Background on the Button case:

Somewhere in the world there's always an expert on any subject, no matter how arcane," says Bret Christian. In 1999, Christian, the publisher of independent suburban newspapers around Perth, Australia, needed to shed light on a murder that had taken place on February 9, 1963. The murder weapon was either a 1962 Simca Aronde, a homely French car with the rounded look of the early '50s that in its time and place was considered sporty for its 1500cc engine, or a 1961 Holden, an Australian GM car.

On the evening of the murder—John Button's 19th birthday—Button's girlfriend, Rosemary Anderson, had stomped out of the house after an argument and was headed home. She walked from Redfern Street, the Buttons' leafy lane of working-class cottages, to the busier Nicholson Road, which ran under a railway embankment. Button followed in the Simca, stopping several times to beg forgiveness. At length, he broke for a smoke at a gas station and watched Rosemary disappear under the embankment. From there, she turned onto Stubbs Terrace, then a poorly lit haven for auto-body shops. When Button resumed his pursuit, he soon found her unconscious along Stubbs Terrace. He took her to a nearby doctor, who called an ambulance.

The police suspected Button, because of the argument and a damaged grille on the Simca that he attributed to an earlier fender-bender. They interrogated him, and punched him up a bit, says Button, and then wrote a confession, which Button signed. Button served five years' hard labor for manslaughter.

Unknown to Button until after his trial, another man, Eric Edgar Cooke, had confessed to the same murder. Cooke was a serial killer who had terrorized Perth since 1958. His 20 murders and assaults on young women included six hit-and-runs. After he was nabbed for a shooting, in August 1963, Cooke, a small man with a harelip and cleft palate, whose father had beaten him with the regularity of sunrise, confessed the rest. The police, heretofore stymied, embraced the confessions, except regarding Anderson and another murder where conviction had been achieved. (The Kennedy assassination, which had occurred two days earlier, pushed Cooke's trial off the front pages, says Christian.) But the Court of Criminal Appeal dismissed the two men's subsequent appeals.

His sentence served, Button worked desperately to prove his innocence. A break came in 1991, when his brother met a journalist, Estelle Blackburn, at a dance. Blackburn poured her life into Button's case, spending six years writing a book, Broken Lives. She dug up "fresh evidence" that enabled reopening the case under Australian law: a Vespa rider who claimed Cooke had chased him, and a man who had seen Button place the unconscious Anderson in his car, but who was not called as a witness at the trial.

Christian published Blackburn's book in 1998 but worried that it lacked "the killer piece of evidence she needed [for Button] to win in court." These witnesses' stories were vague, and Christian feared presciently that the prosecutor would "tear them apart."