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WITH ONE SHOT

Family Murder and a Search for Justice

by Dorothy Marcic

New book revisits a cold case –
and the evidence doesn't match the official story

Suzanne Brandon's obituary in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* describes her as a "devoted wife" who "overcame many obstacles." But what it leaves out is that she's the confessed killer of her fourth husband LaVerne Stordock—and that she profited from an unusual number of mysterious deaths, usually those of family members. In fact, author Dorothy Marcic suspects that Suzanne could be a rare female serial killer.

In her new book, **WITH ONE SHOT: FAMILY MURDER AND A SEARCH FOR JUSTICE** (Citadel / Kensington Books | April 2, 2018 | \$16.00 trade paperback), Dorothy, who is Vernie's niece, wants to set the story straight and find justice for the murder that's affected her family for decades.

Dorothy's "Uncle Vernie," a respected local police official, was murdered in 1970, when she and her cousin Shannon, Vernie's daughter, were teenagers. Suzanne confessed to the murder, but many of the facts didn't match up. She pled insanity and spent only eleven months in a mental hospital, never spending a day in prison.

"About ten years ago, Shannon and I both became obsessed with finding out what happened to Suzanne and her family," Dorothy writes. "Maybe it was our moving toward senior citizen status, or the fact that our children had grown up and we had time to focus on other parts of family needs. And perhaps it was also the realization that Suzanne's family members were getting older, so time was passing us by."

There were five first-degree murder cases that same year in Dane County. Three went for the insanity plea. Only one of them got the insanity plea and only one got out on bail: Suzanne.

On the surface, the case seemed closed. But Dorothy and Shannon were still haunted by it. Shannon had lost her father, and had also been cut out of the will, despite having a close relationship with Vernie. Suzanne had gotten everything: the house, the life insurance, and even double indemnity.

Then in 2014, Dorothy was sitting in her New York City apartment and the phone rang. It was Shannon—who found out that Suzanne had gone back to her birth name, Suzanne Brandon. She, her son David, and her daughter Louisa were living outside Chattanooga. Dorothy got on a plane immediately, and drove out to Suzanne's isolated home.

What resulted was over 14 hours interviewing the confessed killer. One of the major questions that Dorothy had was, how could Suzanne have been diagnosed with chronic paranoid schizophrenia when it didn't fit? Dorothy consulted psychiatrists and mental health professionals who said that symptoms would not suddenly appear in a 41-year-old. Nor would the condition be cured in eleven months. Rather, it's most often an illness that's managed for an entire lifetime.

Dorothy also wondered what role Suzanne's surviving children, David and Louisa, played in the murder. How much did they know? Were they involved? David was home the night of the murder, and the gun used to shoot Vernie belonged to him.

Dorothy interviewed David, Louisa, and more than 60 people connected to the case, including detectives at the Dane County Sheriff's office. She delved into court documents, real estate records, and coroner's reports, and even hired a forensic illustrator to build 3-D images of the crime scene. She also became certified in the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, a tool created by Robert Hare, the world-recognized leader of psychopathic research, in order to measure Suzanne's propensity to be a psychopath. The more Dorothy researched, the stranger the case became—and the more dubious the official story.

She had been thinking about writing a book about Vernie's murder, but wasn't sure how the case's many angles could fit together into one narrative. When the first season of the podcast *Serial* came out, she realized that she could structure the book so that readers might examine the case with her and see how much was overlooked. Along the way, she reveals such information as:

- the improbability that Suzanne, who had zero experience with guns, would have selected and been able to operate the most complicated one out of thirteen guns in the arsenal—
and select the right bullet without rummaging through the ammo drawer
- the direction of the brain splatters at the crime scene and how they indicate where the shots originated

- how Wisconsin laws about insanity pleas changed right before Suzanne pled insanity plus many other essential factors that illuminate the complexity of the case.

“Maybe we just all assumed everyone was more-or-less honest, that no one looked beneath the surface of clean appearances and polite, even deferential behaviors,” Dorothy writes. “When I used to tell people where I was from, the images in their minds and mine were cheese, cows, and happy farmers, who maybe drank a little too much beer on weekends. But now people say, ‘Oh, *Wisconsin*.’”

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About the author

Dr. Dorothy Marcic is a playwright whose productions have played in over seventy cities, including over seven years of her Off-Broadway musical, *SISTAS*, which has also aired on BET-TV. A new musical, *This One's for the Girls*, opened in October. She is an adjunct professor at Columbia University and a former professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. She was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Economics-Prague, has three masters and a doctorate, and is the author of fifteen books, including the bestsellers *Understanding Management* and *RESPECT: Women and Popular Music*. Dorothy has appeared on C-SPAN, CMT, and Bravo Network. Her website is drdorothy.com.

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