

Docket No. 76**Arita M. L. Bohannon**

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A richly detailed New Orleans is the backdrop for this brilliant and intense debut drama.

In a compact 186 pages, Arita M. L. Bohannon constructs a harrowing story that asks the question, “Justice for whom?” When a five-year-old girl is viciously attacked, the case is assigned to up-and-coming New Orleans Assistant District Attorney Sandy Morgan, who must face personal demons in order to bring justice to the victim and her family in *Docket No. 76*.

Not quite thirty, Morgan’s reputation as a hardworking attorney is matched only by her subtle beauty: “She appears sweet and nice, and then she opens her mouth and pure hell pours out.” A devoted daughter to her lawyer father, she has followed in his legal footsteps. She’s also not immune to the charms of a certain Detective Bradley Curtis, with whom she’s worked a couple of cases. But all this becomes secondary when she’s handed the file for docket number 76, and the past comes tumbling in on her.

Bohannon inhabits her story with real, believable characters, from the smarmy—some might say oily—defense attorney to the put-upon, sometimes cantankerous judge to the brilliant, barely flawed architect in whose home the young girl, Dori, was attacked. Descriptions of New Orleans and its environs also make for a rich background locale.

The writing is top notch; because she is a lawyer herself, Bohannon is able to break down the legal vocabulary into an easy-to-understand rendering. This also aids in the pace of the story, which flows fairly consistently, even including a couple of twists near the conclusion. The novel deals with a topic that is adult in nature, but it’s handled in such a way that it’s not gratuitously on display. The event actually feels clinical because it’s dealt with in a just-the-facts format.

The dialogue comes across as authentic and natural, particularly those conversations between Morgan and her father, such as when they tease each other good-naturedly. For example, she slyly comments, “Oh, didn’t learn that one in Latin class, Papa Bear?”

The plot unfolds in a timely manner, with only two deterrents worth mentioning. The author tosses in one big red herring at the start of the story, and readers will have to suspend disbelief briefly at the idea that someone would ever forget the name of the person who grievously harmed their child.

Law & Order fans will be rewarded with the give and take of an emotional trial, including the testimony from the very believably drawn child witness. Bohannon reveals in the author’s note that she was also the victim of a childhood sexual assault, which adds an additional personal layer to an already intriguing story.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (April 4, 2014)

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