



# Love and Death in the Sunshine State: The Story of a Crime

*Cutter Wood*

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**“I was convinced that somewhere in this pile of anecdotes and photographs and recollections was the vital clue, the detail that would make everything slide into place, and as I began to assemble all the information I’d gathered into an idea of a woman, I imagined myself at the head of a troupe of deputies and detectives, leading us all inexorably in the direction of Sabine Musil-Buehler.”**

When a stolen car is recovered on the Gulf Coast of Florida, it sets off a search for a missing woman, local motel owner Sabine Musil-Buehler. Three men are named persons of interest—her husband, her boyfriend, and the man who stole the car. Then the motel is set on fire; her boyfriend flees the county; and detectives begin digging on the beach of Anna Maria Island.

Author Cutter Wood was a guest at Musil-Buehler’s motel as the search for her gained momentum, and he was drawn steadily deeper into the case. Driven by his own need to understand how a relationship could spin to pieces in such a fatal fashion, he began to talk with many of the people living on Anna Maria, and then with the detectives, and finally with the man presumed to be the murderer. But there was only so much that interviews and transcripts could reveal.

In trying to understand how we treat those we love, this book, like Truman Capote’s classic *In Cold Blood*, tells a story that exists outside documentary evidence. Wood carries the investigation of Sabine’s murder beyond the facts of the case and into his own life, crafting a tale about the dark conflicts at the heart of every relationship.

## Love and Death in the Sunshine State: The Story of a Crime Details

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## From Reader Review Love and Death in the Sunshine State: The Story of a Crime for online ebook

### Stephanie says

"...nor for a long time after did it occur to me that much of the grieving after a death is done not so much for the loss of the loved one but for the simple passage of time, which so gently obliterates everything before it."

*Sigh*

Cutter Wood can write. He is a fantastic writer, in fact.

The way this story was presented just irritated me to no end.

Wood begins the story with a personal memoir. He explains why he picked this particular murder - he had a personal connection to the motel - but also details his life before he gets to the details of the case. At some point, he begins to have dreams of Sabine Musil-Buehler, the victim. He allows this to lead into a fictional account of what Musil-Buehler & Bill Cumber's relationship may have been like. It did nothing for me.

I feel odd being so harsh on Wood for his fictional account because I have adored true crime books that allowed the fictional side to seep in.. but Wood's account was just dry and I couldn't feel the passion or love between Sabine and Bill. Also, there were no references cited for the entire book so I don't know if his account was influenced by anyone, articles, etc or if it was all a figment of his imagination.

I think this book would have been more interesting if Wood just stuck mostly to the facts of the case and did not interject his life memoir into it.. I think he was trying to connect the lull of his love life to the lull in Bill & Sabine's love life but I just couldn't make the connections as I feel he intended.

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### Valerity (Val) says

This was a bit of a mash-up of the author's relationship blended with the story, which was really about a woman in Florida's Anna Maria Island who goes missing. There are three suspects: her husband, her boyfriend, and the man found driving her car. The writing is a bit different. I generally prefer my true crime to be free of any fiction, but I found that in this situation I didn't mind the author's take on what may have happened. This is a good read for crime buffs and history fans with the flavors of Florida thrown in. An advance digital copy was provided by NetGalley and author Cutter Wood for my honest review.

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### Amy Morgan says

Sooo when I read a supposed true crime novel I expect the main focus of the book to be the actual crime. This was a mix of a crime that happened in FL which you don't find out much about until almost the end of the book and a mix of information on the author's relationship with his girlfriend, which I really cared

nothing about. The writing was not bad but if you are wanting to read a true crime novel this in my opinion does not fit into that category. It is mainly just a book about the author's life with a girl he loved in elementary school who is now his girlfriend and a crime happened to be committed in a hotel he once stayed at and so he just threw that in for interesting conversation?

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## Robin says

Writer frets about being a pretentious writer, gets interested in a true crime, spends most of the book pretentiously talking about his life and then I put it down.

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## Julie says

It's insufferable, but I couldn't stop reading it.

Imagine Payne Lindsey (or John David Booter for that matter) sets out to write a true crime book and instead writes an overly-florid MFA-style memoir. Then, 75% of the way through, he realizes he never really investigated that whole "crime" thing, so he writes this weird, speculative, fictionalized interlude (in the most purple of purple writing) about what might have happened. And to bind it all together, he tries to contrive some tenuous connection between this murder and his budding--but ultimately banal--relationship with his girlfriend.

He wants so badly to be a Writer. And this book is so Written that it's distracting and irritating. Wood over-describes everything, and strings words together not because they serve any purpose here, but because they sound pretty or evocative. Example:

"Lilacs perfume the garden, tractors plow the field, the pillows have been fluffed, a soft rain falls along the coast; there are newborn calves, ferny creeks, songs of melancholy and of innocence; the eggs are fresh, the cream is cool, a woodpecker hammers in the hickories; the canoe noses in the reeds, looking for a place to moor, and a rocket ship plunges through the vacuum of space; the factories promise silk and steel, the horizon promises the night; there are avenues of corn where a child can walk till dark and not see another human soul, and avenues of wristwatches and purses down which we stroll to the art museum to see the exhibition on Le Corbusier; in winter, there are fires, in summer, winds, and in spring and fall, the geese fly home beside the moon and wake a thousand miles of lovers. We must fly to those we love. Anoint them with oil, adorn them patiently with laurel and bay."

(wtf?)

I assume this paragraph was meant as some kind of love poem to his girlfriend/wife, and yes, these are all very pretty words. But it's too much, and it doesn't belong here. It serves no purpose other than to be florid. All that ornamentation and all those extraneous descriptors are so precious, they take you out of the story.

But the point of no return for me is when Cutter stays at the motel which was owned by the victim in order to score an interview with her (innocent) husband/co-owner. In the same breath that he asks for an interview, Cutter informs the husband that he wants to stay at the motel longer, but only has so much money, so could the husband/co-owner/suspect possibly cut him a deal on a room in addition to an interview for his weird not-so-true-crime book?

Wood *can* be a good writer. And I appreciate the way he evokes the tiny moments of disappointment and disenchantment when a new love is replaced with the reality of a worn-in (and worn-out) relationship. I just wish he'd learn some restraint, rein in his poetic license, and bill this as a memoir rather than any sort of "story of a crime." This is not a true crime story, so much as a young writer's foray into narrative non-fiction, trying to write about what he knows best (himself and his relationship) but maybe trying too hard.

With a bit more fine-tuning, Wood might produce some great work. But this one didn't work for me.

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### **Ronnie Cramer says**

A crime occurs at a small Florida motel. A young creative-writing student realizes he once stayed at that motel and decides to look into the crime, but he ends up examining his own life more than anything else. The writing is good, but the overall reading experience is like hearing some great guitar playing in a bad song; you can appreciate the talent without enjoying the result.

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### **Craig Pittman says**

If I had known before starting this book that it was an unusual mix of genres -- true crime, memoir and fiction -- I might have put it aside without even opening it because I dislike fiction that masquerades as fact. That would have been a mistake on my part, though, because I would have missed out on a beautifully written book that takes you inside a murder like few others I have ever seen.

Cutter Wood is a first-time author who writes like an old pro. He starts off the book talking about how he wound up spending some time at a small beach motel on Florida's Anna Maria Island. Later he gets a clipping in the mail about how the motel's co-owner has gone missing and part of the motel burned down. Intrigued, he decides to travel back to Florida to poke into the mystery himself.

The first part of the book is about Wood's blundering attempts to make sense of both the case and the Florida beach town where it occurred. There is both humor and pathos here. But then the narrative shifts gears as he recounts how his life became tangled up with the woman who wound up living with and eventually marrying. Then it's back to the mystery again. At first this seemed like an odd juxtaposition, but it pays off later in the book when you realize the truth of the title.

The fiction part of the book is clearly marked as fiction, which is a plus, as Wood reconstructs what he thinks really happened with the missing woman, who at that point had been gone for seven years. The writing here is quite beautiful, with a meticulous attention to detail. I talked to him about this part during a reading he did at Inkwood Books, and he explained that he'd spent a week visiting the person who eventually confessed to what had happened, and thus was able to get many many real details into his fictional recreation, lending it tremendous accuracy.

The book swoops back into fact again at the end, but then concludes with a somber meditation on love and our inability to make it stay that really brings all the parts of the book into sharp focus.

I took a point or two off because he gets a couple of details about Florida wrong -- there are more visitors in the winter than in the summer, not the other way around, for instance. But those are minor errors and I eagerly await his second book to see where this talented writer travels next. I hope he returns to Florida soon.

## Trin says

The nicest vacation of my adult life took place on a little island off the Gulf coast of Florida called Anna Maria. I don't think I've met a single person who wasn't also on that trip who has ever heard of it. So when I saw that there was a new true crime book set on the island, I naturally had to read it right away.

Unfortunately, the best thing I can say about this book is that it's an interesting, if inadvertent, study of perception. I went to Anna Maria expecting nothing except for a chance to hang out with some friends; I'd never been to Florida before, had heard a lot of crazy stories, but basically arrived feeling open-minded. This little island far exceeded my expectations: it's bright and cheerful and funky and weird. I loved it. Like anywhere, I'm sure it has its seedy underbelly. But Wood paints it as nothing but hopeless and bleak. Somehow we were in the same spot, but with totally different filters on our mental and emotional lenses. I got some kind of frothy chick flick; he got film noir.

He also, early on, gets a basic detail about the island wrong: he describes a supposed sighting of the missing woman at "Mr. Bones, a bar." Mr. Bones is not a bar; it does not have a bar; it is a BBQ restaurant. And if you've even stepped inside it, you'd be unlikely to forget its lack of bar setup, as the entranceway contains a giant ice-filled coffin from which you self-serve your drinks. Were Wood writing about a crime in a big city, I could understand not visiting every relevant location, but Anna Maria is teeny tiny. There aren't that many restaurants and over the course of writing this book he spent many weeks there. Why would he not investigate this location? It's called *Mr. Bones* -- that's not intriguing enough? Anyway, this oversight resulted in two things: 1) I almost immediately stopped trusting Wood's depiction of events, and 2) he missed out on some damn fine BBQ.

The above paragraph may sound, and indeed is, extremely nitpicky, but there's so little to this book, I find myself grappling for *anything* to hold on to. Wood completely fails to paint a vivid or interesting portrait of a place I know for a fact is at least interesting-*looking* and ought to be fun to describe. He likewise does not draw an intriguing psychological portrait of any of the people involved. Instead, there are full chapters relating to Wood meeting, moving in with, and eventually losing a girlfriend who I guess we should all be grateful he depicts as a manic pixie dreamgirl and not a bitch. She moves with him to Iowa, where Wood writes satiric descriptions of Iowa Writers' Workshop parties, despite himself being a member of that program, and with this book being one of the most Iowa things I've ever fucking read. This thing is barely 200 pages long and supposedly about a murder, and I could now draw you a intricate map of Wood's navel.

When he finally returns to the subject of the crime, it's for a deeply speculative look at its lead-up for which Wood provides hardly any sources, and only after the fact. This whole book reads like a thesis for which the student realized he did not have sufficient material, and therefore frantically padded out. The greatest mystery here is: how the heck was it published?

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## Sara says

How did I hate this book? Let me count the ways. See Julie's review. Pretentious, disjointed bullshit. Go back to your MFA program, and be nicer to your girlfriend, and at the very least, refrain from mocking her in print...On top of it, he imagines and describes a death scene from inside the head of the victim, using her as a tool for his own writing practice. Gross.

## Melinda says

If you read the reviews like I did on Amazon you're probably wondering which of his five MFA writing buddies the author got to fabricate those 5-star reviews. I was curious so I found a copy of this stinker at my public library. The best thing I can say about this mash-up is it was short -- I read the 225 pages in less than 24 hours, maybe a tad longer than it took Mr. Wood to write the book. Here is a sentence from page 86 I read three times: "If we were are smart, of course, we recognize the difference between a person's popularity and their worthiness of love, but who is immune to the desire to see the things one cherishes celebrated at large." I have never heard of "an empty bottle of pinot grigio." I mean, it's either a bottle of wine or it's an empty bottle, isn't it? "Seen from above, Florida emerges from the continent like the appendage of an amoeba" is another strange turn of phrase since I didn't think one-celled organisms can have arms and legs. One of my suspicions, however, was confirmed by reading this book. Never write to a prisoner. He will always write back.

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## Sarah Marie says

Love and Death in the Sunshine State: The Story of a Crime by Cutter Wood

### 1.25 stars

Sabine Musil-Buehler owns a nice little hotel in Florida with her estranged husband. Sabine's car is stolen, but she is nowhere to be found. An investigation turns up with blood on the vehicle and Sabine's boyfriend is beginning to look like the number one suspect in this odd case. No body, but a car and an apartment covered with odd patches of blood shows that something has gone array. Cutter Wood visited this hotel once and has developed a connection to the case. Love and Death in the Sunshine State focuses on finding out what really happened to Sabine and the connection that Cutter develops with the main suspect. I can't help but compare most true crime novels to Truman Capote's In Cold Blood and it doesn't help that the publishers are doing this as well. In Cold Blood is effective because it focuses on the town, the family that was murdered, and the killers before, during, and after their crimes. Wood decides to focus on a relationship and himself. The case doesn't become the centerpiece of this story until about 50% of the way through. It made for a very boring read. I skimmed the majority of this novel because it had no pertinence to the case and I was uninterested in Wood's own relationships. Capote never made In Cold Blood about himself, but Love and Death in the Sunshine State is all about Cutter Wood with the convenience of a connection an odd murder. Wood's largest drawback as a writer is overexplaining. The majority of this novel consists of frivolous information that has no importance to the true crime case that is being presented as the centerpiece of this story. I'm looking at all this from the perspective the crime being the driving force of this novel and from that perspective it does a half-baked job of really laying down the facts and delving into the people that have been affected by this crime, but if I look at this novel from another perspective. The perspective that this is a story about a young man struggling with graduate school, a serious relationship, and trying to explain the connection he has to this strange case then this novel is even worse. Wood's writing style is not strong enough to really hold itself up without the allure of the true crime mystery. I feel like I'm being harsh, but this novel was a pain to get through and because I didn't like the writing style my enjoyment of this novel really suffered.

## Whimsical Writing Scale: 1

The crime itself is fascinating and the last half of the book wasn't all that bad to get through. In fact, Wood's writing style became a little bit easier to get through. I won't go too much into the plot itself because this is a true crime novel and if I tell you all about the crime then I kind of ruin the purpose of you reading this novel. I do think that the case itself is interesting and one that I'm sure many true crime will be interested in analyzing. This isn't the worst novel I've ever read and it definitely has its moments, but I don't think this was the novel for me.

## Plotastic Scale: 1.5

**Cover Thoughts: It doesn't look very sunny, but it does look like In Cold Blood.**

*Thank you, Netgalley and Algonquin Books, for providing me with a copy of this novel in exchange for an honest review.*

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## Annie says

Eh. A lot of it felt like one big tangent. The book is purportedly about this older woman who owned a hotel on an island off of Florida who disappeared/was probably murdered by her husband or her boyfriend. Then someone set the hotel on fire. \*shrugs\* that's pretty much the extent of the story.

Cutter Wood (whose parents oh so clearly think they're hilarious. What a goddamn name) stayed at this hotel one time, so he feels a deep personal connection to Sabine, the murdered woman. He kind of investigates, kind of just spends a lot of time visiting Sabine's boyfriend in prison and buying him books and wandering around the island.

Then he spends a huge chunk of the book waxing on about his girlfriend Erin and road trips and his family and I'm not totally sure what any of that had to do with the murder. Plus, it was pretty boring. His life isn't all that interesting. I'm sure it's very interesting to Wood himself, don't get me wrong, but it's not a life that an outsider would find worthy of 3/4 of a book.

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## Pepe says

It is not often that I do not finish a book. I really, really try to select books I will enjoy, and then, persist through if I begin to struggle. Often, it ends up being well worth it. This is not one of those books. If you read the book's synopsis, and interpret it as I did, you would expect a tale of murder. I think it was the 3rd chapter before any significant mention of the crime was made. I gave it the benefit of the doubt, but by the time I got about 35% in, most references to the crime were still missing, much like the victim of the crime. At that point, I flipped through about 20 pages to find the next reference to the crime, and then, I gave up.

I wanted to read a true crime non-fiction book. I got the author's memoir about his writing program and meeting his former crush. If that was what I wanted to read about, then perhaps this would have been okay. But that wasn't what I expected, and memoirs are not something I choose to read very often. The ones I do

read relate to other topics entirely. So if you want to hear about a writer's struggle, this might be the book for you. But if you're looking for a true crime read, keep looking. Unfortunately, this one does not deliver much of the true crime.

I received an e-ARC of this book from #NetGalley. This is my unbiased review of what I read in #LoveandDeathintheSunshineState.

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### **Jesse says**

The book is really two stories, one about the author and the other an unsolved murder on a Florida island where he once vacationed. The constant running through both stories is the colorful characters. From the author's squirrel-napping father and profane, gin-drinking mother to the lead suspect in the murder who sends him a drawing of a teddy bear "suitable for a mat frame" from prison, the characters are eccentric and lively. As I sat reading this book on a island in Florida, looking out at a town similar to the one he describes in such detail, it rings incredibly true to how I imagine the experience if I got out of my chair and haphazardly began investigating a murder. It was extremely entertaining with a fair share of the awkward encounters that inevitably stem from an amateur murder investigation.

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### **Rita Ciresi says**

It's impossible not to have a strong reaction to Love and Death in the Sunshine State. I want to say you'll either love it or hate it, but I suspect many readers will fall somewhere in between. As you can tell from the book description--and some of the vitriolic reviews provided by ordinary readers here on Goodreads--Love and Death in the Sunshine State blurs genres. It's a little bit of true crime, a tad of memoir, and a whole lot of fiction rolled into one.

I was absolutely enamored of this book for the first few chapters. Cutter Wood is a would-be writer, enrolled in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, who hasn't yet found his material. Like many of his classmates--whom he skewers in deft mini-portraits--he's striving to be a writer with a capital W, pouring out reams of purple prose that go nowhere. On a trip to Florida, he stays at a motel on Anna Maria Island. Later one of the owners is murdered. The prime suspects are the woman's estranged husband and her ne'er-do-well new boyfriend. Wood becomes obsessed with the crime and returns to Florida to report on it.

I'm totally with the author, all the way up to the point where--unsure he'll ever get to the truth of the crime--he launches into a fictional account of it.

The fictionalization of the crime takes up almost all the rest of the book. Had it been more condensed--and perhaps more in keeping with the perspectives of the victim and the murderer (whom I won't name, because it would spoil what little suspense there is)--I might have bought into it. But the prose is so florid, and the descriptions so lush--so beyond the intellectual and imaginative capacities of the characters--that I grew uncomfortable and sometimes impatient. The death scene, especially, unnerved me. Wood's decision to "enter" the body of the female victim felt (to me, at least) like a violation. His decision to enter the consciousness of the murderer was slightly more palatable, as it revealed how easy it might be for anyone--male or female--to lose their cool and commit an act of violence.

I couldn't wait for the author to return to the "real world," but once there, I didn't fully understand his decision to fictionalize the story or fully see the connection between the story and his own life. The

acknowledgments have a distinctly John D'Agata-like feel, making the assertion that neither fact nor fiction can ever tell the elusive "truth."

Although I didn't agree with some of Cutter Wood's artistic choices, I admired the way he took enormous risks. Many of the passages in this book are beautifully written and the ending is haunting.

Love and Death in the Sunshine State would make a great choice for book clubs (how could you not have strong feelings about it?) and a wonderful addition to a creative nonfiction course syllabus (you can find a teaching moment on almost every page). Inevitably this memoir will be compared to *The Fact of a Body* (in fact, author Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich has provided a blurb for Cutter Wood's book). I highly recommend both books to serious readers and anyone interested in new directions for creative nonfiction.

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