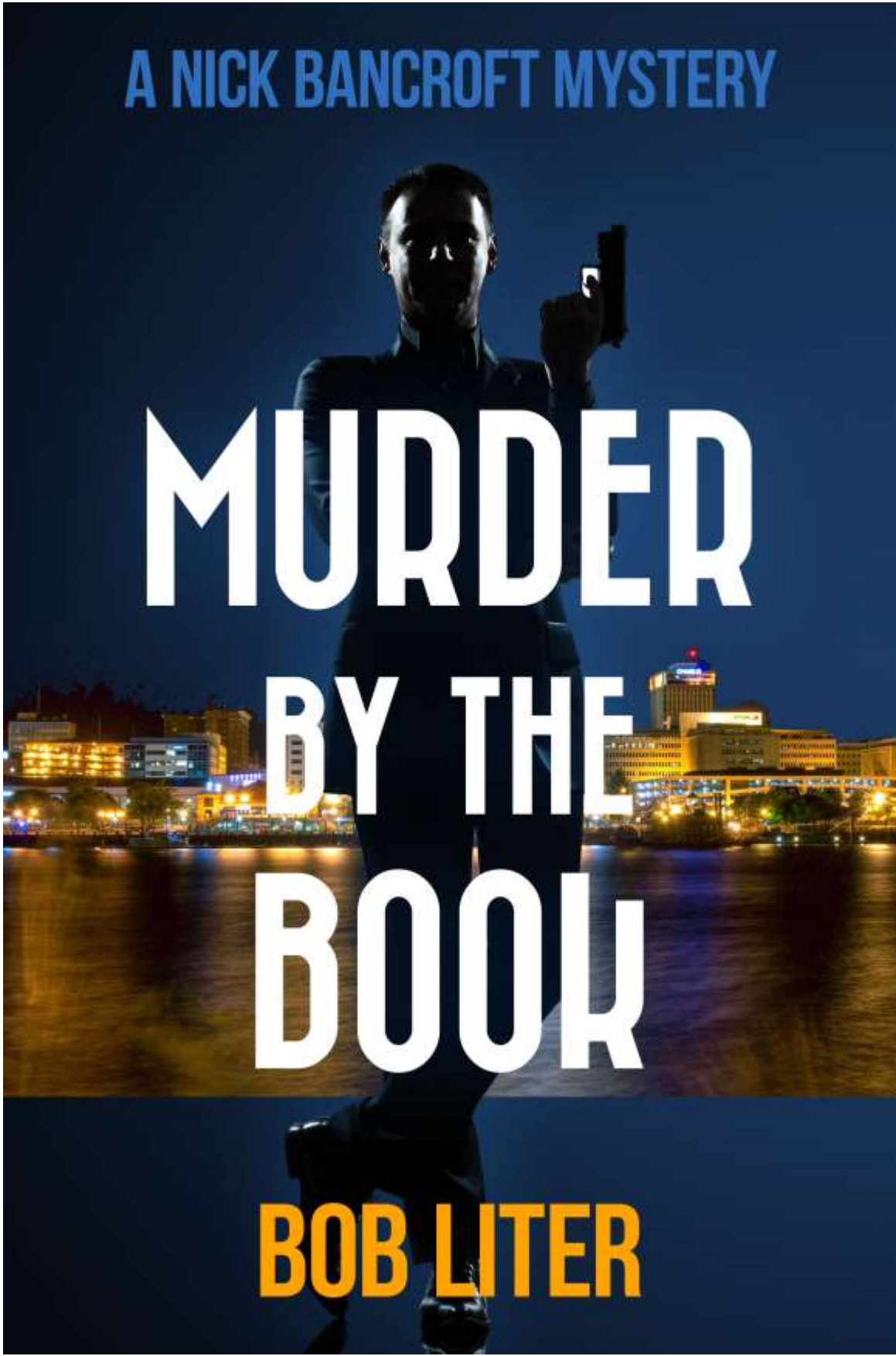


A NICK BANCROFT MYSTERY



MURDER
BY THE
BOOK

BOB LITER

Murder by the Book

A Nick Bancroft Mystery

By

Bob Liter

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Introduction by Martie Liter Ogborn

Welcome to *Murder by the Book*, the first novel in the series of Nick Bancroft Mysteries. While reading my Dad's books, preparing them for re-release, I discovered how much of himself he put into the stories. I hope you enjoy the puzzling who-done-it and the fascinating character study of Bob Liter aka Nick Bancroft who, by some standards, is just a good man who falls into the strangest situations.

For a proper introduction, here is a brief history and a few revealing stories of Robert T “Bob” Liter, (1923-2008). Dad was born in Iowa to Charles and Hazel Liter. The only boy in a family with two sisters, Bob was enterprising and caddied at the Des Moines neighborhood golf course where a golf-pro took Dad under his wing and taught him the game of golf. Although Bob was a lefty, left-handed golf clubs were hard to come by, so the golf-pro taught him how to play with a right-handed set. Bob learned and mastered many sports left-handed, although all his life he played golf right-handed and never forgot the generosity of his first golf instructor.

Shortly after high school, Bob enlisted in the military. As a Navy seaman recruit in World War II, one of his early assignments was a water boiler operator on a Landing Ship - Tank (LST) to support military amphibious operations. Along with other irreverent sailors who manned these curious ships, they sarcastically claimed the acronym stood for “Large Slow Target.” Hope, courage, and persistence went a long way during his years in the Navy.

One story I remember hearing; Dad was on shore leave in North Africa with fellow crew members all in sailor dress whites for a night on the town. Returning to the ship, slightly inebriated, the group wandered through an oil field. Their shoes were covered in black muck. In the morning it was apparent that Bob would be in trouble. His small shoe size, a men’s 5, and the small footprints on

the deck leading to his bunk easily convicted Seaman Recruit Liter. Bob was the only one to serve time in The Brig for the indiscretion.

Between his tours of duty, World War II and the Korean War, Bob attended and graduated from Drake University, School of Journalism. Dad even found time to get married to Mom.

Lillian Hyde, soon to be Lillian Liter, had graduated from high school and was working at S.S. Kresge's new FIVE and DIME in Des Moines. She would regularly be impressed by a cocky young fella named Bob who would come by the store and visit while she worked. Lillian could always tell when Bob was near, because from three aisles away she could hear the taps on his shoes and the tunes he would whistle as he walked toward her.

Bob Liter and Lillian Hyde were married on March 4, 1950 and honeymooned in a Quonset hut in Northern Iowa. It must have been some honeymoon! Not long after the wedding, Mom was sitting on a park bench in the quad of Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa close to their apartment and telling Dad I was on the way. I was born in November of 1950 around Thanksgiving. My Dad named me Martie Lynn. Mom and I didn't find out until years later he had named me after a waitress he had a crush on while he was in the service.

Dad's hope, courage, and persistence proved to be stepping stones into the newspaper world. By this time our happy little group now included my sister and brother. The family moved to Lincoln, IL and Bob went to work at the Lincoln Courier. Dad had the opportunity to pass along the generosity of his first golf instructor to a young fellow, John Swingle. Here is the story in John's own words:

"A week after I received my high school diploma I received a call from my hometown newspaper. I think it was the next day I had an interview with Bob Liter, city editor, about a summer proofreading job. Little did I know that Bob Liter was about to become my boss, my mentor, a terrific friend, confidant, and an exceptional influence on the rest of my life! He welcomed me to meet his

family, a relationship which continues to this day. Bob Liter was a terrific teacher that passed along his knowledge of the newspaper business on a practical everyday basis and not classroom programs. With that knowledge I launched my newspaper career that I enjoyed all of my working days. Bob Liter was a true newspaperman with a talent for writing, and an exceptional friend! My sincere thanks, Bob!" - John Swingle

Dear Reader, please enjoy the first chapter of *Murder by the Book*. I would love to hear from you. Email me Martie@BancroftMysteries.com or follow the wild and crazy adventures on the website <http://www.BancroftMysteries.com>

Social media:     MARTIE LITER OGBORN



Murder By the Book

CHAPTER ONE

Tires screeched as I started across Commerce Street on my way to Otto's Tavern for breakfast. I jumped back to the curb. Half a block to my left a battered pickup truck swerved around a man running in the middle of the street. Damn. It was Broadway John. His canvas shoes slapped the hot, cracked pavement with each uneven stride. The truck, loaded with junk for the scrap yard, rattled by.

Broadway John pulled up gasping for air.

"Mister, I think she's dead. She lost her clothes, and she's like a stiff dog I found once," he said.

"What do you mean, 'she's dead?' Who?"

"She's all stiff and cold, like the dog."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"All right, just calm down."

"She's at the football stadium, sitting in the first row. Doubled up with a book in her lap. You know, Centrel High, up on the bluff. I was looking for cans."

He carried his usual plastic garbage bag. It was empty. I ignored the lack of logic in looking for aluminum cans in August at a football stadium. I didn't want to get involved, damn it. I didn't want to hurt his feelings either.

"Come on," I said. "We'll drive up there."

I retrieved my ancient Escort from behind the nearly abandoned office building I had just left. The car sputtered the ten blocks or so to the stadium. We parked at the gate beside a police patrol car. Broadway John, or BJ as I called him, was trying to force a pair of thick eyeglasses onto his face.

"Look what I found," he said proudly, holding them toward me.

"Don't try to wear them. They're too small. They'll give you a headache. Come on."

The football field was surrounded by link fence, but the gate was open. We crossed the cinder track and headed toward the wooden bleachers on the grassy field. BJ trotted ahead. A policeman standing on the cinder track stopped him. Crime-scene tape was stretched from the top of the bleachers to a stake driven into the track and then back to the top.

When I caught up BJ insisted, "She was right there, right there." He pointed to the front row of the stands near the 50-yard line. Tears joined perspiration on his face.

"I believe you BJ. Police must have taken the body away. Let's go back to the car."

"What does he know about this?" the cop, a young patrolman I didn't know, asked. "There was a body. Homicide has been here and left. The body was taken to the morgue."

I explained that BJ saw the body when he was looking for aluminum cans.

"I'll give Detective Andy Brown all the details, but I want to get BJ out of here, okay?" The cop took our names and reluctantly allowed us to leave.

BJ still was confused about what happened to the body. I changed the subject.

"Don't look for cans at the football stadium in the summer. You'll find more in Hellerman Park. Don't stay around there too long, either. Remember, I told you to stay away from there when the bad guys come."

By the time we got to Hellerman Park, a block-square playground taken over at night by drug dealers, he was humming a tune I couldn't quite place. I left him there and returned to what I had started to do, get breakfast at the tavern. I told BJ's story to Otto Kamp, the bar owner, as I gnawed on a doughnut almost as stale as the air in the place.

"I suppose you want another cup of coffee," Otto said. I nodded. He added another figure to my tab.

"You better call Brown."

"Yeah, I guess I should."

I called Detective Andrew Brown, Centrel City, Illinois' finest, and explained how BJ found the body and how police already had taken it to the morgue when I returned BJ to the scene. Brown said a woman who runs every morning there called in.

"She must have been there right after BJ. I don't suppose it will help to talk to him but bring him in just in case," Andy said.

I agreed and figured that would be the end of my involvement. Sure, and I'd also win the lottery.

The next morning I sat at Otto's bar reading the sports pages of the Centrel City Press. Otto sat in a worn, cushioned chair behind the bar. A wall lamp cast shadows beyond his ancient head. He commented from time to time on the news in the front section of the newspaper. I was trying not to listen. I was perturbed because there was no report on the Professional Bowlers' Association national tournament in Milwaukee. The finals were to be on television the next Saturday. It pissed me off that the paper had room for local dart ball results but no room for a national bowling tournament.

It was around 10 o'clock. The sun partially penetrated the dirt on the front windows. I know because I was looking in that direction, composing in my mind the blistering letter to the newspaper I would never write, when a man I later learned was Ramsey Sinclair, opened the front door, hesitated, allowing sunlight to actually enter the place, and said in a voice that carried to every corner, "Is Nick Bancroft here?"

That's me. I couldn't see much against the light, but I noted the classy cut of his suit and decided it looked too expensive to be owned by a bill collector.

Still, I hesitated to answer. He said, "Well, surely the question is not that difficult for you two ... gentlemen."

"I'm Nick Bancroft," I said.

"Could I tear you away from all this and back to your office long enough to discuss business?"

I stiffened.

Otto must have noticed. He said, "Mister Bancroft was just saying it's time for him to get back to work."

Sinclair turned and left. I followed in the wake of his long strides as we crossed the street, went up the creaking wooden stairs, past the Ballard Inc. office on the second floor and up to the third floor.

The notice from my office door informing potential customers I could be found at Otto's was on the floor. A dirty, chipped blue bowl near the note reminded me I forgot to feed the cat.

My office consisted of a worn, oversized wooden desk with drawers that stuck, a swivel chair that didn't always swivel, and some battered filing cabinets. In front of the desk was a wooden chair for the occasional visitor. A radio with a cracked plastic case sat on the window ledge beside an ancient air-conditioner. The window overlooked the parking lot in back of the building. A one-room apartment adjoined the office. The rest of the third floor housed cobwebs and dust.

I settled behind the desk. Sinclair rejected my offer to sit after looking at the "guest" chair. He was slender and a shade over six feet tall. His hair and eyebrows were black. Touches of silver highlighted his sideburns. His close set, penetrating eyes glared at me. His thin lips were turned down, reminding me of a drama mask.

He asked me to investigate the murder of his daughter, Linsley. "I'm sure you know about it by now. Her body was found at the football stadium. I'm from Chicago, but I used to live in this burg years ago, and I have contacts here. I'm

told you're the person most likely to find out who killed my daughter."

I said, "First you should know, just for the record, that I am not a licensed private investigator. I'm an ex-reporter who inherited this sorry office from a friend for whom I occasionally worked. He died and had the bad taste to leave me his dying detective agency. It offered me a chance to live here for awhile and quit the entertainment business that passes as news."

Sinclair didn't need to know the place was rent free for a few more months because my benefactor had paid it in advance, and that I was just drifting until the rent ran out.

He informed me he knew all the details about my squalid existence – he didn't actually say squalid, just implied it – and said he wanted an answer.

I said, "Yes."

"I'll pay you two-hundred dollars a day. I expect a telephone report tomorrow at four o'clock. Four o'clock. Don't make me wait. I'll deduct from your pay for every second I wait for your call."

He handed me an envelope and left. It contained ten one-hundred dollar bills and a card bearing his name and phone number.

I stuffed the money into my billfold and took a can of cat food from the filing cabinet, opened the thing, and put the stuff in the bowl. My cat responsibilities were met for another day. I went across the street to Otto's and my favorite stool.

"Now tell me again how much I owe you, Mister Bartender," I said.

"I suppose you want another cup of coffee."

I fanned the bills near his face.

"Here's a hundred, my man. It was twenty-six dollars for coffee and those things you call doughnuts and seventy-three for beer, right? You may not keep the change. However, get yourself a beer on me, and I'll have one also."

Otto stared at the money. "It's too early for beer for you ... or me. That guy hire you to rob a bank? Pay you in advance? Thanks for taking care of me before you pay the others."

"You and the office utilities – those are the ones I pay first."

He put the money in his billfold, took a dollar out of the cash register, and handed it to me. He tore up the tab that had been next to the cash register for several weeks.

He placed a cup of coffee in front of me. "On the house," he said.

"Sure, now that I have money you offer free coffee. When I'm broke you charge it to my account. Great."

Otto turned to his chair behind the bar, sighed, and sat down. He was at least 60 years old, judging from his wrinkled face, although we never discussed his age. He probably weighed 200 pounds even though he was little more than five feet tall. He wore baggy pants, a pair of squashed shoes, and T-shirts that advertised things. For some reason I liked the guy. Maybe he was a father image.

I told him about the case. He got up and riffled through newspapers on a small table near his chair. "Ya, here it is." He handed me the newspaper section containing the report on the death of Linsley Sinclair. The paper identified her as a 33-year-old resident of Centrel City. Cause of death, according to the report, still was under investigation.

Detective Andrew Brown was quoted, but, as usual, he didn't offer much. Brown and I had argued many times about his withholding information that, according to me, belonged to the public.

"Wow," Otto said. "You're in the big league at last. I may never have to loan you beer money again."

"Yes, but I may not be big league long. Sinclair didn't give me a chance to explain that I probably can't find out more than the police. Brown is on the case, and he's good."

"You solved the Anderson case when you were a reporter. Why not this one?"

"Yeah, why not," I said as I slid from the bar stool and left.

The sun did a job on my eyes before they adjusted, otherwise I might have avoided BJ. Still, I had promised to get him to the police station. The poor guy thinks I'm the greatest thing since the last Broadway musical because I did a piece on him a couple of years ago when I still worked for a living. He's been a character around the downtown area for more years than anyone could remember. He's big, bony, has a hawk nose, but has the mind of a child – a sweet, harmless child.

He knew a bushel of Broadway songs from musicals and usually sang at least one whenever we met. His real name was John Snyder. He walked with me and sang to himself, lost in his own musical world. Apparently he had forgotten about the body.

We walked by a pool hall, a couple of taverns as forlorn as Otto's, Lou's Restaurant, and several boarded up businesses to get to the police station three blocks away.

The cement steps leading to the station were worn from constant traffic over the years. I climbed them once again.

"Hey, where you been?" asked the desk sergeant, a guy named Morris, as we entered the main room with its high ceiling, soiled windows, and scattered desks.

The ringing of telephones, the hum of conversation, occasional shouting, and the long counter designed to keep the public at bay reminded me that maybe I missed the place. I had spent a lot of time there as a reporter.

Morris gave me the prepared-for-the-media reports on Linsley Sinclair's murder. I leaned against the counter as I read them and wrote in a small

notebook. He gave me a questioning look as BJ continued his singsong routine. When I finished BJ and I went around the counter to Brown's office. Brown talked to him briefly.

"What a witness he would make," Brown said after BJ left when I told him we had private business. I invited Brown for a cup of coffee at the Lucky Diner across the street. It has been there forever and probably never passed a health department test, but at least it was convenient. After we got the coffee I informed Andy that Ramsey Sinclair had hired me to find out who killed his daughter.

Andy, who is about my height and weight, five feet ten and 180 pounds, and about my age, late thirties, put his left hand on top of his bald head and said, "Why in the world would he hire a broken down bowler to investigate anything?"

"He's heard how good I am, I suppose."

"How good you are? The lawyers seem to think you're capable of investigating traffic accidents. Desperate people sometimes hire you to gather divorce evidence, but a murder?"

Andy, with his angry dark eyes and jutting chin, intimidated witnesses. He also intimidated most reporters and other low types. However I had learned to get past his tough exterior and was no longer awed by him.

"I read all the police reports. Tell me what the reports don't say."

It annoyed me, the need to beg for information from "public servants." It was no different when I questioned Andy, although he was less arrogant and self-serving than most.

"How much is this guy paying you to tell him what police have found out so far?" Andy asked.

"Enough so I don't mind buying you coffee. He demanded that I give him a report by tomorrow afternoon. You always know more than you tell reporters. Give me a break. If this story is good enough I'll sell it to one of the Chicago papers. I can make you a hero."

"Would you do that for me? Gee, wouldn't that be swell." He leaned toward me. "The victim's mother lives here. She's in the phone book. Mrs. Ramsey Sinclair. She's divorced. Never remarried. And there is this thing that you must promise to keep quiet, at least for now."

I nodded. I had almost always kept promises I made to him. An overhead fan groaned as it pushed hot air our way. The skinny, redheaded waitress behind the counter laughed as she talked to a customer. I waited.

"There were no marks on the body except a small one on the left arm, like a pin prick. The lab people probably will find that something lethal was injected into her system. And whoever killed her put a sex etiquette book on her lap."

A sex etiquette book. No wonder he had kept it quiet so far. The media would have a ball with that.

"Anything you find out you give me, right?"

I agreed. Before it was over he held out on me and I returned the favor.

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