

October 21, 2018

Hon. Edgardo Ramos
United States District Court
Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse
40 Foley Square
New York, New York, 10007

Dear Judge Ramos,

I have spent my entire career—nearly 32 years—at the agency that bears Candida Donadio’s name. Candida is a legend in our business. A middle-class Italian from Queens who infiltrated WASPy New York publishing of the 1950s and turned it on its head. Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity’s Rainbow*), Philip Roth, Robert Stone and Laurie Colwin are just a few of the greats she discovered or worked with in their early years, introducing fresh energy and an oddball genius to late Twentieth Century American writing. An agent’s job requires long commitment of time and effort with no certainty of payoff. Identifying talent, nurturing it, finding the right editor. More books fail than succeed, and many never get published. Through Candida’s hard work, success followed for these authors, but first came her love for and commitment to the work, followed by loyalty to the writers and their families, in good times or bad. She instilled these priorities in all who worked with her, including my colleague Edward Hibbert and myself, as we have tried to instill them in others.

In my years at Donadio, I’ve had the honor of working closely with Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather*, his son Tony, Peter Matthiessen, author of classic *The Snow Leopard*, and the only writer to win the National Book Award for fiction and nonfiction, as well as Peter’s son Alex. Also Michael Herr, Frank Conroy, Walter Abish, Edward Gorey, James Hynes, McKay Jenkins, and too many others to name. I’ve dreamed up ideas with them, read, reread, and edited their manuscripts, and negotiated countless contracts. I’ve also been to dinners, baseball games, hospital rooms, and funerals with them. Debated George Elliott vs Emily Brontë or Red Sox vs Yankees. I’ve watched their children grow up. Candida used to remind us that the clients were not our friends, but it was an impractical rule. They were her best friends, even when business bruised friendship, and they have been my friends. A trust underlies these relationships, one that goes back a generation in some cases, to the mothers and fathers of current clients. No crime committed against us or those in our care could be greater than the violation of that trust.

Darin Webb came to us via a nonprofit for which he did the bookkeeping. He expressed a desire to assist arts-related companies, a strong interest in our work, and a team spirit that made him a valued member of the Donadio family. With a friendly insistence, he assumed more and more duties, came in early to pick up (intercept) the mail, and made himself available for any task, evening or weekends. Over nearly twenty years, he earned my complete trust and came to oversee most of the agency’s back office functions. For an extended part of that time, he stole an ever-larger portion of our and our client’s money. His means of doing this were complex—hidden bank accounts, fraudulent reports, gently squeezing out a part-time assistant who asked

too many question—and his motives remain unclear. Explanations he gave when confronted were weak, and he has lied to so many for so long that his words can hardly be credited. I have been told that his motives don't matter, and I concede the point. Yet I would give a great deal to know why. To understand how a person who seemed a friend could smile at us day after day for years while bleeding us dry. What has become clear in the last few months is that he does not have the means to repair what he has ruined, and we do not have the means to continue the work that has occupied my entire adult life. An agency started in the 1960s, which cared for so many great writers, so many talented unknowns, so many friends, will cease to exist within weeks.

The greatest harm has been to the financial interests of several clients. Beyond the anxiety and terrible breach of trust they must feel, some have had their means of travel and of promoting their work—lifeblood to authors—severely impacted, and in at least one case nearly suffered the loss of a home. Three recent widows failed to receive payments that constitute a substantial part of their income, and were too loyal to complain until it was too late. The shame of this for us who looked after their interests is not something that any amount of time or recompense can erase.

My own losses have been severe. At the point the theft was uncovered, the agency's bank accounts were virtually empty. The cost of aggressively pursuing the thief was enormous, and I poured my personal funds into that, even going into my retirement account. Properly figuring the loss has been an equally onerous task, not just in money but in time, and I have spent hundreds of hours assisting our lawyer and forensic accountant in that duty, while receiving no pay from the agency or any other source. Indeed, while paying out thousands per week from my own pocket. I had no hesitation in taking these steps, and would do the same again, but I am keenly aware that I will never get back what I've lost, in time or money or peace of mind. I'm also aware that despite these efforts, we will never untangle the theft completely or account for all of the loss. We have simply run out of time and resources.

Other kinds of losses cut deeper. Darin has harmed people who were in my care, some of them badly. He has stolen my livelihood. He has destroyed our business, a prestigious agency that endured for decades. He has tarnished my reputation. And he has ruined my trust in other people. Some of this damage can be repaired with effort, and some can never be made right. A heavy reckoning is required for all of this. I hope and trust that the sentence for this crime will address all these levels of damage, and I thank you for the opportunity to detail this unhappy experience.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil Olson", written in a cursive style.

Neil Olson