

Xlibris Hollywood Coverage

Title: The House That Jack Built **Author:** Margaret E. Reiling **Date:** 7/5/2010
Genre: Horror, Suspense, True Story **Pages:** 175
Locale: Chicago **Period:** 1955-Present
Imprint: Xlibris

LOGLINE:

In order to free an innocent man from prison, the daughter of a murderer fights to prove that her father killed three boys.

BRIEF SUMMARY (1 Paragraph):

MARGARET REILING grows up idolizing her father, JACK REILING, an evil man who has abandoned several families and scammed numerous people with the use of his innate charm. But when Margaret learns that Jack was, in all probability, the murderer of three young boys in 1955, she dedicates her life to proving him guilty, so that an innocent man who was wrongly accused can be set free. Despite her efforts, no one believes her and the innocent man is sent to prison for life.

SYNOPSIS (2-3 pages)

The author has a secret. “A secret that was so intense that I expected it to come alive, before my very eyes, if I blinked the wrong way.” MARGARET REILING knows her father is dead, but feels his presence in her life, looking at her from every corner. She asks him why he killed “those boys,” and doesn’t understand why he did the things he did. But she hears a phrase that never leaves her: “You can’t be at peace,” she says, “until you have all the pieces.”

When Margaret was 16, she fell in love with an older man, DAN, and became consumed with the desire to find her father. Margaret’s mother had divorced her father and left her to live with her grandparents. It is at this point that Margaret’s mother tells her that she suspected her father, JACK, of killing three boys in 1955, a crime that was blamed on another man. But Margaret has only a tenuous relationship with her father, as he calls infrequently, and only when he wants something, such as when he has another son and wants Margaret to help raise him.

In 1994, Margaret is shocked to see a story break on the news blaming someone else for the murders of the boys. “Would I go to jail for keeping information from the authorities all these years?” she writes. “Would I loose all the family that I loved if I went public? As I watched this man on television, I knew that I had to do something.” Margaret contacts her sister BETH, who confirms what she suspects: their father Jack committed those murders. Margaret decides to investigate the truth, and prove that her father was responsible.

To begin, Margaret must start at the beginning, to that day in 1955 when three boys went missing. As she says, “In 1955, Chicago was a good place to be. People still slept with their doors unlocked, or spent the night on their screened in breezeway. A stranger could walk up to many a house and get a free meal, or an encouraging word. People helped one another without suspicion.” But in October 1955, ANTON and JOHN SCHUESSLER and their friend ROBERT PETERSON spend the day together bowling and walking around, until it gets late and they need to get home. Across

town, Margaret, a little girl now, is getting ready to spend the day with her father Jack, but he never shows up. Across town, the boys are picked up by a man when they hitchhike. This man, who is for now unidentified, takes the boys home, where he kills them one by one and dumps their bodies in a nearby forest preserve. Then, he remembers he had a date to meet his ex-wife JOYCE and his daughter Margaret: the killer is Jack, Margaret's own father.

Joyce moves Margaret to the suburbs, where she is raised by her grandparents. Jack moves in with his aunt BESSIE, who worries about him and what he is doing with his life. She is concerned about Jack's basement, which she terms the "dungeon," and when she investigates it, she finds evidence of a crime - boys' socks, a bloodstained shovel, and the scribbling of a madman. Bessie takes a lot of evidence and puts it in a bag for later. But Jack catches her, and starts to threaten her. When Bessie leaves with her bag of evidence, she is hit by a car, killed, and her bag of evidence taken from her. Margaret remembers going to the funeral, where Jack seemed strangely unmoved.

Margaret learns more about her father's troubled background. Born JOHN JEROME REILING, he endured his father's drinking problems, watching his father die of cirrhosis right in front of him. WINNIE, his mother, moved him and his brother HARRY into her sisters' house, where they lived for many years with Bessie, GERTIE, and PEGGY. Jack displays antisocial tendencies growing up, but no one knows how to deal with them. When Winnie dies when John is 15, Aunt Gertie takes the reins of his upbringing, with unpredictable results.

Jack gets into more and more trouble with the police, and when he gets a neighbor girl pregnant, Gertie gives him an ultimatum to join the Navy. Jack does, and has a penchant for evading courts-martial while fathering a child in every port he's in. Ultimately, he is discharged, and starts right back in on his old habits. He runs some long con schemes, and even tries out for the Chicago Bears. But when he falls for a young pianist named Joyce, he charms her despite everyone warning what a bad seed Jack is. "Little did she know, she was in for the experience that would change her life along with everyone else's forever."

Jack brings Joyce back to meet his family, and they approve of her. When Joyce brings Jack to meet her family, he is deceptively charming, and wins their approval. They are married in 1951, and Joyce is immediately struck with the magnitude of her mistake. Jack is brutal in bed, and mistreats her; they move in with Joyce's parents, and Jack sleeps around with other women. Jack likes to call his mother-in-law, CLEO, with threatening prank calls, until she calls him out on it. Into this strange household, Margaret is born.

With a new baby, Jack and Joyce move into their own apartment, but Jack only gets more abusive. Jack becomes more distant and mysterious, moving out for a time, and this is the time in which Margaret suspects he killed the little boys. The murders are an unusual event for 1955, and the whole city of Chicago is in shock because of it. Joyce is immediately suspicious of Jack, demanding to know where he was during the murders, and alarmed that Jack won't even open his trunk. Joyce is partially blind, so it makes her vulnerable to Jack's deception; when Jack finally agrees to let her see his car, Jack has exchanged it for a new one, and the evidence of any wrongdoing is gone. Jack, ever the charmer, makes peace with Joyce, and moves back in, but trouble follows him: a brick is thrown through a window, and things between he and Joyce are tense. When Joyce accuses him of cheating on her, Jack clears out his money and moves out again, this time for good.

When Margaret is 14, she and her mother, with stepfather MARTY, move to Elk Grove Village. Jack continues to call, but only when he needs money, and takes it from Margaret often. But because she rebels against her mother, Margaret is thrilled whenever her father calls, charming her and pretending he has no other children but her. Jack takes Margaret out to dinner with his new girlfriend, ROBBIE, and promises to take her to California with him when he moves. As he gets to the airport, he takes Margaret's \$50, and gives her an envelope with a message written inside: "Always remember, I am your father." It was the last time she would ever see him. As Margaret the adult probes deeper into her father's life, she discovers that Jack was a bisexual, and one of his ploys to make money was to get girls

pregnant, convince them to let him have the child, and then sell the child into adoption. "I wonder how many more of us are out there?" Margaret ponders.

Margaret meets her husband-to-be, DAN, and tortures her mother with the fact that he is several years older than her. Margaret goes on with her life, having four children, telling them that their grandfather had a terrible secret. But in 1994, KEN HANSEN is accused of killing the three boys, and Margaret knows she can keep their sordid family secret a secret no longer. Margaret finds her other half-siblings, including Beth, and learns that she knows of the murders, too. But the rest of the family is understandably uncomfortable with tarnishing Jack's image; they still consider him a football hero and a charming man, even though he died in 1981. Margaret finds her brother JOHN, who knows nothing about the murders, and DEBBIE, who has AIDS after a life as a prostitute. MARK and Robbie, in California, confirm what Margaret already knows: that Jack killed those boys. "I knew it was time to take all of this and go public. What I didn't know was that everywhere I would turn, I ran into people who would say they were interested in truth and justice, but instead were out for their own self-gain."

Margaret contacts the press and a lawyer, trying to explain that Jack was responsible for the 1955 murders. But the ATF, who has Ken Hansen in custody, refuses to believe they have made a mistake, and fight Margaret's confession tooth and nail. When the news leaks, Margaret is suddenly besieged with offers to be on talk shows, and chooses to go on Oprah. But Oprah's interview is biased, and she doesn't seem interested in the truth. A scheduled satellite interview with Ken Hansen is canceled, and Margaret ends up feeling used to get ratings, rather than find justice for the three dead little boys.

Margaret remains obsessed with getting the truth out, even tracking her father's exact route the night of the murders. Her hopes are that some of the other family members come forward and bare their shameful secret. "I've included some of my writings that came out of me along my endless search, a lonely path I find I must walk alone. But I will never, ever give up."

But before she knows it, her luck changes, and the trial begins. Margaret testifies to clear Ken Hansen's name, but the prosecutors do whatever they can to discredit her, and the judge seems to be against her. Margaret feels as if the government is playing dirty, forcing her brother ROBERT to testify against her in exchange for less jail time. Margaret discovers her phones are tapped, and that the ATF is listening to her every word.

Margaret and Ken Hansen become pen pals, and Margaret starts to consider him a friend. When Ken Hansen's appeal comes up, Margaret's family is at a low point in their lives, as Margaret's mother has chronic fatigue syndrome and her stepfather gets cancer. Worse, the defense tells Margaret that they will not be using their testimony. Frustrated, Margaret watches helplessly as Ken Hansen, an innocent man, is sentenced to 200 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

Margaret is frustrated with the injustice of the justice system, and depressed that no one believes her story, even though she knows in her heart that it's true. "I have a history to leave to my children and my grandchildren. It may not be the best history, but it is ours. Most of all I want my family to see that I told the truth, no matter the cost. I need my family to see that I did it the right way, without fear or regrets, because that is the one true fact in this whole story."

COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS REGARDING POTENTIAL ADAPTATION(S):

(Please describe your thoughts and insights on what is worth mining from the source material for further development. There is no need to discuss the execution of the book itself.)

“The House That Jack Built” is the story of a woman obsessed with posthumously bringing her own father to justice for three murders he committed half a century ago. Although the execution of the book is uneven, the potential is there for a number of different adaptations that could create a compelling work of truth-based drama.

The first opportunity is the adaptation of Margaret’s story, the narrator and writer of this book. The idea of a woman with a complicated history with her father uncovering more and more about him is a powerful idea. The essence of the idea, of course, would have Margaret not learn Jack’s secret from the outset, but instead learn about it in bits and pieces that change her image of him from a charming ne’er-do-well to a cold-blooded murderer. In this version of the story, Margaret could begin by pulling at a thread that she perceives as innocent, but as she pulls and pulls, she realizes that her father is not the man she imagined him to be. This version of the story has most in common with a story like *The Lovely Bones*, in which our protagonist tries to right a wrong close to home, but too late to matter. The drawback here is that all of the action takes place in the past, drawing urgency away from Margaret’s character. It’s not as if her father poses any current threat. It would be a character drama/thriller rather than a visceral horror/thriller, as the current trailer would indicate.

The second opportunity is for a period thriller set in 1955, with bookends framing the contemporary action. This concept could be rooted in one of a few characters: Joyce, in which the story would be a variant of *Wait Until Dark* in which the semi-blind Joyce’s husband is a murderer; Bessie, in which the main character slowly comes to realize that her own nephew is a monster; or Margaret herself. This third option suggests a world of possibilities, including an updated *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Margaret, a child who idolizes her father, would slowly come to learn that her missing classmates were killed by him, and have to make a terrible choice to turn him in and ruin her own life. Perhaps the first bookend introduces us to Margaret, but doesn’t reveal what choice she makes to turn her father in or not; then, at the end, we learn that adult Margaret is trying to atone for young Margaret’s sins.

Both of these versions play with the truth a little. The fact is that this is a book about a woman who knew her father was a murderer and chose not to say anything for nearly forty years. That is a fascinating character study, but not one we can necessarily invest in. To get to the root of that character, we’d have to track with a defense attorney for Ken Hansen, who is desperate to win an impossible case. When Margaret pops up with an alternate theory that looks impossible, the defense attorney initially thinks she’s crazy. But the more the defense attorney learns, the more she realizes that Margaret’s not crazy, and understands the reasons for keeping the terrible secret.

These are three of the best possible ways to adapt this property. But the thing that really makes it work is the character of Jack himself. This guy is a real villain, charming and sociopathic, and a ton of fun for an actor to play. Not only did he kill three kids, but he had kids of his own to sell to childless couples for walking-around money. He may have been bisexual. He charmed a woman (or man) in every place he was in. The guy, in short, is fascinating. He’s too dark for a Dexter-like antihero, but he grounds any of these stories in real menace and evil.