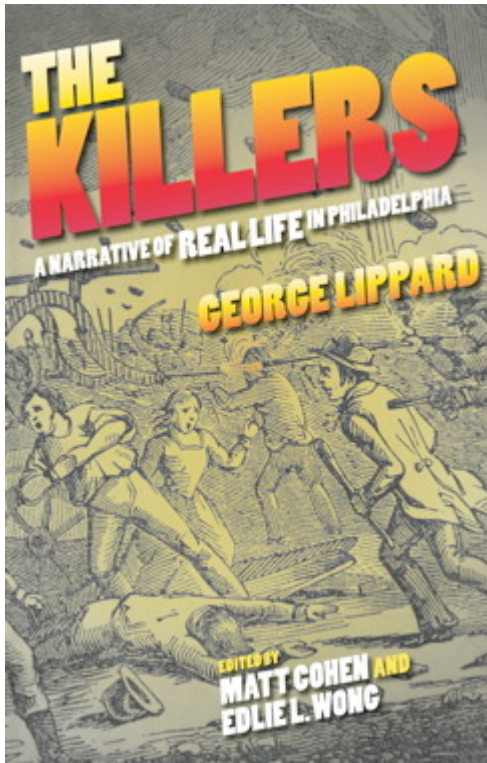


# Getting the Gang Back Together



It may be best to get this out of the way at the outset: George Lippard was something of a kook. A prolific author of sensational fiction and historical tales in the 1840s and early 1850s, Lippard (1822-1854) had a short but tremendously productive career that saw him become one of the most widely known authors of his day. Yet his overheated prose, his intense political commitments, his occasionally cavalier relationship to plot, and the depth of his enthusiasms can make his work a tough sell for contemporary readers. *The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk-Hall* (1844-45) was Lippard's most famous novel—and likely his biggest seller—and it remains the work for which he is best known today. Yet Lippard also published Gothic tales, novels about the Mexican-American War, other sensational urban narratives, historical sketches, and a series of tales of the Revolution that were probably his most widely reprinted works. He also founded his own story paper, the *Quaker City Weekly*, as well as a semi-secret fraternal organization, the Brotherhood of the Union, to which he dedicated much of his time late in his career.

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Despite this prodigious output—Lippard wrote over twenty novels and countless shorter pieces in his twelve years of active professional writing—very little

of George Lippard's work is available in print today. The issue of a new edition of *Quaker City* (edited by David Reynolds) by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1995 helped spark a revival of interest in Lippard, and now his name is frequently seen in conference paper titles. The June 2015 issue of *Nineteenth-Century Literature* consists entirely of a set of essays (convened by Christopher Looby) on *The Quaker City*. Readers have long been waiting for high-quality new editions of more of Lippard's works, which is why the University of Pennsylvania Press's publication of Lippard's 1850 novella *The Killers: A Narrative of Real Life in Philadelphia* is so welcome. At only 120 pages, *The Killers* provides a more manageable introduction to Lippard's work than some of his other novels, while also focusing more insistently on matters of race than most of his work. Edited by Matt Cohen and Edlie Wong, this new edition of *The Killers* includes a useful introduction, an array of helpful contemporary documents, along with a reprinting of the *Life and Adventures of Charles Anderson Chester*, a shorter text issued virtually simultaneously that duplicates much of the material in *The Killers* (although in less comprehensible fashion).



George Lippard, *The Killers: A Narrative of Real Life in Philadelphia*, eds. Matt Cohen and Edlie L. Wong. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 256 pp., \$45.

*The Killers* primarily revolves around events associated with riots that took place in Philadelphia on election night in October 1849. The riots were focused on the California House, a bar located in what is now the Society Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia, just on the border of what in 1849 was the working-class district of Moyamensing (a map of present-day Philadelphia marking the events of the novella would have been a helpful addition to the introductory materials). The Killers were a notorious local street gang in the neighborhood, many of whose members—along with their leader, William McMullen—were veterans of the Mexican-American War. Allegedly responding to rumors that the mixed-race proprietor of the California House, which was at the center of Philadelphia's largest African American community, was married to a white woman, the Killers rammed the bar with a wagon loaded with burning tar barrels, sparking a riot that resulted in several deaths and the burning of the California House.

This riot constitutes the climax of *The Killers*. Lippard's narrative starts several years earlier, though, beginning in 1846 at Yale College. Two wealthy ne'er-do-well students, Cromwell Hicks and Don Jorge Marin, have been expelled for having attempted to abduct a professor's daughter. Cromwell is the son of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, Jacob D. Z. Hicks, while Don Jorge's father, Antonio Marin, is a Cuban exile. In addition to their expulsion, the young men are deep in debt, having run up bills at tailors, bars, and restaurants around New Haven. Their wealthy fathers refuse to bail them out, which prompts Don

Jorge to propose a slave-trading voyage to Cromwell as the best path to riches. Cromwell initially recoils at the prospect of being involved in the slave trade, but after a trip to Philadelphia and a failed effort to embezzle money from his father's business, which ends up in Jacob disowning Cromwell, he forges his father's signature on several bank drafts and sets off for New York to meet Don Jorge. Jacob Hicks supposedly commits suicide when news of his financial ruin is made public. The action then skips ahead three years, and returns to Philadelphia; all of the events that supposedly took place on the coast of West Africa and in Cuba are only hinted at.

Back in Philadelphia, Cromwell is going by the name Bob Blazes and is the head of the Killers. A fellow member of the gang is Cromwell's abandoned half-brother Elijah, who was recently released from a stint in the Eastern State Penitentiary for passing a counterfeit banknote on a bank controlled by his father, who it turns out is very much alive. Unable to find legitimate employment due to his status as a convict, Elijah is forced to turn to crime, and in the process finds a way to gain revenge against Hicks. A side plot features Kate Watson, a beautiful actress who was raised as Elijah's sister. Jacob Hicks sees Kate on the stage and is determined to seduce her, first by offering her adoptive mother money in order to keep her as a mistress. When the virtuous Kate rejects the offer, Hicks determines to abduct her in a carriage on the night of the election. (The plot featuring the seduction of a beautiful poor young woman by an older wealthy man is a near-constant feature of Lippard's narratives.)

Cromwell overhears Hicks arranging for Kate's abduction with Black Andy, an African American owner of a bar at the end of Kate's street. Realizing that his father's wealth must be concealed in his mansion, Cromwell formulates the plan for a riot on election night to provide cover for an attempt to kidnap his father and force him to surrender his riches. As the riot whirls through the city, Cromwell and the Killers find Hicks in Black Andy's bar preparing to abduct Kate Watson, who was chloroformed by Black Andy. The Killers set the bar on fire, while Cromwell and Elijah confront their father. In a remarkable scene of interracial violence, Black Andy murders Cromwell, and then rescues Kate from the burning building before dying in its collapse. Elijah manages to escape as well. Don Jorge is killed by a booby-trapped strongbox in Jacob Hicks' mansion. Elijah witnesses the scene and manages to escape to Central America with Kate, Hicks' gold, and a ledger book that implicates several respectable Philadelphia mercantile houses in the African slave trade.

As is often the case with Lippard's work, the novella bears the marks of hasty writing, and the several strands of the plot are tied up in a rush of bloody action and surprising coincidences. Yet *The Killers* also serves as an accessible point of entry to Lippard's urban-gothic oeuvre, and gives Lippard the opportunity to critique the antebellum prison system, urban squalor and lawlessness, the hypocrisy of merchant elites, and the corrupting qualities of money. The editors perhaps place too much emphasis in their introduction on Lippard's allegedly sympathetic portrayal of Black Andy—especially since, if

Lippard was also the author of *Charles Anderson Chester* (as they seem to credit), it is difficult to explain his much more racist depiction of that novella's version of the character, Black Herkles. More importantly, *The Killers* provides a valuable corrective to our picture of antebellum American literature. The whirlwind action, revenge and seduction plots, and depictions of current (violent) events in *The Killers* offer an example of a popular fiction genre that stands at a striking remove from the literary forms of the period that have been canonized.

*The Killers* would be worth reading for its depiction of Philadelphia's antebellum underworld alone. But, as the editors note, it touches on so many of the key issues of the day—from filibustering to slavery to wildcat banks to penal reform—that it offers an exceptionally rich starting point for discussions of the period's larger historical context. The edition does feel somewhat padded; the inclusion of *Charles Anderson Chester* feels unnecessary, particularly since the evidence that has been suggested to prove that Lippard was behind that work's publication is less than convincing. But the contemporary accounts of the riot provided in the appendix give helpful context in distinguishing where Lippard altered the facts of the California House riot to suit his own purposes. The editors note in the introduction that the "republication of *The Killers* contributes to current efforts to revitalize George Lippard for a new generation of readers" (39). In the pursuit of that goal, the edition succeeds admirably.

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