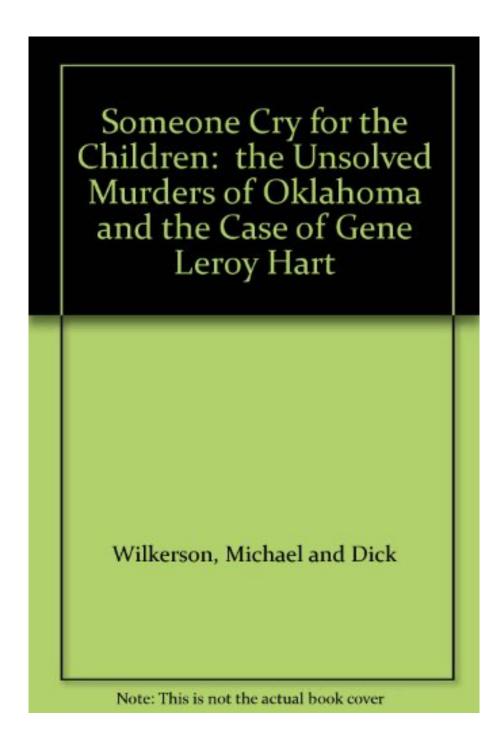


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Novel or True Crime?

By A Customer

The best true-crime books ("In Cold Blood," "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil") are models of research, craft, and psychological insight, and do not presume to be anything more. What makes the genre interesting is a teasing ambiguity which, in the hands of a master, can be richer than any novel's--and can deepen our understanding of motivation, memory, misapprehension--the nature of "truth" itself. But first a little modesty is needed.

"Wilkerson was totally honest, and would not tolerate being associated with dishonesty, impropriety, or poor judgment... If he quit the OSBI [the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation] now, at the apex of his career, he would maintain his credibility and reputation, thus being a more viable advocate. He made up his mind at that moment; he was getting out of the business. Some way, somehow, the public had to know the real story."

This trumpet fanfare is from page 226 of "Someone Cry for the Children," and the noble OSBI agent so described, in bluff third-person, is Mike Wilkerson, the book's author. (He co-wrote with his brother Dick, also an OSBI agent). Honest he may be, but that passage instantly made me question what he thinks he knows. What he (and any detective) ought to know is that most murder cases are extremely complex-this one more than most--with too many variables for anyone to claim a monopoly on truth.

We will never know what happened that night in 1977; Gene Leroy Hart, the full-blooded Cherokee fugitive accused (and acquitted) of the crime, could offer no credible account. Neither could some of the witnesses and experts who testified at his trial.

In a case like this--the gruesome sex slayings of three little girls at a Girl Scout camp--emotions naturally run high, and advocates become hardened in their positions. Wilkerson and his brother "know" the truth; so do Hart's supporters, who choose to remember him as a star athlete and handsome role model for Cherokee children in Mayo County. So what we have in "Someone Cry..." is a detailed but highly subjective account of a maddening case--touted as "unsolved...unexplained" in the jacket copy, but which the authors obviously consider closed. As the excerpt suggests, the book's veiled purpose is to lay out as convincingly as possible (in novelistic fashion) the OSBI's case against Hart. This agenda seeps quietly into every page. OSBI agents are described as "confident"; defense attorneys are "smug." Hart's private conversations with his attorneys

are quoted and described (without attribution) in such a way as to discredit him. His guilty, "nervous" reactions to questions might, to another observer, have seemed like innocent indignation. Finally, the choice of details (such as a "low, guttural moan" heard on the night of the slayings) ties in very glibly with the authors' pet theory of Gene Hart's guilt.

The book has other flaws. Despite the title--which refers to how politics and other hoopla stole the focus from the victims--the murdered children and their families are virtually ignored here. We learn almost nothing about them. The authors don't even bother to get the oldest girl's name right--was it Denise or Doris Milner? (Toward the end we infer that Denise was her middle name). Amazingly, the authors never even tell us the date of the murders--just that it was "mid-June 1977." (There's a general laziness about dates throughout).

A blurb on the back of the paperback edition makes comparisons with "In Cold Blood." In a pig's eye. This book can't touch that one on any level--language, research, insight, objectivity. The portrait of Hart is about as deep as Injun Joe in "Tom Sawyer." Many of the other figures (mainly those connected with the defense) are shrill caricatures. Most annoying are the novelistic asides about Indian "medicine" and the magical efforts of a pseudonymous medicine man to ensure that divine justice is served. As it happened, Hart died of a heart attack a few months after his acquittal, and the authors (who, like many in the OSBI, have some Cherokee blood) imply that the Great Spirit snuffed him out for his crime.

And yet--despite the bias and sloppiness and corn--the Wilkersons succeed in building a case. The wealth of evidence against Hart is impossible to dismiss. To do so is to accept an O.J. scenario of planted evidence and pervasive corruption/racism in the OSBI. So why did the jury free him? Easy: they didn't. Hart was already facing 305 years on unrelated charges (kidnapping, rape, burglary). Setting him loose on society was never a possibility. Why send him to Death Row, then, and have to face the anger of his legions of rabid supporters? Jurors--humans--almost always take the easy route, then convince themselves it was right.

This book is above average for the genre; the writing is hardly inspired, but the Wilkersons know their subject thoroughly. (The careless omissions here and there may be the result of knowing it too well). The story is involving without ever descending to sensationalism. Still, the book does not haunt me the way it might have--had a real writer explored the case from its many, fascinating, hideous angles. This narrow little account left me with nothing but the belief that Hart was probably guilty. Very little light was cast into the blackness of his incomprehensible crime.

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