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.

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.

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. 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 bestselling 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.

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
The real crime was never solved, but the book provides a whodunit and an insider’s view of politics, crime, and corruption in Michigan.