble the first compendium of Irish fiction since 1985? Simple curiosity.

"Magda read [the books on the list] and said, 'There must be more,'" says Rolf, a Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry at Pitt.

"I like these challenges, and I said, 'Perhaps I should really try to answer that.' And we started digging."

They uncovered 5,889 titles written by 1,455 named authors and 286 anonymous scribblers.

"We found a huge number of new authors," Rolf says, before correcting himself. "Well, what I mean is new old authors. The last major compilation of Irish fiction was years ago, and it was clear there was much more out there. We found it."

The Loebers live in a capacious apartment off South Highland Avenue in Pittsburgh's Shadyside neighborhood. Both are tall, thin, and gracious. During a recent visit, the Loebers sit in their living room, eager to discuss their work. Rolf notes that the couple is in the midst of another longitudinal study, the Pittsburgh Girls Study—a companion to the Youth Study, which focuses solely on boys. Before delving too deeply into the study, the Loebers point out another of their interests: collecting art and antique furniture. (Magda says the couple eschews a particular style, buying whatever charms them.)

A statue that dramatizes a scene from the 1889 Johnstown Flood stands in front of the fireplace. It shows a woman, holding a child, standing on a steeply pitched roof as the water reaches for her feet.

"It was covered in gold spray paint," says Rolf. "We cleaned it, and there was gold leaf underneath." A lucky find. But when the Loebers turn to their work, they are precise and thorough, leaving much less to chance.

Since 1987, the Loebers have followed the lives of about 1,500 Pittsburgh boys, gathering data from one-on-one interviews, from teachers, and from parents. The planning process began in 1983; at that time, Rolf says, he and Magda decided that the project had to incorporate as many subjects as possible if they were to get the clearest possible data. The more participants and the longer the study lasted, they reckoned, the better they could trace the causes of crime, the peak ages for criminal activity, and how contributing factors vary with age.

When the Pittsburgh Youth Study began, the Loebers' recruits were 7, 10, and 13 years old and from a cross-section of Pittsburgh's population. Study researchers conducted regular follow-up interviews with the boys, as well as with family members and teachers. They also checked regularly with the courts. Before proceeding, the Loebers knew that serious criminal activity among youth peaked in adolescence, with many juvenile offenders returning to something approximating the straight and narrow in their early 20s. What was less well understood were the factors that, say, contributed to one generation of 17-year-olds being more criminally inclined than another.

"The age-crime curve is a universal phenomenon," Rolf says. "Crime tends to peak in late adolescence. But the height of that peak, and how long people will be engaged in crime, is not fixed. So we acted and became the first study to document the age-crime curve over time for different ages of several age cohorts."

Economic factors, national crime trends, neighborhood stability and safety, and levels of gang membership, gun ownership, and drug dealing, the Loebers confirmed, varied over time, accounting for rises and falls in criminal activity among youth.

These larger societal factors might be thought of as a rising tide lifting all boats, but for the worse.

The early '90s, Rolf says, were particularly rough. Crime was on the rise in many Pittsburgh neighborhoods. Members of the oldest cohort were in their late teens, an age when criminal activity reaches its peak. They ended up with longer and more vigorous "criminal careers," Rolf says.

"When the youngest group was at the same age, there was much less crime among them."

Magda says one of the great surprises of the study was the level of violence young people engage in and are subject to.

"We had 33 homicide offenders in the total sample," she says. A similar number of participants were homicide victims. "We severely underestimated the amount of violence we'd encounter with the [oldest] sample," she adds. "Part of that had to do with the fact that no one could have predicted that, over the course of the study, the crime rate would rise in the city. The older kids in particular—when they were in their late adolescence—they were swept up by violence."

"Before our work, the knowledge about homicide offenders was limited to case reports, what comes after the fact—a kind of reconstruction," Rolf adds. "What we have is information from different sources, including the boys themselves and parents and teachers, as to what happened to these individuals before they committed horrendous crimes."

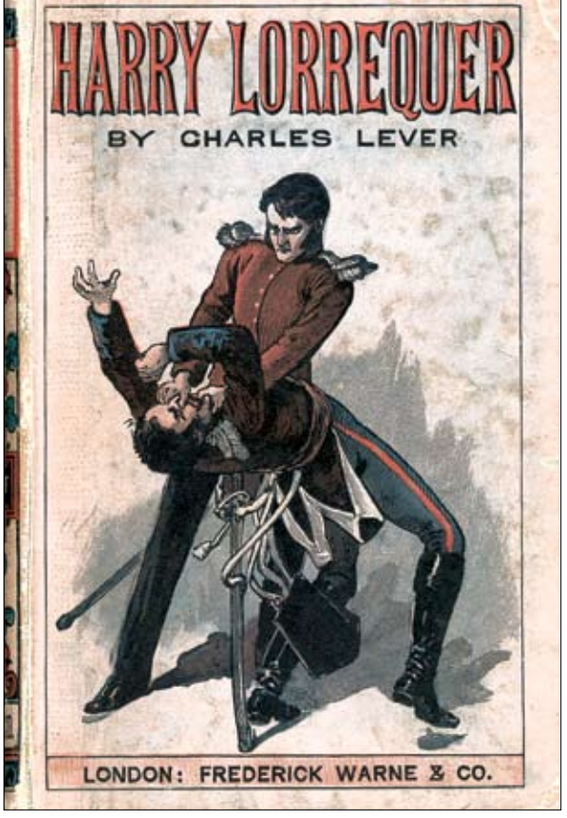
The Youth Study data were used to generate a 2005 paper that Rolf calls "one of the first to tell us, prospectively, what are the predictors, not only of violence, but of homicide." Recent work focuses on pulling factors from the data that tend to reduce criminal behavior among youth.

Empirical studies show that many of the known predictors of violence and homicide, such as parents' poor child-rearing practices and children's poor impulse control, can be modified, resulting in lowered antisocial behavior and lowered risk for violence.

From the living room, down a narrow corridor, to the Loeber library. A bust of George Bernard Shaw stands sentinel atop one of a seemingly endless supply of bookshelves. He appears deep in thought, perhaps wondering what became of the 2,000 Irish fiction titles the Loebers sold to the University of Notre Dame Irish collection. Students of Irish fiction at the South Bend, Ind., school not only use the Loebers' books as resources, but also the Loebers themselves, relying on their expertise for their dissertations. "It's actually quite enjoyable, not that I can answer all their questions," Rolf says with a smile.

A massive antique table is barely visible under piles of books and papers. More bookshelves line the walls of an adjoining room, which is separated from the other by an aged, roll-up map of Ireland. The chaise lounge, which resembles the archetypical psychiatrist's couch, is where Magda did most of her reading. Rolf sat next to her and listened as she read aloud, taking the notes that would become the *Guide*'s plot synopses.

In the first 115 pages of the resulting tome, the Loebers, scholars that they are, offer a key to abbreviations, spell out their methodology,



COURTESY LOEBER



ABOVE: Rolf and Magda Loeber relied on a personal collection of thousands of volumes of Irish literature, including *Harry Lorrequer,* and a decades-long interest in the subject to compile their 1,500-page *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650-1900*. RIGHT: Careful reading by Magda yielded plot synopses for more than 900 of the 5,889 entries in the couple's catalog of Irish lit.

and outline their key findings. The remainder of the book is broken down into sections attending to the anonymous authors of one work, anonymous authors of multiple works, and the works of known authors. The back of the book indexes people, titles, historic periods, themes and settings, publishers, and places related to authors.

Regarding the *Guide*'s thoroughness, Rolf notes that the book should be regarded as more of a social and political history of Ireland than a survey of Irish literature.

"For us it was not [about] discovering the best Irish writer. It was about social history," he says. "What people wrote pertained to the development of political ideas, cultural ideas, and that's what we wanted to report."

Fiction, it seems, is merely a means to an end. "I'm interested in what happens to nations," he says. "How did a country that's basically a colony become independent, and to what extent does that involve a change in culture? Over time, there has been a merging of culture [Gaelic v. English, Protestant v. Catholic], so I'm interested in what the barriers are to that evolution, or why it's flourishing."

A certain topic might have resonated in a particular literary time, notes Rolf, pointing toward the 19th century and the dawn of the Industrial Revolution for examples.

"At that time, there [were] a number of different genres regarding the welfare of different groups, social issues," he says. "It could be individuals living on farms, poor tenant farmers living in hovels. It could be about tenements, chimney boys, prostitutes. There was a huge body of literature that tried to reduce levels of drinking. There was an evolution of different forms of literature that tend to be reforming, that try to help people get better."

Centuries later, social welfare instincts are alive and well among the Loebers.

In concert with the City of Pittsburgh and several foundations, the couple has advanced the adoption of an intervention program directed toward reducing the risk of delinquency in pre-adolescent boys.

"The under-12 group is a particularly underserviced group of children," Rolf says. "When they violate the law, police find them and bring them home, but not much happens." The Loebers and the city are taking bids from social service agencies interested in guiding the program.

When the couple started the Girls Study in 1999, they suspected that the precursors of antisocial behavior in girls might be different from those preceding delinquency in boys.

To get started, the Loebers hired a cadre of assistants who spent about a year knocking on the doors of 103,238 households in Pittsburgh. They needed girls between 5 and 8 years old, and the study staff identified 2,451.

They are still collecting data, Rolf says, but the study has thus far "made it clear that what applies to boys [in terms of delinquency] only partially applies to girls.

"With girls, we've seen more anxiety and depression, more comorbidities and concurring problems." Delinquent girls also exhibit higher incidences of antisocial personality disorder and substance abuse.

As with the Youth Study, the Loebers rely on annual face-to-face interviews with participating subjects, as well as conversations with parents and teachers.

"Next to nothing is known about the etiology of those comorbid girls," Rolf says. "We are looking to change that."

He is optimistic that the Girls Study will spawn quality data to guide other researchers. The integrity of the sample, he says, is key. Since the study began, it has retained about 95 percent of the original participants. Magda credits this rate to their practice of relying on a corps of helpers they train and pay, rather than hiring outside contractors to collect data. "We have more control," she says. "We set up internal checks so we would know if something went wrong, and when it went wrong." Both note that Pittsburgh itself is a benefit for researchers doing long-term work. "Pittsburgh is great compared to other major cities. This is such a stable population," says Magda.

"Most people who watch TV think about crime as something intriguing, and that's the way TV presents it. Of course, it is intriguing, but I don't find any romance in it," Rolf says.

"Our mission is to try and figure out the causes of violence in a community and the parameters through which we could actually bring about change."

One last visit to the Loebers' library reveals a pile of books on a small table in a corner. Magda carelessly remarks, "Oh, we still need to catalog those."

But isn't the *Guide* done? What's left to catalog?

"Well, we're working on a guide to Irish poetry and songs," she responds.

It seems that retirement, or even slowing down, isn't in the Loebers' plans.

"As long as I can still contribute to science, I'll keep working," Rolf says. Growing more excited, he notes that a great deal of data from the Youth Study remain to be digested.

"And the Girls Study is building up," he adds with a grin.

Regarding the nascent guide to Irish poetry and song, Magda seems to approach it as a serious diversion, if there is such a thing.

"It doesn't even really matter if we finish it," she says. "We can quit. We can persevere. It doesn't matter. It's just an enjoyable thing to do," she says. "It's all very exciting. It's a good life." ■