

Perturbed by Pius

Infamous Smithtown murder haunts author, inspires novel

By SETH WALLACH

As a kid growing up on Long Island during the 1980s, author Matthew McGevena, 40, said his parents constantly reminded him about Smithtown's John Pius.

In April of 1979, John Pius, 13, was murdered by four Smithtown teenagers, his body discovered days later behind Dogwood Elementary School with rocks shoved down his throat.

Mr. McGevena's parents, like a lot of parents during that time, used John Pius' murder as a cautionary tale for kids when they headed off to play.

The Pius murder, one of the most notorious crimes in Smithtown history and one of the most litigated criminal cases in American history was the inspiration behind Mr. McGevena's debut novel, *Little Beasts*, which was released July 7.

"This crime stuck in my mind because we had sort of grown up on it," Mr. McGevena said. "The Pius murder was just one of those things as we were running out the door our parents would say to us 'hey, be careful. If you see a group of teenagers go the other way.'"

After a police investigation, four Smithtown teenagers were charged with the murder of John Pius; then 17-year-old Robert Brensic, 17-year-old Thomas Ryan and brothers Peter Quartararo, 15, and Michael, Quartararo, 14. After a litigation process that spanned three

decades, the case is finally closed. But for Mr. McGevena, its impact on his childhood stuck with him.

"Not only was [the Pius Murder] brutal in nature but it reminded us in a lot of ways of the many encounters we would have as kids with older teenagers," Mr. McGevena said. "Teenagers in our neighborhood would sometimes just make sport out of finding some kids playing ball in the street or behind the school and just pushing them around."

In an interview Friday, July 10, Mr. McGevena said *Little Beasts* is not a police procedural or a blow by blow of the Pius Murder but rather a novel which takes place in the fictitious town of Turnball. The town is turned upside down after a murder, inspired by the actual events of the Pius Murder, takes place.

Mr. McGevena grew up in Mastic Beach and said one of his major goals for the novel was to discuss poverty.

"I think I want people to realize the violence of poverty more than anything," he said. "I want people to be awakened to the fact that poverty is not just a deprivation of money, it's a deprivation of self-worth."

The murderer in his book is motivated significantly by his poor economic status, but Mr. McGevena wanted to remind readers that even in the most tragic of circumstances there is hope. It is why he says his characters are given the opportunity to change.

"In good fiction there is always opportunities for characters to change,"

he said. "Readers will see characters go through that transformation with the murder as a catalyst. Sometimes the most tragic circumstances expose people's characters and expose people's strengths."

In addition to poverty, Mr. McGevena said he really wanted the novel to be about what he called "an intersection of worlds." He explained that the "adult world," the "teenager's world," and the "child's world," are very different, and that each operates by its own constitution. Children, for example, do not process consequences in the same way as teenagers or adults, he said.

"They've all drafted their own set of rules in their heads," Mr. McGevena said. "Those three worlds were really on a collision course when the murder takes place."

In preparation for the book, Mr. McGevena said he did a fair amount of research on the Pius Murder and subsequent trial. He looked back at old newspaper articles and said local journalism actually plays a role in the novel. In *Little Beasts*, a young reporter is following the murder and the trial. Sections of his newspaper column about the case appear throughout the book periodically, giving the reader a unique perspective. Mr. McGevena said he wandered around Dogwood Elementary School just to get "sort of a cosmic sense of what had transpired there."

Mr. McGevena is an award-winning



Author Matthew McGevena

poet who shifted to fiction writing in 2005 when he began writing short stories. He said *Little Beasts* was actually written over a six month span in 2002. He wrote the book just weeks after his father passed away, but has revised and polished it for publication over the last 10 years before finally publishing it last week.

"Readers in Smithtown I think will identify with many of the characters who are really just trying to go through the day to day of their lives and make sense of their world," he said. "These characters that exist in this novel do exist in neighborhoods and something like this could happen."

Little Beasts is available for purchase at Book Revue in Huntington and on Amazon.com.



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