



Murder in Mayberry: Greed, Death, and Mayhem in a Small Town

Jack & Mary Branson , Jack Branson

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When small-town police officers come upon a murder scene in which the victim is a prominent millionaire with multiple blows to the head and nearly 100 stab wounds, they're in unfamiliar territory. Throw in lies, gossip, greed, international extradition struggles, and a conflicted federal agent, and the result is *Murder in Mayberry*. Lifting the veil on a picket-fenced, Bible Belt town, this chilling drama reveals a tale of secret lives and drug addiction, and is both an involving true crime story and the story of the author's emotional journey from normal life to life turned upside down.

Murder in Mayberry: Greed, Death, and Mayhem in a Small Town Details

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Author : *Jack & Mary Branson , Jack Branson*

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From Reader Review Murder in Mayberry: Greed, Death, and Mayhem in a Small Town for online ebook

Jennifer says

This could have been cut down to a third of the length. Very sanitized, too much for a true crime book. Was not engaging.

Bob says

Personally knowing, or at one time met, 95% of the people connected with this story makes my review difficult. Previously I only knew the details as they filtered long distance through my parents: the occasional mention during a phone call or the newspaper clipping sent by mail.

I've been meaning to buy this book since it came out, and would like to thank my mother for finally gifting it to me this Christmas.

But to the work at hand: once I overlooked the romanticized depiction of my old hometown, the facts of the crime were well reported and from the unique perspective of close family members.

Dennis Littrell says

Branson, Mary Kinney and Jack Branson Murder in Mayberry: Greed, Death, and Mayhem in a Small Town (2008) *****

Well-penned account replete with local color

[Although the details in a true crime book are known, I want the potential reader of this review to BEWARE of possible SPOILERS!:]

The perp here is Russell Winstead, age about 40, height six foot one, weight probably about 180 pounds. He has all the makings of a classical sociopath, but as yet nobody knows it because he hasn't really stepped over the line. He's charming to women. He has an indulgent father in Earl Winstead, and an even more accommodating rich aunt named Ann Branson. Why he needs to be indulged is because of his gambling addiction. He tried NASCAR racing. He liked the rush but he didn't have the talent. Then he discovered blackjack and saw himself as a professional gambler. He loved playing the role of the high roller, getting comp'ed, having a casino limo pick him up, flashing Bengies all over the place, impressing cocktail waitress, etc. Only problem was Russell Winstead was a loser.

So one night, the night of January 12, 2003 to be exact, he goes once more to the well that is 86-year-old Ann Branson for another "loan." He's already in debt to her for maybe \$70,000 and apparently she refuses. In a rage, he chases her down the basement stairs and crushes her skull with a blunt instrument and then goes on to stab her some seventy or so times.

Enter Mary Kinney Branson, wife of Ann Branson's other nephew Jack Branson, then a US Treasure Special

Agent, now retired. He's about the same height as Russell, but there the similarities end. Where Russell is reckless and uncaring about other people, Jack is careful and very caring. Where Russell fails and needs propping up, Jack succeeds. Where Russell is vain about his looks and worries about a growing bald spot, Jack is modest and his hairline is not receding. So in a sense this is a story about the contrasting lives of these two men.

Mary Branson tells the story from some distance because she is not a blood relative, and as she says, in Madisonville, Kentucky, "blood matters." (Note that, as in "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Mayberry RFD" there is no actual Mayberry. The "Mayberry" in the title is a state of mind. Call it the mind and the lifestyle of a small town in America.)

What sets this true crime story apart from many others I have read is the fact that Mary, through her husband Jack and his connections, and through her being a member of the family and the community, is in an enviable (if that's the right word) position for getting the true milieu of the story. Furthermore, since she is a veteran writer of children's stories, you can be sure that her prose is clear, readable, and without any four-letter words. What I found most fascinating and what kept me turning the pages were the many lifestyle details that Mary Branson gives of the people involved and the portrait she paints of the small town life and its values—not to mention how she also reveals herself, sometimes inadvertently. I'll just mention the nearly constant eating out at fast food establishments!

Here's an example of Mary Branson at her most vivid: The trial has begun and she's watching. She writes, "Once, I'd walked into our family room to find our three-year-old grandson, Taylor, holding his eyelids open as he watched a cartoon on television. I asked what he was doing and he said, 'I'm keeping my eyes from blinking. This is my favorite part of the cartoon, and I don't want to miss even one second.'"

Mary explains, "That's how I felt as David [the prosecutor:] presented the prosecution's case. After being information starved for so many years, I was scooping up every crumb that came my way." (p. 256)

Like her husband Jack, Mary looks before she leaps and she doesn't make rash statements. Consider the case of Ann Branson's housekeeper, Judy, as an example of the care that Mary has taken in weaving this story.

Judy believed that one of two persons other than Russell committed the crime. She insisted on that from the beginning, even going so far as to make some very questionable testimony at the trial, seemingly in an effort to protect Russell. Was she too, like some other women in the story, charmed by Russell? Mary Branson does not say. What she does instead is report the questionable testimony, and note that through it all Judy remained friends with Russell's father, Earl, who incidentally (or not so incidentally) was the executor of Ann Branson's estate.

Here's another example: on page 272 Mary Branson notes that local cop Captain Randy Hargis was initially in charge of the investigation, and had been a "longtime friend of Russell. The two had played softball together and ridden four-wheelers." Then she adds:

"Hargis testified that his primary reason for inviting Ben Wolcott to join the investigation was to give the Madisonville Police Department access to the Kentucky State Police crime lab and other resources."

Mary Branson is not saying directly that Hargis wouldn't or couldn't be objective in handling the case (or that he's lying). She is merely pointing out softly the potential conflict of interest.

Here's some local color near the end: "Thirty miles away in Madisonville, the verdict was announced on the

radio a little before 11:30 a.m. Someone who'd just heard the verdict stepped inside a local bank and called out: "Guilty!" Everyone knew immediately what he meant. Customers and employees applauded."

--a review by Dennis Littrell

SouthWestZippy says

What a heartbreaking story. This book is so well written it had me on a roller coaster of emotions. Quick and smooth read but not a easy read because of the subject.. Nothing was overdone, not the set up, not the story and not the court case.

Sarah says

I've been looking forward to reading this book because the crime occurred in my home town and my father is one of the individuals in the story. It provided an insider's view into a family's four-year nightmare that began following the grisly murder of an elderly woman.

Teresa Wooton says

Coming from the same town, it was such a devastating act of pure evil and violence. The niece and nephew did an amazing job in writing this book as how it occurred from an addicted gambler to a full blooded murderer, not to mention it was his own Aunt whom live he took.

Thaydra says

A true-crime story about the murder of a popular, multimillionaire woman written by her niece-in-law. While the book had a unique perspective, I felt the blurb on the back cover made it sound like it was going to be much more sordid than it was. That is a good thing, of course, considering it was an event that actually happened to real people, but I kept expecting the big surprise as to the "why", when it was addressed rather quickly and wasn't very surprising. There were parts of the book that seemed to repeat themselves, almost verbatim. However, I enjoy reading the hows and whys of true crime, and this allowed a peek into the perspective of the victim's family.

Chicken Little says

Quite the horror story. Wow, what people wouldn't do for money...

RIP Ann.

Dale says

Excellent book

Trish says

Good true story

Lynn says

I'm from Madisonville. I've driven past that house on North Main about a million times throughout my life. I was in high school when Ann Branson was found dead. I remember the rumors and media surrounding it well. By the time the trial started I was in college in another town and not aware of many details of the case. So although I was vaguely familiar with the crime I learned much from this book and the case itself is very interesting. That said....

Oh brother. I had never eyerolled while reading a book before. Branson acknowledges in the preface that she's probably going to sever ties with Madisonville through this book and that it is a personal account and not meant to be seen as a true-crime book (although she has to know that many will classify it as such). So I *shouldn't* fault her on any of that but I will say that this book needed an editor... badly. Too many unimportant details. My eyes about rolled out of my sockets every time she mentioned that her husband was Ann's "favorite" (about every 5-10 pages). Her husband must have the biggest head in the world after all that hero-worship from her. The fact that I'm from Madisonville already puts me at a bias because I know of some of the "characters" and any insinuations about the character of the town or townspeople felt like a personal attack. But on its own the story is very compelling. I just think an impartial third party would have written it better.

Larry says

This book held my interest from the first page. I remember seeing this crime featured on "America's Most Wanted", and that the perpetrator had fled to Costa Rica to escape the death penalty.

The murder victim was an 85 year old lady, who was brutally killed in a small town in Kentucky in 2003. The nephew of the victim was a federal agent, and his wife is a professional writer. This combination is highly unusual among authors.

The book will keep you riveted to your seat, and the identity of the perpetrator will surprise you.

I highly recommend this book to all.

marcus miller says

A good example of why it is probably not a good idea for a person to write a book describing the murder of a family member, even if I might add, the author isn't a blood relative of the victim. For some reason this is a big deal, as is the fact that her husband is the favorite nephew, something the reader is reminded of throughout the book. So, the favorite nephew, "more like a son than a nephew," is a federal agent. You might think he would understand crimes aren't usually solved and the trial held in the same amount of time as a crime on the CSI or Law & Order series. While described as loving, caring, and determined to get justice, being the favorite and all, he instead comes across as an overbearing, impatient, perhaps even arrogant big city fed who certainly knows more (at least according to his wife) than the state and local cops.

Some things I would like to know. The town is described as being like Mayberry but we don't really learn much about the dynamics of the town other than that the author doesn't think much of the local police force. If it is "Mayberry," it obviously has a seamy side I never saw on the Andy Griffith show. What has happened to the coal mines she refers to briefly? Why are there so many casino's? Spending some time placing the events in the context of the town rather than constantly reminding us of her feelings and emotions would have made this more interesting.

♥ Marlene♥ says

Finished today. I did think it was an interesting read but not extraordinary. Not worth the raving reviews I read on amazon.com to be honest. Writing was okay, the story not so much. Except if you are in the middle of it of course.

One thing that annoyed me. There were 3 people that gave tips to the whereabouts of the killer. The author only praised one of them because this person had said to give his or her reward money to charity. The author thought he/she was a hero. Well I do not agree. The other 2 also picked up the phone. You do not know how they live, if they were poor and maybe the one who she thought to be a hero, was rich? In my eyes all 3 were hero's. not just the one who did not want/need the reward.

Another thing I noticed the tone of the author towards Earl got meaner and meaner during the book lol. Even that he took just one zip of water meant he was acting. (and this is just 1 example)
I do not know how many times I've read that Jack, the author's husband was definitely the victim's favorite cousin.

Those are the things why I prefer my true crime books not to be written by family though.

Fishface says

This was a good one. The story was interesting and told from an unusual viewpoint -- a family member married to a criminal investigator helping move things along. I really liked the way the author handled the court proceedings -- instead of bogging us down in evasions, hyperbole and objection she simply presented to us the picture painted by the prosecutor as the evidence came out.

