In her story-telling Irish family, the dinner table always set the scene, said Connie Fletcher. When sister Julie joined the Chicago police force in 1979, her narratives began to outshine those of the other siblings.

"Julie would come to the table with these incredible stories about what she had seen on the street," recalled Fletcher, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and author of the forthcoming book, What Cops Know. "It's a cop's job, and before that she worked in violent crimes and on a tactical team that orchestrated undercover cops in drug busts and raids and in decoy prostitution work. She also has been trained as a hostage negotiator. Through Julie's stories, I began to see that police officers know a lot about crime and about human nature."

Her interest piqued by her sister's narratives, Fletcher set out to record other police stories. "My book grew out of an article about my sister's tactical team that I wrote in 1983 for Chicago Magazine," she explained. The magazine excerpted a chapter of What Cops Know in November 1990 issue. "A literary agent from New York read the article and asked that I put together a book proposal, sample chapter, and table of contents. These publishers proved interested in the project.

"As a rule, police officers don't trust reporters," Fletcher continued. "So my sister helped me make connections. Several lieutenants who read and liked the article also made introductions on my behalf."

**Kitchen table ambiance**

Fletcher received official Chicago Police Department permission to embark on the project, with the stipulation that she interview police off-duty. Fletcher used that stipulation to reproduce her familiar "kitchen table" ambiance: she sat with 135 police officers in restaurants or their own homes, often after shifts of duty that ended at 2 a.m.

"When I spoke with partners or with groups of cops, the interaction really felt like sitting around with my family," Fletcher said. "Most of the officers preferred the interview by saying they didn't have much to tell me; three hours later, they would admit with surprise that more had happened than they realized.

"All of the police officers I interviewed were terrific storytellers," she continued. "They told beautifully crafted stories with suspense, a climax, and a moral. They were vividly about their work."

The officers also exploded any stereotypes they may have had about police, Fletcher said. "They all were intelligent, perceptive, and sensitive. The homicide people said they all cry — and that anyone who says otherwise is a liar. The officers on major accident investigations see horrible and gruesome things — and go home at night and give their children an extra hug. I heard so many cops say they are so thankful for what they have. They may have to act callous on the job, but they really don't feel that way. Many admitted that drug busts in front of children affect them deeply; they hate being the bogey man who knocks down the door and takes daddy away."