

TRELL

ONE COMMUNITY ONE SCHOOL ONE BOOK

When an entire community reads the same book, it becomes a point of reference for all members of that community. Conversation is sparked between teachers and students, librarians and patrons, booksellers and customers, parents and children, neighbors and friends. Story and reading become a part of that conversation.

In a world made more confusing and divisive by fake news and claims of fake news, it's necessary to talk about the importance of finding and telling the truth, and of the power of the press and the journalistic process to do so. *Trell*, by former *Boston Globe* Spotlight reporter Dick Lehr, is a compelling fictionalized account of the 1988 murder of a young girl and the hasty, politically motivated, wrongful conviction of a young black man that will resonate with many communities. Read this story together to talk about gang violence, community responsibility, misplaced political motivations, the free press, investigative journalism, and the importance of justice.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Trell has its origins in one of Boston's most notorious murders—the shooting death of twelve-year-old Tiffany Moore on a hot summer night in 1988. Tiffany was seated on a blue mailbox on Humboldt Avenue in Roxbury, swinging her legs and socializing with friends, when masked gunmen approached. Their targets were boys in a competing street gang, but they hit Tiffany. She died instantly—the youngest victim of street gang violence in the city's history.

Tiffany became known as “the girl on the blue mailbox.” Her murder instantly came to symbolize the cocaine-fueled lawlessness rocking Boston. Some officials even called for the deployment of the National Guard to cope with soaring violence. Police launched a massive investigation, and two weeks later, they arrested a young drug dealer named Shawn Drumgold. The next year, Drumgold was convicted of the murder. He was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. The city breathed a sigh of relief. Tiffany's killer was in jail. Justice had been served.

Except it hadn't. Fourteen years later, I reinvestigated Drumgold's conviction. I was a reporter at the *Boston Globe*, where I'd mostly served on its Spotlight Team. Contacts in the legal community had been telling me I should look into the case, saying police had rushed to judgment to quell public hysteria. In May 2003, the *Globe* published the results of that investigation, a story revealing prosecutorial wrongdoing. Special court hearings followed, where witnesses from the 1988 murder trial came forward and testified to how officials had berated them and coerced their testimonies. By summer's end, the Suffolk County District Attorney, who had previously opposed all of Drumgold's legal appeals, joined his lawyer in requesting that the hearing judge overturn his murder conviction “in the interests of justice.” The judge did so, and Drumgold went home on November 6, 2003.

During my investigation, my focus was journalistic—exposing flaws in the murder case. Even so, I couldn't help but notice the women in Drumgold's life: his attorney, Rosemary Scapicchio; his mother, Juanda; his wife, Rachelle; and his daughter, Kiara. I learned Kiara was a newborn when Shawn was arrested in the summer of 1988. She'd grown up marking time with regular visits to see her father in prison. I learned that in saying good-bye, Kiara would always ask, “Daddy, when you coming home?”

It became the seed for this novel. I wondered periodically what it must be like to grow up with a parent wrongfully imprisoned. I also wondered about telling a story for a younger audience, a story showcasing the themes in the *Globe's* stories—about gross injustice and the eventual search for justice, about journalism and the difference it can make. I began asking, what if the daughter were the central character? What if she possessed the true grit required to push for justice against a system that has failed? What if she convinced a reporter to help her, and together they uncovered the truth? Therein came Trell and Clemens. The two of them took over, and the novel's story line began to take shape. It's a story intended to be inspirational. It's also intended to honor the memory of Tiffany Moore, the resolve of Shawn Drumgold, the tenacity of Rosemary Scapicchio, and the loyalty and love of Juanda, Rachelle, and Kiara Drumgold.

Dick Lehr
Boston, Massachusetts
2017

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *True Grit* is the name of Trell's favorite novel. It's also a good description of her temperament. What do you think is her finest moment in this story? Why?
2. Many families fall apart during hard times. How do the Taylors keep themselves together? How are they able to overcome the practical problems and emotional strains of Romero Taylor's long incarceration?
3. Trell lives in Roxbury, a largely poor and African-American section of Boston. Why is there so much distrust of the police in her neighborhood? Should there be? Are law enforcement officers trusted in your community? Why?
4. At home in Roxbury, Trell is friendly and talkative, but when she starts at the Weld, an exclusive private school, "I basically went mute," she says (page 8). Why? What does "To Certain Intellectuals," a poem by Langston Hughes, mean to her?
5. When her advisor at the Weld School promises, "I'm here for you," Trell thinks, *Really? Here for me? You don't know anything, Mr. "I'm so hip" Rowe* (page 7). What does Mr. Rowe assume about Trell? What prejudices does he have about her community?
6. The murder of young Ruby Graham shocked the city of Boston in 1989. Why did it attract so much attention? How was the tragedy exploited by the media and by public officials? Is Trell another victim of the shooting? Why?
7. Nora Walsh is already overworked, and the Taylor family can't afford to pay her, so why does she agree to be Romero Taylor's lawyer? What makes his case so important to her?
8. "I don't like waiting," Trell says about herself. "I like moving" (page 187). Why are both important? How does patience help her to free her father? How does action?
9. This novel takes place in the early 2000s, more than a decade after the crack cocaine epidemic swept through Roxbury. How did Trell's father get caught up in the drug trade? How did crack cocaine almost destroy his community?
10. Trell's father didn't kill a little girl, but that doesn't mean that he's an innocent man. How does Trell react when she learns the extent of her father's past criminal activity? How does he explain his actions? Would you be able to forgive him if he were your father? Why?
11. Romero Taylor isn't the only character who earns a second chance in this novel. Discuss how Clemens Bittner and Detective Richard Boyle also find ways to make amends for past mistakes.
12. "I'm Thumper Parish," the confident gangster brags. "I play chess; everyone else is playin' checkers" (page 282). What are the risks of believing that you're smarter than everyone else? How do Trell and Clemens prove Thumper wrong?
13. *Quid pro quo* is a Latin phrase often used by lawyers. What does it mean? How is Thumper's agreement with Flanagan an example of quid pro quo? Discuss other instances of quid pro quo that you've seen in stories or in real life.
14. The press is sometimes called the fourth branch of government, as important to our democracy as the three official branches of government — the legislative, executive, and judicial. How does this novel validate the importance of a free press?
15. Dick Lehr, the author of *Trell*, is a journalist and a professor of journalism. What does this novel tell you about his profession? What skills does it require? What are the satisfactions of the work? What are the frustrations? Would you be a good reporter?
16. "Justice! It was like Juanda spit the word out. 'C'mon, girl'" (page 234). Why does Juanda Tillery have no faith in justice? How could her faith be restored? Does the Taylor family ultimately find justice? How?

ABOUT THE BOOK

“Based on events involving the accidental shooting death of an African-American girl, the crack-fueled gang culture of 1980s Boston, and the ensuing outrage, this book will resonate with today’s teens.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Lehr covered the inspiring true story behind this one as a journalist and brings to light many of the important details not only of the case, but of the public conversation that surrounded Boston at the time—and does to this day. . . . This tale of the fallout from the war on drugs recognizes one family’s resolve as it hammers home the failures of public policy and the court system to uphold justice for all.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Without sugarcoating city violence, Lehr presents facts about the case in terms readers will understand.”

—*Publishers Weekly*



On a hot summer night in the late 1980s, in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, a twelve-year-old African-American girl was sitting on a mailbox talking with her friends when she became the innocent victim of gang-related gunfire. Amid public outcry, an immediate manhunt was on to catch the murderer, and a young African-American man was quickly apprehended, charged, and—wrongly—convicted of the crime. Dick Lehr, a former reporter for the *Boston Globe*’s famous Spotlight Team who investigated this case for the newspaper, now turns the story into *Trell*, a page-turning novel about the daughter of an imprisoned man who persuades a reporter and a lawyer to help her prove her father’s innocence. What pieces of evidence might have been overlooked? Can they manage to get to the truth before a dangerous character from the neighborhood gets to them?

From the co-author of *Black Mass* comes a gripping YA novel inspired by the true story of a young man’s false imprisonment for murder—and those who fought to free him.

HC: 978-0-7636-9275-9 • Ages 12 and up

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