

Phillip Margolin (1944–)

By Maureen Flanagan Battistella

Phillip Michael Margolin is a Portland lawyer and as of 2019 the author of more than twenty *New York Times* best-selling legal thrillers. His first novel, *Heartstone*, published in 1978 by Pocket Books, was based on the 1960 murders of Larry Peyton and Beverly Allen in Portland. After the release of Margolin's breakout thriller, *Gone, But Not Forgotten*, published by Doubleday in 1993, he left active practice in 1996 to focus on writing. *Gone, But Not Forgotten* was translated into twenty languages and was produced as a television miniseries in 2004 by Warner Bros.

Born in New York City on April 20, 1944, Margolin was influenced by Erle Stanley Gardner's novels about lawyer Perry Mason. At the age of twelve, he decided to become a criminal defense attorney. After serving in the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa, he attended American University in Washington, D.C., graduating in 1965, and earned his law degree at New York University School of Law in 1970. He married Doreen Stamm, a family law attorney, in 1968, and they had two children; Stamm passed away in 2007. He clerked with Herbert M. Schwab, chief judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals, before entering private practice in 1972.

In his early career as a criminal defense attorney, Margolin was successful in *State v. Hockings*, a 1975 murder trial that charged Charles Joseph Hockings with beating two adults and two children to death with a hammer. Hockings was convicted, but Margolin took the case on appeal. The ruling was reversed because inadmissible evidence was introduced in the trial from an unrelated crime. Another important case for Margolin was his defense of Jean Betty Norris, who killed her husband in 1979. Norris's husband had systematically beaten her for fourteen years in what is now understood as a cyclical pattern of abuse and contrition. In that case, Margolin became the first attorney in Oregon to use the Battered Woman Syndrome Defense. Norris was tried for manslaughter, the jury asked for leniency, and she was placed on probation. In the course of his legal career in Portland, Margolin worked on thirty homicide cases and twelve death penalty cases; he also appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Two of Margolin's novels, *Heartstone* (1978) and *The Burning Man* (1996), are based on specific cases, but Margolin more often has drawn inspiration for his books from his more than twenty-five years as a defense attorney. His careful observation of legal procedure, courtroom and counsel dialogue, and curious legal anecdotes fuel his writing and lend an authenticity rarely found in the genre.

Margolin has written novels with three series characters: father-daughter criminal defense team Amanda and Frank Jaffe, introduced in *Wild Justice* (2000); private investigator Dana Cutler, introduced in *Executive Privilege* (2008); and defense attorney and mixed martial arts fighter Robin Lockwood, who debuted in *The Third Victim* (2018). He co-authored a young adult novel, *Vanishing Acts* (2011), with his daughter, Ami Margolin Rome.

Margolin often explores social justice issues such as judicial fairness, the right to legal representation, confidentiality, perjury, organ harvests, sexual consent, and teratogens. His writing is tightly plotted and problem-based rather than character-based, frequently focused on scientific evidence and moral and ethical dilemmas.

Margolin co-founded Chess for Success in 1992, a nonprofit that uses chess to teach study skills to children in Washington and Oregon elementary and middle schools, and has served on the boards of Literary Arts, Portland Arts and Lectures, and Writers in the Schools. He married Melanie Nelson in 2012.

Sources

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