Jill's Trials

Peter H. Meyers
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Review by Jeremy Conrad

Peter H. Meyers's new book, *Jill's Trials*, is a work of fiction, but its characters and events are clearly drawn from the author's experiences and observations.

Meyers has worked for decades as a criminal defense attorney and served as director of George Washington University Law School's criminal appeals and vaccine injury litigation clinics. He continues to serve as professor emeritus at the school, where he teaches an advanced criminal law course on drugs and the law.

The story follows the eponymous character's career as a D.C. criminal defense attorney over nearly 30 years, from her first trial as part of a fictional law school's criminal defense clinic during her senior year to employment with the Public Defender Service to her ascension to partnership at a prestigious law firm.

In another author's hands, the conflicts that arise in the course of the narrative might have had heightened stakes. But Meyers, eschewing the overblown drama of such narratives, presents a more realistically restrained but no less unsettling set of challenges for his protagonist to face and overcome, and resolutions that are more grounded in their lack of finality.

Too often, legal fiction imagines an attorney as a kind of private detective charged with finding the correct solution to a mystery that the prosecution has incorrectly solved, or as a sort of magician whose trick takes place in open court, snatching the prosecution's case out from under their feet. *Jill's Trials* doesn't indulge in these excesses, opting instead to lay out the ethical, philosophical, and moral quandaries that present themselves when one engages in criminal defense in the real world.

The story isn't without some of the genre tropes. Murders do take place and are sometimes solved — though not by the protagonist — but they do not serve as the central focus of the story. Instead, tension and action stem from the protagonist's insecurities and her response to the pressures of the changing circumstances of her personal life. Courtroom battles are important to the narrative, but Jill's efforts to become an effective attorney, and to achieve a degree of satisfaction in her work and her personal life, represent the book's true core.

Ethical lapses, drug addiction, and work–life balance issues present obstacles that the protagonist navigates with varying degrees of success, but as is so commonly the case in reality, their resolution often falls short of fully addressing the problem. Troubled relationships with her mother, and later with her daughter, are never fully resolved. The complexity extends to Jill's various clients who, while not necessarily guilty of the crimes for which they are charged, are not entirely innocent either.

The muted nature of the story's drama is clearly intentional. Meyers's efforts are directed at profiling the nature of conflicts and pressures experienced by legal professionals, but not at instructing readers on fixing them. Jill and her problems are kept at the same arms-length distance a defense attorney keeps their client.

Meyers touches upon drug use a number of times in the book. An early client is alleged to be involved in the drug trade, though this fact exists on the periphery of the defense case and does not enter into discussion at trial. Jill drafts an op-ed for her law school's newspaper arguing for the decriminalization of all drugs that generates debate among her peers but does not culminate in her being proven right or wrong in any ultimate sense. Jill criticizes her law school boyfriend's use of Adderall in test prep as effectively cheating, but later in her career she slides into regular use of the drug as a way to contend with overwhelming caseloads. Her future husband, concerned about her drug habit, urges her to seek treatment, which she does, and her addiction is dealt with before any significant consequence arises.

Meyers could have made a point about how bad drugs are, or how misguided drug policy is, but instead he avoids amplifying the conflict to the point at which the reader can no longer entertain a nuanced perspective on the topic. Instead of being given a thesis, readers are invited to consider drug use and policy in all its complexity.

Jill's clients are also profiled at a calculated distance. They tend not to be guilty of the specific crimes for which they are charged — allowing Jill a window of opportunity to succeed in their defense, which she often does. Jill also has to deal with clients who are distrustful, manipulative, or compellingly charismatic in ways that make their defense difficult.

This is another place where Meyers's real-world experience is evident. Anyone working in criminal defense will have encountered clients whose distrust of the judicial system extends to their own counsel, or whose ideas regarding how defense should proceed are wholly disconnected from reality and sound legal strategy. Once again, the author eschews the advancement of a singular solution for the problem, which plays out differently depending upon the dynamics of the particular situation and Jill's own development as an attorney.

Legal professionals, especially, will appreciate the veritas of Meyers's approach to storytelling. I found Jill's early ethical lapse deeply unsettling, despite its failure to develop into a narrative-defining conflict. It reminded me of my own early career missteps that, while less severe or significant, linger in my memory as a reminder of the perilous nature of representation and the legal profession. The tensions between the high-minded principles that helped guide Jill into the law and the complex realities of practice also had a ring of truth to them that was more valuable than a more cinematic approach to storytelling.

Attorneys just entering the profession will benefit from the roadmap that *Jill's Trials* offers for a modestly successful career, particularly since it notes many of the stumbling blocks a young criminal defense attorney might encounter in their career. More seasoned practitioners will also appreciate the muted nature of the conflicts and their undramatic resolution or nonresolution.

Reach D.C. Bar staff writer Jeremy Conrad at jconrad@dcbar.org.