Drifting into Darkness: Murder, Suicide, and a Death “Under Suspicious Circumstances”

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and overall has written more volumes of poetry than fiction.

For libraries with collections in Appalachian literature or Southern literature, but especially for libraries that are located in the regions Robert Morgan writes about, this book will be an important addition. Even if libraries also have earlier volumes about Robert Morgan, they may also want to purchase this book, because it will add additional insight into the author for its readers.

Alison Faix, Coastal Carolina University

Drifting into Darkness: Murder, Suicide, and a Death “Under Suspicious Circumstances”

Mark I. Pinksy
Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2022
ISBN: 9781588384577
380 p. $23.95 (Pbk)

Thanksgiving week 2004, wealthy couple Charlotte and Brent Springford Sr. were found brutally murdered in their Montgomery, Alabama, home. The prime suspect was quickly identified as their estranged son Brent Jr., who was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. The first part of Pinsky’s book describes the years leading up to the murders, a vivid portrayal of the Springford family’s life, which seems (despite early tragedy involving the death of their infant daughter and of Charlotte’s parents in a house fire) to be largely unproblematic, with Brent Jr. and his sister enjoying a privileged lifestyle and indulgent parents. However, Brent Jr.’s young adult years started with a downward spiral of destruction with the onset of serious mental health problems, as well as a deterioration in his relationship with his parents. It was during this time in his early adulthood that Brent Jr. came to meet the main character in the tragedy, his spiritual healer “wife” Caroline Scoutt (a woman 24 years his senior who used many different aliases, claimed various Native American heritages, and practiced as a therapist despite no licenses or certificates). Pinsky summarizes the background of Caroline Scoutt and portrays the image of a con artist masquerading as a healer, preying on a vulnerable young man by financially abusing him and forcing him to live in poverty whilst she enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle funded by his parents.

Tragically, as Brent Jr. became more dependent on the woman who his parents believed was helping their son (possibly the only thing keeping him from suicide), they parted with large sums of money, controlled by Scoutt, to provide them with housing and cars. The author states that the catalyst for the murders was when the Springfords decided to stop funding the couple; this marked a final tragic turn in the story, culminating in murder.

The first few chapters are therefore captivating yet uncomfortable reading, akin to watching a train wreck unfolding, as we are led through the deterioration of the family relationship against a backdrop of financial exploitation and Brent Jr.’s mental health decline. Pinsky’s insightful writing prompts the reader to ponder difficult questions: What is the best one can do to support adult children in crisis? Did the relentless bankrolling by the Springfords ultimately lead to the exploitation of a vulnerable young man? When was the line crossed from spiritual quest into a mental health crisis? If Brent Jr. had consistently taken his medication, would the tragedy have unfolded in the same way? These are questions that unfortunately have no clear answers.

Brent Jr.’s subsequent suicide in prison seemed to be the end of the saga. However, the author is in the privileged position of being the brother-in-law of defense lawyer Susan Wardell and was asked by her to investigate the case further. The second half of the book follows Pinsky and his fellow investigator’s research into Scoutt’s role and aims to find out how involved she was with the murder and to what extent she acted as “puppet-master.” Pinsky goes on to describe a suspicious suicide that happened on Scoutt’s property and the discovery that not only was this another vulnerable man living in poverty whose income she controlled, but that she was named as a beneficiary on his life insurance. Numerous other cases come to light of Scoutt taking money to be used to finance her women’s refuge/spiritual center despite it never being built. Despite several attempts by the team of investigators into Scoutt’s affairs, as well as accusations of fraud and witness intimidation (amongst others), the efforts fail to come to any real fruition as she manages to evade the law until her death in 2019.
It is clear throughout the book that Pinsky is convinced of Scoutt’s guilt and himself describes his book as “the murder trial that Caroline Scoutt never had” (p. 353). Although fascinating and well researched, the book is therefore only one side of a very complicated story, with Scoutt now deceased and unable to defend herself against the accusations.

This book would be a valuable addition to the true crime section of a library and is compulsive reading for readers with an interest in family dynamics, criminal psychology, coercive control, and mental illness. It would also be of interest to students of Alabama local or criminal history. The author has worked as a journalist reporting murder cases for 40 years, writing for several publications, including the Los Angeles Times and The New York Times. Pinsky published his first non-fiction book, Met Her on the Mountain, in 2013 on the 1970 cold case murder of Nancy Morgan.

Layla Farrar, University of North Georgia

The NCAA and the Exploitation of College Profit-Athletes: An Amateurism That Never Was

Richard M. Southall, Mark S. Nagel, Ellen J. Staurowsky, Richard T. Karcher, & Joel G. Maxcy
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2023
ISBN: 9781643363776
354 p. $104.99 (Hbk)

Paying athletes has been at the forefront of discussions about college athletics in recent years. Should athletes be paid? Which athletes should be paid? What constitutes payment? These are all questions that colleges and sports fans have been asking. In The NCAA and the Exploitation of College Profit-Athletes, five authors attempt to answer these very questions.

While the book covers a wide variety of topics, including racism, player autonomy, and unionization, the overarching theme is that of amateurism versus professionalism. The history of amateurism, how the NCAA defines it, and how paying athletes affects the idea of amateurism are all central to the core thesis of this book: that profit-athletes (Power Five football and Division I basketball players), many of whom are Black, have been systematically exploited by the NCAA and its member institutions for more than a century.

The NCAA’s explanation of the term “amateur” is central to its treatment of college athletes: “Student-athletes shall be amateurs in an intercollegiate sport. ... Student participation in intercollegiate athletics is an avocation, and student-athletes should be protected from exploitation by professional and commercial enterprises” (pp. 95-96). This characterization of what it means to be an amateur has long prevented NCAA athletes from earning money, while nonathletes are free to do so. The question of whether college athletes are amateurs or professionals has also impacted players’ unionization efforts. As far back as the 1930s, football players organized to improve conditions. The authors describe attempts to unionize throughout the 20th century and devote significant scrutiny to recent efforts by the Northwestern University football team.

Given the current discourse around paying college athletes, it may come as a surprise that this topic has been ongoing for over a century. The authors provide many examples of college athletes being paid even before the NCAA was founded in 1906, as well as throughout the 20th century. In the 1950s, this practice of paying college athletes led author William T. Foster to write:

Only childlike innocence or willful blindness need prevent American colleges from seeing that the rules which aim to maintain athletics on what is called an “amateur” basis, by forbidding players to receive pay in money, are worse than useless because, while failing to prevent men from playing for pay, they breed deceit and hypocrisy. (p. 180)

The authors provide examples of athletes being paid throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, noting that while not all college athletes were comfortable accepting payment, many expected it. After a 2021 Supreme Court vote in which the justices unanimously voted that schools could provide their athletes with education-related benefits, it became clear that those same justices might well support other monetary compensation for college athletes. Seeing the writing on the wall, the NCAA changed its century-old stance and an-