

# Court reporter



Christine McGuire with crime victim Bob Taylor and his niece after the 1992 Taylor-Duran verdict was announced.

## Prosecutor/author Christine McGuire strikes a formidable figure both in the courtroom and on the best-seller list

**O**N CHRISTINE McGUIRE'S desk, a neat stack of folders contain the tragic remnants of lives ended violently — each an unsettled case awaiting prosecution.

The folders are filled with the language of evidence, the records of secretions, rape kits, ligature marks and dismemberment, told in the cold articulation of the autopsy table.

It is a world McGuire, a prosecutor with the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office, knows well, and one that most other crime novelists can only dream of.

McGuire, who has just published a new novel, "Until Proven Guilty" is no ordinary crime novelist or prosecutor. Two weeks after its release the book appears poised on the edge of the best-seller list and McGuire is being compared by critics to mega-sellers Scott Turow and John Grisham.

"I wanted to show people what the courtroom was really like," McGuire said. "And this is one of the few pieces of fiction written from the perspective of the prosecutor. Most crime novels are from the defense point of view."



### COVER STORY

It is also one of the few novels to feature a woman prosecutor.

As with all locally written fiction books, part of the fun of "Until Proven Guilty" is identifying local places and book characters drawn from real life. The book is set in "Santa Rita," a coastal town with a beachfront area named "Española," and features a tough, female prosecutor named Kathryn Mackay — not surprisingly an almost mirror image of McGuire.

The plot revolves around the search for a serial killer whose twisted idea of love leaves a trail of mutilated bodies, most left in areas sounding strangely familiar.

Those familiar with local trial lore will recognize references to a dozen or so cases, from mass murderers to rapists and even a jail escape, all "fictionalized."

"Nothing is based on anything," McGuire said. "It's all fiction. I'll let you (make comparisons) so you can get sued."

So are the characters in the book based on real people?

"No. No. No," McGuire said. "It's all fiction."

Her denials lack some plausibility.

For example, one of the warmest characters in the book is Santa Rita's forensic pathologist, Dr. Morgan Nelson, who in the book is referred to as "Dr. Death" after a local newspaper, "The Gazette" does a feature article on him.

To some the fictional Dr. Nelson sounds a lot like Dr. Richard Mason, the county's real life pathologist, and a nationally recognized expert on forensic pathology. Nelson, by the way, was featured in a Sentinel article three years ago titled "The Doctor of Death."

"Nelson is obviously not Mason," McGuire said. "In the book Nelson has a full head of hair."

Other characterizations are less obvious, including that of the investigator Dave Granz, a heroic figure and former love interest of the novel's main character.

"Oh, that's me, for sure," a number of investigators said jokingly.

by JOHN ROBINSON  
Sentinel staff writer

Photos by DAN COYRO  
Sentinel staff photographer

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## COVER STORY

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when told of the character. It in fact it is none of them. Fat chance, guys.

Others who have read the novel are sure they know who's who. In one section a defense attorney is described as a bit intoxicated and pungent with body odor.

"Oh I know who that is," several attorneys have said. The problem is they all named someone different.

What sets "Until Proven Guilty" apart from the mainstream, detective/courtroom thriller is McGuire's knowledge of crime and justice from the inside. She doesn't have to rely on a wise-cracking

## Preview

- **WHAT:** Booksigning for Christine McGuire's 'Until Proven Guilty'
- **WHERE:** Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave., Capitola
- **WHEN:** 7:30 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, July 14
- **TICKETS:** Free
- **INFORMATION:** 462-4415

gumshoe to conceal a lack of plot with a clever twist of a phrase.

McGuire has details to spare. She knows a crime scene from the inside, she knows killers, cops and attorneys and all the tricks and games they play.

This is a woman who every three months flies to the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va. where she lectures on slavery, coercion and sado-masochism in the profiling of sex killers. Expertise is not an issue.

**S**OME LOCAL defense attorneys will tell you flat out they don't like McGuire. Maybe it's because she's a woman. Maybe it's because she usually beats them, and lawyers hate to lose. They take it personally.

McGuire shrugs it off and won't comment, but somehow it seems to bother her. The verbal barbs and resentment come with the territory, from tough-guy defendants staring in cold hatred across the courtroom to malicious attorneys seeking to even the score.

McGuire has put up with it before. The dedication in her book is replete enough — "This novel is dedicated to prosecutors everywhere: the true public defenders."

A list of her cases include some of the most high-profile and twisted local crimes of the last 10 years. Among the newspaper clippings on her wall are those marking the convictions of Kim Walters, the "Pleasure Point Rapist" sentenced to 141 years in prison. David Rangel — the "Freeway Rapist," and Robert Spedding, the hard-drinking construction worker, who forced Ernie King, an innocent family man, to his death out of a moving pickup. On the wall are also the stories of a half-dozen other murderers sentenced to prison.

McGuire is no stranger to the spotlight or the best-seller list.

Before she came to Santa Cruz in 1986, McGuire worked as a prosecutor in Red Bluff, sometimes



Santa Cruz County prosecutor Christine McGuire confers with an investigator during a 1987 rape case.

called "Red Neck," where she prosecuted Cameron Hooker in a well publicized sex-slave case.

That story became the basis of "Perfect Victim," an international best-seller co-written by McGuire and Carla Norton. "Perfect Victim" is still in print and can be found in paperback nationwide.

**S**O HOW DID McGuire, a skinny little girl from Cleveland, become a bare-knuckle trial attorney and best-selling author? By endless work.

"I went to Catholic grade school and high school," McGuire said. "I thought about being a lawyer because I thought lawyers could help people. At that time most people went to law school because it was a good way to make money."

After graduating from law school in Southern California, McGuire went to work for VISTA, a domestic version of the Peace Corps, as an attorney. She was assigned to work on Indian reservations and spent her time traveling back and forth through the Southwest.

"It was defense work," McGuire said. "I rode the circuit across the states to the tribal courts."

After a brief and unsatisfying look at real estate law, McGuire signed on as Tehama County's first female prosecutor and moved to Red Bluff. In fact she was the only woman attorney in town.

"It wasn't really a problem being a woman," McGuire said. "They adjusted to my presence, and because I was a woman I was assigned all the rapes and child mo-

lests. In a larger office I wouldn't be getting those cases."

McGuire moved into the mainstream heavy felony category, skipping the years of misdemeanor theft and drunken driving cases many attorneys start with.

After the Hooker case, she heard of an opening in Santa Cruz and was invited down by District Attorney Art Danner. McGuire has been one of the top prosecutors in the office and a member of the Special Prosecution Unit, which mean she responds to the crime scenes and guides major cases.

"The toughest thing is the time commitment," McGuire said. "That and going out in the middle of the night (to a crime scene). It is physically hard on me and my family."

There is also the stress and fatigue that a major, weeks-long trial can bring. Attorneys must not only meticulously plot strategy, line up witness, find the evidence and draft arguments, they must be ready for anything the opposition, or judge, throws at them.

It's a tough job.

In addition to prosecution McGuire is becoming established as a major writer in the crime genre. In addition to "Until Proven Guilty," she has a second book partially done and already bought by her publisher, Simon & Schuster.

It took her four years to write "Until Proven Guilty," and getting to know the publishing world has been a job in itself.

"Most people don't realize just how much control the publisher

## 'Guilty' prose

Excerpts from Christine McGuire's "Until Proven Guilty," published by Pocket Books:

*In Saigon, the Chinese street vendors sold little paper pills that you dropped into water and overnight they opened out to form a flower or a tree or a pagoda. That was how Lee felt from the moment he arrived: as if one of those paper pills was unfolding in slow-mo like a flower, a poison flower inside his brain, dark and dangerous and utterly evil. Every chance he got he prowled the sweaty streets, searching. He had no clear idea what it was he was looking for, yet he knew he would recognize it when he found it. It was as if he had always known he would find it. And know at once when he did.*

*She drove over to the morgue, not looking forward to the hours ahead. Watching the pathologist at work was never easy. You always forgot: corpses are heavy, awkward, inert. The pathologist has to do what he does in spite of the chill resistance of the dead flesh, and he cannot do it gently. So you had to psyche yourself up to ignore the hard flat liquid sounds as he heaved the body around, the heavy thud of limbs or head on the unyielding stainless steel table, the raw ripe escaping stinks of the dead. It looked like uncaring brutality and you had to keep reminding yourself it was not. I ought to be used to it by now, Kathryn thought, but dispassion wasn't the easiest thing to bring with you into the chill atmosphere of the autopsy suite.*

has," McGuire said. "They have final say over the title, cover, and they made me rewrite the ending."

To get a book contract McGuire had to produce an outline of her novel and several chapters, which her agent then shopped around. It didn't hurt that she had a previous best-seller under her name, and that the market is hungry for female lead characters.

So is McGuire now rich?

"Hey I'm still working," she said.

McGuire said she has no plans to quit the field of prosecution. One has the feeling that Kathryn Mackay isn't about to quit either, and the two will exist in their parallel worlds for years to come. And more investigators will brag that they in fact are the real Dave Granz.