

The Courtroom as the Stage

A Selection of Michigan Legal Fiction

By Marlene Coir

For your reading pleasure, I would like to introduce (or reintroduce) you to the works of two Michigan attorneys who were also accomplished fiction authors. Both enjoyed distinguished legal careers before publishing best-selling courtroom dramas. The criminal and civil wrongs in these novels take place in venues from Detroit to Ishpeming, and the prose and dialogues often refer to the state's landscape and history.

One of Michigan's most notable and lauded attorneys cum authors, John D. Voelker, was a prosecutor and defense attorney in Marquette County before his 1957 appointment to the Michigan Supreme Court. He was also an eloquent writer who, under the pen name Robert Traver, crafted legal stories imbued with historic and contemporary references and allusions to the people and places of Michigan's peninsulas. While on the Supreme Court, Voelker also distinguished himself with many eloquently penned opinions. In *People v Hildabridle*, a case involving some rather conspicuous facts as well as a Fourth Amendment issue, Voelker's fluent and persuasive dissent convinced one other justice to switch his vote, thus making his dissenting opinion the majority.¹

However, Justice Voelker was quite willing to retire from the Court after the success of his courtroom drama *Anatomy of a Murder* (St. Martin's Press, 1958) proved him capable of earning a living as an author. The novel remained on the *New York Times* best-sellers list for more than a year and was turned into the Academy Award-nominated feature film of the same name. A detailed book review by Frederick Baker Jr. was published in the September 2008 issue of the *Michigan Bar Journal*. In that review, Baker remarks that with *Anatomy*, Voelker created a new genre of fiction, for it was the first novel to truly depict the preparation and trial of a case.²

John Voelker's prose brings a tale from Michigan's history to life in *Laughing Whitefish* (St. Martin's Press, 1965), also published under his pen name. The novel involves a civil matter brought by a young Native American woman pursuing a fractional interest in an iron-ore deposit promised to her deceased father. This fictional account closely follows the real-life saga of Charlotte Kobogum, whose claim made its way to the Michigan Supreme Court in the late 1880s.³ Both the historical novel and the real account revolve around property and inheritance rights and Native American tribal law and custom.

Voelker penned several more works, some about the people and politics of Michigan and others about his favorite activity, fishing. None of his subsequent fiction enjoyed the commercial success of *Anatomy of a Murder*; but his books on angling in the Escanaba River and other Michigan waterways were very well received.

William Jeremiah Coughlin created the character of Detroit attorney Charley Sloan to star in a series of law and courtroom thrillers. Charley was at the top of his profession when he fell to drink. He is now a sometimes down-and-out recovering alcoholic with too many ex-wives and former girlfriends. It's no surprise that Sloan doesn't always toe the line when it comes to the letter of the law and rules of professional conduct. Coughlin, on the other hand, was a

successful criminal defense attorney, federal administrative judge in Detroit, and popular author with a respectable list of best-selling novels. He resided in Grosse Pointe Woods with his wife, Ruth, also an author, until his death in the early 1990s. The Charley Sloan series continued posthumously under Coughlin's name through the pen of mystery writer Walter Sorrells.⁴

In *Shadow of Doubt* (St. Martin's Press, 1991), Sloan is hired by one of his former girlfriends, Robin, to defend her troubled stepdaughter, Angel Harwell. Angel is accused of murdering her father, Harrison Harwell, and the outlook for the defense is not good. Angel was found alone and covered in blood in a room near the victim. She also confessed to, or at least accepted responsibility for, the crime. Witnesses remember many heated altercations between father and daughter, and the prosecution will surely note that Angel and her stepmother stand to inherit millions of dollars from the deceased. In addition, uncooperative and duplicitous behavior on the part of both Angel and Robin hampers Sloan's ability to represent his client. The courtroom, however, once again belongs to Sloan. He appears to be clearing all the hurdles and winning over the jury, but it is the denouement that takes the cake.

In *The Judgment* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), Sloan has been hired to defend Detroit Deputy Police Chief Mark Conroy, who has been

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charged with the theft of \$1 million from the department's secret informers' fund. Curiously, his accusers are the only other individuals who have access to the fund. Shady witnesses, back-room negotiations, and an unanticipated relationship lend intrigue to the resolution of this case. In the dual plot of this novel, Sloan is peripherally involved in the hunt for a serial murderer who is targeting children. A seemingly unrelated killing leads Sloan to a confrontational (and possibly fatal) meeting.

The Charley Sloan series also includes *Death Penalty* (HarperCollins, 1992) and *Proof of Intent* (St. Martin's Press, 2002). Coughlin was a prolific writer in the legal-thriller genre, and a search of his name will bring up a number of additional titles.

Other authors and titles within the genre of the legal thriller with Michigan ties include:

- *Perjury* (Crown Publishers, 1998)—Author Stanley Latreille served on the Livingston County Circuit Court bench for 26 years before retiring in 2009.⁵ In *Perjury*, a confident, successful, and sometimes brutally powerful businessman faces an inflammatory courtroom denouncement by his ex-wife and another soon-to-be ex. This compelling and often disturbing story takes place in a small town near Ann Arbor.
- *Supreme Justice* (William Morrow and Co., 1999)—California-based author Gary Hardwick is a former attorney who lived in Detroit for many years. In this novel, a conservative African-American Supreme Court justice is murdered at a Detroit law school where he was to give a commencement address. Charges are quickly brought against a local activist, but it is up to the U.S. attorney assigned to the

case to unravel contradictory evidence. He discovers that his old street contacts are valuable assets in his investigation and prosecution of the crime.

- *To Account for Murder* (The Permanent Press, 2010)—The author, William C. Whitbeck, is a Michigan Court of Appeals judge, and this is his debut novel.⁶ The book presents a fictionalized account of the murder of Michigan State Senator Warren G. Hooper in 1945. The real crime was never solved, but the book provides a whodunit and an insider's view of politics, crime, and corruption in Michigan during the period following World War II.

If the above titles pique your interest, all can be found in Michigan libraries; most are

available from bookstores or your favorite online merchant. ■

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FOOTNOTES

1. *People v Hildabridge*, 353 Mich 562; 92 NW2d 6 (1958); see also <http://www.micourthistory.org/pdfs/MSC_Feb_Hild1.pdf>. All websites cited in this article were accessed November 23, 2011.
2. Baker, *Reflections on the 50th anniversary of Anatomy of a Murder*, 87 Mich B J 50 (September 2008).
3. *Kobogum v Jackson Iron Company*, 76 Mich 498; 113 NW 602 (1889); *Compo v Jackson Iron Company*, 49 Mich 39; 12 NW 901 (1882); *Compo v Jackson Iron Company*, 50 Mich 578; 16 NW 295 (1883); see also <<http://domemagazine.com/bookit/bookit0511>>.
4. <<http://whowriteslike.com/?tag=william-coughlin>>.
5. Tolen, *Judge Stanley Latreille, 72, Retires After 26 Years on the County Bench*, Livingston County News, Friday, April 3, 2009, available at <<http://www.mlive.com/news/annarbornews/index.ssf?base/news-13/1238769791156310.xml&coll=2>>.
6. <http://judgepedia.org/index.php/William_Whitbeck>.