

‘Met Her on the Mountain’ revisits cold-case murder in Appalachia

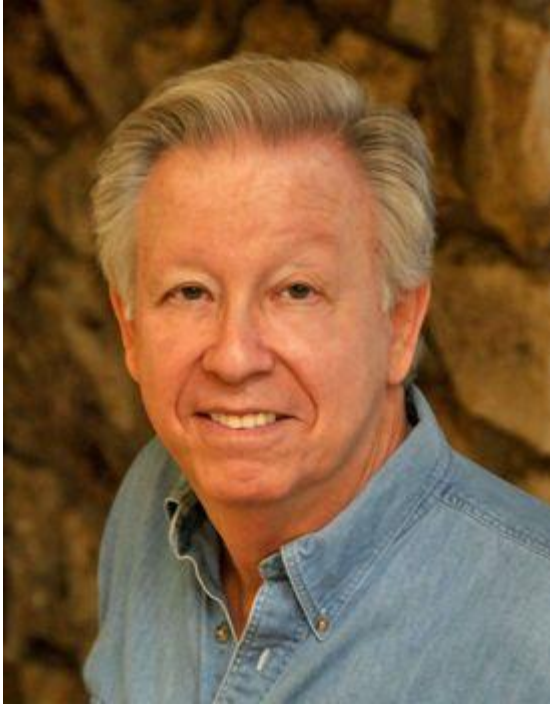
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BY JEFF CALDER

In 1970, a student reporter at Duke University clipped a news story from the paper about Nancy Dean Morgan, a 24-year-old anti-poverty volunteer murdered in Madison County, in western North Carolina. Thus began Mark Pinsky’s “dark quest” to find her killer (or killers), a dogged hunt spanning five decades that drew him deep into the crazy-quilt world of “Mad County.” With its folklore and mountain music, it was a place of cinematic haunting: natural wonders; rocky terror; isolated rural communities with names like Sodom and Shelton Laurel, the site of an infamous Civil War massacre not far from where Morgan’s body was found tied up in the back seat of a 1965 “government Plymouth.”

The book borrows its title from a lyric in “Tom Dooley,” the 19th century ballad that became a chart success for the Kingston Trio in 1959: “I met her on the mountain / There I took her life.” As a seasoned crime reporter who worked at the Los Angeles Times and Orlando Sentinel, Pinsky had familiarized himself over the years with arcane forensic methodologies. Still, it cannot have been easy for him to pour over the grim details of Nancy Morgan’s brutal slaying: rape, strangulation, postmortem sexual assault.



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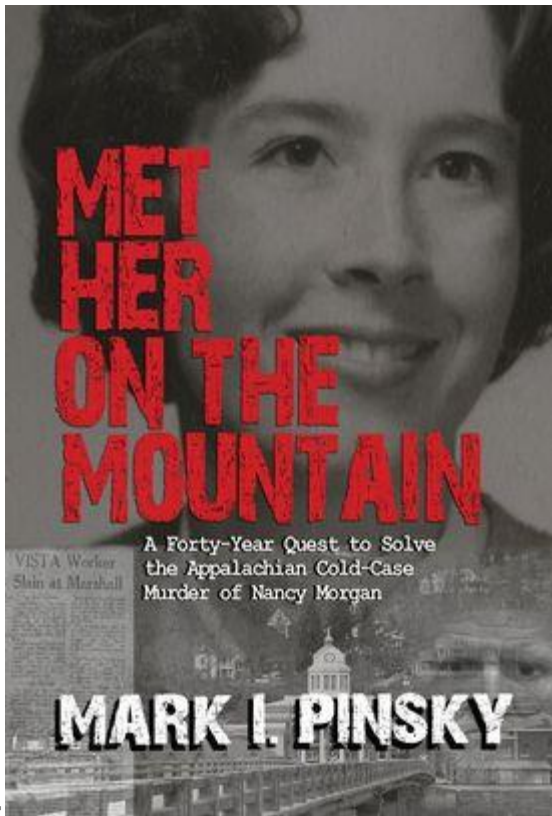
Author Mark I. Pinsky

Throughout “Met Her on the Mountain,” Pinsky identifies closely with Nancy Morgan’s altruistic ideals. She was a quiet liberal whose political awareness developed during the national tumult of the ‘60s. After she graduated from Southern Illinois University in 1969, she joined Volunteers in Service of America(VISTA) for a one-year hitch. VISTA was part of the Johnson administration’s constellation of anti-poverty programs that included Job Corps and Head Start. Morgan trained for 10 days in Atlanta before heading to Madison County, where she set up housekeeping in a log cabin built in 1889.

Madison County had a mixed response to the VISTAs. Some residents valued their work helping the low-income community; others were suspicious of them as outsiders and “do-gooders.”

Nancy Morgan was well liked but following her death, a whispering campaign began: She was flirtatious; “too quick to form friendships”; she wore shorts and drank wine. Accounts surfaced of ideological disputes within the group. The last person known to have seen her alive was her VISTA co-worker Ed Walker.

A traditional stronghold for so-called “hill Republicans,” western North Carolina was an anomaly in an otherwise solidly Democratic south. Nevertheless, in 1950 Madison County fell under the control of Sheriff E.Y. Ponder and his brother Zeno, corrupt Democratic chieftains who play key roles in Pinsky’s account. The Ponders were fiercely protective of “the little man” and adept at securing federal money for programs like road building. But, like a bumpkin Stasi, their consolidation of power relied on a “rat network” of informers, among them, a troublemaker and petty thief named Johnny Waldroup.



+ "Met Her on the Mountain" by Mark I. Pinsky

Responsibility for the original investigation overlapped between local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, none of which comes off very well in "Met Her on the Mountain." At first, no one was charged, but facing a tough re-election campaign in 1984, Sheriff Ponder arrested Morgan's VISTA colleague Ed Walker for first-degree murder. The case rested on the ludicrous testimony of Waldroup, whom neighbors said was "so stupid he once set his own pants on fire."

If there's a hero in this sordid tale, it's Ed Walker's public defender, Joe Huff, a "Democratic dissident" and sworn foe of the Ponders. Huff's cross-examination of Johnny Waldroup was so devastating that the prosecution's star witness "climbed out a back window of the courthouse and ran down the street." Walker was acquitted — even Zeno Ponder had his doubts — but if Walker didn't kill Nancy Morgan, who did and why? Years of sleuthing continued until 1998, when Pinsky followed a lead and finally confronted the depraved villain who steered him toward the most likely scenario.

If anything elevates this exceptional piece of independent investigative journalism, it is that Pinsky, always self-effacing and skeptical, never yields to the cynicism associated with hard-boiled true-crime writing. "Met Her on the Mountain" sometimes seems like "Chinatown" on the Appalachian Trail, but the author appreciates that the people of Madison County have never forgotten this terrible crime, even as law enforcement officials have chosen to look the other

way. (Agents for the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation appear maddeningly obtuse; Pinsky shared his conclusions with them prior to publication.)

The book's ending may be too indefinite for some, and no doubt the author would like to have wrapped things up with a more attractive bow. But as one Madison County old-timer puts it, time is a great healer, "not a very good beautician."
