

## BOOK REVIEW

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### Review of: *Deadhouse: Life in a Coroner's Office*

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**REFERENCE:** Temple J. *Deadhouse: life in a coroner's office*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi; 2005.

The author, a former newspaperman, is an Assistant Professor of Journalism. This book attempts to ride the tsunami-like wave of interest in the forensic sciences (sometimes called the *CSI effect*) now engulfing the country. For periods of time in the fall of 1999 and the summer of 2000, Mr. Temple was “embedded” in the Alleghany County Coroner’s Office. He chronicles his experience there with personnel he accompanied and/or observed as they performed their various duties. He identifies these players by name and denies any fictional or composite characters.

Prominent among this cast are three deputy coroners: a graduate of a Caribbean medical school who can’t get a medical license in Pennsylvania, an ex-paramedic, and a part-time college student/single mother. These “deputy coroners” served in many capacities—driver, crime scene investigator, autopsy assistant, publicity flack, etc. They have 46 h of initial training and one day-long seminar for continuing education years.

Also involved are two female college students doing summer internship, forensic pathologists and a Fellow (who are all foreign medical graduates), assorted other technicians and clerical types, and Dr. Cyril Wecht, the coroner, himself.

The author claims all dialogue is accurate, recorded, overheard, reconstructed from interviews, or pieced together from print material. One sometimes hopes this isn’t true, for much of the language is crude, and comments often are insensitive to the dignity of the decedent and irreverent of the solemnity of death and the activity that surrounds it: “Bodies are debris, junk.” (The famous admonition mounted in the Office of the NYC Medical Examiners, *TACEAT COLLOQUIA EFFUGIAT RISUS* . . . , apparently is not prominently displayed in Pittsburgh.)

One suspects that direct quotations were selected and prized for their shock value, to satisfy the forensic buff’s craving for an inside look in every sense of the phrase. Thus, “corpses crap, fart, ejaculate, groan and twitch.” At autopsy, the brain always is

exposed by “popping the skull.” The forensic pathology fellow slices organs in half “like a cantaloupe.”

Two of the deputy coroners have a sideline business selling T-shirts, sweatshirts and ball caps out of the coroner’s office—some bear the official coroner’s office logo. One shows the Grim Reaper surrounded by the words: CORONER—WHEN YOUR DAY ENDS—OUR DAY BEGINS! Another has the chalked outline of a body sprawled over the word CORONER.

Chapters are based on episodes, activities, or cases the author observed. Most are rather mundane and insubstantial. These are fleshed out with long asides dealing with historical reviews, recapping of published cases, “war-stories” by the veteran personnel, and stories of Dr. Wecht and his storied careers. An extensive list of sources is provided at the end of the book.

Perhaps amusing to some readers of this journal are Mr. Temple’s comments on an “exclusive” group of forensic pathologists and criminologists (“Wecht is a charter member”) who are said to jet all over the world consulting, swapping vials of blood, autopsy reports and crime scene photographs, and huddling together over exhumed bodies. They study the same evidence but face off on TV or in court, presenting different interpretations, then meet afterwards for dinner and backslapping.

He repeats the argument that the *elected* coroner system is better than the *appointed* medical examiner system because the elected coroner is entirely independent of the police and the D.A.’s office.

Finally, Mr. Temple opines that the *CSI effect* has resulted in unreasonable expectations and unrealistic episodes. Further, public fascination with matters forensic (to which this book panders) has led thousands of college students to study forensic sciences in which job opportunities will be scarce in future.

Avid forensic “groupies,” hungry for the macabre, will relish this book—eat it up! However, it may give heartburn to the reader who is active in the forensic sciences.

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