

The St. Paul Conspiracy *

by

Roger Stelljes

**Reviewed by
Robert M. Smith**

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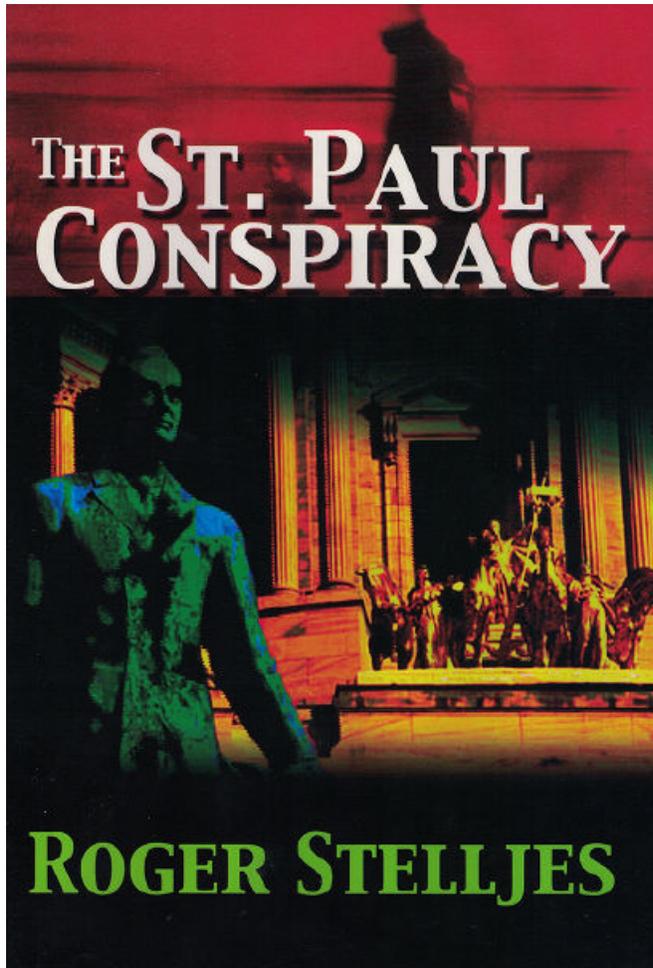
***The St. Paul Conspiracy* is a fast-paced, easy to read mystery/police procedural by Minneapolis lawyer, Roger Stelljes. We are introduced to fourth-generation St. Paul Homicide Detective Michael McKenzie "Mac" McRyan, a lawyer-cop. McRyan is a former star hockey player for the University of Minnesota, a brilliant law student, and handsome. He gave up his career as a lawyer to go into the family trade — that is, police work.**

The narrative involves the usual assortment of stock and off-the-shelf characters, including a U.S. Senator, a prominent political reporter, lots of Irish cops, the district attorney and a high profile defense lawyer.

As you read *The St. Paul Conspiracy* do not expect any major surprises. The plot seems lifted straight out of the headlines of the time. You will not learn new insights into police procedure, the criminal justice system, the politics of a big city police department, or machinations within a major corporation. Instead, the author presents a formulaic, predictable and, at times, preposterous plot.

* North Star Press of St. Cloud, Inc., 334 pages (2006).

On the morning after Halloween, the body of Claire Daniels is found in a high-end condominium between Summit and Grand Avenues in St. Paul, Minnesota. The victim is the Twin Cities' most prominent political and investigative reporter. McRyan leads a team of investigators to solve this murder, which garners considerable local media attention.



Ms. Daniels, the victim, had been having an affair with U. S. Senator Mason Johnson, a married man. She is described as beautiful, a perfectionist, detail oriented in the extreme in her personal and work life, and an energetic, aggressive and wild sexual partner.

On the night she was murdered, the Senator met her at her apartment, where sexual relations occurred. He left the apartment around 1:15 a.m., and was seen and recognized by two persons as he walked back to his car. Routine police work place the time of death at around 1:00 a.m. and identify the Senator as a suspect. Thus, he is faced with a delicate political and criminal situation.

The Senator recognizes that he needs good legal representation, and so he hires Lyman Hisle, who is reportedly the best lawyer in town, who took on only

interesting cases. Representing a sitting U. S. Senator in a murder case clearly qualifies. In a metropolitan area the size of the Twin Cities, the idea that one lawyer should have such an outsize reputation and skills is not realistic and overly simplistic.

Regardless of Hisle's legal abilities, it is made clear from the beginning of the story that the Senator is innocent, that some black ops person nicknamed "Viper" is the real killer, and that Viper is working at the behest of someone else. So, the early police focus on the Senator as the killer ultimately leads nowhere. Of course, the actual identities of Viper and his cohorts are eventually revealed as McRyan, the young homicide detective, and the St. Paul police force solve the crime.

The author also provides McRyan with a love interest, who is conveniently a young district attorney assigned to the case. The romance is also very generic and follows a predictable arc.

Many novels in this genre involve extensive descriptions of court proceedings and trials because they are inherently dramatic. The legal proceedings in this novel are sparse, and there are no trials or dramatic courtroom scenes. The focus is much more on the police than the lawyers.

Viper and his group are described throughout the novel as meticulous to a fault in terms of their preparation and attention to detail. They have CIA and advanced military training, and leave nothing to chance. Yet, the police are only able to solve the crime due an oversight by the wrongdoers, which is inconsistent with the novel's set up. This use of a *deus ex machina* plot device reveals the work product of a first-time author, who needs a convenient way to create a confrontation between the police and the actual guilty parties. By the end, all loose threads are wrapped up quite neatly.

McRyan has become the main character in a series of Minnesota based novels by Stelljes that are popular and well accepted by the public. Readers who grew up or live in St. Paul will be familiar with streets, restaurants and locations that serve as the backdrop for this thriller. Though it lacks depth and sophistication, it is recommended for readers looking for light, escapist fiction – the proverbial “beach read.”

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Robert M. Smith was a graduate of University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts (1974) and University of Minnesota Law School (1977). He practiced law as a solo practitioner from 1977 to 2017. He died on February 25, 2019, at age sixty-seven.

His review of Neil S. Boardman’s novel, *The Wine of Violence* (1964), is also posted on the MLHP website.

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