



Dave Bakke: 'John Doe #24' inspires best-selling novel

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted May 26, 2011 @ 11:00 PM

Last update May 27, 2011 @ 06:39 AM

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Just over 10 years ago, a book I wrote titled "God Knows His Name: The True Story of John Doe #24" was published by Southern Illinois University Press. The book got a little attention, ran its course and became part of the past -- until a month ago, when an email arrived.

John Doe #24 was rummaging in an alley in Jacksonville in 1945 when the police picked him up. He was deaf and could not speak. It doesn't get much worse than being deaf, alone and in jail. But it did get worse for him, much worse.

A judge declared John "feeble-minded" and sent him to the Lincoln State School and Colony, where they gave him his name. In 1945, Lincoln was one of the worst mental institutions in the country. Five thousand people were there, many of them with severe psychoses, and there were only three doctors -- one a dentist.

My book about John's life was put together from the records of more than 40 years of his treatment as a ward of the state and from interviews with people who knew him. I was never able to learn his real name or where he came from. I did learn that there was never anything wrong with John's mind. He was just deaf. And, eventually, blind.

I thought that email that came a month ago might be spam. The subject line said it was from a writer in Delaware. I didn't know any writers in Delaware, but something about it looked legit, so I opened it. It was from Rachel Simon, and it was about John Doe #24.

Rachel's most famous book is "Riding the Bus With My Sister," an account of the year she spent with her sister, Beth, who is developmentally disabled. Beth's thing is riding the bus and becoming friends with the drivers. She does it all day, every day. Rachel spent a year riding with her sister, and her book about that experience was made into a TV movie starring Rosie O'Donnell as Beth.

About five years ago, Rachel spoke at The Arc of Illinois convention. Afterward, she was browsing various books for sale when one caught her eye. It was "God Knows His Name." She began reading it on the plane on the way home.

After she finished reading, she couldn't stop thinking about John Doe #24, the tragedy that was his life and what might have been had he not been sent to Lincoln, put on psychotropic drugs and forgotten for 30 years.

Rachel was preparing to write another book. John became the inspiration. She told me the story flowed from her as if it were waiting for someone to write it.

Her book, "The Story of Beautiful Girl," came out May 4. One of the main characters is known at the beginning of the story as John Doe #42. She simply switched the numbers.

The book just made The New York Times best-seller list at No. 30 in the hardcover fiction category.

When Rachel is interviewed about her new book, or speaks to an audience about it, she talks about John Doe #24's story and how it inspired her to write her new book. His name is in the author's acknowledgements in her book. What a stunner that is.

Her John Doe and mine are both deaf, black and unjustly committed to a mental institution where conditions are inhuman. Both men are capable of much more than people expect. Her John Doe falls in love with another resident whom he names in his mind Beautiful Girl. The book covers some 40 years of their lives.

Some descriptions in Rachel's book echo the conditions at Lincoln State School and Colony. "As you can see," her email read, "I did end up creating fiction that was inspired by John Doe #24 ..." She has taken his story and created something very much her own.

He was just a man in an alley in Jacksonville. Since the state of Illinois did not know who the man was, it named him John Doe #24. That remained his name until his death in Peoria in 1993. It is his name still. He was as close as a human being can come to being nobody -- a nameless man eventually buried in an unmarked grave.

And then his life became a song. After he died, Mary Chapin Carpenter wrote "John Doe #24." I heard the song and it led me to write "God Knows His Name."

And then a theater student in Canada read my book and wrote a play based on John's life. The play was performed in regional theater in western Canada.

And now John has become the inspiration for a best-selling book.

And, someday, will his life inspire a movie? It wouldn't surprise me if Rachel's book gets that done.

When my book was finished, I realized that I still did not know John Doe #24's name, but I knew who he was. Thanks to Rachel, people across the country and abroad who read her book will know that he lived.

Through four very different creations that John inspired, his life has transcended the walls and the degradation that he suffered in Lincoln. He has the recognition that he was denied for what should have been the best years of his life.

If the man could only know that somehow.

Everybody has a story. The problem is that some of them are boring. If yours is not, contact Dave Bakke at 788-1541 or dave.bakke@sj-r.com. His column appears Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. To read more, visit www.sj-r.com/bakke.

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