The Other Dr. Gilmer: Two Men, a Murder, and an Unlikely Fight for Justice


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We’ve all taken an inquisitive pause when we encountered someone with the same name as us, but for Drs. Benjamin and Vince Gilmer (no relation), what would ordinarily be a coincidence was the start of a life-changing journey. The Other Dr. Gilmer tells the story of Dr. Benjamin Gilmer’s fight for justice for his namesake, Dr. Vince Gilmer. Dr. Benjamin Gilmer was a family physician fresh out of residency when he began work at Cane Creek, a rural primary care clinic, in the mountains of western North Carolina. He was aware that the founder of the clinic, Dr. Vincent Gilmer, was serving a life sentence for the June 28, 2004 murder of his elderly father, Dalton Gilmer. At first, Dr. Benjamin Gilmer thought he would quickly explain the coincidence to his patients and move on.

Gradually, Benjamin Gilmer started hearing stories from his patients and staff about Vince Gilmer. The stories painted a picture of a gentle, kind man, who often refused payment for his services and sponsored the local kids’ baseball team even though he had no children of his own. Despite this perspective, in the book Dr. Benjamin Gilmer does not shy away from the details of the murder. He recounts almost moment for moment how Vince Gilmer strangled his father, dumped his body, and cut off his fingers to prevent the body from being identified. He reflects on the contradiction between the crime and the gentle, caring family physician described by patients and colleagues. The book discusses Dr. Vince Gilmer’s report of severe physical and sexual abuse, recent head injury, and recent SSRI discontinuation. Proceeding pro se, Dr. Vince Gilmer discussed his history of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of his father and alleged that his father reminded him of the abuse and attempted to assault him sexually on the night of the killing.

At first, Benjamin Gilmer was afraid of Vince Gilmer, but he was driven to learn more about the case. Working with NPR reporter Sarah Koenig, on an episode of This American Life, Benjamin Gilmer began to investigate the case and met Dr. Vince Gilmer. Dr. Vince Gilmer exhibited gait abnormalities, a movement disorder, word-finding difficulty, and hallucinations, among other symptoms. He then visited Dr. Vince Gilmer again with Dr. Steve Buie, a psychiatrist and the residency training director at the Mountain Area Health Education Center’s psychiatry residency program. Dr. Buie suggested the possibility that Dr. Vince Gilmer could be experiencing Huntington’s Disease, a diagnosis subsequently confirmed by genetic testing. Yet when the medical mystery was solved, the fight for justice was only beginning as Dr. Benjamin Gilmer realized that a man was in prison with a degenerative neuropsychiatric condition.

The first thing to know as a reader about this book’s organization and pacing is that it moves. It’s as compelling as any mystery novel I’ve read. The book begins with Dr. Benjamin Gilmer’s story of starting to practice at Cane Creek and gradually introduces the unseen (at first) character in the book, Dr. Vincent Gilmer, through the stories his patients tell about him. The book then progresses rapidly to medical mystery as Dr. Benjamin Gilmer reviews Dr. Vincent Gilmer’s trial and the initial opinion that he was malingering his symptoms. These excerpts are juxtaposed with the current picture of an obviously ill man. Once the diagnosis is made, the story moves seamlessly from fast-paced medical mystery to a plea for compassion for a man in prison with a severe neuropsychiatric disease. The book concludes with reflections on the treatment of people with mental illness in prison and the lack of adequate psychiatric care in many correctional settings. In addition to his own insights, Dr. Benjamin Gilmer details interviews with people who were involved in the original case, legal advocates, and researchers.

Dr. Benjamin Gilmer invites the reader into his life through this memorable first-person narrative. As readers we spend time with him from the exam rooms at Cane Creek to the farmer’s market in Asheville. We journey with him to Wallens Ridge Prison in
Virginia as he nervously meets Vince Gilmer for the first time, and we feel his anguish when his clemency petitions on behalf of Vince Gilmer are twice denied.

I reached out to Dr. Benjamin Gilmer and he generously agreed to an interview. We talked for about two hours on a Saturday morning over a virtual videoconferencing platform. He told me that his book had four aspects. It was a “deeply personal memoir,” a medical mystery about a murder, a story about our “shared cognitive fallibility,” and, “most importantly, it’s a book about social justice.” He reflected on the idea that society often fails to recognize that the brain can fail and, when it fails in certain ways, it can define how we’re perceived for life.

*The Other Dr. Gilmer* is engaging and compelling. The central themes are important to both forensic psychiatry and correctional psychiatry. First, the text challenges us to overcome our biases. Dr. Vince Gilmer was labeled a malingerer early in his incarceration. This view of him colored the treatment he received in prison when he had behavioral outbursts or simply requested common medications like SSRIs. Too often, the approach was punitive rather than therapeutic. I want to be clear that I did not review nor am I criticizing his forensic mental health evaluation. It is apparent, however, that the perception that Dr. Vince Gilmer was a malingerer, championed by a police detective, colored the treatment he received until Dr. Benjamin Gilmer began to advocate on his behalf. One of the heroes of the story is the late Dr. Colin Angliker, a noted correctional psychiatrist, who took Dr. Vince Gilmer’s concerns seriously and arranged for the appropriate genetic testing.

The second thing a reader should know is that Dr. Benjamin Gilmer offered a recommendation for forensic mental health evaluations. He noted that cancer treatment is often guided by multidisciplinary tumor boards. He marveled that a decision to sentence a person to prison for life could be made with only one mental health evaluator. He recommends that a team of experts evaluate defendants. This suggestion is certainly a thought-provoking idea and interesting comparison.

Third, the book makes a compelling case for compassion in the criminal justice system. Whether or not one believes that Dr. Vince Gilmer was appropriately tried and convicted nearly two decades ago, he is now a man with a debilitating neuropsychiatric disease who is suffering in a correctional environment where he cannot access the care that would be available in the community. I found Dr. Benjamin Gilmer’s words of gratitude and tribute to Dr. Angliker particularly powerful: “Thank you for listening with open ears and seeing with childlike eyes while tirelessly serving incarcerated populations for over forty years. The compassion you shared for your patients never wavered from your first patient to your last: Vince. Your example of truth-telling has changed me forever” (p 285). Every forensic psychiatrist should aspire to no less.

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*Applied Criminal Psychology: A Guide to Forensic Behavioral Sciences, 2nd Edition,* is a scholastic review of literature central to the study of forensic sciences. The book comprises international and multidisciplinary applications in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, criminology, law enforcement, and legal practice. This comprehensive collection offers an introductory treatment of 15 fundamental topics. Moreover, it seeks to do so in a pragmatic manner, such that readers are well positioned to apply its material content readily. Compiler and editor Richard Kocsis, PhD, captures the aim of the text in his Preface: “The book is not merely written from one disciplinary perspective, and nor is it exclusively written by ivory tower theorists or pure clinicians, but instead seeks to optimally blend the collective knowledge, skills, and practical experience sourced in these disciplines and approaches” (p XX). Analyzing such a wide array of complex specialties, topics, and applications is no small task, but Kocsis and his contributors accomplish it, and deserve an unreserved recommendation for a wide audience of researchers, scholars, practitioners, educators, and trainees.