

Debut Novelist Len Williams Seeks Justice Through Fiction

From *PW Daily for Booksellers (Publishers Weekly)*

January 10, 2003

By Channing Joseph

Addressing a hotly debated topic in America today, author Len Williams has taken his astounding real-life story and turned it into the new legal thriller *Justice Deferred* (Welcome Rain, \$26.95), a book that considers the nation's "three-strikes" laws. These laws, which have often received much public support, can in some 20 states put even nonviolent criminal offenders behind bars for life after committing only three minor offenses.

Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and a fan of Williams's book, has lauded the novel on both its literary and social merits. "I really do believe," she said, "that even [with] the most ardently conservative individual, if they saw the kind of case that is [put forth] in *Justice Deferred*, they would rebel."

The book's author, a former CEO of several large companies, including Coca-Cola New Zealand and Pic 'N Save Corp., decided to write the novel after his own experience with what he sees as the tragedy of "three-strikes" laws. After the 1980 disappearance of his then-17-year-old son Michael, Williams sought help from authorities. "He and his family tried every outlet imaginable," said Welcome Rain editor Chuck Kim, "and they met with a lot of indifference from the police forces, with the FBI, and with pretty much any law enforcement agency you can think of. They felt that no one cared unless the kid was famous."

Williams himself described his experience with the authorities as "frustrating," saying the police "did nothing beyond entering data in their system and calling us if they got any 'hits' from other law enforcement agencies. If a Congressman's girlfriend goes missing, however, dozens of detectives are called in. Ordinary people get very little active help."

It was not until nine years later that Williams's family received their first bittersweet chance to gain closure: a criminal in Alabama announced to the police that he had murdered Williams's son and buried him in a swamp. When police officers led the alleged killer to the supposed location of the body, he attempted to escape but failed. Williams, then posing as an FBI agent so his identity would not be revealed to the criminal, eventually discovered that the man had simply seen the missing Michael's picture on a milk carton and decided to confess to killing the boy for a chance to escape prison.

The man was serving a life sentence he felt was unfair--a sentence which had been handed to him by Alabama's "three-strikes" laws. According to Williams, the man's "incarceration [was] the result of misguided undercover police officers who operated fence houses as multiple felony entrapments, luring these men into crimes that put them away for life."

Williams began to feel pity for the criminal who had lied about killing his son, a feeling which, he said, "gave me the idea to humanize the 'three-strikes' issue through the medium of a novel. I wanted to reverse the roles of the prosecutor and the prosecuted."

In *Justice Deferred*, Williams creates Billy Ray Billings, an escaped ex-con who goes to amazing lengths to nail the two cops who use Alabama's third-strike rule to engineer an unjust life sentence. *PW* Forecasts praised the novel, suggesting "the combination of dialogue-driven scenes and surprising plot twists is downright addictive."

Williams has since commented that if his novel annoys the police, his task will have been accomplished, adding that "the police need to make more of an effort to see themselves as the public does. Their job is to protect and defend, not to act as prosecutors and judges." Although he thinks that there is not much hope of exonerating the prisoner who falsely confessed to his son's murder, Williams hopes that the book will do some good for other people unfairly targeted by "three-strikes" laws. "I hope it makes people rethink their views on this issue," he said, "and the roles of police and prosecutors, who can sometimes be unnecessarily heavy-handed."

He also hopes that publicity from the book will put him into contact with someone who

knows what happened to his still-missing son Michael.

Strossen, the ACLU president, told *PW Daily* that the scenario in Williams's book is "typical of somebody who has been put away by these 'three-strikes' laws... Many of these people have engaged only in properties crimes, and I'm not condoning any crimes...[but] what the public had in mind was putting away violent criminals." In Strossen's opinion, these laws exist at least partly because politicians who are tough on crime get votes more easily than those whom the public thinks may be sympathizing with criminals. "It's easy to have a slogan that Joe Blow is tough on crime," she said, "[but] it takes more explanation to tell people 'Hey, wait a minute, it may sound tough, but this is how it really works.'"

She also cites a case recently brought before the Supreme Court, in which California's "three-strikes" laws may force a man to serve a sentence of 50 years with no possibility of parole for shoplifting \$150 worth of DVDs that were to be holiday gifts for his nieces and nephews.

Strossen said that in some jurisdictions, police have been discovered to be manipulating laws in order to make multiple-felony charges out of one crime. She also mentioned that the resulting "lifers" cost taxpayers \$30,000 per year per inmate for the rest of their lives, "tying up resources for education and other programs."

"These ['three-strikes'] laws are crowding our prisons with nonviolent criminals... [and] it's ironically putting states in situations where they have to release more violent criminals," Strossen said. "[Len Williams's *Justice Deferred* conveys a very serious reality that every person needs to know about."