



Truth is Stranger than Fiction: An Interview With Carol Pogash

By Linda U. Foley



Author Carol Pogash

Photo Susan Wengraf

Pogash, a veteran journalist and author, was fascinated by the shocking murder of popular therapist Felix Polk by his delusional wife in the sleepy hills of Orinda. As the tale unraveled, Pogash was appalled by the unethical methods to which the renowned Felix Polk ascribed from using experimental therapies on his patients and sleeping with one of them to est (Erhard Seminars Training started by a used car salesman). Nowhere was the loosening of values more pronounced than in the 70s—especially in California. In this milieu, est—a variation of positive thinking—provided a platform for Felix Polk to follow his feelings, guilt free.

Pogash says her book is not merely an accounting of a true crime but “a condemnation of a controversial, decadent therapeutic culture including sleeping with patients (a taboo inherent in the Hippocratic oath), satanic ritual abuse, and repressed memory.”

Ironically, it was recovered memory (an 80s-90’s fad), which was the beginning of the end for Felix Polk and his volatile family.

Writing about controversy (including murder) is not new to Pogash having covered many such stories for the San Francisco Examiner, contributing frequently to the New York Times and Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post and writing about the AIDS epidemic in her book *As Real As It Gets* about the medical and human dimensions of the disease. *Seduced by Madness* combines Pogash’s expertise as an investigative journalist and lyrical writing to create an immediacy to the crime that recalls Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. “Hansen knew what a dead body looked like. Polk’s eyes were open and fixed. His chest was still . . . In the course of his career, Sergeant Hansen had notified many people of the death of their loved ones. He had heard people scream . . . twitch and shiver . . . He had never seen anyone as devoid of emotion as this woman. After a minute, she spoke. ‘Oh well,’ she said, looking up from her seat on the bench, ‘we were getting a divorce anyway.’”

Pogash’s descriptions are spot on, drawing the reader into the scene. “She drove her car through parched pastures, where her tires left crevices in the soil . . . His tanned face was rounded and carved in curves . . . She had the perfect features of a woman in a soap commercial before Dove dis-

covered average women.”

Living in the same town as the murder took place had its unexpected bonuses. “Occasionally, at the market, I’d be standing in front of the butternut squash and someone would approach me—aware I was working on this book—and offer bits and pieces of information which were useful.” Pogash attended the trial every day and got to know her characters pretty well. Her research in fact was so conscientious that direct feedback from Polk’s sister was that “At times she was so engrossed, she forgot the book was about her brother.” Other family members also “liked what they said was an honest accounting.”

Once the trial ended, Pogash says, she wrote the book quickly, but she wasn’t satisfied with the first half. She hired San Francisco editor/writer Ethan Watters who helped with the bumpy sections. The effort produced a book that works because this is what critics and others have to say:

“...For fans of true crime, psychology, courtroom drama. . . this is a triumph.”

Publishers Weekly (*Starred Review*)

“Electrifying. . . Carol Pogash goes beyond the lurid headlines and gets to the heart of the matter.”

Cassandra King, author of The Sunday Wife

“Fascinating look into the brilliant mind of a woman many thought to be delusional.”

USA Today

“Very well done.”

Ann Rule, the doyenne of true crime stories

“Rarely has there been a case like this, and nobody knows it better, or tells it so well, as Carol Pogash.”

Keith Morrison, award-winning correspondent for Dateline NBC

“Riveting Reading. . . Ms. Pogash has produced a truly chilling study of evil.”

The Washington Times

Carol Pogash will be speaking at the Moraga Library on January 15 at 7 p.m.