

Who Killed Betsy Aardsma?

Forty years after a grad student was murdered in Pattee Library, people are still trying to solve the crime. One of them is not a cop. He's not a detective. He's just a regular guy—who has taken it upon himself to find Betsy Aardsma's killer.

Sascha Skucek has a theory.

He thinks Betsy Aardsma was stabbed from behind. The cops don't buy it. Or, at least some of the ones Skucek has talked to don't. Skucek has never actually seen the 1,700-page police file about the 22-year-old grad student who was murdered in Pattee Library on



Nov. 28, 1969. The file is closed to the public, because, even now—40 years later—it’s an active investigation. The killer has never been caught. Skucek intends to find him.

Him. Skucek is sure it’s a him—someone tall enough to approach Aardsma from behind and reach around her body, strong enough to then pierce her breastbone with a four-inch-long blade, leaving her to drown in her own blood on the floor in the stacks of Pattee. A man fast enough to get away.

Skucek '99, '07 MFA Lib isn’t a detective. Or a private investigator. He’s just a lecturer in English at University Park. And he isn’t the only civilian who has taken an interest in this case over the years. **Bill Earley '69 Lib**, a retired Wall Street consultant who enrolled as a grad student shortly after Aardsma was murdered, researched the case for years. He started writing a book about it, though he later gave up the project. Author Pamela West based her 1990 science fiction book, *20/20 Vision*, on the story. **Ryan Buell '06 Com**, an investigator on A&E’s *Paranormal State*, filmed a segment on Aardsma’s ghost, which some believe haunts the library. (Buell asked to perform an exorcism in the stacks, but the University said something along the lines of “Um ... no.”) In 2008, York, Pa., salesman Derek Sherwood launched a Web site called *whokilledbetsy.com*, offering a \$2,000 reward to drum up leads. (He got a few, though none were promising.)

But Sascha Skucek, 33, is in a different league. He’s been digging into the crime for 13 years. He’s written four articles about it for *State College Magazine*. He’s driven to Michigan to see Aardsma’s grave. He carries a photo of her in his wallet.

“This guy got away with murder,” says Skucek (pronounced SKOO-check). “Something feels right about trying to change it. I probably won’t, but I’m still going to try.”

It’s a stunning amount of dedication for a guy who has a full-time job and a writing career he’s trying to build. He never even knew Betsy Aardsma. When she was killed, he hadn’t even been born.

“When I first met Sascha, he knew more about this case than I did,” says state trooper **Kent Bernier '93 Lib**, who, until earlier this year, was the lead investigator on the Aardsma case. “He’s done his homework. He’s focused on things that might actually solve the case.”

SASCHA SKUCEK REMEMBERS THE day he first learned about Betsy Aardsma. It was Sept. 18, 1996—the day after the shooting on the HUB lawn that took the life of a 21-year-old student. Skucek, then a sophomore English major, was reading about the shooting in a *Collegian* article, which referenced another campus murder that had happened 27 years before. That murder was in Pattee. And it was unsolved.

The story had, by that time, dissolved into the realm of urban legend. Students told tales about “the girl who was stabbed in Pattee” to scare freshmen. Lion Ambassadors mentioned it on campus tours. Some students weren’t entirely clear on whether the story was even true.

Skucek decided to look into it. He’d been searching for some-

thing to write about that he could publish somewhere. He knew that an unsolved murder could be great material for an article. Plus, a little part of him wondered, *What if I can solve this crime?*

He started in Pattee’s archives, which had a thin file of newspaper clippings about Betsy Aardsma. The story of record was this:


It was the Friday after Thanksgiving in 1969. Aardsma, who’d just started at Penn State that September, had spent the holiday in Hershey with her boyfriend, **David Wright '73 MD Hershey**, who was in med school there. She took a bus back to State College on Thursday night to get a head start on a paper for English 501.

Just before 4 p.m. on Friday, Aardsma and her roommate left their room in Atherton Hall and walked up to Pattee, where they parted. Aardsma stopped in to see one of her English 501 professors, Harry Meserole, whose office was in Pattee’s basement. She dropped off her coat at the desk assigned to her on Level 3, checked something in the card catalog on the main floor, then headed down to Level 2 in the core, the cavernous central area that houses rows and rows of books, known as “the stacks.” A library employee noticed her there, in the narrow aisle between rows 50 and 51, looking for a book.

Sometime after 4:30, there was a loud noise. Less than a minute later, two men emerged from the core and came upon a student, **Marilee Erdely '68 Edu**, studying at a desk.

“Someone had better help this girl,” they said to Erdely, then led her to the aisle between rows 50 and

PREVIOUS PAGE: Sascha Skucek carries a photo of Betsy Aardsma as “a gentle reminder that I haven’t solved her murder yet.”



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the murder in order to
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51. Betsy Aardsma was motionless on the floor, books lying all around her. The two men promised to get help and left. Erdely thought Aardsma might have fainted or had a seizure—there was no blood. Erdely screamed for help, but no one came for what she later said seemed like 15 minutes. During that time, a man was seen running out of the library's front entrance.

At 5:01, Ritenour Health Center received a call from the library. By the time the ambulance arrived, a small crowd had gathered at the scene. An EMT mistakenly thought he felt a faint pulse, and rushed Aardsma to Ritenour. But, at 5:20, she was pronounced dead—of a stab wound to the chest.

That was about the only thing anyone could explain: why no one at the scene realized Aardsma had been stabbed. While the knife had severed her pulmonary artery and punctured her heart, the majority of the blood filled her chest cavity. The small amount that leaked out blended in with her red dress. Which was why the police weren't called, why the library wasn't locked down, why people (and all of their fingerprints) were permitted to gather at the scene, why the killer got away so easily. No one knew a homicide had taken place.

But, beyond the blood, the crime raised more questions than answers. Why didn't Aardsma scream? Why was a man running out of the library? And, above all, why was she killed? Had she come upon someone doing something illegal or indecent who didn't want to be recognized? Was she involved with drugs? Was it an attempted rape?

Betsy Aardsma barely knew anyone on campus; she'd been there for only eight weeks, and spent the

weekends in Hershey. She was pretty, with long brown hair and hazel eyes. Friends described her as smart and edgy, with a great sense of humor and a huge laugh. She'd grown up in Holland, Mich., and gotten her bachelor's at the University of Michigan with plans to go into the Peace Corps, but instead decided to follow her boyfriend to Pennsylvania. Her parents were glad about the move, especially since, during the spring of 1969, several women had been murdered around Ann Arbor. (It turned out to be serial killer John Norman Collins, who was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in 1970.) When Aardsma called home on Thanksgiving, she told her parents, "Everything is fine."

The day after her murder, police

Aardsma's boyfriend, a medical student, had a solid alibi: He was in a study group at Hershey.

set up a base in Boucke Building, where 23 state troopers worked around the clock to identify, then find, then interview the 650 students and staff who'd been in the library on the afternoon of Nov. 28. Aardsma's boyfriend, initially a suspect, had a solid alibi: He was in a study group in Hershey at the time of the murder.

The police came to Aardsma's English 501 class and questioned each of the 60-plus students. "Everyone was tempted to point fingers," says Nicholas Joukovsky, who co-taught the class and who still teaches at Penn State. "There was one particularly obnoxious guy in class and some students *wished* it was him ... but it wasn't."

Students all over campus were shaken. "I'm scared stiff," one told a

Collegian reporter. Even before the murder, "incidents of exposure and perversion," the *Collegian* wrote, had occurred in the library. In fact, on that Thanksgiving weekend, several Peeping Toms had been reported, as well as acts of "exhibitionism" in Pattee. The campus police added a special library detail.

Police released a composite sketch of a possible witness who was seen in the area at the time of the murder. And yet, in the following weeks, they had no solid leads—no weapon, no promising suspects, no motive. In a draft of talking points for a news conference, the officer in charge wrote, "We have a serious problem here."

Those weeks became months. A police team traveled to Michigan to see if there was any connection to

the murders there, but hit a dead end. Back at University Park, they continued to interview students, sometimes using hypnosis and polygraph tests. They placed hidden cameras in the stacks to see if they could catch the killer returning to the scene. Penn State offered a \$25,000 reward for information "contributing to the apprehension and conviction of the person or persons who caused the death." Nothing came of any of it.

The months became years. Still there was no weapon, no motive, no suspect.

Ten years later? None.

Twenty? None.

Then, in 1996, Sascha Skucek decided to see what he might be able to uncover.

He started with a man no

reporter had spoken to before: Thomas Magnani, the pathologist who had performed Aardsma's autopsy. (Reporters had interviewed only the coroner). Magnani revealed that Aardsma hadn't struggled. She had no defensive bruises; there was nothing under her fingernails—information that the police knew, but had not been released to the media. Aardsma died very quickly, Magnani said. It probably took no more than a minute.

"What she saw during that minute," Skucek later wrote, "has haunted me."

Skucek tracked down Joukovsky, one of the two English 501 instructors, and found that Aardsma and her roommate had made a stop in Burrowes Building as they walked to Pattee on Nov. 28. Joukovsky was holding office hours and asked Aardsma for a book she'd used in a class project. Aardsma had already taken the book back, but offered to retrieve it from the library.

Skucek also unearthed the story behind an early suspect, an English professor named Robert Durgy. Like Aardsma, Durgy had come to Penn State that August from the University of Michigan. Around Thanksgiving, he abruptly left town with his wife and children. Two weeks later, he died when his car slammed into a bridge. One of the reasons police went to Michigan after the murder was to determine when, exactly, Durgy had left town. In the end, multiple sources confirmed that Durgy was in Michigan



IN THE STACKS: Skucek's research has raised a new theory about why Aardsma was killed.

student on the night of the murder. Skucek heard it from a Penn State dean who worked with the prof. The student had showed up at his professor's house on the night of the murder, asking "Have you seen the papers?" A woman named Betsy Aardsma had been killed, he said. The strange thing was, the news didn't appear in the paper until the next day.

Skucek tried to find the student. Unfortunately, he died in 2002.

SKUCEK KNEW HE WASN'T DONE. Not even close.

By 2002, he had graduated and moved to Boston, where he worked at a financial firm. One day, he got an e-mail from his Penn State mentor, Rob Gannon, who asked him why he wasn't writing.

"Do what you're supposed to do," Gannon wrote. So Skucek took off, driving around the country for nine months, hoping to turn his travels into a book.

"All the while," he says, "I had Betsy's picture in my wallet, always a gentle reminder—when I took my license out at bars or Blockbuster—that I hadn't solved her murder yet." And, so he began digging again. By 2003, he was back at Penn State, enrolled in a graduate writing program in English.

Skucek conferred with the other civilians researching the case, like Pam West and especially with Bill Earley, the retired Wall Street consultant, who once sought advice on

when the murder took place.

After more than two years of research, Skucek landed an internship at *State College Magazine* his senior year. There, he accomplished what he initially set out to do—publish. His article appeared in the December 1999 issue. Skucek printed all of his findings—information the cops had known for 30 years but had never made public.

"The only way I can help the case is to present info that's new that makes people think a little differently about that day," Skucek says. "It could jog someone's memory."

The article was the work of a young writer, earnest and overwritten. But his reporting surprised even the police.

"When I read his article, I thought, 'This guy's on the right track here.' He knew what he was talking about," says Officer Bernier. "It helped.... When the public's interested in it, when there are people writing articles about it, then calls come in."

Like the story from the professor who'd had a weird interaction with a

the case from a former FBI official. Skucek hunted down cops who'd worked on the original investigation, and those who'd taken charge of it in the years since. At first, no one would talk to him. Why would they? How would sharing confidential information help a case that hundreds of very able officers had scrutinized for decades?

"If there was something that the media could have helped with, if we knew the killer had a scar on his right finger or something, then we would have gotten that out to the press right away," says Ron Tyger, one of the original investigators who worked out of Boucke Building in 1969. "But Betsy was squeaky clean. She wasn't involved with drugs or in any war protests—she wasn't involved in anything that could lead to leads if we released it."

But that was then, Skucek figured. Now, there was the Internet. Criminal databases. DNA testing. If he could get his hands on more of the details hidden in 12 thick binders at state police barracks, he might be able to fill in more pieces of the puzzle. And, maybe, that would spark new leads.

Eventually, word got around that Skucek was in it for "the right reasons," as Bernier says, meaning that he wasn't trying to turn the story into a book contract or a movie deal. Skucek's goal was the same as theirs: to solve the crime.

"Sascha and I are going to solve it together," says Trooper Leigh Barrows, who

took over the case in February and calls Skucek her "right-hand man." "It's wonderful to have someone who has as much interest in this case as I do, to bounce ideas off of." She knows the case has grabbed hold of Skucek the way it has seized so many cops over the years.

"Wanting to solve it just grips you that way," says Bernier. "It becomes personal." Ron Tyger says that, even

now, in his retirement, hardly a day goes by that he doesn't think about the case. Trooper Barrows keeps a photo of Aardsma on her desk.

The info Skucek garnered from various sources over the years (while he was getting his MFA from Penn State, then landing a teaching job in the English department) became the background for three more articles for *State College Magazine* in 2004, 2008, and in January this year. He reported, for example, that sometime in the spring of 1970—the spring after the murder—a 12-year-old found a knife in the bushes outside of Rec Hall. The boy turned it in to police, who have never revealed what came of it. Also, there was the splotch of Aardsma's blood found by the light switch next to a set of stairs—not part of the route the EMTs used when taking her body out of the building. And then there were the results from the blacklight analysis after the murder that revealed that the scene of the crime—in fact, the entire Level 2 core area—was covered in semen residue that had been collecting for a long time. That helped explain why police also had found pornographic magazines, dozens of them, hidden throughout the bookshelves. Two rows from where Aardsma was murdered, police had found a half-full root beer can, surrounded by porn magazines.

Already, there were so many theories about who could have killed Aardsma that it was impossible to cre-

More Unsolved Mysteries

THE MURDER OF BETSY AARDSMA IN PATTEE Library in 1969 is one of at least four unsolved tragedies involving Penn State students. Here are the other three.

Coed Found Murdered at Lemont Schoolhouse

WHEN: March 28, 1940

WHO: Rachel Taylor, a 17-year-old freshman from Wildwood, NJ.

WHAT HAPPENED: After busing back to State College after Easter break, Taylor was last seen on College Avenue, walking from the bus station to Atherton Hall. Her body was found the next morning in the driveway of a schoolhouse in Lemont. She had been sexually assaulted and beaten. State police investigated for months, but never identified a suspect or a motive.

Student Killed in Her Allen Street Apartment

WHEN: March 4, 1987

WHO: Dana Bailey, a 21-year-old senior from Philipsburg, Pa.

WHAT HAPPENED: Bailey called off from her waitressing shift at the Corner Room, went to an aerobics class, then settled in for the night at her apartment. The next afternoon, her mother found her naked body, tied and blindfolded. She had died of multiple stab wounds to her heart and lungs. The investigation is still active.

Student Disappears on Halloween

WHEN: Nov. 1, 2001

WHO: Cindy Song, a 21-year-old senior from Virginia

WHAT HAPPENED: Song was last seen when friends dropped her off at 4 a.m. at her apartment on West Clinton Avenue, after a night of Halloween parties. She was wearing a Playboy bunny costume. The case has been featured on *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Psychic Detectives* and as the subject of a *Without a Trace* episode. It, too, is still an active investigation. —VG

ate a legitimate profile of the murderer. But Skucek's article raised another one: Had Aardsma unintentionally interrupted someone engaging in something intimate? Had she come upon a person who'd rather kill her than risk having anyone find out what she saw him doing there, in the stacks?

AS SKUCEK STRIDES THROUGH the front door of Pattee one crisp afternoon last spring, he points out that there was a security desk by the entrance in 1969. Students had to have their bags checked before leaving the library. That's why so many people noticed the man, bypassing the line, sprinting out through the doors on the day of the murder.

He walks to Level 3, where Aardsma had her desk. (Today it's called Level 1.) Then, he descends

One investigator, now retired, still thinks about the case almost every day. The current investigator keeps a photo of Aardsma on her desk.

the narrow, switchbacking steps, pushing the heavy metal door into Level 2 (now called Level BA), into the stacks, humid and claustrophobic. He heads directly to the aisle between rows 50 and 51. It's not the same as it was 40 years ago. The books are different. The linoleum is lighter. There are many more lights. And, now, the aisle doesn't stretch all the way to the wall as it once did, which made it impossible for anyone cornered here to escape. Skucek stands in a spot about three-quarters down the aisle, and points down.

"That's where it happened."

Skucek still is no closer to figuring out what Aardsma saw in that minute before she died. But what he has uncovered about what happened after the murder is a much more nuanced version than the one he first read about 13 years ago.

First of all, Marilee Erdely—the student who said two men approached her, said, "Someone had better help this girl," and then led her to Aardsma's body—was actually so shaken, and screaming so uncontrollably, that the paramedics who arrived on the scene initially thought she was the injured woman they'd been called about. Erdely's behavior was so erratic that her testimony, in the end, was called into question.

Which could clear up why another witness who was making copies on the west side of the core saw just one man—not two—running out of the core area. The man

that something was wrong, followed the man up the stairs, but either lost him or gave up.

However slightly, this information changed the way Skucek viewed the crime. He even has a few possible suspects in mind, from facts he's picked up over the years from police. There's the artist who was at a party after the murder, going on about how easy it was to kill someone and get away with it. He claimed to have seen the killer. And then there's that student who allegedly told his professor he'd read about the murder in the paper, before the story was published.

Both of these men, though, are dead. In fact, almost all of the nine people who were there on Level 2 that November afternoon in 1969 are dead. Marilee Erdely. The witness who was making copies.

There's one man, though, who Skucek thinks is still alive. He was supposedly sleeping on Level 2 at the time of the murder. He now lives out in the Southwest; Skucek has his phone number. Calling him, though, is tricky. Skucek doesn't want to do anything that could get him in trouble for interfering in an active investigation. And maybe it's the wrong guy. Maybe

he didn't see anything. Maybe he did. Or, maybe, he was the man that Betsy Aardsma was looking at in that last minute of her life.

Sascha Skucek doesn't know.

But, one way or another, he's going to find out. ▀

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