
O'Rourke Returns *

Riley McReynolds is back. The hero of Michael O'Rourke's debut novel, *The Ordeal of Riley McReynolds*, is now a partner specializing in white-collar criminal defense at Cosgrove & Levi, a large Minneapolis law firm.

Against his wishes Riley is assigned by the firm to represent Gus Tanzdahl, the CEO of its largest client, in a divorce action. To pressure his wife, Ellen, to release her claim to a fair division of his corporate assets, Gus instructs his lawyers to seek custody of their 4-year-old son. Worse, he dredges up court and medical records to smear her. Riley finds himself in that rare predicament for a trial lawyer: he admires his opponent and loathes his own client.

To escape this sordid case, Riley watches television. In a documentary on Chicago gangster "Deanie" O'Banion, murdered by Al Capone on Nov. 10, 1924, Riley sees a photo of a teenage girl at O'Banion's funeral. He is transfixed by her face. Impulsively, he decides to find out what happened to her, a search he calls an "enthusiasm" though his mother dismisses it as "childish nonsense." He learns that the girl's name was Bridey Reaves and that she left Chicago carrying an old suitcase with the mob close behind. Bridey moves through the Midwest in the 1930s using as many aliases as Capone's rivals who were killed in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Once she even planted her identity on the body of a dead woman to throw off hit men.

* Book review of *O'Banion's Gift*, a novel, by Michael O'Rourke, published by St. Johns Publishing Company in 2003. This review by Douglas A. Hedin appeared first in the May/June 2004 issue of *The Hennepin Lawyer*. Though reformatted, it is complete. It is posted with the permission of the Hennepin County Bar Association.

O'Rourke alternates accounts of Riley's reluctant representation of Gus with his quixotic quest for Bridey. Structurally the book is two novels in one, and the result is not entirely successful. Riley's search for Bridey might easily have become a separate novel involving, for example, his hunt for her as a missing heir in a probate contest.

In this novel, as in his first which was seen by some as having elements of a roman à clef of his years as house counsel for a Minneapolis bank, O'Rourke portrays corporate chieftains like Gus as vulgar, sexist, and incessantly scheming for power and money. O'Rourke has none of the respect a novelist such as Louis Auchincloss has for wealth, recently made or inherited, in his stories with law firm settings. But O'Rourke has something else: he is funny. There are inside-the-profession jokes (the defense firm representing Gus in harassment claims is Hadley & Baxendale) and many outside (answering a phone call from a client who once served time, Riley's secretary begins, "State Parole Board").

Midway through the novel there is a brief scene, about six pages, that may rank among the finest in that fortunately small genre, divorce literature. Riley, his wife, and daughter dine with an old law school friend, now a senior judge of Hennepin County District Court, and his family. Across the restaurant Riley spots Ellen Tanzdahl. Riley moves his chair so she cannot see him. Earlier that week before Riley could intervene, his associate, Sara Hall, served a slanted memorandum exposing Ellen's unfitness for custody. Suddenly Riley's table goes silent. He turns. Behind him stands Ellen clutching her son's hand. She dresses him down. The tension in the room and Riley's discomfort jump off the pages. This is O'Rourke at the peak of his creative powers.

But he cannot sustain this high level of writing and this is never more apparent than how he concludes the parallel stories. Responding to a discovery demand, Sara Hall uncovers shenanigans by Gus that present Riley and her with a wrenching ethical dilemma. Oddly, Riley, a pillar of integrity, does not resolve the crisis; instead, Sara blows the whistle, dashing her

dreams of partnership in the process. Meanwhile Riley's search for Bridey comes to a maudlin ending.

O'Rourke is at his best when describing the world of the law—lawyers, firms, clients, judges. He has a keen eye for the tensions within law firms, the schmoozing of big clients and, above all, the antics of the trial bar, the most visible segment of the profession. He is amused at trial lawyers' haughty attitude toward "desk lawyers" and notes that at meetings of Cosgrove & Levi's Partnership Committee, "more often than not, those closest to the door were the litigators."

Unlike most lawyers-turned-novelists, O'Rourke sees that the civil side of the profession provides rich opportunities for the creation of intricate plots and the development of characters such as the surprising, indomitable Riley McReynolds. Let us hope we see more of him again—soon. ■

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Posted MLHP: March 16, 2012.