

JOE HILLEY:
Lawyer and Legal Thriller Author





by Charles F. Carr

In 1996, I turned 46 years old and shocked my entire family by asking them to leave Birmingham after 20 years and move with me to Fairhope to open a new branch office for our law firm. After a few months of working by myself, I was fortunate to bring Bill Sisson and Craig Goolsby from the Mobile Brown Hudgens firm in with me.

After getting a few other lawyers in with us, I received another resume. The lawyer's name was Joe Hilley and he too had practiced in Birmingham. I may have passed on Joe at the time, because we really didn't need another lawyer, but I saw that he had worked with Redden, Mills & Clark. I knew from my days in Birmingham that anyone who had worked with Drew Redden, Bill Mills and Bill Clark had to be a real lawyer and not just a civil litigator like me. It was time that our firm had a "real lawyer" in our midst.

Joe Hilley came into the office to meet with me one day shortly after I reviewed his resume. The first thing I thought when I sized him up was that I would want him as my middle guard on my defensive line in a football contest. His shoulders were wider than two of mine. He was not short but he filled up every inch of his body.

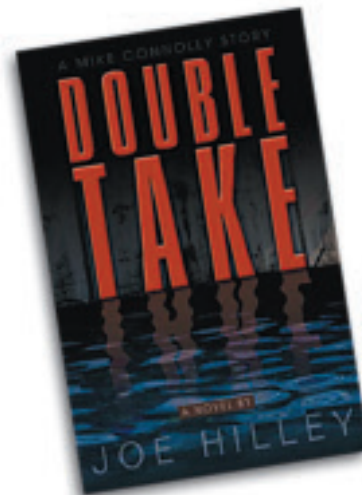
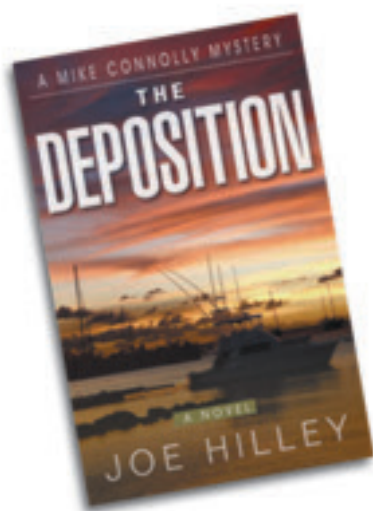
As the interview moved along, I sat fascinated, listening to Joe tell stories about practicing law with Drew Redden and the others at his old law firm. He was packed with short stories and told them in a manner that reminded me of a young Orson Wells.

Sisson, Goolsby and the other "Mobile lawyers" in the small branch law firm had changed the landscape of our law practice from what I had been used to in Birmingham. In Birmingham, I had grown up wearing a coat and tie every day. One of the first things Bill Sisson asked me when we started working together was whether I objected to an office policy that allowed the lawyers to dress a little less formally. No coats were ever seen in our office after that day. Joe Hilley fit in well with that atmosphere. Joe's neck was just not built for a coat and tie. Joe also frowns upon wearing socks.

Lunches were a completely different thing in Baldwin County compared to Birmingham. In Birmingham, two or three lawyers might head off to lunch occasionally. More often, we would eat in the office and continue working. If we did go to lunch together as lawyers, the conversation revolved around some tough case or some judge's ruling.

Fairhope lunch was completely different. We probably had 100 percent lawyer attendance at lunch at least three days a week and 60 to 70 percent the other two days. For some reason, "law talk" was forbidden. One day, there was an entire discussion on the difference between beans and peas. While Joe Hilley was with us, we were treated to some fine stories. I had no idea where he got all these experiences but lunches were a lot more fun after Joe came with us.

Left: Author Joe Hilley at one of his book-signings

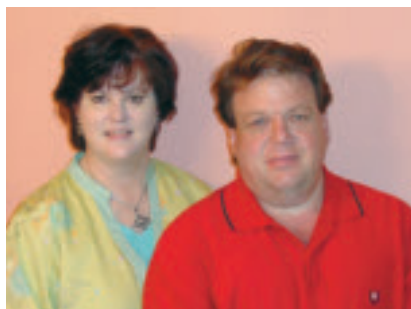


Joe was a good lawyer and did excellent work for us. I was taken aback when he came in to see me one day and announced that he was leaving. My first impression was that he had finally realized that we weren't real lawyers and that he had teamed up with a firm that knew how to try a criminal case or a divorce case. I wasn't prepared for his telling me that he didn't have another job and that instead he *planned to write a book!* As he talked, I kept wondering if he knew how many people had tried to write a book and quit after a few chapters or how many had written a book and never found a publisher. I knew that for every John Grisham there were a thousand Susan and John Does who wrote and never published.

We tried to talk Joe out of it. I encouraged him to work part time for us and that would give him an extra three to four hours a day to write. He couldn't do it. He said that he needed his entire day free. He wanted to have time with his family and then he wanted to be able to think about nothing but his story without thoughts of work or a caseload.

I wished Joe well, gave him a hug and then he left my life for probably six to eight months without my hearing from him. I realized later that this was my fault. Once again, I had let work and my own life's issues blind me to the problems of good friends from the past.

Joe struggled during this time a lot more than I had realized. He didn't struggle with his writing; he struggled to put food on the table and to simply survive. Perhaps it was Bill Sisson or one of our other lawyers or some other mutual friend of mine and Joe's who told me that Joe had to sell his furniture to afford to keep writing. Now if someone had said that a friend had to sell their IRA stocks or perhaps cash in their insurance or maybe even sell their house, I would have known the person was struggling financially. When I heard Joe was selling his furniture, I knew how desperate things were.



Joy and Joe Hilley

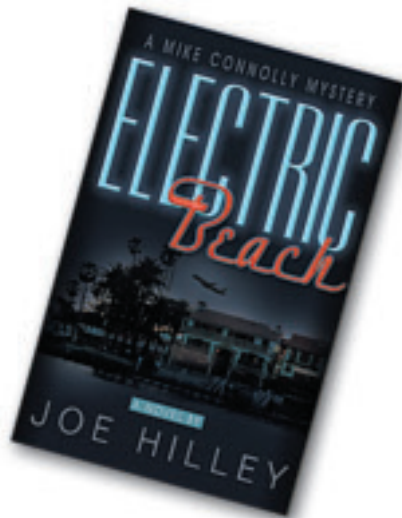
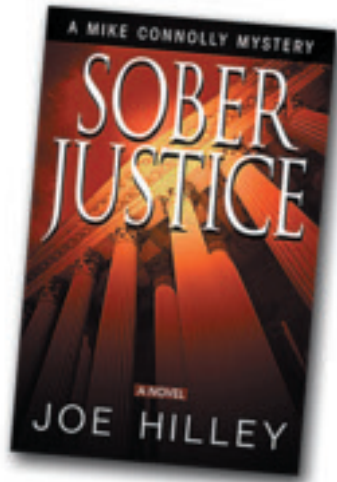
When I talked to Joe, I realized he had become one of my heroes. He had been willing to give up everything in life, other than his family, to reach the one goal that meant everything to him. I thought of people like Martin Luther King and Gandhi. Joe was so much closer to these guys than I would ever be. He was willing to give it all up to do what he understood to be "the right thing."

Joe has now written six novels. His debut novel was *Sober Justice*. It follows Mike Connolly, a Mobile criminal attorney who is trying to fight an alcohol addiction and the loss of his family and overcome a reputation that he is destined to be a failure as a lawyer. Connolly is a repeating character in Hilley's novels. His books are set in the Mobile and Gulf Coast areas of Mississippi and Alabama. Other novels include *Double Take*, *Electric Beach*, *Night Rain* and *The Deposition*.

Joe writes good stuff. I have read my share of legal thrillers over the years and Joe's work is as good as anything I've seen. I've wondered why we don't see Joe's sales rank up there with Grisham's. I don't know how many novels Grisham has sold lately, but by the end of 1997, he had sold 20,000,000 hard cover books and 67,000,000 paperbacks.

Scott Turrow has published only one more novel than Joe Hilley, but his books sell like mad. Why haven't you heard of Joe Hilley?

There is so much more to selling books than writing a captivating novel. We all have heard of writers who go from no-names to best-selling writers after being "picked" by Oprah Winfrey. Joe tells me that his stubbornness, which was such an asset in refusing to give up on writing a novel, has been one of his downfalls in being commercially successful. Joe believed that there was a market for a "clean mystery novel." He refused to sensationalize and he used words that you wouldn't mind your children using. He found himself somewhere between the



writings of the successful Christian authors and the writers of sex-packed, bawdy language-laden best-sellers that we have seen over the years.

If this article makes Joe sound pretty sensational, what does it say about his wife, Joy? Joy was the one who told Joe that they should sell their furniture to get them through those early days before the book was published. She is not just a perfect wife for Joe; she is nothing short of a saint! She and Joe have been married for over 20 years. Joe and Joy have two children, Laura Katherine and Jack. Don't you know these wonderful children will have some beautiful memories of their Dad? He was with them every day during their young years and they probably had no idea of the sacrifices he was making to achieve his goal in life.

I have been blessed to meet so many wonderful people who have had an impact on me in my lifetime. Joe is an inspiration to me. There is no doubt that his books will be best-sellers one day. Material success will never change Joe Hilley. He will always be good to the core and will always have on penny loafers and no socks.

Do yourself a favor. Go to the bookstore or *bn.com* and order one of his books. If you like it, tell your friend who lives in Vermont. Lawyers in Alabama might not be Oprah Wynfrey, but we could be the next best thing. To Joe, in closing, I say, "God Bless you for being such a beautiful chapter in my life." ▲▼▲



Charles F. Carr was a founder of the Carr Allison firm which has offices in Alabama, Florida and Mississippi. He practiced law in Birmingham and Mobile and now is in the Carr Allison Dothan office and resides in his native city of Enterprise.



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