

James O’Kane’s New Book ‘Jefferson Avenue’ Presents 1950s Bedford Stuyvesant: The Gangs, Lives, Loves and Humor

MADISON, N.J. — In his new memoir, *Jefferson Avenue: Stories from a Brooklyn Boyhood, 1941-1958*, Dr. James O’Kane reveals the boyhood that launched a life in criminology. His career has spanned four books, fifty articles, and forty years of teaching Drew University students in the classroom and on the streets of New York City.

O’Kane, a sociologist whose previous book was *Wicked Deeds: Murder in America*, is also known for his work in ethnic studies and urban problems. His passion was fueled as he came of age on the gang-ridden streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant during times that were both politically incorrect and colorful in a way he’s never been able to recapture living in suburbia. Old habits die hard, though, and he writes:

Even where I live in affluent, safe Madison, New Jersey, I often lock my front door as I bring out the garbage since I never know who might break in and jump me. Paranoia lingers.

Jefferson Avenue is a story that chronicles and celebrates a life and an era. It follows O’Kane’s family’s emigration from Ireland; his father’s death from tuberculosis at thirty-eight; the tough endurance of his mother, Tilly, who raised three children in apartments on Jefferson Avenue and other nearby streets; and the moral guidance provided by the priests of Our Lady of Good Counsel parish.

O’Kane brings the ’50s neighborhoods to life. He depicts gypsies, pedophiles, early feminists, and weekend shows at the Monroe theater. He shows readers an age in which gangsters controlled city streets and children were sent to fetch a jar of ale from the local gin mill.

The inspiration for writing *Jefferson Avenue* was to preserve an era gone by, and O’Kane does so lovingly but realistically. Readers see the often harsh realities of mixing ethnic cultures that were at first slow to trust each other:

The Italians had arrived on the block in the late 1940s. As these newcomers moved in, many old-timers believed that they would be murdered in their beds, with their throats slit with that most popular Italian weapon — the stiletto. One had best sleep lightly so as to avoid falling prey to a Sicilian assassin! The next wave comprised the blacks, or African Americans, as they are currently called. As they arrived on Jefferson Avenue, new fears emerged as the Irish, Germans, Jews, and their new comrades, the Italians, convinced themselves that this new group would murder them with their preferred weapon of choice — the switchblade knife. ...

Of course, we youngsters eventually realized that no one had actually been sliced, stabbed, or hacked by anyone else, and we gradually acclimated to each other.

But O’Kane employs humor as well. Readers meet a host of interesting people, including Moose, the teen who pretended to be mentally disabled to avoid being lynched by a gang. They also get a lesson in carbohydrates as a young O’Kane mused on how long it took one of his Italian friends to eat dinner with his family:

How could anyone eat that much spaghetti and avoid life’s most gratifying food, the magnificent, all-purpose potato?

Dr. James Gray of American University writes, “In the pages of this book the old will remember and

the young will learn.” And Andrew Baron, a New Jersey attorney whose career was inspired by O’Kane’s teaching, calls *Jefferson Avenue* a “folksy and fascinating story.”

“With almost thirty years of experience in a variety of legal roles, I still rely on humane lessons learned while sitting on the edge of my seat in Dr. O’Kane’s classroom at Drew University,” Baron said. “They remind me that defendants, police, and probation officers are also individuals entitled to the respect and decency that all of us deserve in the criminal justice system.”

Jefferson Avenue: Stories from a Brooklyn Boyhood, 1941-1958 will be released in paperback on March 26, 2014, and is available through various outlets including Amazon.com and www.Jim-OKane.com. Look for it in ebook format soon.

If you’d like more information, or to schedule an interview with James O’Kane, contact him through his press page at http://www.Jim-OKane.com/jefferson_media.htm.

###