Ann Rule lawsuit against Seattle Weekly tossed
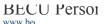
By GENE JOHNSON, Associated Press
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SEATTLE (AP) — A judge has thrown out true-crime author Ann Rule's defamation lawsuit against a weekly Seattle newspaper, finding that an article accusing her of "sloppy storytelling" constitutes protected free speech.

Rule, who has written dozens of best-selling books, sued the Seattle Weekly and freelance author Rick Swart over a piece published in 2011. The article criticized her book about Liysa Northon, an Oregon woman who served 12 years in prison after killing her husband.

When it ran the story, the newspaper didn't realize that Swart, then a longtime Oregon journalist, was engaged to marry Northon.

Rule said the piece damaged her reputation. King County Superior Court Judge Laura Inveen dismissed the claims in separate rulings Monday and Tuesday. She found that Rule's lawsuit violated a Washington state law aimed at barring lawsuits that target the legal exercise of free speech and public participation, and that Rule had not established there were any false, defamatory statements about her in the article.

The judge awarded Swart and Seattle Weekly $10,000 apiece, not including legal fees, as the state law requires.

Rule "was just clearly trying to silence her critics," Swart's attorney, Christopher Blattner, said Wednesday.

But Rule's lawyer, Anne Bremner, said she didn't believe the state law should apply to an article published in a newspaper and that she anticipated asking the judge to reconsider or filing an appeal. Bremner argued the law only applies "to speech trying to influence the government."

"This statute clearly was not enacted for the purpose of defeating general defamation claims," Bremner wrote in an email.

The lawsuit came amid a long-running feud precipitated by "Heart Full of Lies," Rule's book about Northon.

Northon argued that she was a battered spouse and that she shot her husband, pilot Chris Northon, during a camping trip in eastern Oregon in 2000 to protect herself and her children. But Rule's book "Heart Full of Lies" suggested Liysa Northon had long planned the killing and faked evidence of abuse to cover up her real motive: collecting insurance money and other benefits.

Liysa Northon pleaded guilty to manslaughter and was released in 2012. She married Swart in prison in 2011. The Seattle Weekly's then-editor, Caleb Hannan, said he didn't learn until after the article was published that Swart and Northon were engaged.

In a lengthy editor's note days after the piece ran, Hannan explained the omission and said he had uncovered several minor mistakes in Swart's reporting. But he said evidence supported the main argument of the piece, which said Rule had failed to interview some of Northon's relatives and had overlooked indications that she was, in fact, a victim of domestic violence.

"The article contained innumerable inaccuracies and untruths concerning the testimony and evidence in the trial of Liysa Northon and also included various unfounded personal attacks on Rule," said the complaint. "At the time ... Swart and Northon were engaged, and any meaningful inquiry by Seattle Weekly or Hannan should have discovered this significant source of bias."

In seeking to have the case dismissed, Seattle Weekly noted that Rule herself invoked Oregon's version of the state law in winning the dismissal of a lawsuit that Northon filed over the book. If Oregon's law protected Rule for the publication of the book, then Washington's should protect Seattle Weekly and Swart for the article, the defendants argued.

Rule has written dozens of books. Her 1980 tale "The Stranger Beside Me" detailed her time working on a crisis hotline with serial killer Ted Bundy.

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