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True Crime

Quest for Justice: Defending the Damned
Richard S. Jaffe
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Murder in the first degree: a chilling and terrifying charge for anyone. For Richard Jaffe, however, it's the very first step in one of the American legal system's most important causes. Having spent almost his entire legal career as a criminal defense lawyer, NPR guest, and O.J. Simpson trial commentator Jaffe retells the cases that defined his career spent balancing life and death.

Jaffe grew up Jewish in the Deep South during the Civil Rights era—a minority upbringing that certainly sensitized him to the plight of underdogs. His further negative experiences during the Vietnam War protests cemented an uneasiness with law enforcement and a strong desire to champion for the underserved. Skillfully blending memoir with a true-crime style, Jaffe explains how certain cases directed his moral compass, in work and in life.

Hired out of college by Attorney General William Baxley, Jaffe had many early successes as a state prosecutor. His first work experience illustrated the attention attorneys must pay to minutiae and would prove crucial in his successful switch to defense. One notable victory he recorded was a precedent-setting verdict won for the family of a fifteen-year-old black child struck and killed by a vehicle driven by a drunken man with a long string of previous DUI offenses. Until that trial, no jury in the country had ever convicted a person of murder arising from vehicular homicide, and Jaffe held particular pride for his role in the case, knowing that this time, "southern justice" had not prevailed.

Jaffe's switch to defense was, in part, a wish to avoid prosecuting a capital punishment case. Instead, he devoted his practice to proving the innocence of death row inmates and fighting on what he perceived as the legal high road. While some of his stories are entertaining—like the antics of gun-waving Judge Jack Montgomery—others illustrate maddening legal loopholes.

The trial of Ardragus Ford, a wheelchair-bound teenager who physically could not have committed the crime he was accused of, dragged on for more than three years based on the false testimony of one witness who lied repeatedly under oath.

This human drama is an insightful look into the legal condition of our country and will inspire debate between supporters and detractors of capital punishment.

Courtney Sorrell