

Media Information

Murder Creek

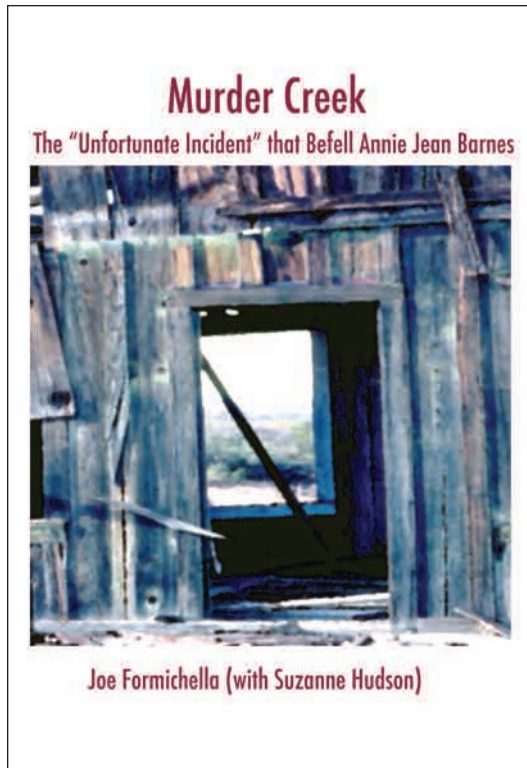
The "Unfortunate Incident" that Befell Annie Jean Barnes



Joe Formichella (with Suzanne Hudson)

River City Publishing





Genre: Nonfiction / true crime

ISBN-13: 978-1-57966-073-4

ISBN-10: 1-57966-073-8

Format: Cloth

Trim Size: 6 x 9

Page Count: 300

Retail Price: \$25.95 (subject to change)

Pub date: November 2007

About River City Publishing

Like the nearby Alabama River that flows through the heart of the South, literature sustains us, transports us outside of ourselves, and brings us home. River City Publishing, a literary press located in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to discovering the books that do just that.

Carolyn Newman
Publisher

Praise for *Here's to You, Jackie Robinson*

“Focusing equally on the Mohawks, the history of blacks in baseball and race-relations in the 20th-century America, Formichella is equally comfortable conveying the conversational tone of yarn-spinning former ballplayers as he is dissecting the personal and cultural ramifications of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement. Both heartbreaking and inspiring.”

—*Publishers Weekly*



A Synopsis

Formichella examines all aspects of the unsolved crime that inspired Suzanne Hudson's 2004 novel *In a Temple of Trees*. When Annie Jean Barnes died one evening in 1966 outside an exclusive hunting camp retreat near small-town Brewton, AL, it seemed all the wealthy town fathers were culpable. But at the behest of those who were likely responsible, the crime was swept under the rug and details ignored by investigators. The publication of Hudson's novel, however, brought the ghost of Annie Jean back to life. Joe Formichella, in classic investigative style, reopens the case and questions a multitude of crime experts, law enforcement officers, and citizens alike—including many who, so it was said, would never speak about the "unfortunate incident" of Annie Jean's death. A gripping tale of how the upper class often gets its way through violence and coercion.



Q & A

Tell me what prompted you to write this book, especially since, as I understand, there's already been a novel that's dealt with the case?

That's funny. An agent asked me the same thing. But I can tell you *exactly* what prompted *Murder Creek*, and it has a lot to do with that novel. When Suzanne debuted her book, *The Temple of Trees*, four years ago up in Brewton, five of the woman's children came to the reading. They weren't there for literature though. They were there to find out what happened to their mother forty years ago. They'd never been told, and weren't able to find out on their own, the story had been buried so deep. That astonished me, that somehow the truth could be kept from them all this time. And it's not like they didn't care. They were still very upset, very angry, but someone had decided to make the truth disappear. The project really started out as just a promise to them to find out what we could.

And when did it become a book?

After we interviewed the lead investigator. He dodged us and dodged us for a year and a half before he agreed to talk. And then, just before we met, he destroyed his notes from the case, along with all of his other field notes – told us it was a matter of storage. After that interview, it felt like we had a story worth telling.

You've written about other true events or people. What's different about this one?

Every story's different, of course, but this one was completely unlike anything I'd written before. I had no idea where this story was taking me, no concept of its arc. That's not the most comfortable of circumstances, for me at least. I like to have some vision of the totality of the thing, even if I'm ultimately surprised by how the story progresses from beginning to end. It's not like Irving, where he says he knows *exactly* how his books end beforehand, often writes his endings quite early in the process – though I don't deny the attractiveness of that; but I like to have some notion.

And is that why you decided to treat this one as non-fiction?

Right. That's always the question, isn't it? Which presentation best serves the story? I like to think the story dictates that decision, rather than my deciding. And in the past, with each of the earlier books, I entertained the possibility of either fiction or non-fiction, whether the event sparked the creation of a larger narrative, or if it needed simply a narrative strategy to best illustrate what actually happened. In this case, I admit, considering the motivation behind it, there wasn't much debate. I mean, because we started out just trying to get whatever answers we could for Annie Jean's kids, and because we didn't have any idea what that ultimate truth would be, it seemed to me that the only way to tell this story was in its truest possible form, which is how I hope it reads: what we found out, what we didn't find out, how we got there, each and every step along the way, even the wrong turns and deliberations.

Plus you did a lot of, how shall we say, peripheral research?

Oh, yeah, and that's one of the things I like most about the process, finding out how much I don't know. And it's usually within that task where I discover I've *really* got a story, when all the coincidences and concurrences start piling up. You know, researching the history of Escambia County,



the civil rights movement, latter-day Southern dissent, the minutiae of turpentine, the scholarship on poverty, Alabama politics and its constitution, and they all seem to crisscross at Brewton, in 1966, well, that's when I know.

So is that where you started?

Actually, one of the very first things I did, research wise, was to go back and re-read two great books, *In Cold Blood* and *Circumstantial Evidence*, for inspiration, as much as anything else. Again, because I'd never done anything quite like this.

You mentioned Alabama politics: do you mean the politics of this case, or in general?

Both, really. The politics of Alabama, especially that awful constitution we've been fighting about for over a century, has been so skewed toward the rich and the powerful – in a lot of ways completely, up until 1966, anyway, when there was at least the beginnings of reform – Brewton wouldn't be Brewton otherwise, and the local politics certainly wouldn't be the same. If you consider that the core of most struggles is an effort to maintain the status quo, Brewton has always had a very significant status quo and some very powerful forces maintaining it.

Did you encounter some of those forces?

Oh yeah. We were warned off the story plenty of times. It might sound crazy – and Suzanne would certainly agree with you – but that was actually kind of exciting.

Is that what draws you to non-fiction? Would you say you prefer it to fiction?

Oh, I don't know. I think it was a unique aspect of this particular story. As to which I prefer, it all depends on the story. For instance, I'm juggling several ideas right now that run the gamut, from an epistolary novel about Katharine Wright, to an Iraq war veteran's journals, to a straight historical non-fiction book on Alabama politics, all the way to progressively more creative non-fiction stories about an Alabama fugitive, and a character I encountered in the course of researching this book, Alabama's nineteenth century version of Robin Hood, a guy known as Railroad Bill.

How does he play into the story of Annie Jean, and could you speak more generally about creative non-fiction?

Bill's a delightfully peculiar embodiment of the racial and economic divides that define Brewton and East Brewton – where Annie Jean was actually from – which are separated by Murder Creek. The railroad tracks parallel the creek, and Bill would ride up and down stealing freight and food from the white barons and businessmen and give it to the poor blacks who lived along the tracks. In the case of his story, there's an awful lot of myth that's grown up around him over the years, so the narrative strategy is of necessity quite a bit looser with the facts. I'd call that an example of creative non-fiction, rather than anything like a classroom definition.





About the Author

Joe Formichella is a Hackney Literary Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee whose work has appeared in *Grassland Review*, *Red Bluff Review*, and the Southern literary anthologies *Stories from the Blue Moon Café II* and *Climbing Mt. Cheaha*. He is the author of *The Wreck of the Twilight Limited*, a novel, and *Here's to You, Jackie Robinson*, an historical account of the all-black Prichard Mohawks, an amateur baseball team formed in the 1950s, shows how those young players succeeded despite the degradations and persecutions of the Jim Crow South. He lives in Fairhope, Alabama.



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