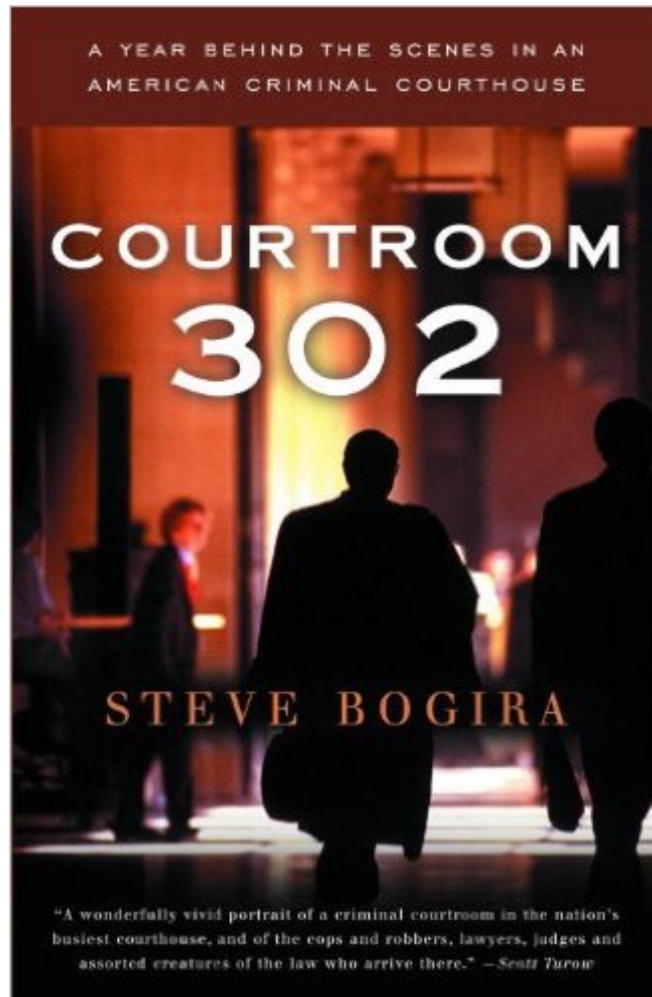


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Courtroom 302: A Year Behind The Scenes In An American Criminal Courthouse



Synopsis

Steve Bogira's riveting book takes us into the heart of America's criminal justice system. Courtroom 302 is the story of one year in one courtroom in Chicago's Cook County Criminal Courthouse, the busiest felony courthouse in the country. We see the system through the eyes of the men and women who experience it, not only in the courtroom but in the lockup, the jury room, the judge's chambers, the spectators' gallery. When the judge and his staff go to the scene of the crime during a burglary trial, we go with them on the sheriff's bus. We witness from behind the scenes the highest-profile case of the year: three young white men, one of them the son of a reputed mobster, charged with the racially motivated beating of a thirteen-year-old black boy. And we follow the cases that are the daily grind of the court, like that of the middle-aged man whose crack addiction brings him repeatedly back before the judge. Bogira shows us how the war on drugs is choking the system, and how in most instances justice is dispensed "as, under the circumstances, it must be" rapidly and mindlessly. The stories that unfold in the courtroom are often tragic, but they no longer seem so to the people who work there. Says a deputy in 302: "You hear this stuff every day, and you're like, 'Let's go, let's go, let's get this over with and move on to the next thing.'" • Steve Bogira is, as Robert Caro says, "a masterful reporter." • His special gift is his understanding of people "and his ability to make us see and understand them. Fast-paced, gripping, and bursting with character and incident, Courtroom 302 is a unique illumination of our criminal court system that raises fundamental issues of race, civil rights, and justice. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Thanks to Court T.V. and T.V. dramas, most Americans think of courtrooms as spacious, well-lit venues where prosecutors and defense attorneys vie for the attention of a thoughtful, attentive jury. But most lawyers aren't Johnnie Cochrans, many jurors are eager to get back to their regular lives, and the vast majority of cases never even go to trial. "Courtroom 302" looks beyond the made-for-T.V. ideal at one of the dingy, cramped, hectic rooms where justice is often imperfectly meted out. In writing this book, Steve Bogira spent the bulk of 1998 covering this courtroom and its dramatis personae: a firm-but-fair judge, two somewhat jaded deputies, a large ensemble cast of overworked public defenders and diligent prosecutors, and a rotating cast of defendants and jurors. He does an admirable job of reporting on them, of getting them to let their guard down and discuss their thoughts, feelings and motivations honestly and openly. The result is a well-rounded and compelling book that shows the true face of American justice at the turn of the Millennium. Bogira emphasizes the sheer volume of crime and punishment in the court he covers. Cook County boasts the nation's largest integrated court system, and the number of defendants who pass through the system is staggering: 78,000 defendants per year. (On average, every courtroom handles three per day!) And throughout the book's descriptions of dramatic and memorable trials--a prison shanking, a cabbie shot by someone who might have been a jilted lover, a coke deal gone bad, a vicious race beating--the steady drip-drip-drip of plea bargains and bench trials reminds readers that the courtroom can be as dry and routine as any other workplace. There are flaws with the book.

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