

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Review of: *Mute Witness Trace Evidence Analysis*

**REFERENCE:** Houck MM, editor. *Mute witness trace evidence analysis*. Academic Press: San Francisco, New York, London, Sydney, Tokyo. 2001, 192 pp.

This carefully produced book has much to recommend it. The editor has brought together, in nine chapters, a selection of case histories told from the forensic scientist's point of view; a rare feat in an age when forensic science is presented to the public from the peculiar viewpoint of the screenwriter. It presents a realistic, behind-the-scenes look at the science of trace evidence analysis and how it is used today in the solution and prosecution of crimes. It appears at a particularly important moment in the history of forensic science because for the lay public, and many young forensic scientists as well, DNA analysis is believed to be *the* forensic science. Real trace evidence analysis, to those unaccustomed to the rich history and successes of this particular branch of forensic practice, is often regarded by many as a poor stepchild whose time has come and gone. This volume, and another to follow with yet more cases, proves that this is not so. It does, however, illustrate that trace evidence examinations today are the province of the analyst. The mere comparator (to which some trace evidence examiners degenerated) is, fortunately, becoming a relic of the past. This is illustrated time and again here by means of very readable narratives, photographs, drawings, tables, photomicrographs and spectra. Practicing forensic scientists, both new to the field (by whom this book should especially be read) and older, experienced practitioners will both profit by reading the stories of these cases written by the forensic scientists who actually investigated them.

The range of topics covered in these investigations is broad and serves to illustrate the wide ranging knowledge that the trace evidence examiner must eventually acquire. The cases described required the analysis and comparison of such diverse items as fiber "nubs," glass, wig fibers, polymer films, plastics, and feathers to name but a few. In most instances, the case described was the author's first acquaintance with each material as evidence and we are permitted to look over their shoulders as they learn about the material and how to identify those features that are significant for identification. This is, perhaps, the most useful aspect of this work and one of the features that make it so valuable for the forensic scientist who is new to the field of trace evidence. As those of us who have been conducting such studies for many decades know, "You never know it all." But the intellectual joy of identifying a complete unknown and the mental stimulation of uncovering the features by

which a small piece of a (usually) larger object can be reliably characterized and compared are among the greatest rewards of being a forensic scientist.

As with any compilation there is the expected variation in quality between chapters. Many of them are very well written and hold the reader's attention because of the stories themselves as well as the writers' skill in telling a good yarn. Others are less well written, and it is here that the editor should have taken his responsibility more seriously, even to the point of telling his authors that their chapters needed revisions and then helping them to raise their quality to the level of the best written ones. There is no point in going into this more here because readers will see these differences in quality when they read the chapters themselves. Just because this variation in quality in compiled volumes (often at its worst in published proceedings of meetings) has become normal doesn't mean that it has to be so. It is to be hoped that this will be remedied in the new volume of cases and that the editor or the editorial staff at Academic Press will help the authors whose final submission falls short of the quality set by the best chapters. This is, however, probably the strongest criticism that can be directed towards this book.

In summary, this work is highly recommended in spite of its minor failings. It gives each of us a chance to acquire further experience and knowledge as well as helping us to learn new ways of looking at microscopic evidence. This reviewer would also recommend it for another purpose. It is an excellent reading recommendation for friends and acquaintances who want to know more about forensic science after watching the forensic dramas and true-crime shows that are now so popular on television. Because of its format and the style of writing, it is an enjoyable read for any reasonably intelligent person who wants to learn more about real forensic science. In our laboratory we have recommended it to the large number of high school and college students who contact us regarding information about forensic science. The particular value to these students is that it is not afraid to include the science. None of the popular books that have recently appeared on the subject present the subject in this way. Unlike this book, they do not include spectra and photomicrographs or explain how the scientist used this information in arriving at their conclusion. It is a good way for students who are curious about forensic science to see if they prefer what they see on television or in this book. It is the latter who will be joining us in the laboratory in the future.

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