

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Investigation of Stolen-Recovered and Other Crime-Related Vehicles*

REFERENCE: Stauffer E, Bonfanti MS. Forensic investigation of stolen-recovered and other crime-related vehicles. Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2006; 594 pp.

The authors propose two objectives: to fill a gap in the literature and to provide a comprehensive coverage of the topic. The first has definitely been accomplished. It was indeed refreshing to encounter entire chapters devoted to the use of traditional evidential materials to solve crimes not to mention crimes specifically related to automobiles. The second objective, however, involves mutually exclusive factors. Reference books of a textbook size cannot cover a substantial topic comprehensively. In addition, morally, a forensic science author must walk a thin line when discussing actual techniques, i.e., with enough detail to inform other forensic scientists and investigators but not so much they teach the criminal how to avoid apprehension. The authors acknowledged these factors and settled for an encyclopedic approach. Specifics of methods are usually not included but rather a plethora of background information on the topic with a subsequent, detailed discussion of what methods are available to use that information in a case. The methods discussions usually include both the perspective of the field investigator and the laboratory forensic scientist, their capabilities and limitations, guidelines on processing the evidence, and, most importantly, how the findings impact the investigation.

An international perspective was evident throughout. Twenty-two authors from seven countries contributed, which resulted in some duplicate coverage and different styles of writing, but neither was a substantial problem. The international perspective was reinforced by extensive presentations that contrasted the procedures in Europe, the United States, and Canada of license plates, registration procedures, keys and locks, overall security technology, and the relationship of the public and private investigative agencies. The introductory chapter presents the level of auto crime internationally and its multi-national character while the final chapter brings in the enforcement support by INTERPOL.

The organization of the subject material falls into the following five categories: a discussion of the problem, general approaches to solving the problem through investigation, including crime scene investigation, specific physical evidence approaches to automobile investigation, specific perspectives for automobile investigation, and, specific nonphysical evidence approaches to automobile investigation. Sequencing chapters for a smooth flow is always a challenge when trying to organize around both types of examination and types of investigation, but it was done well with only a modest amount of "see Ch xx" occurring.

The overview of the auto theft problem in the introductory chapter was interestingly presented with anecdotes and statistics to inform the reader not only of the amount of auto theft but also of its ramifications and its relation to other crime. Clear and concise caveats were presented about the misuse of such statistics but unfortunately no advice was given about their proper use. Token discussions were presented of prevention, investigation, and agencies involved therein. These were well discussed later and could have been left out at this point.

As the title suggests, the bulk of the book focuses on specific physical evidence approaches to investigating crimes involving automobiles. In this age of bottom-line managers and technician-specialists, it was refreshing to see that both traditional trace evidence examinations play a major role, although DNA and drugs are not neglected, and the impact of findings are presented as well as on-scene evidence analyses. The differences in perspective among the fire investigator, auto theft investigator, and the forensic scientist are even discussed. Again refreshingly, the viewpoint of the car as both being evidence and substrate for evidence was emphasized throughout.

The final portion of the book presents two unexpected topics: the involvement of auto theft in international organized crime including terrorist operations, and the use of crime mapping and crime analysis in those investigations. These aspects could, hopefully, be enhanced somewhat in the next edition.

Of course, there are the usual differences of opinion of the reader with some details. In the fire chapter, for example, the statement is made that the accidental cause considerations are ignored due to the wealth of detail involved but traditionally, one must first eliminate accidental causes before assigning an incendiary cause. Similarly, the concept of a hit-and-run being primarily a smash-and-grab investigation seemed rather strange when manslaughter investigations are more frequent and a significant number of burned and submerged vehicles result from an attempt to dispose of such evidence. Similarly, the techniques of engine sabotage are not discussed, although their omission may have been deliberate.

Technically the book makes an excellent presentation. Text is very readable and uncluttered. Photographs make substantive points rather than merely provide diversions for the nonreader. Most of the photographs are in black and white but some have information that can only be seen in color, and these are duplicated and collected together into a 31-page repository.

Overall, the book not only fills the void that the authors intended it to fill, but also much more.

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