

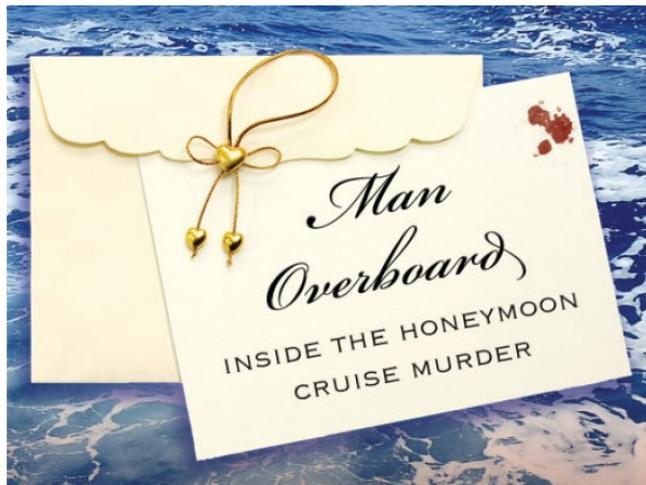
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Arts & Entertainment

'Man Overboard' a Tragic Tale

Area author provides insight, compassion in her story of the young Greenwich man who vanished on his honeymoon cruise.

By [Don Harrison \(Open Post\)](#) - September 17, 2011 1:45 am ET



Joan Lownds was a reporter at the weekly *Greenwich Citizen* when she began to formulate the idea

of a book about the young man who vanished from his honeymoon cruise in July of 2005.

Her labors are captured in *Man Overboard: Inside the Honeymoon Cruise Murder* (Globe Pequot Press; \$14.95), which was published on Sept. 1 and is available online and at bookstores.

"I thought it would be a book...so many twists and turns," the Naugatuck-based author said recently. "Right after (covering) the (congressional) hearing in D.C., I began to realize the ramifications of the story...when the other victims began to come forward."

After signing a book contract with Guilford-based Globe Pequot last November, she was given a Feb. 1 deadline by the publisher. "It wasn't easy," she confessed. "I was staying up until midnight writing and editing. And then I'd get up at 6 the next morning to begin again."

The tragic case of George Smith IV garnered nationwide attention from the media and led to congressional hearings into the seamy side of the cruise ship industry. "Today," "Good Morning America," "Dateline NBC" and "Oprah" were among the electronic heavyweights to cover the heartbreaking saga. On the print side, *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair* and *USA Today* provided in-depth coverage.

A handsome 26-year-old from an old-line Greenwich family, George Smith and his attractive blonde wife, Jennifer Hagel, were married in late June of 2005. She was raised in Cromwell, a blue-color upstate community. Their honeymoon aboard the Royal Caribbean luxury cruise ship, "Brilliance of the Seas," began in idyllic fashion. But on the morning of July 5, the bridegroom had vanished.

A 16-year-old passenger from Chicago, taking an early-morning walk on deck, spotted a blotchy red stain that stretched several feet on the wide metal overhang protecting the lifeboats. It was blood.

Another passenger, a 32-year police veteran from Jersey City, N.J., was awakened at 6:30 a.m. by his

cousin, who had seen the same blood stain on her way to breakfast. After viewing the horrific scene, the cop immediately recognized it as something he had witnessed too many times back home.

“This is not an accident,” he told his cousin.

Later that morning, blood was found in the Smiths’ cabin. But the cabin was empty.

After a night of partying with – and later probably without – her husband, Jennifer arrived at 8:30 a.m. for the couples’ massage appointment in the ship’s spa. She was wearing the dress she’d worn the previous night and a pair of flip-flops. It was only then she learned from ship personnel that “my husband had gone missing.”

George’s body was never recovered. Jennifer accepted a \$1.1 million settlement from Royal Caribbean separate from the Smiths and moved on with her life. In 2009, she remarried.

Years of legal wrangling followed, and the FBI says the case is “very active and open” and its highest priority in Connecticut. Four men who were befriended by George and Jennifer on the cruise were considered persons of interest.

“You don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes,” said the Smiths’ attorney, Brett Rivkind, “to deduce that a crime took place in that cabin.”

More than six years later, Smith’s parents, George III and Maureen, and his sister, Bree, still believe George was murdered and cling to the hope that those responsible will be brought to justice.

Royal Caribbean was uncooperative and sometimes adversarial during the investigation and court appearances, and early on attempted to portray George’s disappearance as an accident or a suicide.

“They’re definitely going to find answers,” Joan said of the family. “They’re not going to quit until they find answers about George’s disappearance.”

Joan Lownds has covered the case virtually from the beginning, first for the *Greenwich Citizen* and now with her current employer, the Hersam Acorn weekly newspapers, which include the *Greenwich Post*. Early on, she won the trust of the Smith family, and for a while was the only local reporter with whom they would communicate.

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“I was lucky enough to have their trust,” she said. “They’re really wonderful people.”

If there is a bright side to the Smiths’ ordeal, it began with U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, of Connecticut’s 4th District, who launched a congressional hearing on cruise ship safety in December of 2005. “The Smiths say he’s their hero,” Lownds noted.

As the story grew in scope, others who had lost family members – or who had been victims of violent crimes – aboard cruise ships began to come forward. Bree Smith and three of their number co-founded International Cruise Victims (ICV) to raise awareness of the potential dangers aboard these luxury ships.

When Shays was ousted by Jim Himes, a Greenwich Democrat, in the 2008 congressional election, Himes took up the Smiths’ cause, as did Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry.

Through their efforts and those of other legislators, the historic Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act bill, requiring cruise lines to report serious crimes, was created. On a hot July day in 2009, President Barack Obama signed the historic bill into law; it goes into effect on Jan. 1, 2012. According to the author, the law will be enforced by the Coast Guard and FBI.

What are Lownds' thoughts about George Smith's disappearance?

"I believe there was foul play and he was murdered," she responded. "It could have been a botched robbery. It could have been a fight. The FBI has spent millions investigating a very tragic altercation. I don't think they'd do that if they didn't believe there was foul play."

Joan Lownds will discuss and sign copies of *Man Overboard* at Barnes & Noble in Stamford on Thursday, Sept. 22 (7:30 p.m.) and at Elm Street Books in New Canaan on Saturday, Sept. 24 (noon).