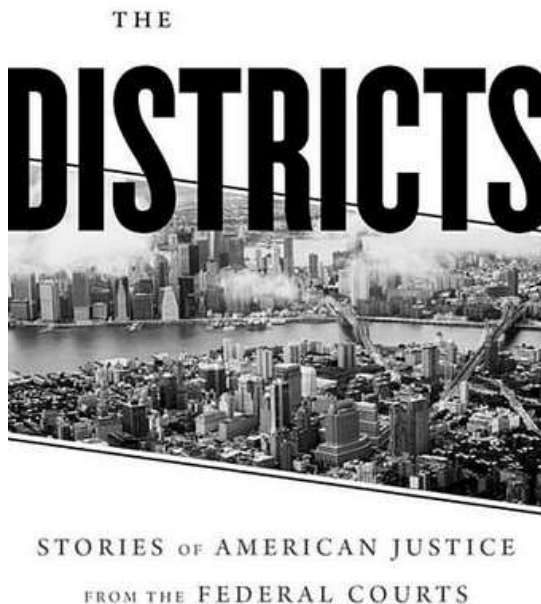


IMMENSELY SUCCESSFUL: Author Dwyer achieves goal

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“The Districts: Stories of American Justice from the Federal Courts” by Johnny Dwyer. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 368 pages, \$27.95.



JOHNNY DWYER

“This book is not about the law per se,” Johnny Dwyer explains near the beginning of “The Districts: Stories of American Justice from the Federal Courts,” his new comprehensive primer on the U.S. judicial system. “It is about the impact of the law on the lives of people who make their work in it, and those who find themselves at odds with it.

“How we choose to define, prosecute and punish crime offers a window into our politics and society,” he continues. “The stories in this book are told from the point of view of prosecutors, judges, jurors, defendants and their counsel. This book does not provide definitive histories of each of New York’s federal districts or U.S. Attorneys’ Offices. Instead, it steps into a moment of time to report on the labor of the courts. The daily work of finding justice seen here is human, subject to all the intimacies that go with ambition, fear, sense of duty and the need for retribution.”

I was fascinated by “The Districts” from the moment it arrived on my desk. When I receive most books for review, I typically just add them to the stack and get to them in due course. But this one was different. Given the current political environment, with all of its ambiguities and alternative interpretations regarding notions of right and wrong, I felt drawn to Dwyer’s subject matter in a way I seldom experience with other manuscripts. Only a few pages into his compelling depiction of a world most of us know primarily through movies and television, I was hooked. Without a doubt, this is one of the most enlightening (and entertaining) books I have ever read on the inner workings of the federal courts.

Dwyer is at his best when he brings the American justice system down to the human level, as he does in “Juror #27,” the 18th chapter and one of my personal favorites. Here he goes behind the headlines to show how high-profile cases often intervene in the lives of everyday citizens, many times with unanticipated consequences for those who find themselves – often by circumstances beyond their control – at the center of some of the most complex and far-reaching decision – making situations that tend to characterize our legal proceedings.

“The public clash of two of New York’s most powerful figures before the trial had little impact on Arleen Phillips until she was called as a juror,” Dwyer observes. “She listened intently as the prosecutor Carrie Cohen forcefully laid out the government’s case. The charges rested on two distinct corruption schemes. The first involved a seemingly positive cause: mesothelioma research. (Sheldon) Silver had directed state funds into research of the rare cancer, which stems from asbestos exposure. But in an ethical pirouette, he had done so after a researcher referred patients suffering from the disease to the law firm where Silver worked, resulting in bonuses paid to Silver. The second scheme involved a straightforward kickback. Silver directed two of the state’s largest real estate developers to hire an attorney whom he recommended, and that attorney then paid Silver a kickback for the referral.”

There is a lot more to this case, as you will find out when you read “The Districts.” Things that often seem black and white typically take on varying shades of gray in the hands of clever attorneys who have as their first priority winning a case as opposed to seeking justice – which often takes a back seat to exposing the truth.

“The Districts” is extensively researched, with 28 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the prologue, 20 chapters and an epilogue that form the main narrative. Structurally, the book is arranged in five major sections: “Organized Crime,” which comprises the first four chapters; “Drugs,” which consists of the next three chapters; “White-Collar Crime,” the following four chapters; “Terrorism,” which is made up of six chapters; and “Public Corruption,” the concluding three chapters. The writing style is clear and relaxed. Dwyer has a way of distilling the inherent complexities of the subject matter he is exploring down to the level of the casual reader who has minimal experience with the judicial nuances that seem to increasingly permeate our court system. He cuts through the jargon and the noise that inevitably seeps into this kind of investigative reporting to extract the essential ingredients relevant to getting a realistic perspective of the larger forces that are always at work when it comes to the law and how it is parsed out to the high and mighty as well as to the low and relatively benign.

Dwyer teaches at the Arthur L. Carter Institute of Journalism at New York University. His articles have appeared in The New York Times, Rolling Stone, Esquire, Propublica and Foreign Policy. This is his second book, his first being “American Warlord: A True Story,” which was published in 2016 and revolved around an American teenager whose father eventually became a notorious dictator of Liberia.

As always, I found Dwyer’s descriptions of the personal characteristics of the various players who populate this insightful drama to be one of the most mesmerizing features of “The Districts.” Case in point, witness his portrayal of the physical presence and somewhat questionable methods of Judge Valerie Caproni, especially when she was rising through the ranks as a prosecutor in the Eastern District:

“At just under 5 feet tall, she was often heard more clearly than seen in the courtroom 443,” Dwyer notes in “Post-Tammany,” the 19th chapter. “From her perch on the bench, she looked down at the attorneys, jurors and accused. When they looked back at her, often the reflection on her glasses and short brown hair and soft contours of her face seemed to float in place Oz-like as she leaned back in her chair, her robes bunching over her shoulders.”

“She earned a reputation as a relentless prosecutor: when a young Chinese gang member charged with murder in a botched ransom plot claimed he was a juvenile, Caproni pursued capital charges and won a court order to use X-rays to determine whether he was, in fact, an adult and eligible for the death penalty through a process called forensic age determination,” Dwyer continues in a later paragraph. “During the investigation of TWA Flight 800, she subpoenaed a freelance journalist’s phone records without receiving approval of the attorney general, forcing the Justice Department to acknowledge one of its prosecutors had broken its regulations.”

And Caproni, it turns out, is more the rule than the exception, at least according to Dwyer. As the author astutely notes, “the ultimate subject of this book is power. It doesn’t focus exclusively on the most powerful figures, but also looks at ordinary people and how they respond to the power of the law.”

After making my way through this intriguing series of vignettes, I am happy to report that the author is immensely successful at achieving the overarching goal he had in writing this book. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.