

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PANAMA CANAL SOCIETY INC.

Dear Members,

I had the privilege of being one of the vendors at the Panama Canal Society Reunion in Orlando last summer. I had a table where I sold and autographed copies of my novel, *Death in Panama*, which is loosely based on my experiences in Panama in the early 1980s, when I was assigned to Fort Clayton as an Army prosecutor. The central part of the plot involves a murder trial in which the victim was a thirteen-month-old little girl. The book also makes observations on Army life and briefly on Panamanian society and life in the Canal Zone.

Recently, I received a distressing email from someone who had purchased my book and after reading it felt that it insulted Zonians. I apologized to that person and hope I've made amends. Now, please allow me to offer this broader apology to all of you.

If you read *Death in Panama* and were offended by how it portrays Zonians, please accept my sincere apology. That was never my intent. One of my oldest and dearest friends is a Zonian. We've been through a lot together, and I would never dream of insulting him or where he came from.

Nevertheless, the criticism of *Death in Panama* in the aforementioned email is both valid and fair. Like most fiction, *Death in Panama* isn't balanced. Although I've written a lot over the years, *Death in Panama* is my first novel, and what I learned in the process of writing it is that writing good fiction is really hard. It needs to be dramatic and entertaining in order to engage the reader, and when one gets too focused on being fair and balanced, the resulting product is often too long or boring or both. But the author of the email is correct: I left the reader with an unbalanced view of Zonians, which was not right and was not my intent. Although some of the incidents described in the book are based on actual events, the overall portrayal of Zonians is distorted, and that's not right. I've received similar criticism from some of my fellow Army officers who complained that I portrayed all Army officers as foul-mouthed drunks who cheat on their wives, and some of my high-school friends felt that my description of life in a small town in the South was insulting to them. One reviewer even said she didn't like my portrayal of women, which left me scratching my head, since I see the principal female character as being one of the most admirable characters in the book. As I said: writing good fiction is hard.

In a small way, I think I can appreciate the sting the author of the email felt while reading my book. I feel the same way when some movies or books portray all Southerners as prejudiced bigots. I grew up in the deep South in the 1950s and '60s and saw racism first-hand. But I was also fortunate to have some amazing teachers and role models, as well as my parents, who taught me that prejudice in any form is wrong, regardless of whether it's based on race, religion, or creed. Those mentors have nothing in common with the bigoted characters created by Hollywood and some authors, and yet many who see those movies and read those books think all Southerners are that way.

In *Death in Panama* I tried to show that we're all flawed. There's good and evil in all of us, and our daily challenge is to ensure that good triumphs. I was also trying to show how naïve the protagonist was and how his experience in Panama—primarily his Army experience—stripped away that naiveté. I have a lot to learn about writing fiction, and I will certainly take to heart the thoughtful comments that the author of the email provided. I'm currently writing a sequel to *Death in Panama*, which takes the protagonist to the next chapter of his life following his resignation from the Army. It will probably offend some of my former colleagues from the law firms where I used to work because it attempts to expose the hypocrisy and pretense that often exists in prominent law firms. Certainly, not all lawyers are guilty of those sins but many are, and I think it's a story worth telling. But as the email reminded me: fiction should be dramatic and entertaining, but it should also be honest. That's a tough chore but a worthy goal.

Yours in friendship,

William Venema

