

# CAPE COD TIMES

## NEWS

# 'Mob mentality' or caring community? Books about Provincetown serial killer ignite Facebook fight



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Cape Cod Times

Published 4:38 a.m. ET July 11, 2022

PROVINCETOWN — Exploitation or truth-telling? Intimidation or protecting a family?

Those opposing viewpoints recently ignited a contentious debate on Facebook and beyond over two books about Provincetown serial killer Antone “Tony” Costa and planned events at East End Books Ptown for their launches.

Following email threats and dozens of social-media comments being posted — with mentions of lying, ignoring pain for true-crime money, mob mentality and trying to silence the wrong people — the two book-signings were canceled and one author called the Provincetown police.

Some in the community wrote thanks and praise for the cancellations being sensitive to the feelings of local families connected to the 50-year-old murders.

Others raised questions about censorship, defaming and silencing a female writer, and who gets to decide who is actually welcome in Provincetown.

And both writers and supporters questioned what the reaction says about American freedoms within a troubling climate for artists and free expression.

“They (silence writers) in North Korea,” said author Liza Rodman, whose launch event for the paperback edition of her 2021 memoir/narrative nonfiction book “The Babysitter: My Summers with a Serial Killer” (co-authored with Jennifer Jordan) was canceled at East End Books. “We don’t do that here.”

Casey Sherman, whose “Helltown: The Untold Story of A Serial Killer on Cape Cod” about Tony Costa was released July 5, said he also had his scheduled summer book-signing at East



End Books canceled late last month — with no explanation.

## Who was Tony Costa?

In the late 1960s, Costa was suspected of killing, dismembering and burying four young women whose bodies were found in a Truro cemetery near where he grew marijuana. The women were Patricia Walsh and Mary Ann Wysocki of Providence, Sydney Lee Monzon of Eastham and Susan E. Perry of Provincetown.

A few years after his conviction in Barnstable for two of the murders, Costa was found dead, hanging in his jail cell. His ex-wife and generations of their family remained in the Provincetown area.

Just hours before the launch party for Rodman's book on June 28, an announcement that it wouldn't happen was posted on Facebook: "Regrettably, we're canceling tonight's event," the post said. "Thank you for your understanding. It was not our intention to create pain for any of the parties involved."

Store owner Jeff Peters did not return multiple Times' messages for additional comment.

Among multiple community members who thanked the store via Facebook was Provincetown author Jeannette de Beauvoir.

"It's not the fact of the subject matter," she explained to the Times in a message. "It's the fact of members of his (Costa's) family still being integral members of the town this particular bookshop serves."

**Rodman's book:** In new memoir, local serial killer Tony Costa babysat two youngsters

Provincetown native Morgan Hayden, who knows members of the Costa family, said the locals were being protective, trying to help stop Costa family members from reliving the trauma caused by Tony Costa's murders.

"(Rodman) has every right to do everything she did, but we as a community had every right to say to the book shop and to her 'Absolutely not. You can't come down here,'" Hayden said in a phone interview after being part of the Facebook conversation.

Hayden — who said she has not and will not read Rodman's book — described the planned author appearance as "hurtful" and "tacky" and said the Costas deserve some peace.

"I don't want to discount (Rodman's) trauma because that is trauma, too," Hayden said. "But coming back here after writing a book to make some money on your story when the other



people's stories are still here, they're still living them, that's where the problem is. If she wanted to go to Orleans and do that, fine, but Provincetown is where these people are still living and it's hurtful to them."

## Threats and 'intimidation'

But Rodman and Sherman and their supporters question why anyone's writing should be banned from anywhere and exactly whose past or legacy is being protected or covered up.

Chris McLaughlin, a memoirist who lives on the Outer Cape and works in Provincetown, was one of several people who came to Rodman's defense on Facebook.

"What ended up happening was she was silenced and especially now, we can't allow women to be silenced anymore," McLaughlin said in a phone interview. "I just thought it was disgraceful.

"There's so much ignorance, hate and intolerance on social media and to shut this woman up and basically make her fear for her own personal safety is unconscionable," especially in a town known for "embracing everyone. ... She had every right to write this book, and Jeff had every right to to promote this story."

Both Rodman and Sherman said they've seen and experienced past "intimidation" by Costa family and friends for their own work and, during their research, of others investigating the Tony Costa murders.

"I was threatened on e-mail many times by people who'd been involved in that case ... just really ugly stuff," Rodman said in a phone interview.

She acknowledged she was partly relieved when the Provincetown event was canceled because she had become scared enough to call Provincetown police to ask them to be on hand.

But in the end, the reaction via emails and Facebook made her angry.

"You can't shut my book down and you can't shut my events down, and I don't care where they are. You don't own Provincetown. No one does," she said. "The story in my book took place in Provincetown, and that's why we launched it there."

**Sherman's book:** Stunned at the sheer brutality': Author Casey Sherman's 'Helltown' explores Costa serial murders on Cape Cod



## Profiting off local tragedy?

The Facebook debate appears to have started with a comment by Peter Cook, who has previously identified himself to the Times as a Costa family member, on an East End Books post advertising the June 28 event with Rodman: "Gross. Tourists profiting off local tragedy is not cool. There's still families around affected by this."

When asked by the Times for additional comment, he declined via Facebook.

In a July 7 post on her blog, Rodman called the pressure via social media and emails "a series of online bullying, insults, veiled threats, and outright lies" that were defamatory and said members of the Costa family "have propagated a smear campaign toward this book and its authors since publication."

In addition to maligning the writers, Sherman said, the complainants affected a local business owner.

"You've got the family and friends of a serial killer trying to intimidate and harass a local business owner to either stop an event or keep books off shelves, which is completely insane to me," Sherman said. "The family of Tony Costa has a choice not to attend any book signing or event and not to buy the book. Other people in that community should have the choice to learn about their history, whether it's part of a dark history or something else. I think targeting an independent bookseller who is just trying to stay in business sets a bad precedent. ... I don't want booksellers to be victimized by an online mob."

Sherman is the author of 15 books, most about real events, including Boston mob boss Whitey Bulger, and said he's never seen this type of situation with his other work. One of his books is about the Boston Strangler, whose last known victim was Sherman's aunt.

Both he and Rodman pointed out that it's not people related to the victims' families but to the murderer's families who have been complaining to the authors and on social media.

"They're targeting the messengers and not the monster here," Sherman said. "I would never try to prohibit the story of the Boston Strangler from being told by anybody, and the same respect should be given to the writers focusing on this very dark period in not only Provincetown history, but American history."

## The family perspective



In a phone interview, Michael Costa told the Times he appreciated the community support shown on Facebook and joined that social-media conversation about the book-signing because he felt Rodman was entering their “backyard” and trying to use his father’s name and story to sell her story and make money.

He said the family’s pain when the subject of the murders surfaces again is very real — that “it’s a 50-year-old story, but there are still people here that have deep scars and emotional feelings concerning the whole story.”

He said he was 4 years old when his father was arrested and he endured bullying and nasty comments about his father and family while growing up.

“And there’s the guilt that I feel for something my father did as I move through life,” he said. “It’s been a kind of difficult existence living under the shadow of a father like Tony Costa.”

Michael Costa said he has little knowledge of Sherman’s book and has not read Rodman’s.

“The money “she’s going to make, is that worth it? Is it worth the pain that other people are going to have to go through because of the story she felt like she had to write?” he said.

“We’re trying to bury this whole story and trying to rise above it all.”

## **‘Mob justice’?**

Rodman said she believes the social-media argument that got her book-signing canceled made the family and case more public than if her event had gone on.

“Mob justice is a slippery slope, and that’s essentially what they did, and in doing so, they brought more attention,” she said.

Rodman denies any suggestion that she’s getting rich from writing the book. She said it took years to try to explore her and Tony Costa’s story on her own, then with Jordan, as part of a personal journey.

“This book grabbed a hold of me and would not let go and that’s why I had to write it.”

## **‘A personal story’**

One aspect of the debate that bothers Rodman and McLaughlin most is the people commenting on Rodman’s book who haven’t read it.



In an author's note, she and Jordan say that in the "hybrid work of memoir and narrative nonfiction," Rodman's story "is subject to the limitations of her memories from childhood. We understand that others who were there will have differing recollections." However, "those events involving Tony Costa and his crimes are taken directly from the original records and source documents" as well as recordings of Costa in jail, his own writing and interviews the authors conducted with people who knew Costa.

In an email to the Times, Rodman noted that her memoir is "a very personal story that happens to be told alongside the Tony Costa story because they were happening simultaneously and he and his Mom, Cecelia were in our lives. The book is, at its core, about the comparison of those two adults. I was more afraid of my mother than I was of a brutal serial killer who happened to be an occasional babysitter."

By phone, Rodman said: "I had a good relationship with Tony. One of the challenges of the book was to sort of present him as a whole human being and not just a serial killer. ... So we presented a pretty humanistic picture of Tony Costa and we worked hard to do that."

## **Who decides what can be talked about?**

Sherman said he, too, has gotten contacted by local people unhappy with his Costa book but "I've been in this business 25 years so getting harassing emails is nothing new to me, and I'm not going to be intimidated by it."

While centered in part on the new angle of how famed authors Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. became involved in the coverage of Costa's murder trial, "Helltown" also recounts the facts of the murders and investigation through exhaustive research while telling the story in a style that includes what he describes as "elements of fictional storytelling."

Both authors and their supporters in the Facebook quarrel felt the opposition to the East End Books events was part of a larger issue of who decides what art can be talked about in what setting.

"If you pressure a bookseller for a Liza Rodman book or a Casey Sherman book, now you can do that for any book that comes out," Sherman said. "Provincetown is supposed to be a welcoming community for artists and authors and you've got a very small cabal at work here utilizing social media to carry their pitchforks and their torches. ...

"I'm not going to be intimidated by these people. The friends and family of Tony Costa have got their own agenda and that is to protect the memory of one of the most brutal serial killers

in American history and I won't stand for it," he said.

There is a lot of trouble in the world, and I don't know what to do about it.

My name is...