ForeWord Reviews

LAW

Kids for Cash: Two Judges, Thousands of Children, and a 2.8 Million Kickback Scheme
William Ecenbarger
The New Press
978-1-59558-684-1
(Nov 1, 2012)

In the best of circumstances, juvenile justice treads a tenuous path between punishment and rehabilitation. In 2009, a scandal broke in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, that showed how precarious this route could be when Judge Mark A. Ciavarella illegally sentenced thousands of children to two detention centers so that builder Robert Mericle could turn a handsome profit. In return, the crooked judge and his cronies received almost $3 million from Mericle for keeping his investments filled.

William Ecenbarger, a longtime reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, who shared a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Three Mile Island Nuclear event and authored *Walkin' the Line*, spent two-and-a-half years interviewing more than two hundred victims and their parents, judges, lawyers, and juvenile justice experts while covering the case; the resulting narratives, which are blended into this gripping story, are too unbelievable to be fiction. The author reveals that a toxic brew of Ciavarella's arrogance, silence by those familiar with the judge's antics, and a culture of corruption in Luzerne County—based on an undistinguished history of palm greasing, bubbled over into this notorious incident. (In the not-distant past, education majors at the University of Scranton were told that if they hoped to get a teaching job in the region, they better include $5,000 cash with their applications.)

Ecenbarger skillfully sorts out the too-clever money-laundering scheme and identifies the culprits, and there are plenty of them, notably Ciavarella and his co-conspirator, Judge Michael Conahan, who took large "finder's fees" and recurring cash payments from Mericle. The author engages the reader as he unravels the scam and describes the fate of the judges and builder. Justice was indeed served when Ciavarella was forced to resign in 2006, and, following a ten-day trial in 2011, the former judge was disbarred, required to pay $2.2 million in restitution, and sentenced to twenty-eight years in prison, while Conahan was sentenced to nineteen years.

Much more than a retelling of Ciavarella's rise and fall, the author weaves throughout his book the stories of several children incarcerated and the enduring—and at times

tragic—effects on their lives. A few of these children, along with some fiercely dedicated juvenile advocates, helped to expose Ciavarella, and the records of the thousands of children that Ciavarella sentenced were expunged. Readers of true crime and citizens concerned about public scrutiny of the judicial system will be engrossed.

Karl Helicher