

# Ex-Chicago cop faithful in fiction

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There are no atheists in foxholes, and not many in the trenches in Chicago's never-ending battle against crime.

Faith is all-important to Chicago Police Department detectives Pete Shannon and Marilyn Benson — and to their creator, John M. Wills. The former CPD officer and FBI agent instills the same belief system in his Chicago Warriors characters that sustained him during his 30-plus years in law enforcement.



"It's the last thing a lot of us think about before we kick down that door," says the 61-year-old Wills. "We say that quick prayer. ... You don't wear it on your sleeve, though.

"One thing that cemented it for me was when I was shot. It was on a Friday the 13th, in the line of duty. I got religion real quick. It was a crazy experience. Even after I got out of the hospital ... the gang member I killed was a member of the Black P-Stone Nation, and my family and I were getting death threats over the phone."

In Wills' third and latest Chicago Warriors novel, *Targeted*, a psychotic gunman just back from sniper duty in the Middle East is picking off police officers for sport and revenge, and the cops can't stop him. Enter Pete and Marilyn, who set aside another case involving a priest accused of child molestation whom they consider innocent. But it's the partners' first crack at homicide, serving on a task force chasing the elusive shooter.

As Pete's marriage spirals downward because of his obsession with the case, Marilyn's faith is tested to the max when her fiancée, also a CPD officer, is gunned down at almost the same moment she is critically injured in a hit-and-run accident while jogging.

The tragedies hurt Wills almost as much as they did Marilyn. But at least the author spared her.

"I thought about killing her but I couldn't bring myself to do it," Wills admits. "It was tough enough to have Officer Murphy [her fiancée] killed. I was sitting there with tears in my eyes while I was writing. ... I think it was Robert Frost who said, 'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.' I'm a prime example."

There were plenty of tears for Wills' wife of 39 years, Christine, after he was wounded.

"I saw what it did to my family," he recalls. "When the cops come to your door and ask your wife to come to the hospital in the middle of the night to sign some papers for your husband, you know something is very wrong."

Wills' decision to leave the force here to join the FBI was career-motivated.

"I was about 32 years old, and I started thinking about my future," he says. "I was wondering if I'm still going to be pushing around a blue and white when I'm 60. I was finishing up my degree at St. Xavier right when the FBI got into drug investigations. I didn't have any special qualifications, but they wanted someone with my street background. If I applied today, I probably wouldn't get in."

When he joined the FBI, his first posting was Detroit. He wound up in Quantico, Va., at the FBI Academy, finally retiring to Fredericksburg in 2004.

"I sat home for weeks thinking, 'Man, I've finally arrived.' Then I thought, 'Man, I can't do this the rest of my life.'"

He took a job as a firearms instructor, and now gives lectures nationwide to law-enforcement personnel, pursuing his writing career and spoiling his four grandchildren — payback for all the time he spent on the road away from his family while his three children were growing up.

He began doing articles for professional magazines — exciting compared to writing affidavits for search warrants but not the creative outlet that short stories and later novels offered Wills. He uses his on-the-job experiences in his plots, "but in bits and pieces. As a former agent, I have to submit everything I write to the FBI for their approval. Therein lies the rub. They don't want that in the public domain, especially with pending cases."

Although Wills left the Chicago Police Department decades ago, he maintains friendships with several high-profile co-workers, including acting Police Supt. Terry Hillard and Philadelphia Police Commissioner Chuck Ramsey, who is considered a front-runner for the Chicago vacancy.

Wills speaks highly of both men. Hillard and Wills received the prestigious Medal of Valor at the same ceremony, having been wounded in the line of duty during the same year. Wills recalls that Frank Sinatra sang at their reception.

Wills says Ramsey and another Chicago comrade, Terry Gainer, now sergeant at arms for the U.S. Senate, worked the streets of Washington, D.C., even after becoming high-ranking law enforcement officials, "making street stops there. ... If they gave Chuck Ramsey that job, it would be one of the best things that ever happened" for Chicago and the department.

Morale has been low since 21-year FBI veteran Jody Weis became superintendent in 2008. Wills maintains there's no rank-and-file resentment or jealousy between the CPD and FBI, although turf battles sometimes occur. In *Targeted*, the task force chasing Hardcore gets vital assistance from FBI profilers. Wills' FBI agents are just like his street cops, albeit smoother around the edges.

All of Wills' characters, from his earnest priest to scum-of-the-earth lowlifes, draw the line at profanity.

“I often get asked that question: Does this reflect your real world? I’ve worked with cops where every word was ‘f-this’ and ‘f-that,’” he says. “Other cops and agents don’t throw those kinds of words around. I went to Catholic school all the way through St. Xavier; I even went to the seminary until I realized I was better suited to be a cop than a priest. I wanted to show you could write a good book without the sexual scenes or the language.”