

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Science: An Introduction to Scientific and Investigative Techniques (2nd Edition)*

REFERENCE: Nordby JJ, James SH. *Forensic science: an introduction to scientific and investigative techniques*. 2nd ed. Boca Raton: CRC Press; 2005.

You can check the Internet all you want—go ahead. Nowhere can you find a book that tells you how to write a textbook. Believe me, I've looked. As a disclaimer and a qualifier, I've been writing a textbook for another publisher. The only thing tougher is getting forensic scientists to write *for you*. Nordby and James fearlessly attempted both in the first edition of *Forensic Science*. The second edition offers improvements over the first, but the book is essentially the same: A comprehensive, if occasionally spotty, compendium of authored chapters on the various forensic sciences.

Its strengths are its weaknesses. Whether or not the book is adopted as a textbook for an introductory survey class in forensic science will depend on teaching style and what the class emphasizes. *Forensic Science* is soup to nuts, covering everything from autopsies to computer forensics to DNA to criminal profiling to insects. This makes it a flexible text, and instructors can assign whichever chapters from this cornucopia of criminalistics that best suit their course. The breadth of the book, however, means that not much space is allotted to each topic: Chapters average 18 pages (median value; it's also the modal value and the range is 24). In some chapters, a lot of material has to be jammed into those 18 average pages. Some of the chapters seem arbitrarily split. Why not combine the three forensic engineering chapters into one? Why separate analysis of blood stains from body fluids?

If *Forensic Science* were to be used as a single holistic textbook, the real issue becomes the chorus of voices from the wide variety of authors (40). A volume with so many authors requires a strong editorial hand to balance the styles into a coordinated whole. That balancing didn't happen with this book. This is either a positive (a diversity of experts writing from their strengths) or a negative (an out-of-kilter, disconnected series of chapters), depending on your taste. An example of the trouble with multiple authors is the handling of thin-layer chromatography (TLC). TLC applications appear on pages 70 (toxicology), 431 (ink analysis),

and 445 (drugs); however, the *explanation* of how the technique works does not appear until page 450. The number of authors and styles, in the absence of strong editing, doesn't allow *Forensic Science* to build knowledge and topics like an introductory text ought to. Some chapters are good; those by Spaulding, Gaensslen and Young, Bodziak, Norwitch and Seiden, and Duncan, Tracy, and Stauffer, in particular, are excellent. Others are too short or a bit weak. The chapter on the entirety of trace evidence is only 26 pages in length (barely longer than the Glossary) and simply doesn't do this bulwark of the forensic laboratory justice. One author refers to a ruler as a "dedicated dimensional standard." Another author boldly states, "Many disciplines of forensic science require deductive reasoning, which is not often emphasized in academic environments," which should come as a surprise to many faculty, particularly in the Science Departments.

The graphics appear visually flat and others are inappropriate (the image of a family dog sniffing a chewed-up, bloody skull—"Scavenging by medium-sized canids is usually patterned and is initiated in the area of the face"—is unnecessary, if accurate) or lack visual explanatory power. That some chapters have too few graphics also detracts from the book, and the addition of basic, building-block visuals would improve this text greatly.

Another issue for some instructors considering adopting this book as a single text is the way the pedagogy is handled. The end-of-chapter questions are a hodge-podge and do not provide a uniform structure for the student or the instructor. Again, coordinated editing of the supporting materials would help make *Forensic Science* a better textbook.

Nordby and James note in the Preface that the book was "developed primarily to provide a standard text for students of forensic science at the introductory level . . . The text also serves as a useful reference to those already involved in forensic science." *Forensic Science* succeeds more in the latter than the former. None of the distractions noted prevents *Forensic Science* from being adopted as a textbook, but they may be—depending on the instructor and the course—impediments. The book does not lack content; it lacks pedagogic structure. Despite this, it is a solid book packed with information, and *Forensic Science* improves the current landscape of introductory forensic science textbooks.

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