

The Lawyer's Lawyer

By James Sheehan, published by Center Street,
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<http://www.jamesheehanauthor.com/books.php>



Reviewed by John R. Runyan

"You're the best lawyer we have. There's no doubt about that. You're a lawyer's lawyer. But frankly Jack, you cherry pick your cases. You look to represent only those people you believe are innocent. So, in your cases, you're not necessarily putting the death penalty on trial. The Felton case is high profile. It's a circumstantial evidence case. We have the best opportunity we have ever had to expose the death penalty and the flaws in the criminal justice system to the world." (p 137)

Jack Tobin is a well-known and respected Miami trial attorney who earned a handsome living and eventually started his own firm representing well-heeled insurance companies. Retired to a sleepy fishing town on Lake Okeechobee, Jack is now a volunteer attorney for Exoneration, a non-profit foundation that, like the Innocence Project, specializes in representing death-row inmates. Jack was drawn to this work when the mentally disabled son of a childhood friend—Mikey Kelly—was convicted of murder and ended up on Florida's death row. When his meticulous lawyering helped prevent a miscarriage of justice and saved an innocent young man from the electric chair, Jack was hooked.

Sheehan's earlier Tobin novels, *The Mayor of Lexington Avenue* and *The Law of Second Chances*, begin when Jack was Johnny Tobin, a.k.a the Mayor of Lexington Avenue, growing up in New York City. Jack was given that moniker by Fr. Charles Burke, the pastor of St. Francis Parish, and his best

buddy, Mikey, because Jack (Johnny) supposedly knew more people than Fr. Burke and didn't have the advantage of the pulpit. After saving Mikey's son from execution, Jack turned his attention in *The Law of Second Chances* to Henry Wilson, an African American wrongfully convicted of murder who became Jack's best buddy, fishing companion, and part-time investigator.

In *The Lawyer's Lawyer*, Sheehan's third novel, Jack reluctantly takes on his most challenging assignment to date. Thomas Felton, a Florida law student suspected in the serial murders of a string of University of North Central Florida coeds along with the wife of the investigating police chief, is convicted of murdering two of the coeds. Exoneration calls on Jack when the law student is scheduled to be executed. Although he is unconvinced of his client's innocence, Jack agrees to take on the case when he discovers serious prosecutorial misconduct. However, Jack's world is turned upside down and he must join the hunt for his client when, upon Felton's release from prison, the police chief's daughter is also murdered.

Sheehan's novels have a strong, autobiographical influence. Like Jack, Sheehan was born and raised in New York City, moved to Florida to attend Stetson Law School, and was a practicing trial attorney in the Tampa Bay area for 30 years. His unpredictable plot twists draw on his substantial experience as a trial attorney before becoming director of the Tampa Law Center at Stetson University. He writes in short, James Patterson-esque chapters, alternating

plots in the style that has become so commonplace, if not hackneyed, in popular crime novels.

Sheehan does not ignore Jack's love life, skillfully developing his characters and weaving in enough romance to please even those readers not enamored by his considerable legal acumen. When Jack's vulnerability is on display and personal feelings and emotions begin to collide with his legal instincts and strategy, Sheehan's writing is at its best. This is a recurring theme in all three novels.

Those who abhor the death penalty and, like me, root for the underdog, will find Sheehan's novels an easy and enjoyable read. *The Lawyer's Lawyer* contains none of the flashbacks to Jack's New York City childhood that pepper *The Mayor of Lexington Avenue* and *The Law of Second Chances*—a blessing in my opinion, because I found those passages too long, less interesting, and somewhat distracting. However, because Sheehan builds on his development of characters like Tobin and Wilson from one novel to the next, I recommend reading all three novels in sequence. ■



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