

# Detroit Deceit

By Robert E. Forrest, published by Tate Publishing and Enterprises, LLC (2013), softcover, 241 pages, \$18.99



Reviewed by John R. Runyan

Let me start by acknowledging that Bob Forrest is a personal friend. For those of you who don't know him, Bob is a partner at the Detroit firm of Kerr, Russell and Weber, PLC, where he concentrates on white-collar criminal defense. In the late '70s, Bob served as a trial attorney for the Criminal Section, Tax Division of the Justice Department in Washington, D.C.

*Detroit Deceit* is Bob's first novel. Although set in the present, it bears some of the hallmarks of a historical novel, inasmuch as it tangentially involves public corruption—"pay-to-play" bid-rigging in the city's Water and Sewerage Department—as well as references to Steven Grant, the white suburbanite who fled to Wilderness Park in 2007 after strangling and dismembering his photogenic young wife, and the infamous 1992 Malice Green incident, the vicious flashlight beating of a 35-year-old African American by two white Detroit police officers during a routine traffic stop.

Those familiar with the city will also find more comforting references to a number of past and present Detroit landmarks, from the well-known (Campus Martius, the Caucus Club, the Detroit Athletic Club, Fishbones, Joe Louis Arena, the First National Building, the Book Cadillac Hotel, and the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Bloomfield Hills) to the more obscure (the cigar bar in Harmonie [not Harmony] Park, the Post Bar, Il Ponto on Lake St. Clair, and Birmingham's Forest Avenue Grill).

The protagonist is Alex Drew, a twice-divorced, white-collar criminal defense attorney. Like most sole practitioners, Alex

does a masterful job of juggling a number of competing demands on his time. Having negotiated a favorable plea bargain for a Detroit city councilman charged with tax evasion, Alex must come to the assistance of his longtime friend and ATF special agent, Ger Rollins, against whom the U.S. Attorney's Office is seeking a grand-jury indictment for a felony civil rights violation (à la Malice Green) in connection with his role in the arrest of an armed parole absconder. At the same time, Alex lodges an appeal from a mistrial declared by a federal trial judge after a five-week, multi-defendant jury trial—alleging that the judge improperly questioned the jury foreman in chambers without all parties present—in a case in which Alex's client was charged with conspiracy to bribe Ford Motor Company purchasing agents.

If this is not enough, the assistant U.S. attorney who tried the conspiracy case is charged with obstruction of justice when it is discovered that in order to protect his family, he has stolen and leaked to the defendant the confidential report of the special agent recommending prosecution in a public corruption case. Alex becomes involved in tracking down and representing the former assistant's father when he is subpoenaed to testify before a federal grand jury. And all of this is peripheral to the central trial around which the book is constructed—the trial of Alex's jury-tampering client, Edward Dailey, for income tax evasion.

Despite the daunting plot complexity suggested above, the strength of the book is the well-constructed story line. The reader gets a good feel for the professional life of a busy criminal defense lawyer—each new

crisis preempting the last. Bob's intimate knowledge of the intricacies of federal criminal procedure is also on full display. His writing is at its best when he takes the reader into the courtroom, steps into Drew's shoes, and conducts a withering cross-examination of one of the government's key witnesses or makes a compelling closing argument for Dailey's acquittal.

If the book has any weakness, it is that readers may be left feeling they didn't get to truly know Alex Drew. Perhaps this is because Bob has a sequel in mind, or maybe it's because Drew is a twice-divorced workaholic with few close friends. But I suspect that if Bob probed a little deeper, he would find that apart from his two girlfriends, Drew has interests outside the law; passions or avocational pursuits; strongly held convictions about life, marriage, politics, or religion; or vestiges of his upbringing that might give us a better window into his soul.

Still, *Detroit Deceit* is well worth reading. It provides a fascinating glimpse into the complexities of criminal tax prosecutions. A good friend and a great writer, Bob's efforts have produced an admirable first novel. ■



*John R. Runyan is managing director of Sachs Waldman in Detroit. He also serves as vice chair of the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee, where he oversees publication of the Michigan Bar Journal.*