

Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town

Mardi Link

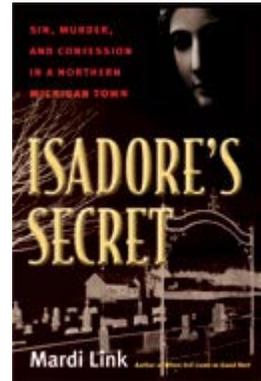
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=355567>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

## **Q&A with Mardi Link, author of *Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town***

*Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town* is a gripping account of the mysterious disappearance of a young nun in a northern Michigan town and the national controversy that followed when she turned up dead and buried in the basement of the church.

Mardi Link, a former crime reporter and author of *When Evil Came to Good Hart* discusses her latest true crime book.



### ***University of Michigan Press: How did you discover the story for Isadore's Secret?***

**Mardi Link:** Living in Northern Michigan for the past twenty years, I'm pretty familiar with the area's local legends. The mystery of what happened to Sister Janina is just one of these, but one I also thought had more truth than fiction attached to it. There is a play based on the case that was produced on Broadway and an old movie, but I wanted to separate what was true about her story from what was invented. I wanted to find out which was which, and to see if I could learn more about the Sister's life, why she was killed, and who the guilty party was. What, I wondered, could drive someone to kill a naive young Felician nun more than a century ago?

### ***UMP: What did you discover when you began to research the killing?***

**ML:** Isadore is a small town in Leelanau County, just a four corners really, with a few farmhouses, a school and convent now closed, and the majestic Holy Rosary Church rising up and visible for miles around. Weekly Mass is still celebrated here, sometimes drawing as many as 200 or 300 people. Descendants of the same families live there now that lived there when Sister Janina taught at the school and disappeared.

Although more than 100 years have passed, very little has changed in the physical look of the place but also in the attitudes of the people who live there. Most people wouldn't talk to me at all about the crime and they still refer to it simply as, "the tragedy." It's as if it happened last year, and not last century. Luckily for writers like me, we are a society that documents our history, and so I was able to find extensive newspaper accounts, but also hearing and trial transcripts, psychiatric reports, correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts all relating to the case.

During my research I learned of a Michigan native, a college professor by the name of Eduard Adam Skendzel, who had spent his summers and his retirement years researching the lives of Michigan Catholics. When he died his brother donated much of Eduard's research to the archives at The

Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town

Mardi Link

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=355567>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

University of Notre Dame. I called the archivist, explained the book I was working on, and asked whether or not the Skendzel collection was extensive enough to make it worth my while to drive down from Northern Michigan. She explained that librarians measure collections by how large they are if placed on the floor folder to folder. "Well," I asked her, "then how long is this one?" "Fifty-eight feet," she answered. I told her I'd be there the next day.

***UMP: What would you say was the most dramatic moment when putting the book together?***

**ML:** I spent three full days inside the room reserved at Notre Dame's archives for researchers. I'd get there right when they opened at 8 and not leave my chair until they shoed me out at 4. The room is equipped with long wood tables, and it's very, very quiet with good lighting, vintage ceiling fans whirring, and the smell of old paper wafting through the air.

You're not allowed to bring in anything but a pad of paper, and they even provide the pencils. I was looking for anything I could find about Sister Janina, how the Catholic Church responded to her murder, and of course the reason she was killed. Part of the legend was that she was pregnant and that was why she was killed. After so much time there was certainly no scientific way to prove or disprove this, and so although I wondered if there was any historic way to learn whether or not this was true, I didn't hold out a lot of hope that the pregnancy of a nun would have been documented or, if it had, that the documents had survived time. Then on the third day, in the afternoon, I was looking through notes and letters written by Father Andrew, the priest who served at Holy Rosary when Sister Janina disappeared, and I found (something). . . She (then) became a real person to me, not only a nun and a historical figure but also a woman with real feelings.

***UMP: Who really killed Sister Janina?***

**ML:** I think the Church and the court got it right all those years ago. Father Andrew's housekeeper, Stella, killed Sister Janina in a fit of religious fervor. I think Father Andrew fell in love with Sister Janina . . . . Although some people in Isadore are convinced he killed her, Father Andrew was an avid outdoorsman and was out fishing for the entire day she disappeared. At least two witnesses could verify this. Plus, he looked for her long after everyone else had given up. Stella would run down Sister Janina's character to whoever would listen, was unaccounted for at the time of her disappearance, and confessed to the crime. Plus there's a physical reason I think she's guilty: The church basement where Sister Janina was killed had a very low ceiling, only about five and a half feet. The coroner said Sister Janina had been killed by a blow to the head, struck from above. Stella was a tiny woman, not even five feet tall. It would have had to have been someone very short to have raised up a weapon in that basement. Stella's own confession corroborated this. I think she was guilty, but I'm not sure she'd be convicted today. The torture she suffered in jail would surely have disqualified her confession.

Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town

Mardi Link

<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=355567>

The University of Michigan Press, 2009

**UMP: How was writing this book different from *When Evil Came to Good Hart*?**

**ML:** When I started researching the Good Hart murders, forty years had passed. The murder in *Isadore's Secret* was sixty years older than that so the passage of time was one thing that made the research different. However in both books I tried to put myself in that time period to better understand the people I was writing about. Neither Good Hart nor Isadore initially welcomed me into their community. However, after I got to know people in Good Hart they opened up to me, and eventually many of them became friends. That was not the case in Isadore. After months of researching, attending Mass at Holy Rosary, and knocking on doors, I only found four people who would talk to me, and most of them were in their thirties and forties. One man in his eighties, an Isadore native, did talk with me and even translated the Polish documents I'd found, but he said the only reason he felt comfortable speaking with me was because he'd moved away from Isadore to Traverse City. I've since heard they are organizing a boycott of the book.

I think because the Catholic Church was complicit in covering up a murder all those years ago . . . people there are ashamed of this part of their community's history. But *Isadore's Secret* is also about how the parish managed to build a beautiful church in spite of what happened, and about how the original Isadore settlers have maintained their parish and their rural lifestyles amidst scandal and secrets. The fate of Sister Janina is a fascinating piece of Michigan history, and it needs to be read and experienced, not stuffed in an archival box somewhere.

---

To read more about *Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder, and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town*, visit the University of Michigan Press website at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=355567>.

For more University of Michigan Press podcasts, visit [www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/](http://www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/)