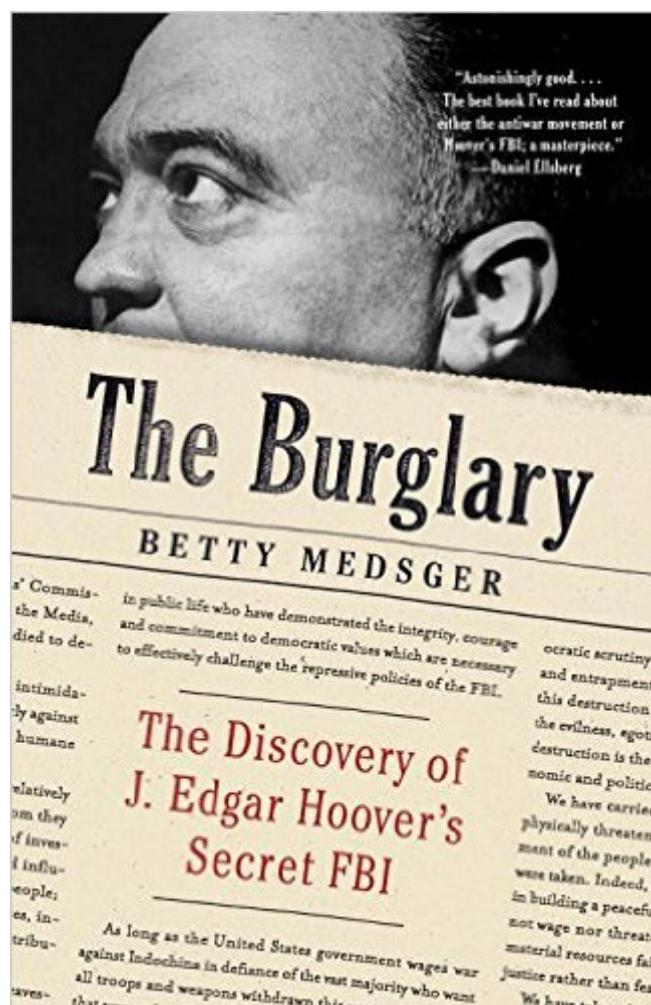


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The Burglary: The Discovery Of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI



Synopsis

In late 1970, a mild-mannered Haverford College physics professor privately asked a few people this question: "What do you think of burglarizing an FBI office?" In remarkable detail and with astonishing depth of research, Betty Medsger reveals the never-before-told full story of the history-changing break-in at the Media, Pennsylvania, FBI offices. Through their exploits, a group of unlikely activists exposed the shocking truth that J. Edgar Hoover was operating a shadow Bureau engaged in illegal surveillance and harassment of the American people. The Burglary brings the activists, who have kept their secret for forty-three years, into the public eye for the first time—including, new to this edition, the recent discovery of the eighth and final member of the team. The burglars' story of personal sacrifice and civil disobedience is a vital episode in the American whistle-blower tradition that includes the Pentagon Papers, Watergate's Deep Throat, and, most recently, Edward Snowden and the NSA.

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Customer Reviews

I found this book absolutely absorbing. Both the skill with which it is written and the story that it tells are astounding. The story centers around the decision in 1971 by 8 respectable and responsible people, including a young married couple with 3 children, to break in to a small local FBI office to attempt to get proof that the FBI was spying on and attempting to suppress dissent by those who opposed the Vietnam War. This act of civil disobedience was much different than what Civil Rights protestors had engaged in--if caught, these people would face not just a few days or weeks in a

local jail, like Martin Luther King in Birmingham, but instead as much as 30 years in a federal penitentiary. The author writes movingly and in great detail about what would lead people to make such a bold decision, their backgrounds, how they prepared themselves, the precautions they took to keep their act secret (again, unlike many other acts of Civil Disobedience), the stress and fear they felt, and at the end, how they now feel looking back on their younger selves. I was so moved by the story of the Robins family and their deep love for each other and for their young children, and yet their belief that a moral life may require putting all that at risk for a higher good. Though it might seem irresponsible, it is routinely expected that a married soldier of either sex will be willing to risk death or disability even though they have a family, so their conviction makes sense, and yet, it was so painful and hard won.

My first thought on having completed this massive tome is that it's misnamed. Yes, the break-in and the removal of secret files from the Media, PA, FBI office is discussed at length (one could say "at long length"), but that's only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Most of the book deals with the history and development of the FBI, before, during and after that break-in. Calling this book *The Burglary* is tantamount to calling *Around the World in 80 Days* something like *My Trip to Paris*. Considering that Ms. Metzger was one of the original recipients of the Xeroxed copies of the pilfered files, she's certainly been involved in the story for a long time. That break-in occurred in 1971. After all this time, though, seven of the eight burglars have decided it's safe to come out of the closet. (The one hold-out, whoever he/she is, is probably either paranoid or dead...or both.) To be sure, this is a fascinating book, even if it does stray. There are many insights into the workings of the FBI under Hoover. If you go by the book's subtitle, "The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI," rather than the actual title, which is limiting, you have a fascinating history of the bureau. But just when Ms. Metzger has wandered afield of the Media burglary, she'll toss in a line or two bringing it back into focus, such as: "The [Media] break-in may have been necessary in order for the truth about FBI operations to emerge." So despite the length of this book (which I still feel is excessive), the information contained in Ms. Metzger's volume is fascinating and eye-opening. The burglars were looking primarily for corroboration that the FBI was stepping on Americans' right to dissent (in particular against our presence in Vietnam).

In our age of Wikileaks, Edward Snowden's release of CIA documents, and endless debate over how much we shall allow governments to operate in how much secrecy, histories like this one need telling. On March 8, 1972, the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI - really, a small group of

concerned anti-war protesters - burgled the FBI building in Media, PA, taking every document they could find in the building. This amateur group of burglars' intent was to validate to themselves and others their (and others') suspicion that the FBI was using its accountability-immune power to create a sense of terror amongst the American people and spy on people who posed no ostensible threat to national security (anti-war protesters, social activists, etc). Once the documents were gotten, the Commission set out to gradually release documents to media sources so that Americans could glimpse what sorts of things the FBI was doing. As the book states, not only were the Commission's concerns completely validated, but their "results" kicked off a huge firestorm of controversy over the (until then) quite autonomous FBI. This is a wide-ranging book, profiling the planning of the burglary, the media's reaction to the leaked documents, the FBI's attempts to contain the PR damage as well as their unsuccessful attempts to find the burglars (who were never caught), and the nation's attempts to grapple with how to reform an agency that might need some secrecy in order to protect the country, but also clearly needed to be accountable to the nation.

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