



# A witness to the cold

David Guterson's novel "Snow Falling on Cedars" may have landed him a place on the literary map, and the New York Times bestseller list back in 1994, but it is his continued attention to Northwest themes and stories, coupled with his maturing sense of nuance since that early blockbuster, that has established him as such an intriguing regional writer.

"The Final Case," his first novel in over a decade, borrows many details from a shocking 2011 incident that happened in Sedro-Woolley, Washington. Hana Williams, an Ethiopian girl who had been adopted into a large Christian family, died of hypothermia right outside of her home, while the rest of the family stood inside, watching her. It was apparent that Hana was malnourished and physically abused before her death. Williams' parents, who justified their harsh disciplinary measures as necessary training to raise righteous, God fearing children, were taken to trial, convicted and given decadeslong sentences.

Guterson attended their trial. Now, nearly 10 years later, he has written "The Final Case." The nameless, aging narrator in his novel also is an author. And that narrator ends up attending a trial that contains many strikingly similar elements of Williams' tragedy. It happens this way, the narrator is virtually retired, by virtue of the fact that he simply has stopped going into the room where he used to write.

The narrator's dad, on the other hand, is an octogenarian attorney who still goes into the office every day with his briefcase and his bran flakes, despite the fact that the telephone seldom rings for him anymore. But one day the telephone does ring. It is the public defender's office in Skagit County, which has run out of available public defend-

## This week's book

'The Final Case' by David Guterson  
Knopf – 272 pp — \$27

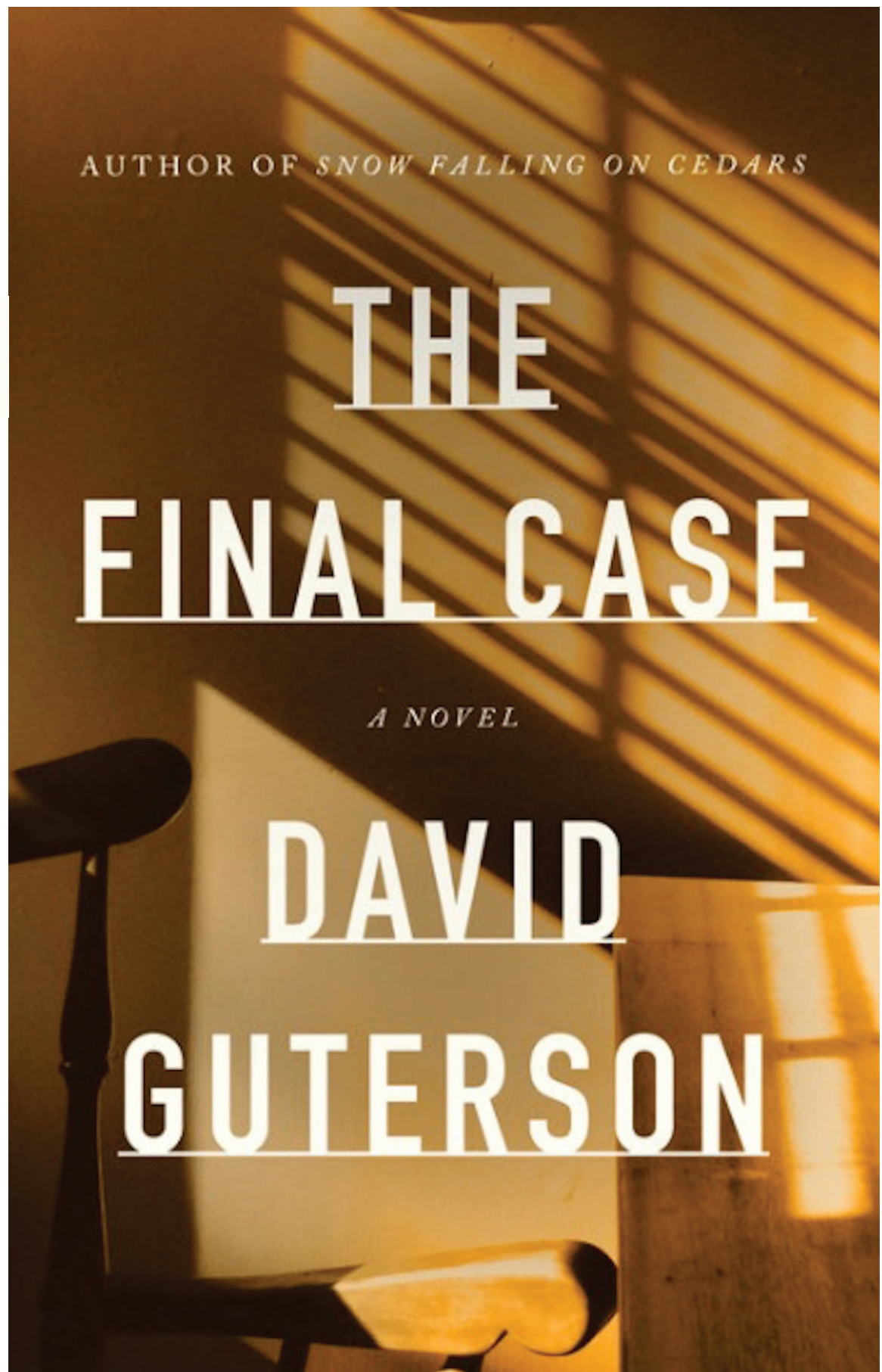
ers and needs someone to represent a woman being accused of the murder of her adopted child.

The attorney asks his son to drive him up Interstate 5 to the Skagit County jail so that he can meet with his new client. And so begins the narrator's immersion into the sad and sordid details of the case. While there is plenty of courthouse procedural in this book, this novel is about much more. Guterson and his narrator, in both metaphorical and physical driver's seats, exercise license to take plenty of detours.

Into not only the pleasures of tea culture, for example, but also the nasty imperialist abuses of the tea trade. (The narrator's sister owns a teahouse.) Into the Ethiopian crisis, into home ownership ("a series of staying actions against ruin"), briefly into exploding head syndrome, and into the world of fiction writers who grapple with insecurity, absurdity and cynicism as they court relevance or revelation in the crafting of something out of nothing.

And yet Guterson perseveres, perhaps invoking one of his own early influences, novelist John Gardner, as our nameless narrator sits "in a slant of commodious October light" and contemplates both the appalling tragedy and the sustaining love of the human race. "The Final Case" is a gracefully written, deeply affecting novel.

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