

the guardian

Sunday 6 June, 2010

## Has a salesman solved a 25-year old murder case?

A self published book about the death of an 11-year-old girl in 1986, in Argos, Indiana, might to the killer's arrest

When Thomas Crowel visited a cemetery in Argos, a small town in rural Indiana, a few years ago he had no idea that it would change the direction of his life and lead to the reopening of a cold murder case.

He came across the tombstone of a girl called Brandie Peltz who died in 1986, aged 11. Curiosity aroused, he found out that she had been strangled and sexually assaulted.

It should be said at this point that murder mysteries are not the normal preoccupation of Thomas Crowel. He is a door-to-door salesman who has written several motivational books such as *Simple Selling: Common Sense That Guarantees Your Success*.

But once he was hooked on the unsolved case, he devoted the next three years to pursuing it. He became interested in the account of a key witness, a passing motorist who, according to newspaper accounts, had noticed smoke coming out of the roof of the girl's house. Brandie was found face down in the bath. She was subsequently taken outside where efforts to revive her failed.

Crowel drew the conclusion that the most likely murderer was not a Brit who had been regarded as prime suspect in the original police inquiry 20-odd years ago. He decided to put his theories into print, writing his account as a novel, which he published himself.

He called it *The Passerby*, and changed all the names of the individuals to avoid legal trouble. The man he believes murdered Brandie became a character in the novel.

James Ellroy it isn't. Crowel has sentences such as: "You could smell the grass and the cattle manure. It was a sweet smell, not entirely different from the smell of a brewery." But literary quality aside, the book caused quite a stir locally, particularly as everybody appeared to be all too aware who the main characters were.

Among the novel's readers was a state detective, Tom Littlefield, who has reopened the case of Brandie Peltz on the back of it, to the chagrin of the local Sheriff. Littlefield recently told the local TV station WNDU that he was optimistic the murder would now be solved.

"It's a small town and people in a small town talk," the detective said. As for Crowel, he has happily sold 10,000 copies of the book and is confident an arrest will soon be made. "I think they are going to get the guy who killed this little girl. I just believe there was divine intervention and that I was guided where to go."