

Former attorney's book named Book of the Year by International Rubery Book Awards

Christina Jolliffe | The Chronicle-Telegram

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David Miraldi

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LORAIN — The steel mill is an industrial giant, providing livelihood for the immigrant neighborhoods all around the city.

Christmas shoppers frequent the bustling downtown storefronts.

And major crime in the city of about 70,000 people isn't an issue.

That is until the arrest of Casper Bennett, accused in the death of his wife, Florence Bennett, who was found by her husband in a bathtub of scalding water, just before Christmas 1963.

Was her death an accident? Was it suicide? Or was it murder?

Retired attorney David Miraldi still isn't sure, but in his book, "The Edge of Innocence: The Trial of Casper Bennett," Miraldi re-creates the trial of a man that captivated the city, and 54 years later still demands attention.

Miraldi was just a boy when his father served as Bennett's defense attorney in 1964. But he still remembers the case. And he remembers reading the ongoing newspaper coverage and asking the question, "Did he do it, Dad?"

So when his mother moved to an assisted living facility in 2005, and Miraldi and his family were going through boxes, finding his father's file on the case was intriguing.

The file stayed closed for another five years, but Miraldi felt himself pulled back to it.

When he finally opened it, he discovered his father's closing arguments and some briefs, altogether not very much. But there was something about it that Miraldi could not put down.

"You've got a man accused of murdering his wife in scalding bath water," Miraldi said. "His hand showed some burns. He had an alibi that was not that solid. And the police rushed to arrest him."

Because there was no transcript of the trial, Miraldi had to piece the story together using his father's file and newspaper accounts, such as articles from The Chronicle-Telegram that were written by then-reporter Don Miller.

"I imagined the thoughts of the characters, and I had to re-create the testimony," he said.

He published the book as historical fiction, and it was named the 2018 Book of the Year by the International Rubery Book Awards.

"The Rubery Prize is a prestigious international book award that seeks out quality books from independent writers, self-published writers, and books published by small independent presses from all over the world," according to a news release.

When the book won the award, it was reclassified as non-fiction.

"It's somewhere between narrative non-fiction and creative non-fiction," Miraldi said.

Whatever it is called, the story is compelling, agreed authors and critics who judge submissions for the award.

In awarding the top prize to Miraldi, the judges found that the book was "a page turner (that built) to a gripping climax." The judges praised the book because "it provided an insider's perspective on the gamesmanship that underlies the jury system." The judges also "were captivated by the author's description of Lorain in the mid-1960s, a typical Midwestern steel town with its sense of community, strong immigrant population, and belief that its thriving way of life would never change."

A Lorain native, Miraldi is a 1971 graduate of Lake Ridge Academy. He received his undergraduate degree from the College of Wooster, and his law degree from the Ohio State University College of Law.

He began practicing law in 1978 and worked as a civil trial attorney until three years ago, when he retired.

As an attorney, Miraldi often would write legal briefs on issues, trial briefs, evidentiary briefs or motions to dismiss, and it always was something he enjoyed.

Writing a book wasn't too difficult, he said.

"It actually flowed pretty well," Miraldi said. "It took four to five months to write the first draft. I took some advice from another attorney-turned-writer, John Keyse Walker, who said to let it sit 60 days and revise it again. So, that's what I did."

Miraldi enjoys the writing process.

"It's laborious, but it is also fun and rewarding," he said.

He's already been working on two new books, but is focusing his attention on just the one for now, a narrative non-

fiction book about a former client and an episode in her life. He's about one-third of the way finished, he said.

“I have a lot of things I enjoy doing,” Miraldi said. “I play tennis. I like to play the piano. I’m interested in photography. And I have two grandchildren in Cincinnati that I try to see, and I travel. But I also try to write a little every day.”

As for his award, Miraldi was pleased and surprised after learning he had won.

“It’s nothing I expected, but it’s certainly the icing on the cake,” he said. “I had a story to share. You always wonder if anyone is going to read it; and if they do read it, you wonder if they are going to enjoy it. If nothing else happens, I’ve had a tremendous amount of fun.”

“The Edge of Innocence: The Trial of Casper Bennett” is available online at Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, Google Play, iBooks and Audible. It also is available locally at Nielsen Jewelers in Lorain, Jax Store for Men and Women in Lorain, Ben Franklin in Oberlin and Barnes and Noble in Westlake.

“It’s a courtroom drama, but it’s also the story about a bygone era,” Miraldi said. “It returns us to Lorain, Ohio, when it was a thriving industrial city. It is fun to revisit that era and think about life back then. I grew up in Lorain. I’ve lived in Amherst, Elyria and now Avon. I’m Lorain County through and through.”

Miraldi resides in Avon with his wife, Leslee, who also is an attorney. The couple has three adult children and two grandchildren.

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