

Book Publicity

James L. Horton

The series of five McDermott mysteries have sold more than 2,000,000 copies in the last eight years. The author, Lee Vining, is about to introduce a much-anticipated sixth novel – *The Senator*. Vining, a hard-drinking brawler, writes like he lives. His fans number in the millions, and he is a regular on celebrity circuits. Movie rights for *The Senator* have been sold and when it reaches the screen, it will join two other McDermott films that have earned over \$100 million apiece domestically and \$400 million globally.

Sara Willins is publicizing the new book. Her task is not to generate interviews for Vining but to select those that give him the broadest exposure. She has dozens of interview requests logged already in her computer. She will book Vining on national morning shows, late night talk shows, negotiate with the style/feature sections of the Top 25 newspapers, complete a satellite media tour to the top 20 markets and conduct a Q&A with the author on the new book's web page. The National Press Club has extended an invitation as well for Vining to talk about his research into corruption in Washington, DC. Advance word is that the book might become an issue during the current election year because depictions of politicians are thinly veiled.

Vining is a good interview. He is foul-mouthed but personable with a macho view. He is no stranger to controversy, especially in the way he depicts women. When attacked, he gives as good as he gets but he does so in a way that leaves audiences laughing as well as cringing. He presents himself as a truth-speaker in a society of hypocrites, and truth is ugly. His is a world in which people are on the take, in which money is the power, in which husbands and wives betray one another. His novels hew closely to real events and have sparked online forums that discuss possible conspiracies Vining has uncovered.

Two weeks before the publicity launch, Willins had completed her line-up of media coverage. It was everything Vining and the publisher could ask for and more. Willins' staff had put finishing touches on logistics and timing for appearances and were typing detailed schedules for Vining that included his favorite drinks and snacks in hotel rooms. Willins would act as Vining's handler throughout the tour, a task she usually passed on to a lower-level publicist when authors were less known.

Willins was shocked then horrified one week before the launch when the news reported that Vining had been arrested. His ex-wife had turned him in for insider trading and tax evasion. It was rumored that she was bitter over the settlement in the pre-nuptial agreement and was pushing for millions more. When Vining resisted, she went to the authorities with evidence.

Vining was photographed by mobs of newsmen during the “perp walk” into the station house. He was released on \$750,000 bond the same day but had to turn over his passport and was forbidden to leave the country. He refused to talk to the media.

Willins was on the phone to the publisher as soon as the first news reports flashed over the wire.

“Can we stop the launch?”

“Books have shipped. We have 200,000 in the pipeline.”

“Can we delay the “on sale” date by a week or so?”

“That would be difficult, and what difference would it make?”

Willins knew it wouldn’t help. Vining’s lawyer would prohibit him from talking about the case, but that is all that the media would want to interview him about. She considered cancelling the media tour. The publisher was against it and he teleconferenced in the general counsel who supported him.

“You’re going to kill the book if he doesn’t get out there. Controversy helps sales. We’ll tell them he can’t talk about it, and he can parry questions,” said the publisher.

“That’s not Vining. Even if his lawyer tells him to shut up, he’ll say something.”

“So what if he does?”

“He can jeopardize his case and the book too.”

The publisher thought for a moment. “We can media train him with a murder board...”

“That’s possible if his lawyer even lets him appear. He’s due in court before the end of the month.”

The general counsel said ultimately it was up to Vining’s lawyer what to do as long as Vining fulfilled his publishing contract that obligated him to a number of appearances, but those appearances did not have to be on national media.

Willins dialed Vining who wasn’t subdued.

“The bitch sabotaged me. She’s not going to make it stick, and I’ll go to hell before she gets another nickel.”

He was eager to do the media tour. He figured he could sell the 500,000 first printing in half the time with the controversy.

“Your lawyer?”

“F—k the lawyer.”

A day later, just five days before the launch, Willins received a call from Vining’s lawyer who told her to cancel the media tour.

“Did you talk to Vining?”

“I did.”

“Yesterday he was eager to go ahead.”

“I told him if he did he could get another lawyer.”

Willins called the publisher and told her the lawyer’s decision. She teleconferenced Vining into the discussion. Vining was furious.

“The son-of-a-bitch is messing with my livelihood.”

The publisher conferenced the lawyer and general counsel into the call and asked if there might be a resolution. For 30 minutes, the five of them debated pros and cons. The lawyer went from adamant opposition to cautious approval. The general counsel repeated the publishing firm’s contractual provision. They agreed if Vining avoided all questions related to the case and there was no further media, the tour could go ahead. As a precaution, Willins would prepare a list of tough questions that might come up and answers for Vining to review before interviews. Vining agreed, though he was hardly subdued by the discussion.

Three days before the launch of the media tour, Willins received an urgent call in her office.

“*Dateline* is promoting a segment on the Vining case for this evening.” Willins brought up the NBC news magazine web page. It trumpeted new and disturbing evidence on Vining and his “illicit activities”. That evening, the 10-minute segment showed documents and an interview with Vining’s ex-wife who said Vining had concealed millions in a Bermuda account. Willins called Vining who said everything was a lie, and he would sue NBC. Willins then called the publisher who conferenced in the lawyer and general counsel.

“What do we do?” The publisher asked. Willins needed an answer and fast.

#

Questions for discussion:

1. What should Willins advise?
2. What can the publisher do to protect the book?
3. What should Vining do?
4. What would you have done?