

BOOK REVIEWS

The Soulbane Stratagem

A novel by Norman Jetmundsen, Jr. • Hardcover • John Hunt Publishing • October 1999

Reviewed by Charles A. Stewart, III

The Soulbane Stratagem:

You won't find it in the convenience store down the street, nor in crowded airport bookstores along side Grisham's novels yet, but when you do find it, Norman Jetmundsen's first novel is an exciting discovery. The book is a sequel to C. S. Lewis's book, *The Screwtape Letters*. I happened upon his novel at the University Supply Store while visiting my alma mater, The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where Norman was an undergraduate student, too.

Do not be fooled. This is not the typical lawyer's mystery novel. The site of the novel is Oxford, England. The main character is an American student, Cade Bryson, who is studying at Magdalen College. While studying in the library late one snowy winter's solstice night, Cade discovers some strange letters hidden in the bookshelves. These letters were exchanged between a junior devil, Soulbane, and his fiendish superior, Foulheart. They contain a riddle about the location of some reports to be prepared by Soulbane. Cade Bryson goes in search of the reports. He receives help from a fellow student, Rachael, and Mr. Brooke, the vicar of a small country church. The story is exciting, with some unexpected twists and turns. The message is strong and very timely.

Like C. S. Lewis's characters, *Screwtape* and *Wormwood*, these evil characters are pleased with the current state of the world and the church. In discussing the state of the modern world, Soulbane addresses the numerous victories that the devil has managed to have on Earth. Of course, from the devil's perspective, everything is reversed (i.e., evil is good, down is up, he has no compassion). Among those victories are the inability of man to tell right from wrong, the nuclear destruction of the family, the effect of technology on our lives, and the overall decay of the moral and religious fiber of our society. Soulbane even says the following about lawyers:

"As a part of our research, we attempted to interview that special species of vermin they call lawyers. Badness knows, there are enough of them down here! (Even our Royal Hindness can't stand to be around them for very long.) It is clear that the goal of lawyers in their trials is not justice, but winning. We tried to get a group of them to explain to us why there is so much litigation in western society, and why society is so distrustful of the legal system, so that we could clarify the matter for this Report, but all they did was argue, and we never got a straight answer. Later, several even tried to send us a bill for their time!"

Norman graduated from Sewanee with a degree in English literature. He attended the University of Alabama School of

Law. Thereafter, he clerked for Judge Sam Pointer in the Northern District of Alabama. He then studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he received an MLitt. in Law. A Rotary International Scholarship is what landed Norman in Oxford. It was while at Oxford that he kindled his interest in C. S. Lewis. Lewis taught at Magdalen College, where he wrote *The Screwtape Letters*.

Norman conceived the idea for the book while crossing High Street in Oxford one day. Having tossed around the idea of the book for nearly ten years, Norman started putting down his thoughts in March 1994, two months after his wife, Kelli, gave birth to triplet boys, Jonathan, Taylor and Nelson. The birth of the triplets is partly responsible for the book's having taken so long to write, as is the fact that he maintained his full-time law practice at Bradley Arant Rose & White LLP. After a couple of years, he began to think that perhaps this could turn into a book, and Norman then engaged in a self-study program to learn how to write fiction.

Norman is a member of the litigation practice group with Bradley Arant, and also works in the area of alternative dispute resolution, serving as a mediator and arbitrator in various cases. The firm has been very supportive of the publication of his novel. Also, the Rev. Dr. Paul Zahl, an Episcopal priest, and the Rev. Fred Barbee, editor of *The Anglican Digest*, provided him with guidance, advice and support. In addition, Norman received assistance from Robert Fraley, a former University of Alabama quarterback and sports attorney, who was Norman's friend in law school. Fraley's firm, Leader Enterprises, helped Norman find a British publisher in John Hunt Publishing Ltd. The tragic death of Robert Fraley with golfer Payne Stewart occurred immediately before Norman left for Oxford to launch the new book. Norman, Kelli, his brother and several friends, including his partner, Joe Mays, and Joe's wife, June, were present for the official launch of Norman's book at Magdalen College on October 29, 1999.

Norman's first novel is a real success, and I highly recommend it to you. Your local bookstore can order *The Soulbane Stratagem* from the United States distributor, Morehouse Publishing, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. (It can also be ordered over the Internet from Barnes & Noble, at www.barnesandnoble.com, and from www.amazon.co.uk.)

Based upon my reading of this book, I certainly hope Norman will write another one!