



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

Douglas Ann Munson in a L.A. parking lot. "I thought you had to be drunk to write, that's what all my heroes did," she says.

# A Hostile Witness

## Attorney's Novel Relays the Pain She Sees Daily in Dependency Court

By BOB SIPCHEN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Somewhere in the Los Angeles County Criminal Courts building, the McMartin Pre-School trial had just ended with a whimper, leaving the city wondering if maybe the whole seven-year case wasn't just a bizarre collective dream.

But even as the verdicts were being read, on the 12th floor of the building, Douglas Ann Munson ping-ponged between two storage closets—conveniently transformed into courtrooms—and a daily nightmare of decidedly real child abuse cases.

Commandeering a corner of the hallway from the morning crowd of distraught and bewildered parents, Munson, a dependency court attorney, counseled a nervous young client on why the court wants her to kick heroin before it will return her children.

A few feet away, a girl of 4 or 5 *clickety-clicked* around on the heels of shiny new patent-leather shoes. Another girl sang a "Sesame Street" tune while eating Cheez-Its. Nothing in the children's faces revealed whether they had been sodomized, immersed in scalding water, abandoned, beaten or merely neglected—the standard litany at dependency hearings.

But then, the scars of abuse, like the other wounds depravity and poverty leave on this city, are not visible to everyone.

A few years ago, however, the daily assault on innocence got to Munson:

"I just got up one day and couldn't go on anymore. I felt overwhelmed. Depressed. Like I was seeing things other people weren't seeing. I saw people crying in the hallways. I saw people shooting up in the bathroom. I saw women who had come to

California literati.

In the hallways, colleagues congratulated Munson. "I can't wait to read your book," one woman gushed while waiting for an elevator. Munson smiled and said thanks.

"They think it's a Jacqueline Susann *roman à clef* and they'll find themselves in it."

But the characters, explained Munson (named Douglas after an uncle killed in World War II), are not taken from real life, not directly anyway.

Which should relieve her colleagues. "El Nino" is hardly light reading, and none of its characters—the abusers and the abused, and the lawyers and courtroom personnel who seem to absorb the sickness that surrounds them—are the sort anyone would like to see as a reflection of himself.

Publishers Weekly said "El Nino" is "a raw, sometimes ugly book that will distress but not fail to move." Kirkus Reviews called the novel "an anguished tour of several kinds of hell."

All of which are in Los Angeles.

Munson's novel unfolds in an unusually steamy summer during "El Nino," the tropical condition that heated the Pacific and wilted Angelenos a few years back. In the course of the novel, Sandy Walker, a dependency court attorney, explores the

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Douglas Ann Munson  
Author of 'El Nino'

the court because they had a child abuse case, standing in the hallway hitting their kids."

To confront the pain—the city's and her own—Munson turned to her typewriter. Working at night, with an array of spiritual candles and a hypodermic needle as totemic inspiration, she poured out her thoughts.

Now "El Nino," her fictional exploration of this Los Angeles underworld, has arrived in bookstores with beautiful cover art and complimentary blurbs from Southern

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# MUNSON: Novel Reflects the Pain of Dependency Court

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city at its most distressing. Alternately avoiding and confronting the tragedies of mangled families and her own past as she goes, Walker wanders through a vibrant inner-city slum called Barrio Loco Nuevo and the shadowy side of La-La Land where parents torture their children.

This is, the Chicago Tribune's book critic said, a "Nathanael Westian" Los Angeles, "a cursed place, a desert where people quite possibly are not meant to live—at least not happily."

But that critic also praised Munson's "tremendously courageous writing," adding that "El Nino" is "not to be missed by anyone who seriously cares about what's happening to our society on the edge of the 21st Century."

In a corner of the courthouse snack shop, Munson looked out a grimy window at the city and launched a preemptive rhetorical strike: "I guess the question everyone is going to ask me is, 'Is Sandy Walker, that horrible drunk in the book, really you?'"

A redhead now, after a long run as a bleached blond ("I'm constantly reinventing the self"), Munson played with her long ponytail and sighed. "I don't know."

"El Nino's" Sandy Walker is hardened to the wretched victims she encounters each day because she understands them too well. She was raped by two neighborhood boys at age 15, while "Sea Hunt" played on TV. She was abused by her father. She is an alcoholic, a drug abuser, and her lusty appetite for sex—particularly with young

Latinos—would have to be considered dangerous, even before the age of AIDS.

Munson was never raped or physically abused as a child. While she was writing "El Nino," she did go into a wild, self-destructive spiral. Then she was found to have breast cancer—now in remission—and had little choice but to pull out of it abruptly, kicking alcohol as part of the cure.

Munson, 42, said she is now much happier and healthier—a condition that makes her, as an artist, rather uneasy. "I thought you had to be drunk to write, that's what all my heroes did." She has, however, just completed a second novel—a pulp mystery.

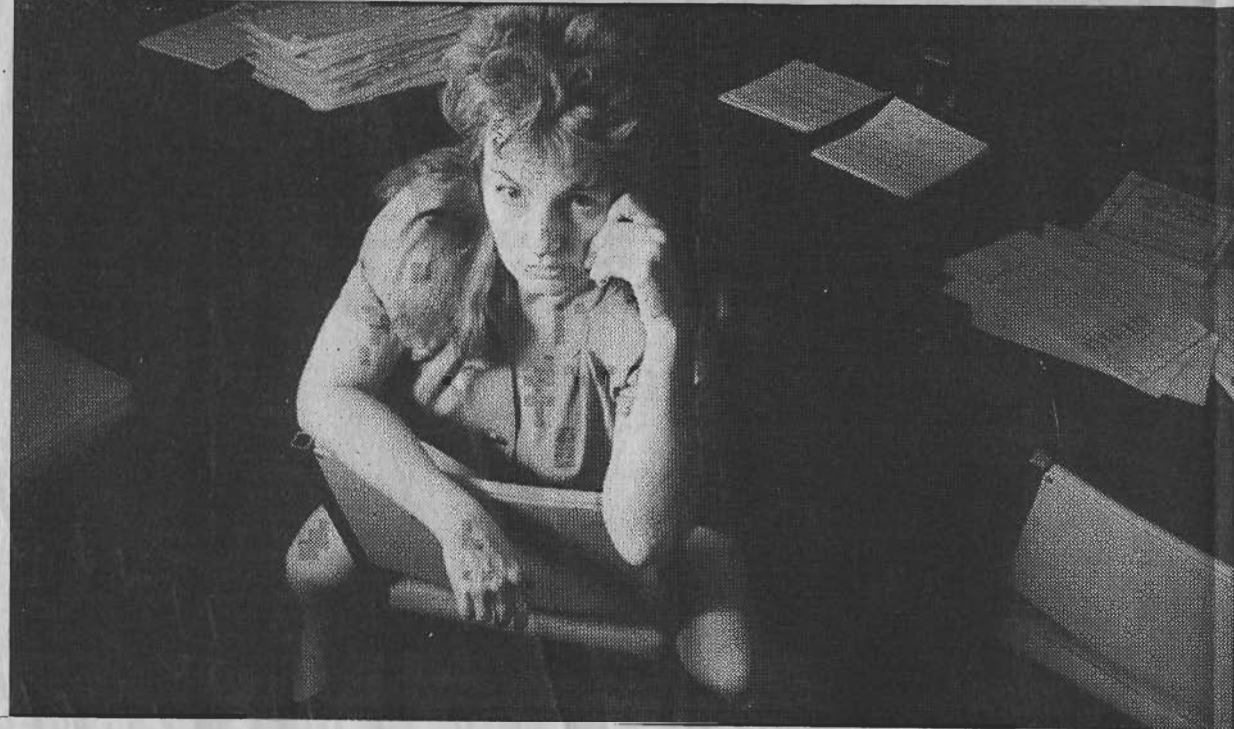
Barbara Cohen, another dependency court attorney and a friend of Munson, said the author herself is widely recognized as a character of sorts by her colleagues. Some find her peculiar, some intriguing. "She has a style all her own . . . a sense of adventure, of risk-taking. She looks at life as a drama to be played out."

Munson's father was a newspaperman who moved his family from town to town across the country as he moved from paper to paper. "I can't remember a single friend I had as a child," Munson said. "Someone once told me I seemed to be a person who was raised by wolves."

Then her father took a job writing industrial films. He was quickly hired by Disney studios, and moved the family to Los Angeles.

"Dad always told me that I





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Attorney Douglas Ann Munson says she writes to reveal the myths that would otherwise remain un-

told as a way "to honor the children who for whatever reason won't be able to tell their own story."

couldn't write, that I shouldn't write," Munson said. "He told me it's a tough gig; he didn't think I could cut it."

A strict disciplinarian, he had an old-school newsman's disdain for those who wrote for other than economic reasons. "He thought people who write for personal growth and enlightenment were just being artsy. . . . That was the worst thing someone could be, like the people who move to Ojai to make bad pottery."

When Munson was 17, she told her mother she didn't want to go to college. "I wanted to be a waitress and go on the road, like Jack Kerouac," Munson recalled. "We were in the kitchen. She picked up a coffeepot and threw it at my head."

College proved to be the only way to escape her family. Munson enrolled in the University of New Mexico, with a major in Latin

American studies and minors in Spanish and geology. As part of the program, she lived in Quito, Ecuador, for a year, where she became involved with a local union.

As she described it, that episode—like much of her life—sounds dramatic, in an out-of-whack, David Lynch sort of way: "It was a hot dog vendors' union; they went all over the city selling miniature hot dogs in little miniature buns."

While in Ecuador, Munson corresponded with a UCLA law professor who urged her to study the law. She did. "I felt like I was the only person at law school who really didn't want to be a lawyer. The first day, there were people who already owned monogrammed briefcases."

When her father died, Munson started writing poetry. "Self-confessional, 'Aren't I trash?'"

poor-me stuff," she calls it. One editor, she remembered, rejected a poem she had written "because it had too many images."

After nine years as an attorney in dependency court, her predilection for images comes through. With a caseload of 200 families or fractions of families or alleged families, all somehow coming apart, the work can get daunting.

As she ricochets from case to case and courtroom to courtroom, she compared what she does to working in a MASH unit, to working on an assembly line. "It's like flying down the freeway in a convertible with no windscreen, and having it all hit you in the face," she said.

Between frantic moments, Munson explained that she actually likes her job: "You get hooked on the action." Yet she sees the state of things as an indictment of society.

American culture has no room for innocence, she said. "There are no children anymore. Look around. They all look like little MTV sluts."

Something is wrong with a society that periodically bewails the plight of its "poor little abused children in Movies of the Week," but then refuses to pay for solutions, she continued. "We need free child care, food programs. . . more inviting employment opportunities than selling crack."

And even when things do fall apart, no one wants to pay to fix it. "This is one of the largest court systems in the country and the child dependency cases are stuck in a storage closet!"

"El Nino," however, is a poetic, deeply personal book, not a polemic. "Our lives are myths," she said, and her writing reveals the myths that would otherwise remain untold "to honor the children who for whatever reason won't be able to tell their own story."

With a histrionic flourish that folks who know her say is typical, Munson decided to take a reporter for a ride in a battered old Mercedes handed down from her mother. Pulling up beside a faceless government building near the corner of Bixel Street and Beaudry Avenue, she got out and walked down a sidewalk covered with gang hieroglyphics, running her hand along a dirty chain-link fence that encloses a parking lot.

"This is Barrio Loco Nuevo," Munson said, adjusting her Ray-Bans, gesturing to the lot.

While she was writing "El Nino," she used to come here, sit in her car, listening to Spanish-language radio stations and watching the people go about their lives. Then one night she arrived and found bulldozers leveling the neighborhood, moving out the impoverished residents to make room for commuters' cars.

"Now, Barrio Loco Nuevo doesn't exist anymore, except in my book."