

Word.

A monthly
literary
review

August 1994

Reconstituted Juice

**Instant
Book Author
Don Davis
Flashes
O.J. Simpson's
Life Before
Our Eyes**

By Matthew Budman

You're stuck in Safeway's 12-items-or-less lane behind a shopper who can't count. Or maybe a United Airlines clerk just announced a one-hour delay for your flight. So begins the Great Search for Reading Matter, starting with whatever's in the nearest wire rack.

Lately there hasn't been much in terms of variety: Except for the Weekly World News and the Sun ("DOG FACE BABY IS 1 YR OLD"), what you've seen is the broad forehead of a certain athlete-turned-pitchman-turned-actor.

It's been all O.J., all the time.

O.J. smiling, O.J. distraught, O.J. glassy-eyed. Three consecutive Newsweek cover stories, five each in the Globe and Star. "The O.J. Nobody Knew" in People. Of course, there's only so much you can absorb in those few moments before the Safeway checker asks, "So how did you want to pay for this?" and you have to ignominiously shove Time back in the rack with TV Guide.

Some people want, need, *must have* more on O.J.

That's where Don Davis and St. Martin's Press come in.

Ever picked up one of those \$4.99 instant books that promise "the untold story" about the latest high-profile crime? Chances are, Don Davis wrote it at blinding speed. Only three weeks after the true-crime author learned of the O.J. murders, his *Fallen Hero* hit the supermarkets, the first and most credible of three (so far) books on the case.

When a call from St. Martin's came the afternoon of June 14, barely *two days* after the bodies of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman were

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Jive Talkin'

Slinging slang with UCD's
Clarence Major.

page 3

Brown Out

Local author Dale Brown
flies away.

page 5

Speedreads.

Unknown hymns, geographical
cures and dark shadows.

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Cover.

(continued from cover)

discovered near her Brentwood condo, Davis knew his fifth instant paperback would soon be on bookstore shelves. His agent negotiated a contract by the following morning, and Davis got to work.

"I no longer consider myself a reporter or a journalist, in the strictest sense of the words," the Colorado newspaper veteran says from an LA hotel room. "I'm a storyteller now. My job is to put this in a narrative, interesting kind of form to give it context and color and the smell and the feel as well as just, 'Lawyer Joe Jones said this' or 'Policeman Sam Smith said that.' I try to tell a story. What people need to know is: who was involved, why it happened, why certain people made certain decisions, and they won't find that kind of thing in a newspaper."

A week after taking the assignment, Davis sent a finished manuscript of *Fallen Hero: the Shocking True Story Behind the O.J. Simpson Tragedy* to New York. His version of the Simpson saga ends June 17, after the superstar's freeway chase and subsequent lock-up. "We have to stop somewhere," Davis explains. There's also an appendix

with transcripts of Nicole Simpson's two 911 calls and a list of domestic-violence hotlines and shelters.

Just how does one compile a 258-page book in a scant seven days?

"I spent a lot of time doing the research that I needed, talking to people on the telephone, lining up people who could help me in Los Angeles and Buffalo and San Francisco, and tapping some old sources across the nation, everything from prosecuting attorneys to private detectives. And so much of O.J.'s background was already public record; the guy had had books written on him by the time he was 30 years old. And then the incredible media coverage that was ongoing and still goes on today was something I had never encountered. It was like having another reporter on my payroll. I probably could have written another 10,000 words."

And doubtless many readers would have made it through another 10,000. Not everyone complains of media oversaturation; instant books are more popular than you might think.

The concept of the instant book gained prominence, Davis says,

with "the advent of the Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan stuff," but it's nothing new: In years past wire services and newspapers have cobbled together quickie pocket books on the first moon landing, the JFK assassination, the Guyana mass suicide, and Oliver North's testimony. Only in the last several years have true-crime stories caught the public's exclusive attention.

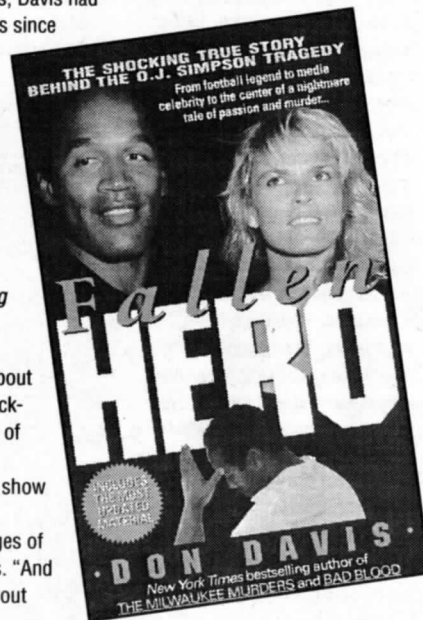
Davis' first stab at an instant book was *The Milwaukee Murders*, on the Jeffrey Dahmer case. It made best-seller lists by straightforwardly casting the grisly story like a mystery novel. After a 30-year career covering wars, revolutions and sports events, Davis had found his niche. He has since become one of the country's top true-crime writers.

There's no question that these books are a guilty pleasure, like watching *Hard Copy* or listening to Lionel Richie. You don't leave *The Real Tonya Harding Story* out on the coffee table. After all, there's something unseemly about our collective rubbernecking at the car accidents of others' lives.

"The demographics show our primary market is women between the ages of 25 and 50," Davis says. "And there are a lot of them out

there that just really enjoy reading these sagas of real live people who have spun off and done something terribly bad, because these people could be their neighbors. That's what makes these stories really spooky—it's always the person that you would least expect to commit a murder. Women like to be scared, but in the safety of their homes."

His scariest book, *The Milwaukee Murders*, remains his most successful, and it's a work he's proud to be associated with. "It was a best seller in half a dozen countries around the world, including the United States, and it's still



selling, and it's still the best book that has been written on Jeffrey Dahmer, including the one by his father," he says.

Four instant books later, Davis has honed his craft. So how does *Fallen Hero* stack up against true-crime books written at a more leisurely pace? Not too badly, all things considered. The writing is smooth and responsible, avoids sensationalism, and only occasionally lapses into don't-read-this-too-carefully prose ("O.J. came to the campus unknown to those who had not heard about the whiz kid from San Francisco ..."). Davis' conclusion blasts the press for rushing unconfirmed rumors onto the air and the LAPD for favoritism and sloppiness.

He sometimes overreaches in trying to make the football star's life an exciting roller-coaster ride—as in a passage on *The Naked Gun* that implies O.J. bears primary responsibility for the film's success—but so what? Readers don't pick up *Fallen Hero* (or *Bad Blood*, Davis' Menendez brothers opus) for the same reasons they might peruse Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* or Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. As Davis says, "God knows, this is not going to be the last book written on O.J. Simpson."

In fact, after finishing *Fallen Hero*, Davis didn't look at his book again until it was on stands. "I got my copy and read it," he says, "and said, 'Hey, this is a pretty good book.'" □

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