



Rubin "Hurricane" Carter and the American Justice System

Paul B. Wice

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Paul Wice takes the famous case of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter to another level of scrutiny as he puts the criminal justice system itself on trial. The case illustrates many of the strengths and weaknesses of the much maligned US criminal justice system while affirming the power and resoluteness of the human spirit. Early on the morning of 17th June 1966, the sound of gunfire echoed through the quiet streets of Paterson, New Jersey, as four people were shot, three fatally, inside the Lafayette Bar and Grill. Twenty-nine-year-old Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a prominent professional boxer, along with his companion, John Artis, were arrested and charged with committing this brutal crime. Prosecutors would later theorize that the murders were racially motivated - Carter and Artis are black, the victims white - to avenge the killing of a black Paterson tavern owner. Despite barely credible and oft-times contradictory evidence presented by both sides, a year after the killings Carter and Artis were convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. A second jury upheld the previous convictions in 1976. Artis was imprisoned until 1981, when he was released on parole. Carter remained in jail until 1988, when acting prosecutor John Goceljak elected not to pursue a third trial following the reversal of the 1976 retrial by the Federal District Court, a decision ultimately affirmed by the Circuit Court of Appeals and the US Supreme Court. With the release of the widely discussed movie on Carter starring Denzel Washington, the case again became visible and controversial. Wice follows the tortuous legal path of this case as it wound its way through first the New Jersey then the federal justice system for 22 years. His interpretations are informed by interviews with key members of both the prosecution and defence, as well as by previously unused court documents and transcripts. He evaluates the Carter case within a larger theoretical framework to illustrate many of the critical weaknesses of the adversary system and appeals process that is so basic to the American judicial system. Here is what can happen when police and prosecutors act unprofessionally, when critical witnesses lie, and when the justice system itself is unwilling to correct its errors or admit its mistakes.

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