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Righting a wrongful conviction

By [Steve Weinberg](#)

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On Dec. 6, 1984, somebody robbed and murdered Ray Liuzza on a New Orleans street. Liuzza, who was from a prominent family, left behind lots of friends and business associates. Police and prosecutors investigated vigorously but lacked an obvious suspect.

Based on sketchy eyewitness accounts from the murder scene and a telephone tip that reached police 25 days after the crime, John Thompson found himself in custody. With no history of violent crime and no felony record, Thompson, 22, proclaimed his innocence from the start. Nobody believed him.

Thompson's photograph appeared prominently in the news after his arrest. As a result, three siblings who had been victimized by a would-be carjacker three weeks after the Liuzza murder identified Thompson as their assailant. Again, Thompson proclaimed his innocence. Again, nobody believed him.

What occurred to Thompson between December 1984 and this year constitutes the narrative of "Killing Time," a thick, true-crime narrative. It turns out Thompson did not commit either crime but spent nearly 20 years locked up. After being convicted of attempted carjacking as well as murder, Thompson was sentenced to death in Louisiana, a state known for its aggressive use of capital punishment.

It is reasonable to assume that Thompson would have been executed by the state except for the unexpected intervention of two attorneys from a Philadelphia law firm, Michael Banks and Gordon Cooney, who decided to take up the case.

The two generally come across as heroes. Over a period of years they advocated tirelessly for Thompson without any reasonable hope of success because of the criminal justice system's built-in obstacles to obtaining re-hearings based on claims of actual innocence, leaving them to struggle to find evidence of legal problems in previous trials. The discovery that evidence had been mishandled would ultimately break open the case. Furthermore, Banks and Cooney risked losing status at their own law firm. But they demonstrated intellectual and emotional commitments that never dimmed.

Impressively researched, "Killing Time" is the work of two relative unknowns, John Hollway and Ronald M. Gauthier. Hollway is a lawyer who has prosecuted criminals and defended criminals. "Killing Time" is his first book. Gauthier, a mystery writer who has published three novels, is a librarian who previously served as a literacy instructor in the Louisiana prison system.

The Hollway-Gauthier collaboration is successful on at least three levels. First it serves as a detailed but approachable primer on how and why wrongful convictions occur, especially when a zealous elected prosecutor like Harry Connick Sr. in New Orleans is guiding the courtroom strategy. (One of the nation's most visible and controversial local prosecutors, Connick, the father of musician Harry Connick Jr., retired near the time when Thompson finally won his freedom.)

Second, it works as a gripping narrative of a prosecution gone awry, a narrative built impressively on hundreds of thousands of pages of police and court documents.

And finally, this book serves as evidence in a world populated by skeptics and cynics that a few good Samaritans like the Philadelphia lawyers exist and can make a positive difference.

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