

Beyond Terror: A Battered Wife on Trial for the Alleged Murder of Her Husband in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Ralph Thorton

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John Davis is a down-on-his-luck man who, after a night of drinking, takes his wrath out on his wife and family. It's not the first time he's done it, and when his wife Jean pleads for him to leave the house to cool off, he threatens to kill her. "The police won't be of any help to you," he claims. "They won't do nothing to stop me." When a gun finds its way into Jean's hands in the heat of battle, it doesn't take long before her husband's final attack ends with a shot and blood trickling out of his mouth.

While the scenario is very familiar to twenty-first-century audiences, *Beyond Terror* is fascinating. It's set in 1984—the same year that a made-for-television movie, *The Burning Bed*, first brought national attention to domestic violence. So when David Chartier, a lawyer who works with the Davis family, drives to meet his client, there's a sense that what he's about to do is ground-breaking.

It will also be a challenge. The nature of the case seems open and shut: even if the abuser was nothing short of a monster, Jean is being tried as murderer. Those are the stakes, and the rest of the book documents Chartier's struggles to keep the scales of justice tipped in his client's favor.

Author Ralph Thornton provides an astonishing amount of detail on this extraordinary case. He also does an admirable job of explaining the legalese side of the case. While this is certainly helpful, general readers may feel that Thornton relies too much on facts to tell his tale—even to the point that the story sounds a bit like the court transcript. The most successful true crime authors (most famously, Truman Capote in his work, *In Cold Blood*) walk a fine line, balancing what really happened with the natural dramatics they see in the situation. It's clear from Thornton's description of the forest on Highway 14 and everyday life in Michigan's rural Upper Peninsula that he has the potential to portray this drama, but he simply doesn't draw on it.

Nonetheless, *Beyond Terror* is the kind of book that's hard to put down and even harder to stop thinking about. For legal experts, professionals who specialize in domestic violence, and fans of legal nonfiction, *Beyond Terror* is an interesting account of the one of the first (but sadly, not one of the last) trials of a domestic abuse survivor.

KATERIE PRIOR (August 5, 2010)

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