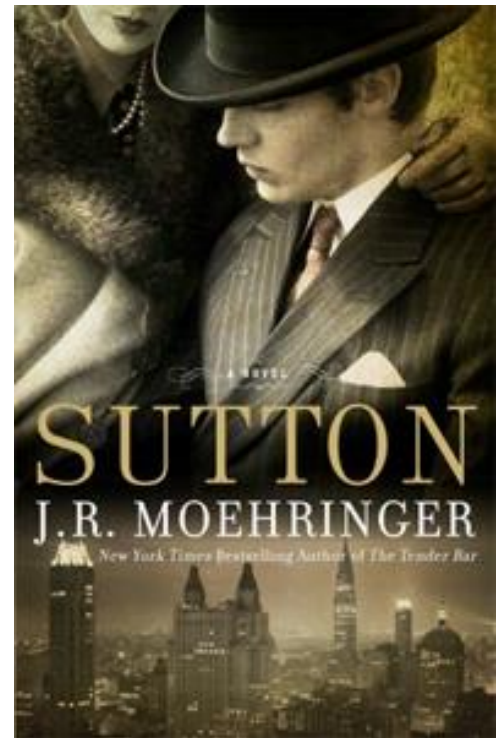


Sutton

J. R. Moehringer

## Introduction

Willie Sutton was one of the most notorious, infamous and frequently quoted figures of the twentieth century—yet little is known about him. From the 1920s to the 1950s he robbed dozens of banks, made off with perhaps two million dollars and escaped three maximum security prisons—but how? And why? Who was Willie Sutton and what drove him?



From scattered facts and widely conflicting accounts J.R. Moehringer builds a cohesive narrative of Sutton’s life and an intriguing portrait of his psyche. Charming, gallant, loyal, romantic, honor-bound, self-deluded, Moehringer’s Sutton is essentially driven by two things—an indomitable will to survive and the boundless memory of one lost love.

## Discussion Questions

1. How is Willie Sutton an atypical criminal, unlike those more commonly found in gangster movies and noir novels?
2. Before they set out on their journey, Sutton tells Reporter that newspapers deal in myths, as do “comic books, Horatio Alger, the Bible, the whole American Dream.” Sutton adds, “I used to buy in . . . That’s what got me so mixed up in the first place.” What does Sutton mean? What myths have been highly influential in your own life?

- 3. For good or ill, how did growing up in Irish Town shape Willie? What did he learn from the neighborhood code of honor? From seeing his parents struggle financially? How did his abuse at the hands of his brothers forever alter the trajectory of his life?**
- 4. Discuss Willie's best friends Eddie and Happy. What do they provide for Willie, and what do they cost him? How do they mirror his brothers?**
- 5. What's the larger significance of the brutal scene at the slaughterhouse? Does it come to mind at other moments in the book, such as when Willie crosses paths with Arnold Schuster?**
- 6. Sutton tells Reporter and Photographer that the "real hero" of the 1969 moon landing was Mike Collins, the one astronaut who never set foot on the lunar surface. What does Sutton mean? In what ways does this remark open a window into Willie's worldview?**
- 7. What role does Daddo, a relatively minor character, play in Willie's development and later life?**
- 8. Discuss the symbolism of eyes and the connection among characters who lose their sight or suffer some eye injury—Daddo, Eddie, Margaret, Arnold Schuster.**
- 9. Willie flatly claims: "Money. Love. There's not a problem that isn't created by one or the other. And there's not a problem that can't be solved by one or the other." Do you agree?**
- 10. At the start of Part Two we learn that Willie is fascinated by the safe "as an intellectual subject, as an abstract concept." How does the idea of a safe, of something valuable locked inside something impenetrable, recur throughout the story?**

- 11.** What do we learn about Willie through his interactions with Wingy?
- 12.** While at Eastern State, Willie receives an off-the-cuff but elaborate diagnosis from the prison psychiatrist. Do you agree with the doctor? Is he too harsh? Too soft? Is it possible the doctor is the only person who ever sees Willie for what he really is?
- 13.** Do you think Willie is a good person? If so, how to explain his inability to live by society's rules? If not, how to explain his dedication to nonviolence, his love of literature, his genuine empathy for the suffering of others? And if he's a rare mix of both good and bad, did his punishments fit his crimes?
- 14.** Sutton seems struck and slightly bothered by the notion that he's not a hero but an antihero. Which does he seem to you—hero or antihero? Or neither?
- 15.** Willie argues that to live in society, to survive, each of us must take something away from somebody. Each of us must rob. Is he being glib, or does he make a valid point?
- 16.** When Sutton meets Bess's granddaughter, Kate, he provokes her to reveal a different version of his affair with Bess. Does he accept her version or simply ignore it? Which version of the novel's love story do you believe—the one Willie remembers or the one Kate heard from her grandmother? Does the scene with Kate change how you feel about Willie? Does it make him seem delusional, or does it simply raise the idea that there is much about him—and Bess—that we'll never know? Do you agree with Reporter, in the final chapter, when he muses: "All love is delusional"?

## **An Interview with J.R. Moehringer**

**How did you hear about the story of Willie Sutton, and what made you want to turn it into a novel?**

**I used to hear about Willie Sutton all the time when I was a boy. My grandfather was fascinated by Sutton, and the fellas who hung out at the corner saloon with my Uncle Charlie spoke about Sutton with a kind of perverse admiration. For them, as for countless Americans, Sutton was a lovable rebel, a gentleman bandit, a kind of Robin Hood. So maybe it's natural that he popped into my head during the global financial meltdown of 2008. As I watched with horror, and anger, the chaos and suffering caused by banks, I thought of this legendary figure who'd dedicated his life to taking down banks. And I thought this would be an interesting time to write a novel about him.**

**What are the challenges or benefits of writing a novel that is rooted in historical fact? What forms did the research take?**

**The benefit is that you have a readymade story, with a basic structure and chronology. You have a real person, with a real date of birth and a real date of death and some indisputable facts in between. You're grounded by those facts, secured and comforted by them, as is the reader. But you're also constrained. Sometimes you want the story to go in a completely different direction, and it won't; the facts won't let it. Sometimes you want the protagonist to make different choices, better choices, and he simply can't.**

**In your Author's Note you say this book is your "guess" about what happened to Willie when he got out of prison, but it's also your "wish." What do you mean by this?**

**Picturing Willie's life, trying to divine his motivations, I didn't always feel as though I was imagining. I was often guided by a kind of wishful novelistic thinking. I believed, or wanted to believe, that Willie was a good person at heart, and thus that's what he became in my book. A good person gone bad.**

**Did you take the tour yourself and visit all of the locations in the book?**

**Every last one.**

**Why did you make Willie so literate, reading classics, poets like Ezra Pound and Hart Crane?**

**I didn't. Life did. That's one of those indisputable facts about Willie. By all accounts he was a voracious reader. Maybe it was all the time he had on his hands in prison, but I don't think so. I think he was a born reader. He had a gift for language. I got my hands on a letter he wrote to his publisher and I was amazed by how beautifully it was written.**

**Do you agree with Sutton about the pervasiveness of myth in our culture? And is the novel still able to contribute to mythmaking?**

**Yes, I think we're inundated with myth. It takes different forms, it evolves with technology, but it's still a vital part of us. Which is good and bad. Myths can mislead us, yes, but they can also help us find meaning. And I think the novel, though it's on the wane, though it's been overtaken by other media, can still have mythic power. And I hope it always will.**