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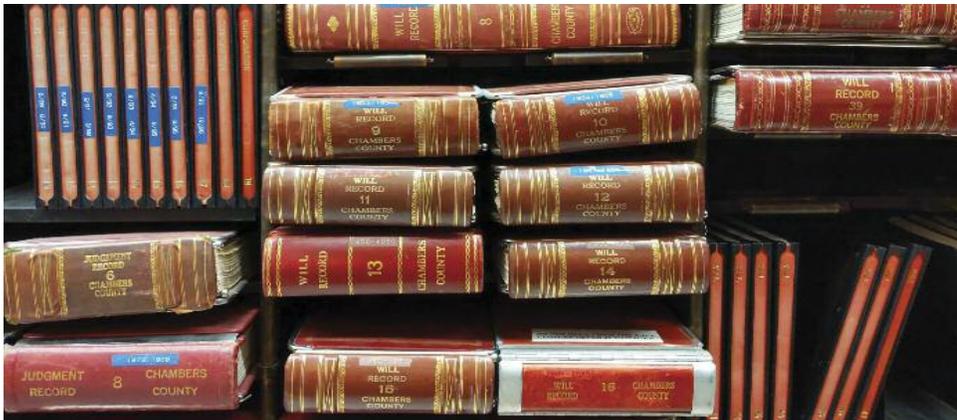
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How are YOU doing?



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Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and The Last Trial of Harper Lee

By Casey Cep

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. 314 pgs.

Reviewed by Allen P. Mendenhall

Imagine my surprise when, out of the blue, in the winter of 2016, I received a message through my website from a writer named Casey Cep. “I’m writing about your essay ‘Harper Lee and Words Left Behind,’” she said.¹ “It was a pleasure to read, and I’d love to talk with you about it. Any chance you have a direct email address or a telephone number at which I could reach you?”

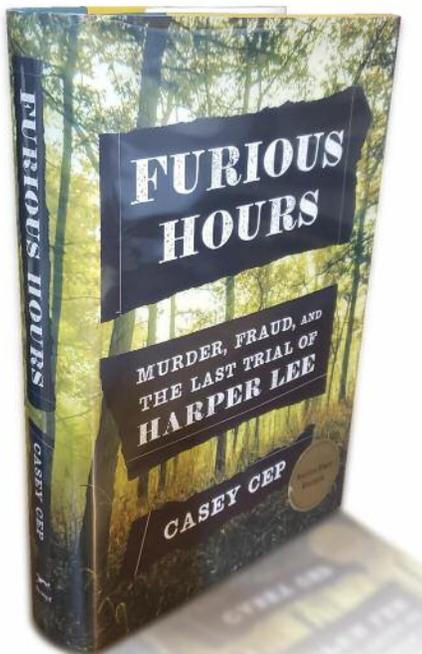
The essay she referred to described my grandfather’s childhood in Monroeville and his relationship with Harper Lee and Truman Capote.² I recognized Cep’s name from an article she had written a few months earlier.³ I told her I’d be glad to talk. She replied that she was in the area that very day—in Lanett, in fact. For whatever reason, though, we didn’t meet, but we did email back and forth.

How I regretted that missed opportunity as Cep’s fame spread across the globe earlier this year, after the publication of *Furious Hours*, which involves the true-crime thriller that Lee allegedly wrote (in whole or in part) but never published. The presumed offender in the story is the Reverend Willie Maxwell, an African-American preacher in Coosa County who, in the 1970s, purportedly murdered two of his wives, his nephew, his brother, a neighbor, and, lastly, his adopted daughter, Shirley Ann, and then collected death benefits on life insurance policies that he secured in which he was the beneficiary.

I lost that chance to meet Cep, but refused to miss *Furious Hours*. If Cep could render Maxwell with haunting sensitivity as Capote had deftly profiled Perry Smith, the convicted murderer from *In Cold Blood*, then I was, I knew, in for an exhilarating read.

Lee is just one of three key figures in *Furious Hours*, with the other two being a colorful attorney named Tom Radney and, of course, Maxwell. Divided into three parts—“The Reverend” (Maxwell), “The Lawyer” (Radney), and “The Writer” (Lee)—the narrative shifts between these titular subjects, but proceeds more or less chronologically. After all, Cep couldn’t explain Radney’s and Lee’s involvement with Maxwell without first explaining what brought Maxwell into their lives.

These apparent murders left a target on Maxwell’s back. Almost everyone in his community considered him a threat; reciprocally, he considered them to be threatening to him. In those days, the life insurance industry, though thousands of years old, was still immature in the United States. “By the time the Reverend Willie Maxwell began buying life insurance,” Cep explains, “the industry was wild the way the West had been: large, lawless, and lucrative for undertakers.”⁴ If you lived in Maxwell’s town, you couldn’t know for sure whether he had purchased a life insurance policy on *your* death. “[I]t was stunningly easy,” Cep submits, “to take out insurance on



other people without their knowledge, and somewhere along the line the Reverend Willie Maxwell started making a habit out of it.”⁵

While those close to Maxwell died, one by one, under mysterious circumstances, as he steadily accumulated wealth from life insurance payouts, people in Alex City grew uneasy. Everything about the situation was grotesque. Maxwell’s neighbor, Dorcas Anderson, for instance, was supposed to be a pivotal witness for the prosecution when Maxwell faced charges of murdering his first wife, Mary Lou, but Anderson changed her story at trial, baffling and angering “those law enforcement agents who had taken her original testimony.”⁶

What was Dorcas thinking? What was her motive? The answer soon became clear: “In November of 1971, barely fifteen months after Mary Lou’s body was found and only four months after he was acquitted of her murder, the Reverend Maxwell took another wife: his neighbor, and the state’s would-be star witness, Dorcas Anderson.”⁷ Not long after that, poor Dorcas was dead, too.

Rumors circulated that Maxwell practiced voodoo; no one could explain how, by all appearances, he got away with murder. But *was* it murder? “[O]f all the deaths associated with the Reverend Willie Maxwell, only two,” Cep points out, “had ever been declared homicides, and neither of those had resulted in convictions.”⁸

Maxwell finally got what was coming to him. An Army veteran named Robert Burns shot him three times in the head at Shirley Ann’s funeral. Burns regarded himself as the heroic vigilante, and wasn’t alone in that opinion. Many locals were relieved to be rid of Maxwell.

As if these twists weren’t curious enough, Radney—a liberal darling and sometime politician who had represented Maxwell in both civil and criminal matters connected to the murders—ended up defending Burns against the charge of murdering Maxwell. A representative of the New South with a national following, Radney was harassed and threatened because



Allen Mendenhall and Casey Cep meet and compare shoes.

of his politics. He was a media sensation, the object of hate and adoration, and he acquired the moniker Big Tom.

Big Tom needed to stay in the limelight after his political career took a turn for the worse. What should he do but apply his legal skills to Maxwell’s case, or cases. “All those years of representing Maxwell,” Cep writes, “hadn’t endeared Big Tom to anyone around Lake Martin, but it had helped him make his name as a lawyer who could handle any case.”⁹ Any case, including that of Burns. Big Tom wound up on the other side of Maxwell this time. Fearful that Maxwell had a living accomplice who could exact revenge, folks in Alex City and around Lake Martin were reticent about Burns’s trial, which was, by any measure, sensational. Then a jury found Burns not guilty by reason of insanity. “Like the dam on the Tallapoosa River,” Cep intones, “the gates had closed on the Maxwell case, and ever so slowly the waters began rising.”¹⁰

Cep never discovered whether Lee actually wrote a book about Maxwell. If Lee’s manuscript exists, its title is *The Reverend*. Until her literary estate is unsealed, we probably won’t discover whether she completed it, at what stage she abandoned it, or whether she undertook to compose it at all. In many respects, then, Cep wrote the book that Lee didn’t write, or might not have written.

Fans of Lee—or “Nelle,” as she was known to friends and family—will delight in the final section of *Furious Hours*. Readers of *this* journal—mostly lawyers—will take special interest in Amasa Coleman Lee, Nelle’s attorney father, and in Nelle’s legal education, to

say nothing of her research for Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. One gets the distinct impression that Cep was working on a biography of Lee when, over time and by slow degrees, the possibility of a different kind of book emerged.

Suspense and intrigue aren’t the only commendable qualities of *Furious Hours*. Cep is a master stylist, her prose rhythmic and resonant and refined. Her opening passages about the Tallapoosa River and the Coosa River—too long to quote here—testify to her talent as a craftswoman.

She presents, as well, extensive history about the South in general and Alabama in particular. George Wallace, Lurleen Wallace, Martin Luther King Jr., the Scottsboro boys, Booker T. Washington, Zora Neal Hurston, Mark Twain, Fred Gray, the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, Albert Brewer, Tammy Wynette, Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Morris Dees—they’re all here, if only in passing. Other figures who appear are ancillary to Maxwell’s account, but significant to American history: John F. Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Adlai Stevenson, Walter Kronkite, Dan Rather, Gregory Peck, and Lyndon Johnson, to name a few.

My story, I’m relieved to report, has a happy ending. Recently I was a panelist at the Mississippi Book Festival and noticed, on the program, that Cep was also a panelist. I sat in on her talk and marveled at the crowds that flocked to her as fans had flocked to Lee. Cep thanked me in her book, in light of our email correspondence and some leads I gave her, but the extent of “help” I provided did not merit the

(Continued from page 463)

acknowledgment. I wanted, now, to return thanks for her kind gesture.

Eventually the crowds dispersed. There we were, two people who knew each other, in a manner of speaking, but didn't *really* know each other. A weird feeling sets in when a disembodied personality you've grown accustomed to in writing suddenly materializes as a flesh-and-blood human with whom, suddenly, you can speak.

We initiated conversation by shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries; soon the ice was broken and we hit it off. Her intelligence was profound; she was kind and thoughtful. When it came time to leave, we hugged like old friends, making sure to snap a photo of the saddle oxford shoes we both happened to be wearing. Before parting, she told me she wished she could've

met my grandfather, who passed away in 2013. He would've enjoyed meeting her, too. What would Lee have thought of her, I wonder. We'll never know. ▲

- 7. *Id.* at 41.
- 8. *Id.* at 229.
- 9. *Id.* at 109.
- 10. *Id.* at 145.

Endnotes

- 1. Email correspondence with Casey Cep, January 27, 2016.
- 2. See Allen Mendenhall, *Harper Lee and Words Left Behind*, 37 *STORYSOUTH* (2014) [available at <http://www.storystouth.com/2014/03/harper-lee-and-words-left-behind.html>]; republished in ALLEN MENDENHALL, *OF BEES AND BOYS* 37 (2017). This essay mentioned, in passing, rumors I heard from my grandfather and others that Lee had drafted a manuscript about an Alabama salesman who murdered his wives to commit life insurance fraud. Cep was, at the time, researching this same bit of gossip.
- 3. Casey Cep, *Harper Lee's Abandoned True-Crime Novel*, *THE NEW YORKER* (March 17, 2015).
- 4. CASEY CEP, *FURIOUS HOURS* 35 (2019).
- 5. *Id.* at 36.
- 6. *Id.* at 39.

Allen P. Mendenhall



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books include *Literature and Liberty* (2014), *Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Pragmatism, and the Jurisprudence of Agon* (2017), *Of Bees and Boys* (2017), *The Southern Philosopher* (2017), and *Writers on Writing* (2019).