

## Review: 'The Road Out of Hell' a Chilling Tale

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"The Road Out of Hell: Sanford Clark and the True Story of the Wineville Murders" (Union Square Press, 304 pages, \$24.95), by Anthony Flacco, with Jerry Clark: This is a darkly disturbing true account of a 13-year-old boy, Sanford Clark, sent to live with his uncle on an isolated chicken farm in California in 1926.

Clark is quickly subject to all manner of abuse by his uncle, Gordon Stewart Northcott, a psychopath and sadist who lures young boys to the farm to sexually assault, torture and kill them, to Clark's slowly dawning horror.

Northcott forces Clark to help with his grisly deeds, rendering the boy so guilty and terrified that even when he escapes at one point, he's afraid of how he might be received and slinks back to the farm.

Flacco depicts Clark's life with the aid of court transcripts, newspaper articles and interviews with Clark's son, yet chooses to tell the story mostly from Clark's perspective.

There are many scenes between the uncle and Clark only, so it's impossible to know how much is verbatim from accounts and how much is influenced by Flacco, a screenwriter and author of both historical novels and other true-crime books. Still, the effect is visceral and haunting, simply by suggesting the exchanges that might have occurred between Northcott and Clark.

One of the boys reported missing and killed by Northcott, Walter Collins, became part of a notorious case involving the LAPD (depicted in the movie "The Changeling"), when police tried to send a boy who was not Walter home with Collins' mother.

However, that case is barely mentioned in the book, since Flacco keeps the narrative tightly focused on Clark and what happened on the farm. That approach sacrifices some background and perspective, but creates an intensely unsettling, almost claustrophobic atmosphere. Clark's guilt and shame at what he is forced to do and bear is palpable, and when he finally manages to escape from Northcott after two years, with the help of his sister Jessie, he unsurprisingly has difficulty getting past what he has gone through.

Flacco, with the help of Clark's son Jerry, paints a vivid portrait in the latter part of the book of a man who went on to marry, raise two sons and serve in World War II.

It is ostensibly a tale of redemption, but the book also makes it clear how disturbed Clark was for the rest of his life. It was a time when counseling and therapy weren't common, so Clark simply bore the pain, rarely discussing his past and suffering from flashbacks and periods of deep depression for the rest of his life.

"The Road Out of Hell" is a chilling look at a dark chapter in America's history.