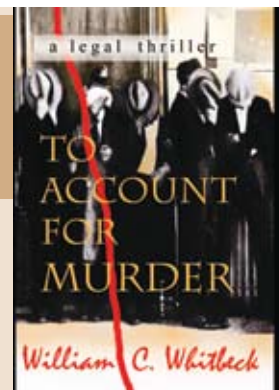


# To Account for Murder

By William C. Whitbeck, published by The Permanent Press (2010), hardcover, 272 pages, \$28  
<http://williamcwhitbeck.com/>



Reviewed by Frederick Baker Jr.

**M**ichiganders who think only Illinois can produce political scandal and intrigue on a scale that soon will see consecutive governors imprisoned have probably never read *Three Bullets Sealed His Lips* by Bruce A. Rubenstein and Lawrence E. Ziewacz. Their political history tells, in exhaustive, and sometimes exhausting, detail the true story of Michigan State Senator Warren Hooper and one of the biggest scandals in Michigan political history. Hooper was executed in 1945 just before he was set to name names in testimony before a one-man grand jury about a scandal that reached the highest levels of state government.

Now William C. Whitbeck, a sitting Michigan Court of Appeals judge, has retold the same story in novel form from the point of view of Hooper's (renamed Maynard) putative slayer, Charlie Cahill, a soldier who returned from World War II with one arm missing to practice law in Lansing. Following in the tradition of another Michigan appellate judge who, 50 years ago, novelized the story of a case he defended in a little book he called *Anatomy of a Murder*, Judge Whitbeck has woven a nerve-racking tale told from the viewpoint of an accomplice after the fact to the senator's murder who finds himself assigned by the grand juror to assist the special prosecutor charged with investigating the senator's murder!

Although the story is so meticulously accurate in its description of the arcane legal processes unique to Michigan's one-man grand jury system that "Robert Traver's" daughter, Julie Voelker Cohen, pronounced it "a lawyer's book," the legal elements are

wrapped around a romance as strange as it is compelling. The reader roots for Cahill and Sarah Maynard to evade detection as Cahill weaves his way through a web of corruption so complete that, if one did not know that most of the story is true, Whitbeck could be chided for the improbability of his plotting. Cahill's goal is simple: to find a way to deflect the investigation from him and Sarah, the woman he loves and the wife of the murdered senator who, Whitbeck interestingly hypothesizes, really deserved it...but I can't tell you why without spoiling the story.

At bottom, this is as much a love story as it is one of political intrigue and corruption, murder, and the legal processes that inevitably attend both, so the book combines all the great literary themes and motivations—money, power, greed, and love, along with its first cousin, sex. But for anyone from Michigan, the book has a special appeal because it is infused with what the literary critics once upon a time called "local color" (e.g., "Killing deer in Michigan isn't a crime. It's a way of life.")

It is not so much a lawyer's book as a book lovingly crafted by a lawyer, and one who has been a fixture and a prime mover on the Lansing scene long enough to have known some of those who were touched by the story he retells here. Whitbeck recreates the period with a lavish attention to accuracy and detail that could be achieved only by someone who has served three Michigan governors, devoted many years to private practice, and spent more than a dozen years on the bench, all while living in downtown Lansing a short walk from the Hall of

Justice. Taking as his raw material a scandal that, even 65 years later, looms large in Lansing's storied political history, Whitbeck has made the tale his own, and now shares it with us.

There is a tendency to regard lawyers who try their hands at crafting fiction in much the same way that we view circus bears on bicycles: a marvelous curiosity, to be sure, but unlikely to keep Lance Armstrong awake at night. In Whitbeck's case, however, the reader will be hard put to find the usual signs of the beginning novelist. This is a finely honed book that reflects the many years he has devoted to writing, rewriting, and rewriting again a story that he was ruminating about even before he assumed the bench. Indeed, one of its chapters was the (anonymous) winner of the *Bar Journal's* first short-story contest in 2007. Though this is his first book, it is not his last—in fact, he did not even seek a publisher until he was well into his second novel so that he would have one ready to go if *To Account for Murder* was well received. It is safe to predict that we will soon see a second title from Judge Whitbeck, the latest to join the select club of Michigan author-judges. ■



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Frederick Baker Jr., a Supreme Court commissioner, has served 28 years on the State Bar Publications and Website Advisory Committee, the past 25 as its chair.