

Jeff Brugh
Los Angeles Times
20000 Prairie St.,
Chatsworth, CA 91311

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Dear Jeff,

Hope you've thrown the flu. It is something Lil and I never have because we get the shots every year. I watch the papers every year for the Atlanta announcement that time has come and shots distributed. Once we see the doctor after that he asks if we have gotten the shots. When you accumulate the years this precaution is more important. Perhaps you are getting close to the starting line? I've been taking them for about 40 years, first at the recommendation of our then HMO. Never any reaction, either.

Glad you and Chip have been in touch. Fine young man. He spoke to me day before yesterday about several more things, like the slug I'd like under my picture. I thought he might get interested in the Atlanta murders story.

The Quill did a good piece. Reminded me with my first experience with the WxPost on my first book, to a lesser degree with the NY Times. I could hardly believe the dishonesty. Both as news and as a ~~review~~ review. The book review editor, who departed not long thereafter, told me that Ben Bradlee told him not to review the book because he was not in a position to evaluate its accuracy! Earlier, when I'd dropped in to speak to the book review editor and he wasn't in, his secretary or assistant told me how much he and she thought of the book, how important it was. The Times got 12 freebees, by its request for almost all, when I made them pay for the 13th and any later ones, the latter I now do not remember. It was assigned to Fred Graham to review. He told me it came between him and his wife when they went to bed and she insisted on reading to the point where he was slowed down in it. When the review appeared, it was a single sentence in a long review about a bad book on the Commission that praised the FBI. Whose work had been both atrocious and intended not to be an investigation of the crime. That sentence faulted the book for being "painstaking and overwhelming!" Later Graham made a study of press freedom for the Twentieth Century Fund. But for a brief period I was luckier. As long as Pete Kihss lived when he got one of my books at it appeared he did a new story, not a review, of about a half page on each.

I continue to believe that the story should be told again and that it should reach more people. What it says is like the thrust of my work: in times of great stress and since then the major institutions fail us and contort to. But I also think that for it to be published today the form has to be changed and it should be shorter, with the original book as backstopping, any publisher who is really interested won't worry about accuracy. If you've not heard from my friend I guess he is not interested. Sorry.

What we each face is reflected in the Post's failure to mention the Sunday expose in the ultra-reactionary Memphis Commercial Appeal, of Army intelligence spying on ^{blacks} backs going back to World War I, with 6 or 8 of its agents spying on King at the time he was killed. The truth is there has been a national Gestapo. Excuse my haste, our best,

Harold

Jeff Prugh

March 20, 1993

Dear Harold:

A quick "hello" and a note to tell you how much I enjoyed receiving your letter. I really do appreciate your making that contact with that publishing friend regarding a reprise of The List. Chet and I have remained resolutely convinced that the book has yet another life -- and it would require very little updating. Like you, we've taken the authorities' own documents and let them "hang" themselves with their own words.

I've chatted a few times with Chip Selby via phone and tried to interest the Los Angeles Times' TV folks in his upcoming segment (March 31) on a fresh look at material that fell through the FBI's cracks in the Martin Luther King assassination. They said they'd check it out -- and I told Chip that's about the only assurance I can muster for now. He's very busy with editing and cutting the piece now, but we intend to get together when he's through. He's expressed an interest in the Atlanta fiasco.

I've been battling the flu for two weeks -- even missed work a few days -- so I have a semblance of an idea of what you're up against healthwise. I do hope springtime brings at least some emotional therapy from your pain, Harold, and I'm sure your own tough-as-nails psyche will continue to help you ride out these storms.

I'm pulling for you.

Meantime, I enclose yet another tome -- this from Quill, the Society of Professional Journalists' mag -- which examines the Atlanta story and the Atlanta newspapers' snub of The List.

Look forward, as ever, to keeping in touch -- and all best to you and Lil.

Yours,
Jeff

ATLANTA PAPERS LISTLESS

'It's astounding that a book by two Atlanta authors, from an Atlanta publisher, on the biggest Atlanta story since the Civil War, isn't reviewed in the pages of Atlanta's two daily newspapers.'

■ Ken Englade

Chet Dettlinger was snoring away in a Los Angeles hotel room early one morning last summer when he was jarred awake by an insistent caller.

"It was a reporter from the [Atlanta] *Constitution* who said she was writing a story about Abby Mann's movie on the murders and she wanted my help. I couldn't believe it," Dettlinger said, his voice rising in indignation. "This was a reporter for the newspaper that had refused to review our book and she was calling me at five or five-thirty in the morning to ask for help."

He paused in his recollection, then added with a humorless chuckle: "What's really kind of funny is she didn't even know we had written a book."

For the most part these days there is little lightness in the voices of Dettlinger or Jeff Prugh when they talk about the Atlanta newspapers, the *Constitution* and *Journal*. As co-authors of *The List*, a 515-page non-fiction work on the so-called Atlanta Child Murders, they have been fighting for months to get what they consider a fair shake from their hometown dailies.

Since the book came out on April 6, they say they have been snubbed or

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maligned by the *Constitution* and *Journal* because they took the newspapers, the legal system, and the police to task for their actions surrounding the series of murders that rocked Atlanta a few years ago.

Retaliation for their criticism, say Dettlinger and Prugh, has so far taken the shape of negative news coverage and — an action the authors consider especially damaging and petty — a refusal to review their book.

"I find it absolutely astounding that a book by two Atlanta authors, published by an Atlanta publisher, and [having as its subject] the biggest Atlanta story since the Civil War is not reviewed in the pages of Atlanta's two daily newspapers," said an aggrieved Prugh. "At least they could give it a bad review."

"I was absolutely shocked," echoed Dettlinger. "I expected them to review it negatively, but even a negative review would have been better than no review. I didn't think they were that parochial. I didn't think they were that small."

Constitution-Journal managing editor Edward Sears brushed off the complaints. "So what if we failed to review it? It's a silly book. Frankly, I'm not the least bit concerned," he said.

But the question the authors raise is a valid one: Does a newspaper have a responsibility to review a book which will unquestionably be of interest to its readers, even if the newspaper disagrees with the book or if the book is critical of the newspaper?

■ The story begins in 1979 with the discovery of the decomposed bodies of two black teenagers in a kudzu-covered area of suburban Atlanta. It ends some three years later with the trial and conviction of a then twenty-three-year-old would-be music promoter named Wayne Williams for the murders not of children but of two streetwise, wary ex-convicts, one of whom was four years older than Williams himself.

That was not the end of the case for

Prugh, a former national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* based in Atlanta, and Dettlinger, an ex-cop who worked his way up from patrolman in Louisville, Kentucky, to an assistant to the chief of police in Atlanta. Stupefied by what they say is the long string of mistakes, misjudgments, and misfeasances that peppered the investigation and prosecution, the two set out to prove the Atlanta murders did not end with Williams's conviction. "It was the list, not the murders, that stopped when Wayne Williams went to jail," said Dettlinger. *The List* enumerates twenty-five murders that fit within the parameters used earlier by officials in determining who would be counted as victims and who would not. These murders, significantly, have been committed since Williams went to jail. There are also, they say, another thirty-eight persons who were killed contemporaneously with the official twenty-eight but who were never counted by police, for reasons unknown, as victims of the Atlanta murderer.

In short, *The List* does not paint a pretty picture of police competence.

"We didn't write a book about all the good things the Atlanta Police Department did," said Dettlinger. "We weren't trying to write a balanced story. We were trying to write a story about how the investigation was screwed up. Let somebody else write a story about how good it was."

The long list of police and prosecution bobbles alleged by Dettlinger and Prugh is in itself enough to give the Atlanta newspapers reason to consider how much publicity they should give *The List*. But the authors are not content with exposing only the faults of the government agencies. The media, they say, goofed just as badly.

The news agencies' mortal sin, the authors contend, was that they swallow the police and prosecution line as voraciously as the hungry hound that wolfs down pellets in the dogfood commercials. According to Prugh and Dettlinger, few if any reporters ever

stopped to examine what they were being fed, much less questioned its digestibility.

"We're not saying Williams is innocent," said Dettlinger. "What we're saying is we're not sure he's guilty. That's a big difference. We're saying his guilt was not proved by the evidence presented at his trial, evidence which was never challenged by the media."

"*The List* is not just critical of the Atlanta newspapers," said Prugh, "it's critical of other publications, too. *The Washington Post*, for example, is mentioned. *Newsday* is mentioned. *The New York Times* is criticized. Even the *Los Angeles Times* [the publication for which Prugh covered the story] is mentioned, inasmuch as it is pointed out that at one time I was told to cool my coverage because it was thought I was becoming obsessed with the story."

Still, even though other members of the media are singled out from time to time by Prugh and Dettlinger for alleged errors, it is the Atlanta media that carry the brunt of the criticism because it is with the Atlanta media that the authors had the most contact, especially Dettlinger because he was called upon extensively as a source during the investigations.

"I was taking reporters on tours of the murder sites. I was explaining to them the nuances of events. They [reporters] were calling me at home at night and reading me their articles for the next day," said Dettlinger. "The *Constitution* printed a map I had drawn up to show the geographical pattern of the murders and they labelled it a staff map. At one point, I was asked to come down and brief editors and reporters on the murders. I got there at five-thirty in the afternoon and I was there until one o'clock a.m. As far as I was concerned, my relations with the *Constitution* were good."

At least they were until his and Prugh's book was enroute to the printer. By then, excerpts from *The List* had been printed in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and an edited version had been filed on the newspaper's wire. The Atlanta newspapers, which had been offered the excerpts but declined, picked up the much condensed copy and used it as the basis for a story on the forthcoming book. Two weeks before the book was published, Dettlinger said, he received a call from *Constitution* staffer Gail Epstein, who had been covering the case from the early days.

"She asked me a bunch of questions about the book," Dettlinger recalled,

Books by Jody Powell, Rosalynn Carter, and the paper's own travel writer got both news stories and reviews.

"and all of them were in a negative vein. Everything was accusatory."

On March 25 Epstein's story was published under the headline "Book on Atlanta murders disputes 'list,' raises hackles of Williams' prosecutors."

The thirteen-paragraph story quoted, in addition to Dettlinger, four other persons: Williams's mother, Faye, and three men officially connected to the investigation — District Attorney Lewis Slaton, fiber analyst Larry Peterson, and police official Morris Redding, who had been in charge of the task force investigating the killings.

According to Dettlinger's and Prugh's publisher, Frank May, *Constitution-Journal* book editor Michele Ross later used Epstein's story as an excuse for not formally reviewing *The List*.

"She told me because we had gotten some [pre-publication] publicity it was the newspaper's position not to review it," said May.

Ross left the *Constitution* in October and refused to be interviewed for this story. However, in an earlier conversation, she was asked if it were true that she had refused to review *The List*.

"We didn't refuse to review it," she said. "We declined to review it."

Why? she was asked.

"Because we did one story on it and we think that was sufficient."

When I pointed out that the story had been written before the book was published she got very cool. "What exactly is your interest in this?" she demanded.

Pre-publication stories did not stop the *Constitution* from running reviews of other books, said Prugh. "Earlier this year books were released by Jody Powell and Rosalynn Carter. The papers gave extensive coverage to these books in news stories before they were published and both were reviewed. In addition, in both cases they even serialized the books. It makes you wonder whether our book is being singled out. The reason they give for not reviewing it — because it was

covered in a news story — just doesn't wash."

Pre-review coverage also did not stop the newspaper from reviewing a book late this summer by Colin Bessonette, a *Constitution* staff member who, a few weeks before his book was examined on the book page, touted his own book in his own weekly travel column.

Although *The List* was not reviewed in the *Constitution* it was reviewed in newspapers in all of Georgia's other major cities as well as in a number of major newspapers around the country, including, according to publisher May, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News*, *The Hartford Courant*, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*. United Press International reviewed the book, as did the *West Coast Review of Books*. It is unclear whether the Associated Press reviewed it or not. AP book editor Phil Thomas said it was the type of book that would have been reviewed by the local bureau, but Atlanta bureau chief Paul Bell said his staff does not, and as far as he knows never has reviewed books.

Still, to the authors, reviews in other cities do not take the place of an Atlanta review.

"No one has challenged the facts in the book," said Dettlinger. "They want to talk about my motivation and so forth, but no one has challenged it. The strongest critical statement yet has been that we misconstrued the facts. But at least they were facts. It's an important book and the newspapers owe it to their readers to review it. They either ought to say it's a good book or it isn't a good book."

"I don't think there was censorship," replied *Constitution* features editor Dave Osier, former book editor Ross's immediate superior. "We didn't try to suppress the book. We didn't review it because we didn't have a lot of faith in the book's credibility."

A judgment on the book's "credibility" is, of course, a judgment on the authors' credibility.

Dettlinger, who was acting deputy director of the Kentucky Crime Commission before moving to Atlanta, also worked as a consultant to the U.S. Justice Department. In that job his tasks included reviewing police programs around the country and teaching police

administration to top law enforcement officials. He also worked as a consultant to the National Crime Prevention Institute and was director of Georgia's Regional Police Academy in Rome, Georgia.

At the time he got involved in the Atlanta murders, Dettlinger and two other veterans of the Atlanta Police Department were planning to set up a national network for missing children. When they read press reports about the Atlanta cases, they thought they could incorporate the local investigation into their national network. "First we went to the police and they said no," Dettlinger said. "So then we went to the mothers. We started with the Jeffrey Mathis case in June, 1980. At that time, the police were saying there was no problem [with missing children] in Atlanta."

When he and the two other ex-cops began digging into the cases, reporters began coming to them, Dettlinger said, because the police were not releasing any information; they were referred to as "private investigators." Ultimately, Dettlinger became a consultant to Wayne Williams's attorneys and sat at the defense table during the trial.

Prugh, who did not meet Dettlinger until the investigation was in full swing, had been a national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* since 1976, when he transferred to Atlanta from the sports staff in Los Angeles. "I was covering the Cuban boatlift when this story broke," Prugh said, "so I got into it rather late. I didn't write my first story [on the murders] until October, 1980, when I went out on one of the searches. After that, I joined the hordes of reporters who stood around waiting for [Public Safety Commissioner] Lee Brown [now police chief in Houston] to tell us whether the latest victim was going on 'the list.'"

In addition to *The List*, Prugh has written two other books: *The Herschel Walker Story*, about the former University of Georgia football hero, and *The Wizard of Westwood*, a biography of former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, co-authored with Dwight Chapin.

Osier also pointed to three post-publication stories about the authors or their book, suggesting that despite the lack of a review the book has not been ignored.

One of the stories was a June 10 piece by staff writer Karen Harris that dealt primarily with a five-hour CBS movie entitled *The Atlanta Child Murders*. The

story, under the headline WRITER CRITICAL OF POLICE ASSISTS IN CHILD-KILLINGS FILM, was thirty-seven paragraphs long. Dettlinger, Prugh and their book were mentioned in seven of them.

On August 12, *Constitution* TV writer John Carman wrote a forty-six-paragraph story. It, too, centered on the movie, which was produced by Abby Mann and features Jason Robards, James Earl Jones, Martin Sheen (who plays the role of Dettlinger), Ruby Dee, Rip Torn, and Calvin Levels. Carman's story mentioned *The List* or its authors in five places, mainly where Carman quotes Mann as denying that the movie is based on the Prugh/Dettlinger book, or where it points out that Dettlinger also worked as a consultant for Mann.

On August 13, the day after Carman's piece appeared, Harris wrote a second story, thirteen paragraphs long. It mentioned Dettlinger only once, in a quote from former Williams prosecutor Jack Mallard. "Mallard said," Harris wrote, "from what he read about the movie in Sunday's newspaper, he expected the film neither to be true to the facts of the case nor fair in its judgments because former Atlanta police official Chet Dettlinger . . . also served as a consultant on the movie. 'I don't see how it could be more one-sided,' Mallard said."

As Epstein's story on *The List* had done earlier, Harris's August 3 story quoted officials whose evaluations of the movie were based solely on what they had read about it in the previous day's editions. The movie is not scheduled to be aired until February and Mann has not released copies of the script.

Taken as a whole, the newspapers' treatment of *The List* (the reporting as well as the refusal to review the book) does not seem fair.

"I think it's appalling," said Atlanta author Toni Cade Bambara, who also is working on a book on the murders. "I think it's horrible the newspapers haven't reviewed it. It makes them look almost as stupid as they indeed are. For many [Atlantans] the [murder] issue is important; it is not closed."

Bill Robertson, book editor of *The Miami Herald*, said the fact that it was local authors writing about a local event would have raised a red flag for him. "I can't remember a time in the five years

I've been here that we didn't review a book which would have local interest even if the author is not local. I feel almost anything that is written about South Florida or Miami must somehow be acknowledged even if we wanted to say it was a perfectly atrocious book."

Malcolm Jones, book editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, said there are times when his newspaper does not review books by local authors or about local events, but usually that happens when the publication is the product of a vanity press. (*The List* is not a vanity-press production and has been marketed nationally.) "I think if the murders had taken place in St. Petersburg, I would have felt compelled to write something about a book on them even if it was awful."

On the other hand, Robert Wyatt, book editor of the Nashville *Tennessean* and a professor of mass communication at Middle Tennessee State University, pointed out that a newspaper is not obligated to review a book. Any book. "There is no fairness doctrine for book reviews," he said. "There is nothing to force a newspaper to recognize a book's existence." However, he did say it was his policy to review any book of local interest.

"I don't think a book review is a freedom of the press issue," said *Constitution* features editor Osier.

"Maybe it just cuts too close to home," said Prugh. "A lot of people can be embarrassed by what we have to say." As an example, he points to a story in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* in which managing editor Sears is explaining the *Constitution-Journal's* fight for a Pulitzer Prize. "I had to stand up in front of all the newspapers in the country [at the 1983 Associated Press Managing Editors convention] and tell them why we did a better job on the story than they did and make them like it," Sears is quoted as saying.

In the long run, Dettlinger said, the decision by the newspapers not to review the book most likely resulted from a desire by editors to keep from re-opening what they consider old wounds; to protect the city's image.

"I think it's the chamber-of-commerce syndrome," Dettlinger argued, "the 'don't attack Atlanta' bullshit. That means to hell with the Constitution of the United States. It means to hell with the man who is sitting in prison convicted on the flimsiest evidence since the Old West. I just think they're afraid of the story." □