



University of Kentucky
UKnowledge

Law Faculty Popular Media

Law Faculty Publications

1-2017

Book Review | Crimesong

Robert G. Lawson

University of Kentucky College of Law, lawsonr@uky.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/law_facpub_pop



Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#)

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

Repository Citation

Lawson, Robert G., "Book Review | Crimesong" (2017). *Law Faculty Popular Media*. 47.
https://uknowledge.uky.edu/law_facpub_pop/47

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Faculty Publications at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Popular Media by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.

Book Review | Crimesong

Notes/Citation Information

Robert G. Lawson, Book Review, 81 *Bench & B.*, Jan./Feb. 2017, at 9 (reviewing Richard H. Underwood: *Crimesong* (2016)).

BOOK REVIEW

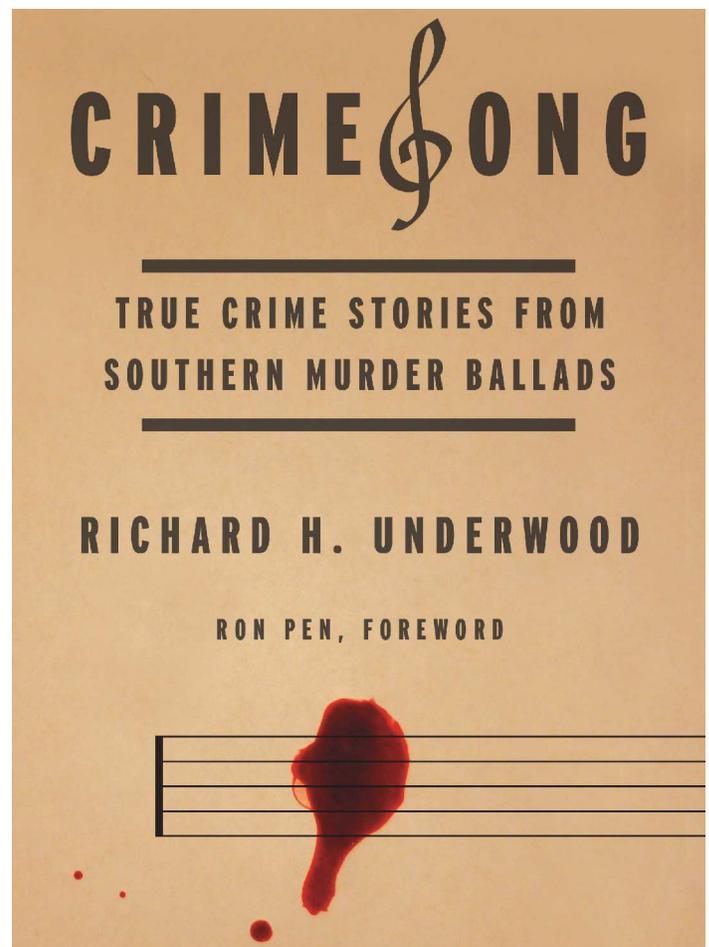
BY: ROBERT G. LAWSON, PROFESSOR EMERITUS

“**CRIMESONG**” is a very unique and interesting book to say the least, one that is sure to be appealing to a very diverse group of readers. As its title indicates, the book is grounded in a selection of ballads that tell non-fictional stories about a set of murders that have occurred in the south over a period of close to 200 years. The ballads provide only a thumbnail sketch of the stories behind the murders, the author goes miles beyond the ballads in search of full truths about the events that motivated the songwriters, and the end product is a book with 24 fascinating and totally accurate accounts of killings that cast some light on both the best and the worst of human characteristics. The author describes his book as “a collection of research for teachers of history, music, and law,” a statement that accurately describes the content of the book but falls way short of describing the reader groups that are sure to find that content interesting if not fascinating.

Because all of the crime stories in the book involve atrocious murders and the legal system’s response to them (sometimes showing its inherent flaws), I believe that the book should be especially interesting to those of us who have participated in the criminal justice system in one way or another (as judges, lawyers, lawmakers, students, etc.), especially in Kentucky since many of the crime stories described in the book involve crimes committed inside our state. Typical of all of the stories in the book is a Kentucky story that shows what you can expect to find and enjoy from a reading of all 254 pages of “CrimeSong”:

Stella Kenney was an 18 year old Carter County girl who lived with her uncle in an adjoining county for several months helping him care for his sick wife. In response to her father’s request that she be returned home, the uncle used a horse and buggy (in 1915) to transport her back to Carter County. On this trip toward home, the girl was struck in the head with a hatchet and killed, with the uncle claiming that the murder occurred during a robbery that had been committed by two unidentified men. After discovering that the victim was pregnant at the time of her death and that the uncle had contacted a doctor seeking abortion medicine, the prosecution charged the uncle with what a local newspaper called “the most horrible crime ever committed in Carter County.” The uncle was tried six times for the murder (twice in Carter County and four times in Lawrence County) before finally being convicted and given a sentence of life imprisonment.

Professor Underwood left no stone unturned in his search for details about this murder (and its ballads), perhaps best evidenced by the fact that he found that one of the defense lawyers in the case was a young man from Louisa, Ky., named Fred Vinson who would one day join the United States Supreme Court as its Chief Justice. What he did with respect to this story (searching and studying court records, newspaper stories, books, and anything else he could find), he did with respect to all of the stories in the book.



“CrimeSong” is a well-researched, well-written, and highly interesting portrayal of human tragedies that made their way into ballads that speak of both the best and worst of our human nature (love, betrayal, jealousy, anger, and violent responses). It chronicles in meticulous detail the legal system’s response to these tragedies and in so doing fulfills the need for a clear historical record of important events that now rest in darkness because of the passage of time. It should be a most interesting read for anyone who finds pleasure in the reading of murder mysteries. And it should be an even more interesting read for those who have connections to the justice system and interests in observing the law’s response to some of its toughest problems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBERT G. LAWSON, professor of law, has a B.S. Degree from Berea College and a J.D. Degree from the University of Kentucky. He has been a faculty member of the College of Law since 1966, with two periods of service as dean: 1971-73 and 1982-88. He received the University of Kentucky Great Teacher Award in 1971 and again in 2001. In 2001, he also received the Outstanding Professor Award that is granted each year to one professor from the state’s several public universities by the Kentucky Advocates for Higher Education. On March 11, 2015, the Kentucky Senate honored Professor Lawson with a resolution in recognition of his retirement from the University of Kentucky College of Law.

