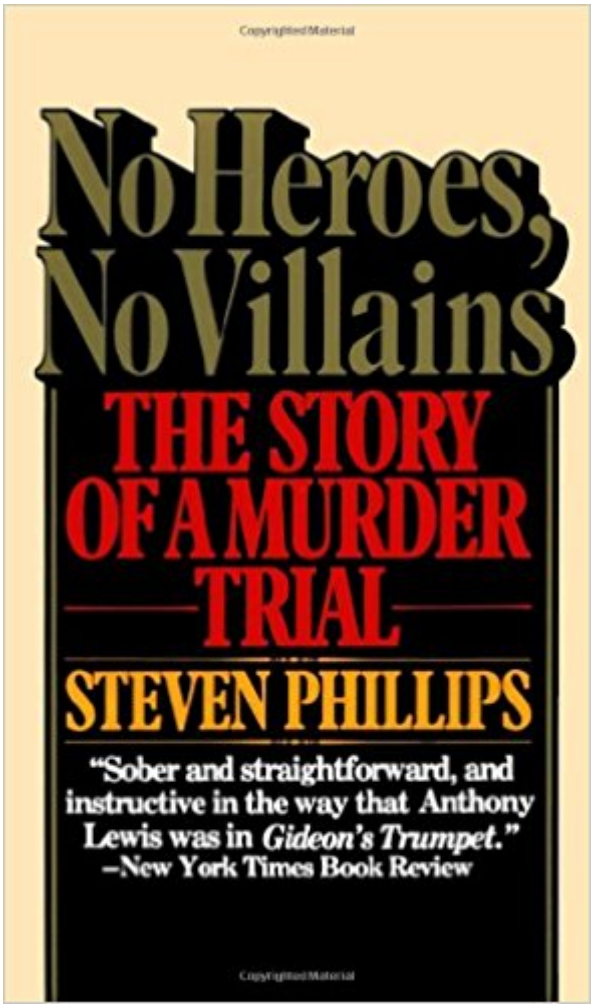
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No Heroes, No Villains: The Story Of A Murder Trial



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Synopsis

On June 28, 1972 in a South Bronx subway station, John Skagen, a white off-duty policeman on his way home, suddenly and without apparent provocation, ordered James Richardson, a black man on his way to work, to get against the wall and put his hands up. Richardson had a gun, and the two exchanged shots. In the melee that followed, Skagen was fatally wounded by a cop who rushed to the scene. In the ensuing trial, William Kunstler handled Richardson’s defense and the author of this book, then assistant district attorney, prosecuted the case. Here is a first-hand, behind-the-scenes account of every step of the proceedings.

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Customer Reviews

"Sober and straightforward, and instructive in the way that Anthony Lewis was in Gideon’s Trumpet."- The New York Times Book Review

On June 28, 1972 in a South Bronx subway station, John Skagen, a white off-duty policeman on his way home, suddenly and without apparent provocation, ordered James Richardson, a black man on his way to work, to get against the wall and put his hands up. Richardson had a gun, and the two exchanged shots. In the melee that followed, Skagen was fatally wounded by a cop who rushed to the scene. In the ensuing trial, William Kunstler handled Richardson’s defense and the author of this book, then assistant district attorney, prosecuted the case. Here is a first-hand, behind-the-scenes account of every step of the proceedings.

Phillips should be commended for choosing an interesting case and portraying it in a way that clearly shows the inner workings of the American criminal court system. Not only is this book instructive and thought provoking, but it is enjoyable to read, written in plain English, and could be finished by any reader in around 4-8 hours. I would encourage everyone to read this book not only to expand one's knowledge about the criminal court system, but also to think critically about one's own personal biases, political leanings, and personalities, and how that might affect their reading of the Richardson case. I might then encourage them to head over to their own courthouse and watch a criminal proceeding from start to finish, and apply what they learned from Phillips to their own experience.Set in 1970s New York City, this is not your average murder mystery. This is the story of James Richardson, who was accused of murdering a police officer, John Skagen. Skagen, who was off duty and headed home after a long day's work, began frisking Richardson at a subway station. In a confusing tussle, Richardson escaped Skagen's custody while firing off four shots, hitting Skagen twice in the shoulders. Skagen fired back at Richardson as he ascended the subway's stairs, and as Richardson fled he shouted to police officers above that a crazy man was shooting at him. George Wieber, an on-duty, uniformed officer, looked down the stairway at Skagen, who was in civilian clothing and had a gun pointed up the stairs. In a split-second decision, Wieber shot off his revolver, hitting Skagen thrice in the abdomen. Skagen's dramatic last words were "I'm on duty," before he died of blood loss from gun wounds inflicted both by Wieber and Richardson.The story is narrated by Steven Phillips, the assistant district attorney who prosecuted this case. While he attests to writing an account of neither heroes nor villains and attempts to portray an accurate and nonbiased account of the criminal proceedings of the case, this is not quite accomplished. Rather, Phillips relays his own commentary about the court system and is fairly critical of it, from the sharply adversarial nature of criminal cases down to the "grim...forbidding...littered with garbage" Bronx Criminal Courthouse. It takes quite a few chapters before Phillips reveals himself as the narrator in this account, and since the information in those first chapters is written in an objective voice, Phillips sets himself up for the rest of the book to conform to his own ideology about how the incident occurred.Phillips reflects on his relationship with opposing council, about how the adversarial nature of their roles forced them against one another, sometimes simply for the sake of butting heads, but all in the pursuit of justice. Phillips relates how speaking to the jury is akin to being an actor persuading an audience to believe his role. He also talks about the nature of evidentiary hearings and rulings, showing that the role of the jury is not to come to a decision based on all of the available facts, but to make a decision based on the facts that both sides of counsel and the judge

agree that the jury can see. He definitely puts a myrrh of confusion and bleakness on the criminal justice system and places a doubt in the reader's eye that our system is fair and just.This account could justifiably be called "No Heroes and Some Villains." In this series of events, it is clear that there must have been a party or parties to blame for Skagen's death, but who is ultimately responsible is the heart of the issue. First, in a criminal court case where the defendant being tried for murder is not responsible, the defense attorney plays the role of hero, protecting the innocent citizen who was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. In a case where the defendant is responsible of murder, the prosecuting attorney plays the role of hero, protecting the streets from criminals and keeping society safe. Since there is no easy way to determine if Richardson is or is not responsible, Phillips places the book title in the center, lack of heroes, lack of villains. But Kunstler, Richardson's defense attorney, took on the case in a rather slimy way, getting the court to appoint him so he could get paid, using this case as fuel for his own political causes. And Phillips, though he believes that Richardson deserves to spend time in prison, by no means pretends to be an amazing bringer of justice, choosing an arbitrary number to negotiate a plea bargain and convincing himself that Richardson belongs in jail. The villainous sides of these characters are revealed, and yet a hero is not to be found. After all, a man was shot dead by two different men. If there were no villains in this case, the chances of their being a dead man would be fairly low.Despite the downfalls in the book, Phillips at least occasionally portrays the criminal court system in an informative way. I would recommend it to anyone who wanted to better understand what happens in criminal court cases, perhaps to supplement their addictive habit of watching Law and Order and Judge Judy. I have worked in both Federal and County level criminal courts, and have worked with a large variety of different criminals, discovery material, and court hearings. Phillips uses plain language to describe the different layers of the criminal trial that make his account accessible to the reader.I believe that Phillip's point in this tale is to not only instruct a general audience about the un-dramatized nature of the criminal court system, but also to portray the difficult nature of both the prosecuting attorney's and defense attorney's job in our adversarial legal system. With attorneys having huge caseloads and little time or help to work on each one, it is an extremely difficult task to deliver justice. Additionally, Phillips lets on how emotionally difficult it is to prosecute someone who may go to jail for many valuable years of their life, when he isn't even sure that the defendant is guilty. In fact, he suggests that simply by being a prosecuting attorney, it is almost vital to assume that the defendant is guilty, in order for each to get a fair trial. A fair trial, after all, is one in which the defense attorney is doing everything they can to convince the jury that the defendant is not guilty, but it also means one in which the prosecuting attorney is doing

everything in his/her power to convince the jury that the defendant is guilty. The confusing nature of the facts is an interesting twist in this book of sometimes drab details into the workings of the court system.This account warmly invites those reading it to formulate opinions of their own about the guilt or not-guilt of the different players in this situation. Because it is a story of a young black male whose actions ultimately cause the death of a white male police officer, it is clear to see how different people's perspectives are influenced by their own race, age, and occupation. In fact, in many state statutory guidelines, sentence ranges for harming a police officer are more severe than harming a normal citizen. There are good reasons for this, but they are mostly political, clearly showing that depending on one's political leanings and other personality traits, this case looks very different from different perspectives.

Insightful on criminal justice and gives readers a understanding of how prosecution works and how the defense tries to discredit the prosecution and vice versa

This book was required reading for my law class. I really enjoyed it from beginning to end. It broke down the case so that anyone could understand the chargers as well as showed how the court system works behind the scenes (jury selection, defense, prosecution)... This will be on my book shelf and I will most definitely recommend it...

I had to read this book for my Systems of Law class and I found it to be interesting. If you are captivated by crime and trials and reading the drama, then you will find this book interesting. If you have to read it for class like I did, then dont be mad. The font size is small and the pages are of recycled paper, but its a book. Get over it. It's the story that counts.

This book was an easy read. My son was required to read it for a college course so after he finished it, I read it out of curiosity. It was quick-paced and held my interest. Only took a few days to read it as well. I was sad at the end though...the amount of time the man ended up being served was unfair to the family and friends of the man who was killed.

Good book, interesting read. I had to read it for a Criminal Justice course.

A+

Great book. Non-fiction and very surprising, informative story.

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