

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

The Mayor's Children's Books

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

The books were already on school library shelves — donated, catalogued, belonging to Baltimore's children — when someone quietly took them back and sold them again. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

Wait — they took books back out of school libraries? Marty, the nerve of that. Before you say another word.

MARTY

We'll get there. The books in question were called Healthy Holly — a self-published children's series featuring a cartoon girl who liked to run and eat her vegetables. The author and publisher of Healthy Holly was Catherine Pugh. From twenty seventeen to twenty nineteen, Catherine Pugh was also the mayor of Baltimore.

MARTY

The arrangement worked like this: organizations with business before the city would purchase large quantities of the book, which were to be donated to Baltimore schools and libraries. The University of Maryland Medical System paid five hundred thousand dollars for copies over several years. Kaiser Permanente paid one hundred thousand. Associated Black Charities paid eighty-seven thousand. Each buyer understood the books would go to children across the city.

CAROL

And some of them did?

MARTY

Some did. But federal investigators found that a substantial number of the purchased copies were simply never delivered — buyers paid, and the books did not arrive. And then there was the matter of the library shelves. Copies that had already been bought, donated, and physically placed in schools were collected back up and sold to the next buyer as though they were fresh stock. The same books, moving through the scheme a second time.

CAROL

A library heist dressed up as a literacy program. I keep picturing a librarian who put those books on a shelf, came in one morning, and they were just gone.

MARTY

The federal accounting placed the total fraudulent proceeds at more than eight hundred thousand dollars. Some of that money, according to prosecutors, funded renovations to Pugh's personal residence.

MARTY

But the element that drew the federal conspiracy charge was what happened to another portion. Pugh routed money through straw campaign contributions — channeling proceeds through other people's names so that they would appear in her campaign finance records as small individual donations. The organizations purchasing those books were, in many cases, entities with contracts or regulatory business pending before the city, which is what made the book sales look — in the judgment of federal prosecutors — less like philanthropy and more like an exchange.

CAROL

The books were the packaging. The money came back as manufactured grassroots support. It's elegant, in a dismal sort of way.

MARTY

In November of twenty nineteen, Catherine Pugh pleaded guilty to four federal charges: wire fraud, two counts of conspiracy to defraud the United States, and tax evasion. She did not go to trial.

CAROL

By then she had already resigned — F B I search warrants on her home, on city hall. I keep thinking about what that looks like from inside a city: federal agents in the mayor's offices, and nobody yet knowing the full shape of what they'll find.

MARTY

She resigned in May of twenty nineteen, while the investigation was still active, months before she entered her guilty pleas. The F B I had executed search warrants on both her residence and her city offices, and the broad outline of the scheme was coming into view.

MARTY

The thing that makes this case sit differently than a straightforward theft is that the cause at its center was real. A mayor writing a children's book about nutrition and healthy habits for her city is, in the abstract, a genuinely good idea.

Baltimore has real food deserts. It has real gaps in early childhood literacy. The neighborhoods the book was meant to serve were not invented, and the mayor had made those neighborhoods central to her public identity. She did not build the scheme around a fiction — she built it around something true.

CAROL

That is what I keep coming back to. The children Healthy Holly was supposedly written for — they were actual kids, in actual classrooms, who were actually supposed to receive those books. That is not a small thing to have used.

MARTY

In twenty twenty, Pugh was sentenced to three years in federal prison. She was ordered to pay four hundred and twelve thousand dollars in restitution and to forfeit an additional six hundred and seventy thousand dollars. She served a portion of that sentence before being released to home confinement during the pandemic.

CAROL

Three years, and a cartoon girl named Holly now has a permanent entry in federal fraud case law. I don't think that is what she was drawn for.

MARTY

Holly is unavailable for comment, which may be for the best. What is settled — because Catherine Pugh pleaded guilty — is the shape of what happened: the books that were never delivered, the books reclaimed from library shelves and resold, the straw contributions, the federal charges. Baltimore elected a new mayor and moved forward, because a city must. The University of Maryland Medical System later faced separate scrutiny for conflicts of interest on its own board, which suggests these things tend to surface more than the original complaint. What no restitution order fully captures is the specific cost of using a real cause as cover — the librarians who stocked shelves that were quietly emptied, the teachers who filled out request forms and waited, the neighborhoods that were supposed to be the whole point. That does not appear in the financial exhibits. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Thanks for sitting with us.