“Crack shot.” “Enigma woman.” “Good with ponies and pistols.” “A much-married woman.” What if such an unconventional woman—and the press unanimously agreed that Nellie May Madison was indeed unconventional—were to get away with murder? Shortly after her husband’s bullet-riddled body was found in the couple’s Burbank apartment, police issued an all-points bulletin for the “beautiful, dark-haired widow.” The ensuing drama unfolded with all the strange twists and turns of a noir crime novel. In this intriguing cultural history, Kathleen A. Cairns tells the true tale of the first woman sentenced to death in California, Nellie May Madison. Her story offers a glimpse into law and disorder in 1930s Los Angeles while bringing to life a remarkable character whose plight reflects on the status of woman, the workings of the media and the judiciary system, and the stratification of society in her time. An intriguing cultural history, Cairns’s re-creation of the case from murder to trial to aftermath casts an eye forward to our own love-hate affair with celebrity crimes and our abiding ambivalence about domestic violence abuse as a defense for murder.

Features:
* Notes:

My Personal Review:
The doctrine of self-defense has always required an "imminent" danger. To a man, "retreat" involves a physical act. But a beaten woman who decides to get her man before he gets her often preemptively strikes while he's incapacitated.

Alas, the law has always shaken a finger at slaying a sleeping drunk.
Nellie Madison woman shot her sleeping husband in the back, and the lawyers and the press didn't know what to make of it. Indeed, her lawyer kicked women off the jury and refused to put on the evidence that would explain why she did it, and the puzzled jurors contemplated the bloody bed set up in the courtroom and sentenced her to hang.

This book finally tells us the entire tale of Nellie Madison for the first time, and it is so terrifically researched, so well put together, you might forget the story took place in 1934. It's supposed to be an "academic" book, and was published by The University of Nebraska Press, yet it's anything but a stuffy academic treatment, and it's a physically lovely, beautifully produced book.

The crime rags were quick to put a moniker on Mrs. Madison, referring to her as "a real-life Roxie Hart," among other names, and dubbed her crime one of the most mysterious in the annals. An investigator called her "the coolest woman I have ever questioned."

Purple prose never fades, and the author couldn't help but quote some of the press accounts. My favorite, courtesy the Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express:

"Like the opening of a detective mystery will be the prosecution's evidence in the trial of the comely 'enigma woman.' There will be told in court the screams of a woman at midnight, excited footfalls in dim halls. Then, like the closing chapters of a 'thriller,' in which the mystery is solved, the story of Mrs. Madison will unroll before the jury, providing, it is hoped by the defendant and her counsel, an adequate excuse for blasting Eric Madison into eternity as he lay on his bed that fateful night."

She was an unusual woman; she began her marital adventures at 13 and was divorced several times -- this when divorce rates were in the single digits -- and yet she never had children.

Then she bought a handgun and made herself a widow. Witnesses originally thought the gunshots came from the adjacent Warner Brothers Studio. Despite the Hollywood backdrop, Nellie May missed her cue; she didn't weep into her handkerchief for the press. Indeed she refused to say anything at all about the murder until she was behind bars and sentenced to swing.

Then she told a story of rib-cracking abuse -- and it was backed up by the dead man's other loves, who told virtually identical stories of stranglings and beatings and humiliations that the flashpoint-tempered Eric Madison heaped upon the many women in his shortened life.

The Enigma Woman is a wonderful piece of storytelling, masterfully constructed, and the author obviously put many miles on her car getting
the full story. I wish I'd written it, and I stand in awe of anyone who can
glean so many fascinating details from a case that's coated in decades of
dust.

I also noticed Amazon is pairing it for sale with The Good-Bye Door, the
book out last fall about electrocuted 1930s serial killer Anna Hahn, another
I enjoyed very much for the same qualities.

The Enigma Woman is top-shelf stuff for votaries of high quality historic
crime stories. Professor Cairns will keep you mesmerized in contemplation
of a most curious murder case, one in which our recalcitrant heroine could
not speak until she was within the shadows of the gallows, one in which
the victim may well have had it coming in spades and by golly got it.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
The Enigma Woman: The Death Sentence of Nellie May Madison (Women in the West)
by Kathleen A. Cairns - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!