

Mardi Link, author of *When Evil Came to Good Hart*
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Q&A with Mardi Link, author of *When Evil Came to Good Hart*

In the summer of 1968, in a sleepy northern Michigan resort town, a suburban-Detroit family was found shot dead in their cabin. Forty years later, the murders remain unsolved and the case has grown cold.

The search for who killed the Robison family stretched from Michigan to Florida, Alabama, and Leavenworth Prison in Kansas. Dozens of investigators took up the case. The murders even inspired a novel. Yet few have gotten as close to the story as Mardi Link, author of *When Evil Came to Good Hart*.



Link's page-turning tale collects 40 years of evidence into a riveting true-crime story. She crafts her book around police and court documents as well as statements and interviews, and explores the impact of the case on the community of Good Hart.

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The University of Michigan Press: Why did you decide to write about the Robison family murders now? It's really a riveting story, but on the other hand, so much time has gone by and the case has been so thoroughly investigated.

Mardi Link: I've been following this case since I was seven years old and heard the crime announced on the radio when I was headed up north with my parents. I had a thick file on the case before I ever considered writing about it. Recently, I knew that the 40th anniversary was coming up and so I looked into the case again to see if it had been solved and to see if I could find out anything else about the investigation. I saw that it wasn't, and so I looked for a book about it but found that there wasn't one. No non-fiction book anyway, only a novel. Essentially, I think now looking back on the process that I wrote the book I wanted to read.

UMP: *What do you hope readers will take away from your book?*

ML: A better idea of the complexity of this case and why it was never officially solved. A respect for the Michigan State Police and for the present day Emmet County Sheriff's Office. An inside and interesting look at one of Michigan's most famous murder investigations that took place in one of the state's loveliest areas.

UMP: *When Evil Came to Good Hart begins with a quote from author Karen Halttunen's book Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination, as to whether evil is a supernatural power engaged in a struggle with the forces of good or do bad things happen*

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at random in an amoral universe. That's an interesting quote to begin a true-crime story with. Why did you choose that passage from Halttunen's book?

ML: I think that's the question I was trying to answer when I started researching this case and I think that's the question readers of true crime literature in general are trying to answer for themselves, too. Anyone who has ever been interested in the Robison family murders ultimately can't help but asking, "Why?" Financial gain just doesn't seem like it could possibly be the only motive for such a horrific display of violence against an entire family. It's almost as if there must have been some darker forces at work. I think Karen Halttunen's quote captured that feeling.

UMP: What in your opinion are some of the stranger or perhaps more fascinating aspects of either the crime or the investigation?

ML: Thousands of people are murdered every year in Michigan, and only a handful of these crimes pass from the front page of the newspaper into legend. The Robison case is one of these because of a number of compelling factors. The place where the crime was committed is so geographically remote, yet so naturally beautiful that it's difficult to believe anything bad could ever happen there. The man who police believe was the main target of the crime, Richard Robison, was a complex mix of ego, genius, and psychosis. The chief suspect was a gun expert and an interesting character in his own right. And, the number of amateur sleuths obsessed with this case from novelists to aging newspaper reporters to childhood friends of the victims, to mentally disturbed correspondents have added another layer of drama to an already fascinating case. Ask just about anyone who lived in Michigan in 1968 if they remember this case, and many, many people will say that they not only remember it, but still think about it today.

UMP: Even though the forensic abilities back in 1968 don't compare to the kind of tools we have available for the investigation of crimes today, do you think that the way the crime scene was handled initially may have disturbed any evidence?

ML: When I spoke with Sheriff Pete Wallin who is the current Sheriff of Emmet County, he said with certainty that if this crime had happened today, it would be solved. I think he's probably right on that. I also think the crime could have been solved in 1968 if Sheriff Zink hadn't been on vacation. And if Undersheriff Fosmore hadn't ruined any evidence that might have been on the bloody hammer they found at the scene by picking it up, and if so many curious law enforcement officers and onlookers hadn't been allowed to walk through the crime scene. The case might also have been solved if Prosecutor Noggle had been willing to arrest Joe Scolaro on the evidence he did have, and get him on the stand during a trial. Of course, that's all conjecture, because Zink was on vacation, the crime scene was disturbed and Scolaro was never arrested for the crime and no trial ever took place. A lot of factors contributed to the case going cold.

UMP: Do you have an opinion as to who committed the murders?

ML: After picking through a thousand pages of the State Police report, the DVD Emmet County has on the case, the crime scene photos, and then interviewing more than fifty people, I think

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Scolaro, Richard Robison's business associate, planned the murder and participated in it. He may have acted alone or he may have had help, but the guilt lies with him either way.

UMP: During the investigation, you write that Dick Robson exchanged 17 phone calls with Joe Scolaro (Richard Robison's business associate and the No. 1 suspect) between Robison's conversation with his banker in the morning of June 25, 1968 and his murder later that day. Were these phone calls verified to provide an alibi for Joe Scolaro that he was nowhere near the crime scene when it happened?

ML: I think those calls come closer to proving Scolaro's guilt than his innocence. Though we can never know the exact nature of the conversation that took place between Dick Robison and Joe Scolaro in those phone calls, we do know that Dick also talked to his banker that same morning in between the calls with Scolaro and found out that money was missing from his company account. A lot of money. I believe Dick confronted Joe in those phone calls. The last of them ended mid-morning and neighbors of the Robison's cottage in Good Hart say they heard shots at about 9 p.m. that night. They thought it was kids shooting at seagulls. Joe had enough time to hang up the phone, get out of Detroit, and drive to Good Hart. No one in Detroit remembers seeing Joe for that entire day, even though he said he attended a busy plumbing convention and talked to clients. He has no alibi.

UMP: Any opinion about the strange charges brought by John Clock, the reporter for the Petoskey News, that Monnie Bliss of Good Hart may have committed the murders to cover up the knowledge by the Robisons that Bliss has murdered his own son? It seems so out of left field and so far-fetched.

ML: One interesting aspect of the case is how doggedly the people who believe Monnie Bliss was the murderer continue to cling to that idea, regardless of the hard evidence that negates it. Monnie was a woodsman; an intelligent, quirky, resourceful northern Michigan woodsman more comfortable with nature than people. Good Hart locals who knew him said that he slept little, knew how to fix or build just about anything, and that he had an odd way of narrating everything he did, out loud, as he was going about his day. He could be awkward in public and John Clock's theory sprung from some weird statements Monnie made the day of the crime and months afterward. I don't believe there was anything sinister about Monnie; he was just an unusual character whom outsiders didn't understand. Clock was an outsider. Monnie passed a lie detector test, did not own guns anything like the ones that killed the Robisons' and from all reports was a devoted father. I don't believe he could have killed anyone. His one beef with Dick Robison, as a matter of fact, was that Robison was too hard on his own four children.

UMP: What do you think of the Leavenworth lead and the car with Shirley Robison's luggage tag in it? Do you think that Joe Scolaro paid Mark Brock to kill the family, and that Mr. Bloxom was an accomplice?

ML: I think there may be something to the Leavenworth lead, and that Shirley's luggage tag ending up in the glove box of an abandoned car a decade after the murders is just another mystery that will probably never be explained in this complicated case. If Scolaro did hire

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someone to kill the Robisons, or to help him kill the Robisons, the Detroit bank robbers, one of which ended up in Leavenworth Prison, are likely accomplices. Police discounted Bloxom's story because he failed a lie detector test. Perhaps he was only lying about his guilt in the bank robbery and telling the truth about his involvement with the Robison murders. He sure had a lot of accurate details about the case for someone who was supposedly lying.

UMP: What do you think of the theory that John Norman Collins, the "Michigan Murderer," was involved in or responsible for the murders?

ML: Not much. It makes page-turning fiction, but doesn't have any basis in fact. His victims were all young women in the Ann Arbor area. Totally different M.O. Plus, there's no evidence that he was ever at the Good Hart cottage.

UMP: After this much time, and even with modern state-of-the-art forensic tools, it seems unlikely that the murders will ever be solved. Do you believe that the murderer or murderers will ever be caught?

ML: I think it's possible that there will someday be enough evidence to close the case. The murderer or murderers won't be caught in this world because one or all of them are already dead, Scolaro by his own hand. Perhaps they're facing justice in the next world, who can know? I do believe that there are people still living who know pieces of information that could be helpful to detectives. Perhaps they don't even know it, or perhaps they are ashamed of their complicity, or just want to put it in the past. I think new details could still come to light. Maybe the press surrounding the 40th anniversary of the crime will inspire them to come forward.

UMP: If anyone has a tip they think might be useful, whom should they contact?

ML: The Emmet County Sheriff's Office at (231) 439-8900. Ask for either Sheriff Pete Wallin or Detective J.L. Sumpter.

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