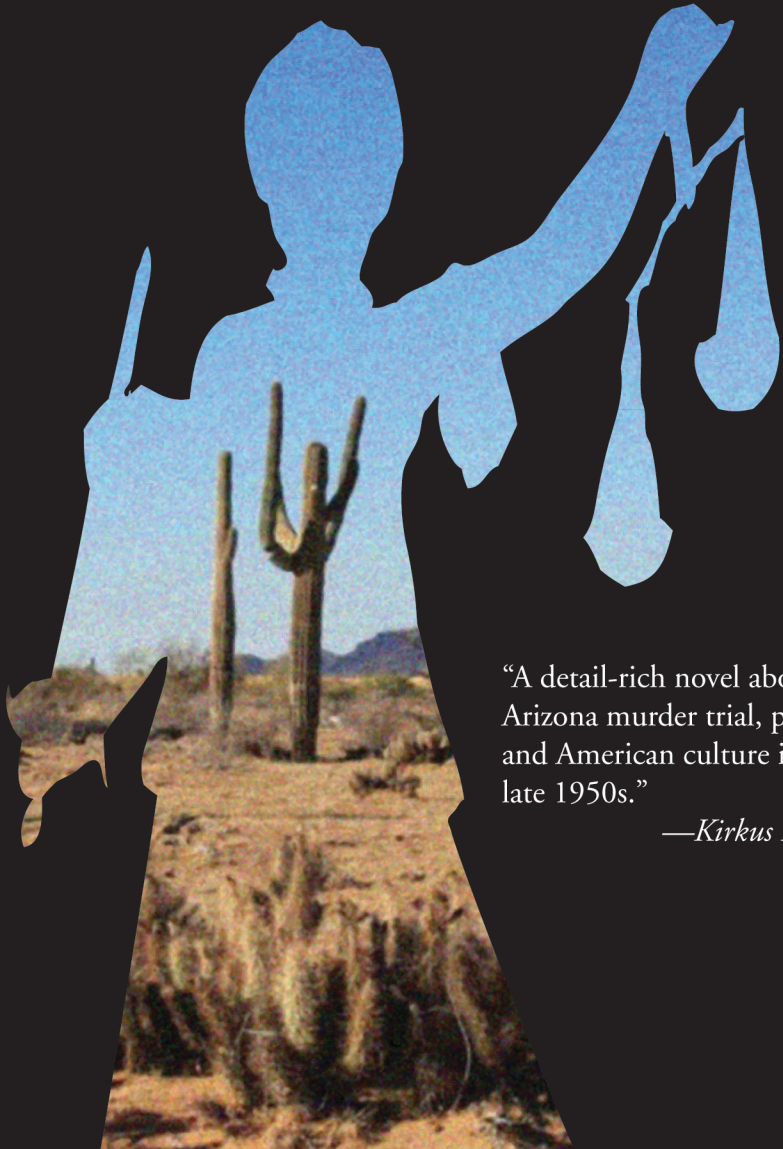


# Verdict in the Desert

Patricia Santos Marcantonio



"A detail-rich novel about an Arizona murder trial, prejudice and American culture in the late 1950s."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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*Recovering the past, creating the future*

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*For Daddy*

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# 1

## *Summer 1959*

MARÍA SÁNCHEZ CURRY left small bloody footprints down Lincoln Street. Under the full moon, they resembled a trail of flowers gnarled by the summer's heat.

Clenching the image of the Holy Virgin on the scapular around her neck, she flinched as she walked over the dirt road. The slit across her forehead throbbed. Her neck felt pulpy and raw. But the bruises and bleeding were too little punishment. She should have been carrying a wooden cross of splinters and heartache. She should have struggled on penitent knees through a valley of death and bones.

*Jesus. Sweet, sweet Jesus*, she pleaded, but didn't expect any response.

The long-haired mutt in her arms yelped because she squeezed him hard. She kissed Oscar's head and cried out. The blood saturating her dress had painted his white fur a dark gray. Wetting her fingers in her mouth, she tried to clean his fur and tasted salt and guilt. She sobbed again, which left her thin knees feeble. Oscar licked her cheek as she wiped her eyes with the edge of her dress. Raising her face to the sky, she blinked. María anticipated judgment to drop on her like an angel's gilded sword from heaven.

Nothing happened.

Closing her eyes in prayer, instead she saw the image of Ben flickering behind her eyelids. She had never seen him so peaceful, especially considering her best kitchen knife had been plunged into the middle of his chest.

Only a few moments before, María had watched her husband settle into death. Groans and red spittle dribbled out of his mouth. No cuss words or hosannas. Before his eyes became hollow blue glass, they betrayed a hint of surprise that she hadn't killed him sooner. She begged Jesus to bring Ben back to life and promised to be good from then on. No more disobeying. No more beer. She would be silent and absorb his slaps like water poured in the desert. But there was only the blood that bound them more than vows. So she had begun walking, not knowing where to go. Outside her front door, Lincoln Street was as dark at one end as it was at the other. She held Oscar tight while reciting her own novena of shame.

María didn't even notice a Borden city police car rounding the corner.



Officer Rod Sawyer's sweaty back produced a sucking sound every time he shifted his weight in the patrol car. And his butt ached. He and his partner had driven around since dinner at Pete's Café downtown. Sawyer badly wanted a stick of gum because he had belched the hamburger special for the last hour.

Older and tough as tires, Officer Sam Jones drove their regular patrol route. He tossed his cigarette out the window. "You're going to have to get use to this, Sawyer. These long, boring nights."

"Anything's better than pumpin' gas at my old man's station. At least I don't have to scrub the dirt from under my nails or clean crap from the toilets."

"We got a different kind of crap on these streets."

Jones grinned at his own veteran police wisdom. And Sawyer needed to wise up. His younger partner itched for gun battles like the ones the New York cops fought in *Naked City*. He wanted to chase a speeding car full of criminals, track down killers and rescue slutty women in tight clothes. Sawyer saw himself as *Have gun, Will Travel's* Paladin in a blue uniform but without a Richard Boone mustache.

Jones didn't blame his partner's daydreaming. It took the edge off the real police work, which mostly consisted of tagging drunken drivers, handing out speeding tickets and breaking up altercations between wetbacks and white trash.

Sawyer gripped his gun. "You'd think somebody needed a head busting tonight. Goddamn, it's slower 'n spit out here."

"You're watching too many cop programs on TV."

"I like westerns, too," Sawyer replied in his defense.

The radio flashed on. "Car 79, we got a report of a domestic at 1287 Lincoln Street. You're over in that neck of the woods, ain't you, Jonesy?" The male dispatcher sounded as bored as Sawyer.

"I know the place. We're on our way."

Sawyer sat up from his slump.

"Don't get excited. It's Ben and María Curry again. Those two fight like clockwork. I'm damn sick of them. A nosy neighbor woman calls when they go at it. Sometimes I feel like running her in, too."

Jones turned the corner onto Lincoln Street.

"There's a woman down a ways," Sawyer said.

"It's María. She's probably drunk and beat up."

When he got closer, he pounded on the brakes. María looked like a creature formed out of blood. "Oh, son of a bitch."

The officers burst out of the car.

Oscar growled as Jones grabbed the back of María's dress and pulled her toward the headlights. "I don't think all that blood came from her head."

Through her fear, María dared to smile, because punishment had arrived at last. The men's eyes were solid with it.

"What'd you do to Ben?" Jones asked and then let out a hard sigh.

"What's wrong?" Sawyer said.

"She can't understand more than two damn words of English." Jones summoned the rudimentary Spanish he had picked up from his years in Borden. He asked her again about her husband.

She lifted her finger and pointed to the house up the street.

Grabbing María's arm, Jones dragged her along to the patrol car. He stopped. "Wait. She's going to bleed all over my seats. I'll walk her back to the house. You drive and meet us there, Sawyer."

At the house, Jones passed María over to his partner. "Watch her and stay out here."

Despite his 270 pounds, Jones hustled when needed. Stepping onto the porch of the house, he wiped the perspiration stinging his eyes. He hated domestics. Couples beat, spit and cursed each other. But have a police officer step in and—bam—they transferred all their venom to him, as if he had caused their problems. Ben was inside, all right. Probably hurt, definitely tight and ready to mix it up as usual. Jones drew his weapon, which gave him confidence.

Footprints in blood led him through the door. The house smelled harsh from burning chicken. Rounding a corner of the hallway, Jones saw Ben sitting against a wall in the kitchen. The officer lowered his weapon. Ben's T-shirt was more red than white from the blood that created a shiny pool around

the body. The officer counted at least six stab wounds. A black knife handle protruded from Ben's chest in what was probably the last blow.

"You ain't going to fight anybody no more, you dumb son of a bitch." Jones yelled out the door, "Bring her in!"

"What a mess," Sawyer said when he joined his partner. He tightened his grip on María, who shuddered and wept with equal parts frenzy and sadness. Shaking her as if she was a misbehaved child, the police officer found one of the few Spanish words he knew: "*Silencio*, dammit, *silencio*."

María put a hand over her mouth. With her other hand, she pulled her dog closer.

"Did you kill him?" Jones asked in halting Spanish.

She nodded. A ribbon of blood from her head wound had slid down her face.

Sawyer held María at arm's length. He guessed she was almost sixty years old, weighed one hundred pounds and measured a little over five feet tall. Tangles of long hair flew out of a salt-and-pepper braid on top of her head. Her eyes shrank to dots in an oval face from all the crying and swelling.

"How could this little thing topple that big man?" He kicked Ben's foot and answered his own question. "She managed somehow, because this boy got it good."

María started toward her husband. Sawyer tugged her back. "Lady, you did enough."

Inspecting the bottom of one of his shoes, Jones spit. He had stepped in the blood. "Damn domestics."