



Ready for the People: My Most Chilling Cases as a Prosecutor

[by Teresa Talerico]

Tough, raw, and occasionally heartbreaking, “Ready for the People: My Most Chilling Cases as a Prosecutor” offers a behind-the-scenes look at the world of criminal prosecution.

Author Marissa N. Batt, a Los Angeles County deputy district attorney, has handled thousands of violent felony cases in her 25-plus years in the DA’s office. Here, she dissects three of the most brutal crimes she has prosecuted: from a case of gang rape and arson to a vicious assault that left a young man severely disfigured and brain damaged.

Batt begins each chapter with an account of the crime, the events leading up to it, and some background on the criminals, victims, witnesses, and other key players. Though the book’s language occasionally seems “street” or crude, the nature of Batt’s subject matter necessitates it. Her author’s note warns readers as much, saying that “to pretty it up or water it down would be less than honest.”

“Ready for the People” is indeed a blisteringly honest look at crime, the path to a courtroom trial, and a justice system that sometimes fails the victims (in a wise move, Batt does not only include cases where she obtained a guilty verdict).

Although her accounts of the actual crimes are arresting, it’s when Batt begins describing her job--the methodical preparation for a trial, the art of interviewing victims and witnesses, the combination of “common sense and instinct” she employs during jury selection--that “Ready for the People” becomes fascinating. It’s like a textbook for aspiring prosecutors in which Batt dispenses nuggets of wisdom, such as offering tips for closing arguments (resist the urge to “entertain” the jury), explaining why that first interview with a violent crime victim is so crucial (establishing rapport and helping the victim deal with trauma), and revealing her “25 Rules of Giving Effective Testimony,” a list that

she hands out to all prosecution witnesses. She also explains courtroom lingo. “With a bullet,” for example, means a year in county jail. A “slow plea” happens when a defendant, against his attorney’s advice, insists on going to trial although his guilt is blatantly obvious. And the term “paper” means an affidavit of prejudice, which an attorney files to claim a judge is unfit to hear a case.

Batt’s cast of characters includes a homophobic judge, a lazy defense attorney, and an ace detective who is Batt’s confidant and colleague. The victims, however, are the most painfully resonant people in these pages. In “Roast Turkey,” two prostitutes and drug addicts are gang raped, tied up and left for dead in a house their attackers set on fire. The women manage to escape, and Batt describes the challenge of presenting the case to a jury, who could potentially view the victims as unsympathetic. It doesn’t help when one of the women appears at the courthouse high on heroin, vomiting and disheveled on the day she is to testify. But once on the stand, the victims actually give strong and compelling testimony. It helped that Batt was able to relate to them and gain their trust early on.

In “Big Surprise,” Batt prosecutes a gay man accused of brutally raping a man he met in a bar. Concerned about how a jury will perceive the case, the victim opts for a trial before a judge, but this may not have been the best decision.

In “Brain Dead,” a member of a Hollywood neighborhood watch group goes too far and viciously attacks a young immigrant. Beaten repeatedly with a flashlight, the young man’s head and facial injuries are unspeakably se-

vere. Batt describes the process of interviewing other neighborhood watch members who had been on patrol that evening, studying crime scene photos and cross-examining a defendant who claims he was merely acting in self-defense and had only struck the victim on his back.

With compelling storytelling and a frank portrayal of the day-to-day life of a deputy district attorney, “Ready for the People” is a riveting look at the frontlines of criminal prosecution.