

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Dead Reckoning: The Art of Forensic Detection*

REFERENCE: Nordby J. *Dead Reckoning: The Art of Forensic Detection*, CRC Press LLC, Boca Raton, FL, 2000, 273 pp. (ISBN 0-8493-8122-3)

Capable, seasoned investigators, whether they articulate it or not, apply “dead reckoning”—the practice of determining one’s position (in this book, in a homicide investigation) by usefully combining knowledge, skill, and experience—in their search for a successful conclusion to each of the cases they work. In this volume, the author, one of the finest minds in the forensic investigation field, reveals the “art” of dead reckoning in the context of investigations in which he has been involved. He shows how logical method and scientific scrutiny are applied by those who have learned to trust their powers of observation.

There are ten chapters in this volume, each describing an investigation, a case study, and offering interesting commentary on forensic points of interest as they develop in the investigation. The author integrates philosophical support for the points being emphasized as each investigation takes a turn, sometimes in the right direction, sometimes not. Each chapter has been composed and presented in a way so as to highlight specific features of “reckoning” in the context of a case investigation and in the interplay between the investigators and others and, of course, within an investigator’s own thinking processes.

The chapters don’t appear to be arranged in any standard order; that is, they don’t necessarily progress from one point to the next in a systematic way, other than one gets the sense that the more fundamental and perhaps least difficult points are those in the beginning chapters; the later chapters present more challenging perspectives for the art of forensic detection. For example, in Chapter one the reader is shown “Reasoning Backward Analytically.” This is presented in a Holmesian way, observing the clues at a crime scene, and reconstructing from them how the scene came to be, determining the steps that evolved in order to produce the effects observed. This approach, of course, is commonly understood by all readers of much of the fictional detective literature. Not that this book doesn’t offer new insights here, it does, but that even casual readers will quickly recognize what the author wishes to show. From that beginning chapter through the remaining nine, one progresses from “Reading Signs,” to “Probability and Serendipity” to “Inductivism, Best Explanations, and Testing Alternatives” to “Natural Signs and Statistical Inferences.” In Chapter five we find “Natural Signs and

Logics of Discovery” and then “Logical Testing,” “Causal Explanation and Formal Deduction” Fallacious Appeals to Medical Authority” and finally, “Opinion, Uncertainty, and Conflicting Conclusion.”

It would be fruitless to try to detail the content of each chapter, other than to say that, the cases are interesting, the investigative processes are well laid out, and the points being featured, whether abstract or concrete, are well developed and informative. Some readers may find the last two chapters the most distressing. In the penultimate chapter, one is confronted with a case of, what is now all too common, suspected child abuse. Here, as seems often to be the case, the “evidence” is incomplete, inadequate, and seemingly in conflict, a portion of the focus is on how legal counsel approaches this matter, in apparent ignorance of “honest” forensic science. In the final chapter, the reader is confronted with a homicide in which the evidence, both physical and testimonial, make a circumstantial case that can be seen by “experts” in different ways. Police investigators, don’t just see but, in the parlance of this book, observe facts and draw conclusions that appear to be just as probable as the conclusions drawn by others who have observed the identical facts. Not surprisingly, the conclusions lead down parallel, never intersecting, tracks.

It is unfortunate that the process of investigation is not taught to beginning students (police, attorneys, and college students, etc.) as this volume sets out to do. Usually there is exposure to “techniques” instead of processes, “formal rules” instead of critical thinking. This book would be an excellent first choice to make a change. Unfortunately, it is not a textbook and doesn’t read like one. For that reason alone, it is unlikely perhaps to be adopted in the traditional investigation courses usually offered at the university level. Nevertheless, it is the analytical, critical thinking, set forth in this volume, that is missing from the regimen to which most investigators are exposed. This book is highly recommended reading for all with an interest in investigative aspects of forensic science, as well as those who practice investigation but who have been unable to articulate precisely how they go about doing what they do. There is here perhaps a bit too heavy reliance on the fictional character Sherlock Holmes but actually it was his creator who helped to develop and give substance to the logic of investigation. The author of this book knows his stuff and he knows how to present it. All with an interest in the application of logic and how it may be used in an investigation should have this volume on their shelves.