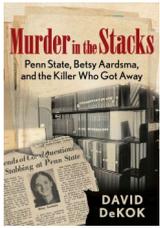


# Murder in the Stacks



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If one single event stands out in the memory of my first semester in State College, Pa., it's the murder of an English graduate student that happened in the library. Before reading this book, I would have guessed it occurred just a week or two into term, rather than toward its end?so much did it color life for the rest of my college experience in Happy Valley, Pa. Yes, this remote mountain valley in almost the exact center of Pa. is actually named that.

Most of my dorm-mates felt absolute terror after the murder. They literally would not leave the building alone after dark. I remember big gangs of young women walking together in a phalanx toward the library to study. I joined them one night, but that was it. I could not time my departures and arrivals and function in such a timid, emotionally-wrought group.

And though this horrible crime happened decades ago, it still has not been officially 'solved.' But the author, a Harrisburg journalist, has come up with some compelling facts that point to a specific fellow grad student. A student in fact that went on to continue his PhD studies and remained on campus for four or five more years.

In a highly readable style, DeKok covers everything about the murder, including great cultural shifts of the times, and a biography of the young victim's life. Betsy grew up in Holland, Michigan where she attended a small religious college before transferring to Ann Arbor. During her undergraduate years, she pushed for changes on campus for women, fell in love with African American literature, particularly the works of James Baldwin, and decided to apply to the Peace Corps so she could give back to society.

A highly intelligent and beautiful woman, Betsy was popular, idealistic and very much her own person already. She spent vacations volunteering in a hospital (she also wanted to become a doctor) and one summer taught at an Indian reservation in New Mexico.

During her last year at Ann Arbor she fell in love with a pre-med student and applied to the Peace Corps. About the time she received an acceptance letter for Sierra Leone, her boyfriend, David got into med school in Harrisburg, Pa.

As friends planned their weddings?it was 1970?Betsy had to decide whether to pursue her dream in Africa or stay in this country and pursue her relationship with David, who would not promise to wait for her if she joined the Peace Corps.

About this time, Betsy's love for literature won out and she decided to apply to grad schools in English. She preferred to stay at Ann Arbor?it had one of the best programs?but because a killer of coeds roamed across Michigan that year, her parents insisted that she attend another school. So she applied to Penn State, where ironically she was murdered during her first term.

The murder itself is described very early in the book?it occurred the Friday after Thanksgiving late in the afternoon with about a dozen students and library patrons in the vicinity. The killer stabbed Betsy with a knife and she fell to the floor. This alerted the other library users that something had occurred. There were no screams or other sounds of violence.

Unfortunately, no one found the stab wounds for about an hour. A man raced past a few witnesses screaming, 'Somebody better help that girl.'

DeKok spends a lot of time on the investigation. Too many untrained state police detectives followed too many false leads. The man the author believes to be the murderer was investigated but only briefly and only once or twice. Both he and another student had asked Betsy out, and amazingly both routinely carried knives. But the police never discovered this.

Also, on the night of the murder, one suspect visited his faculty chairman and knocked on his door, upset, out of breath, and asked if any of the news outlets had covered the murder of 'a girl in the library.' For whatever reasons, this faculty person never reported this to the police. Seven years later, he told a Penn

State attorney and board member, but the information was never passed on to the police.

A fair amount of celebrities play bit parts in this story. They include Kurt Vonnegut, Arlen Specter and Charlie Manson.

True crime is an area I seldom read, but this venture into a murder long ago, provided a compelling, almost novelistic read.

Posted by Dory L. on October 13, 2014

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Murder in the Stacks: Penn State, Betsy Aardsma, and the Killer Who Got Away

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