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WASTED

Austin crime writer to hold book signing

BY KYLE WHITACRE
The Battalion

Popular novels such as *Silence of the Lambs* and Dean Koontz's *Intensity* delve into fictional accounts of sadistic crimes, but sometimes truth can be stranger than fiction.

Austin-based writer Suzy Spencer, whose new book, *Wasted*, deals with a bizarre murder case that occurred in Austin in 1995.

The case involves 25-year-old Regina Hartwell, a wealthy lesbian who indulged in drugs and partying.

A year before her murder, Hartwell had a love affair with 18-year-old Kim LeBlanc, a former high school cheerleader and student at the University of Texas. After breaking up with Hartwell, Kim started dating Justin Thomas.

The couple started using Hartwell for her money and drugs. They had access to her bank account, and withdrew large sums of money from it, but on June 29, 1995, Spencer alleges the two decided to kill Hartwell. They entered her house, and Spencer said after a 30-minute struggle Thomas stabbed Hartwell in the neck.

LeBlanc and Thomas both testified in court that they took the body to the countryside and burned it. Six days later the pair was arrested for the murder. Justin was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison while LeBlanc was never convicted.

Spencer, who has 20 years writing experience for magazines including *Fortune* and *People*, said a friend suggested she write about the murder after the trial in the fall of '96.

After an Austin publishing house rejected the project, a New York publisher called her and asked for a proposal.

"From there on things just got placed together," Spencer said. "It was kind of like I was destined to write this book."

Coincidences followed as she researched the case, including meeting the victim's best friend while researching court documents, and meeting the chief investigator in the case while having lunch at Schlotzsky's Deli.

While writing the book, Spencer interviewed Thomas, an event she said was a chilling experience.

"It's quite unusual sitting in the same room as a cold-blooded murderer who was suspected of killing at least a dozen people," Spencer said. "His whole



Spencer's book *Wasted* is based upon the Austin murder of Regina Hartwell, a wealthy lesbian who became known for her love of drugs, love, and Kim LeBlanc and Justin Thomas. Her upper body was covered with tattoos and she had a love affair with me a tour of them."

Spencer said Thomas still denies the murder and claims LeBlanc is the true killer. She said LeBlanc's testimony, along with Thomas' testimony, was used during the trial to help convict Thomas.

Spencer said a jury member noticed anomalies in Thomas' testimony. During the trial the jury member, a former student at Austin, pointed out these anomalies to the other jurors, who eventually convicted Thomas.

Five days after *Wasted* was released, it became an extended *New York Times* bestseller.

"Only 50,000 books were printed in Austin and all those have been shipped out of town."

"The publishers are probably not doing a reprinting so this might be the last chance to get a copy."

Spencer has started to work on another book, this one deals with another murder in January 1995. She refers to this one as "Southern Baptist killer stripper."

Spencer is spending the next few weeks searching this case while promoting *Wasted*.

She will have a book signing at Hastings Avenue from 7 to 9 p.m. on Saturday.

A&M Men's Basketball

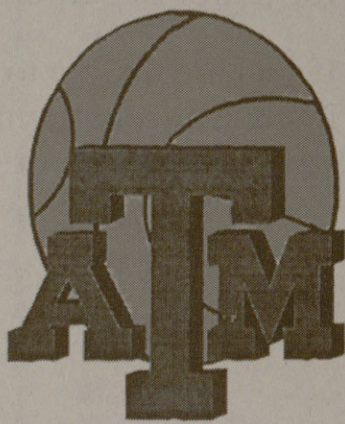
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