

The Improbably Advocate: Australian Courtroom Drama

A.T. Cullen

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A young woman is quickly and dispassionately killed with a single blow. Thus begins *The Improbable Advocate*, an Australian courtroom thriller by retired Sydney barrister, magistrate, and coroner A. T. Cullen.

Cullen tells the tensely constructed story of Matthew Jameson, a young ex-football player turned criminal-defense lawyer out of place in a large, stuffy law firm in Sydney in 1966. His colleagues do not appreciate his efforts, and neither do some of his clients. Nevertheless, he is suddenly thrust into a central role defending a prominent politician accused of murdering the young woman whose demise begins the novel. When the chief barrister in the case is sidelined by a heart attack, Jameson is thrown into the breach to save the day.

Cullen writes well and the action and dialogue move along at a steady and lively pace. Unlike some first-time novelists, Cullen manages to keep himself out of the narrative and allows his characters to carry the load. The author excels at creating the ethical and tactical dilemmas faced by defense attorneys.

There are a number of characters introduced into the plot whose personalities or actions are not fully explored. Angelo Cattani is a young police officer with an attractive story, but he remains a character from whom the reader hears little. The main force for evil is former Nazi Franz Manheim, an immigrant to Australia who lives mostly in the shadows of the novel. Cullen could have made the story richer by giving more significant roles to these persons.

The Australian legal system, as presented by Cullen, is understandable to the American reader. However, there are a few nuances that should have been more thoroughly explained, particularly a “dock statement.” This procedure in Australian criminal law in the 1960s plays a key role in the legal strategy pursued by the defense lawyers in the story.

Occasionally, a sentence seems awkward and the reader is left to wonder if it truly is a difficult passage or merely reflects the difference between Australian English and American English. For example, when the judge is pondering whether to permit the testimony of a witness disclosed late in the trial, the text reads: “but immediately that he had read the statement, he believed he had an obligation to allow her to give evidence.”

Finally, the novel suffers slightly from casual editing. Detective “Cattani” is spelled “Catania” toward the end of the book. The defendant’s wife, Rebecca MacGregor, becomes “Rebecca MacDonald” in a few places. Lastly, here and there, a word in a sentence has been dropped: “As Birmingham strode away, Matthew watched him a wry smile.”

Overall, there is no doubt a jury would deliver a unanimous favorable verdict on *The Improbable Advocate*.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (February 16, 2012)

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