

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: Kurland, "How to Solve a Murder: The Forensic Handbook"

REFERENCE: Kurland M. How to Solve a Murder: The Forensic Handbook, MacMillan, 1995.

There are very few books that have been published on the subject of criminalistics which are so outstanding that no forensic library could be considered complete without at least some of them. For example, Gross' *Criminal Investigation*, Kirk's *Crime Investigation*, O'Hara and Osterburg's *An Introduction to Criminalistics*, Soderman and O'Connell's *Modern Criminal Investigation*, and Svensson and Wendel's *Techniques of Crime Scene Investigation* are classic in their overview of this discipline.

There are a few books on the subject of criminalistics that are so poor that they never should have been published at all. Kurland's book is one of them. The majority of books on the subject of criminalistics fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Of the very worst books ever written on the subject of criminalistics, Kurland's book is certainly near the top of the list. The first paragraph in Chapter One, *The Specialists*, contains the most valuable information in that chapter. It is a quote from Soderman and O'Connell. In that chapter Kurland lists no less than 14 descriptive titles for what he identifies as "scientific specialists". While Forensic Artists, Forensic Linguists, and Forensic Sculptors are included in this listing, criminalists are not.

In Chapter Two, *The Investigation*, the crime scene diagram on page 38 suggests that it is a *meticulous exploded drawing* of how one would be made by a criminalist. Kurland should have given credit to Soderman and O'Connell for this diagram as, with only

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slight modification, it was plagiarized from page 81 of their 1935 book (listed above) in which a 1930 homicide case is illustrated. Not to have acknowledged the source of this diagram as having been copied from a previous publication is unfair and suggests that the author could not, or would not, prepare one himself.

Chapter Three, *The Medical Examiner*, incorrectly illustrates the patterns of gunshot residue as a function of discharge distance. Such information as this ought better to have been in his Chapter Four, *The Gun*, as this subject is criminalistics and not forensic pathology.

Chapter Five, *The Fickle Finger*, and Chapter Six, *Who Was That Masked Man?*, are perhaps the best chapters as they contain the least number of mistakes.

Chapter Seven, *It's in the Blood*, is a perfect example of someone writing on a subject about which they obviously know nothing. Here Kurland states, "If the object emitting the blood is in motion, the blood drops will be oval and have little tails, which project in the horizontal direction that the drop was moving. Falling liquids have a characteristic tear-drop shape, tapering toward the top. Since the top lands last, the taper is forward of the main part of the drop." This is absolutely incorrect. Falling liquids are almost perfectly round, they are spheroids or balls. *The so-called tear-drop shape has never existed in nature, only in the minds of artists.* The author's description of the appearance of bloodstains as a function of the distance they fell before impacting a surface is totally incorrect and his illustrations are wrong.

Kurland's last three chapters are significantly insignificant. His bibliography consists of 31, more popular than scientific, references and includes only two of the five classics mentioned above. This book ought to be in every competent criminalist's fireplace.