



Unreasonable Doubt: Circumstantial Evidence and an Ordinary Murder in New Haven

Norma Thompson

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It was to all appearances an ordinary murder—many might have said that it was an open-and-shut case. But some jurors were not convinced, and the taint of reasonable doubt led one of them to question the very future of our legal system.

For many Americans, the civic responsibility of jury duty might seem an inconvenience; for Norma Thompson, it was a unique opportunity to bring her expertise to bear on the state of trial procedures in America today. With a background in political science, literature, and the classics, Thompson served as jury foreman in a trial of an “ordinary” murder in New Haven, Connecticut. Deliberations were buffeted by crosswinds of common sense and strong emotion. The trial ended in a hung jury because of what Thompson calls the “unreasonable doubts” of two fellow jurors concerning circumstantial evidence in an age when DNA testing holds out the promise of irrefutable proof.

In a compelling tale of contrasting rhetoric, Thompson takes readers into the courtroom to hear a streetwise convict verbally sparring with the D.A., then brings us into the confines of the jury room to have us witness nervous chatter over the meaning of evidence. She also contrasts this ordinary murder with the concurrent brutal stabbing of a Yale student, a case that attracted considerably more police and media attention.

Thompson argues that the indeterminate results of the trial are symptomatic of larger problems in the justice system and society and that the reluctance of most people today to be judgmental is damaging the criminal justice system. As an antidote, she suggests that great literary and historical texts can help us develop the capacity for prudential judgment. Gleaning insights from an imaginary jury of Tocqueville and Plato, Jane Austen and William Faulkner, among other writers and thinkers, Thompson shows how confrontation with the works of such authors can help model more proper habits of deliberation.

Blending personal memoir, social analysis, and literary criticism, *Unreasonable Doubt* is a challenging book that deals squarely with the evasion of judgment in contemporary political, social, and legal affairs. Brimming with brilliant insights, it suggests that the foundations for thought and action in our time have been neglected as a result of the wall erected between the social sciences and the humanities and invites readers to consider jury duty in a new light. Through real-world drama and literary reflection, it shows us that there is more to politics than power—and more of value to be found in the humanities than we may have supposed.

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