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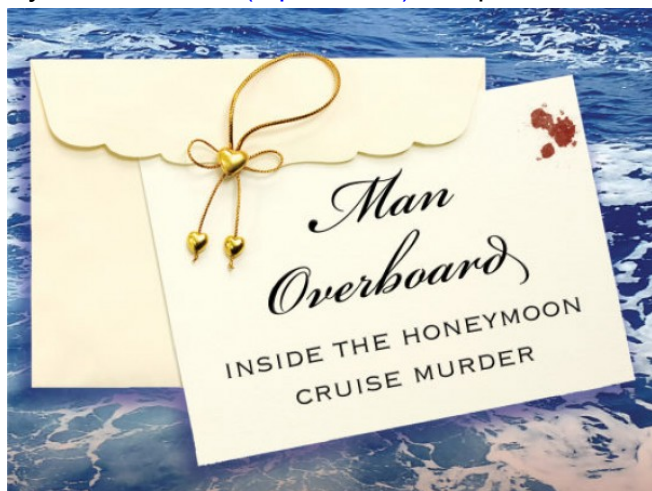
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Community Corner

Naugatuck Author Publishes 'Man Overboard' About 2005 Murder in Greenwich

Author Joan Lownds provides insight, compassion in her story of the young Greenwich man who vanished on his honeymoon cruise.

By [Don Harrison \(Open Post\)](#) - September 12, 2011 5:55 pm ET



When one writes a book review, it's a good idea to be objective. Or at least pretend to be impartial.

But I can't do it. I've known and respected the writer Joan Lownds for several years. In fact, she was a member of my staff – as reporter and then arts editor – 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 think you said it first; you're going to have a book," the Naugatuck-based author smiled over lunch this past week. "I thought it would be a book... so many twists and turns.

"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."

The tragic case of George Smith IV garnered nationwide attention from the electronic ("Today," "Good Morning America," "Dateline NBC," "Oprah," et al) and print media (The New York Times, Time, Vanity Fair, USA Today, et al) and led to congressional hearings into the seamy side of the cruise ship industry.

A handsome 26-year-old from an old-line Greenwich family, Smith and his attractive blonde wife, Jennifer Hagel, were married in late June of 2005. 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. And 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.

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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 Brett Rivkind, the Smiths' attorney, "to deduce that a crime happened 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 Smith 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 Smiths, and for a while was the only local reporter with whom they would communicate.

"I was lucky enough to have their trust," she says. "They're really wonderful people."

If there was a bright side to the Smiths' ordeal, it began with U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, from 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. Jim Himes, a Greenwich Democrat who defeated Shays in the 2008 congressional election, took up the cause, as did Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry.

Through their efforts and those of legislators from other parts of the country, the historic Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act bill, which will require 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 will go into effect on Jan. 1, 2012. "It will be enforced by the Coast Guard and FBI," Joan said.

What are the author's 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 the Whittemore Library on Wednesday, Oct. 12, beginning at 6:30 p.m. She's scheduled to be interviewed by WATR's Larry Rifkin on Oct. 6, at

11:30 a.m.

Don Harrison was the founding editor of the Greenwich Citizen, an award-winning weekly newspaper, from 2002 to 2009. Joan Lownds was a valued member of the Citizen staff for 1 1/2 years. She has dedicated the book to her son, Kevin, a third-year law student at the Georgetown University Law Center.

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