

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Practical Homicide Investigation: Tactics, Procedures and Forensic Techniques*

REFERENCE: Geberth VJ. Practical homicide investigation: tactics, procedures and forensic techniques, 4th ed. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2006, 999 pp.

Each year in the United States about 16,000 murders are reported to the police. The average clearance rate for these crimes (murder and non-negligent manslaughter) was 63% in 2004. The rate for some agencies was much lower, <40%. Whether 60% or 40%, this is an embarrassment. It means that far too many murders are never resolved; and, if it is not evident to the reader, resolved here means only to the satisfaction of the police. It does not mean that 63% of the “killers” are apprehended, tried, and convicted. This is all the more dismaying when one considers that compared with other serious crimes, there are few hidden homicides. They are almost always known to the police. They also get the greatest amount of police attention, receive as much investigative resources, including forensic analyses, as can be mustered, and amongst investigators, those who deal with homicides are often the best of the lot. As a rule homicide investigators are better trained, more experienced, and more motivated than those who deal with lesser offenses. In addition, murders are likely more open to solution than are most other types of offenses. Why is the clearance rate not higher and what might be done to improve this situation?

Not all homicides are solvable. The author of this volume knows that. He also knows, now that his book is in its 4th edition, that investigator training needs to be improved. It is that idea that motivates him. In this newest edition, he brings his considerable knowledge, whether personal or drawn from the experiences of others, to all persons, detectives and investigators, who wish to do better in their professional efforts. There is little doubt that if all homicide investigators made good use of the wealth of knowledge available in this volume clearances would improve, maybe dramatically. Why that isn't done is a mystery to me. This volume, the latest rendition of what has become the classic homicide investigators' manual is the next best thing to having a mentor with the understandings of the author. If you are an investigator, particularly a homicide investigator, and you haven't read this volume it would be a mistake to carry out your next investigation before you do. If you do that, what will you learn?

From beginning to end what has to be done—from the investigator's point of view—in a homicide investigation is here. Importantly, the opening chapters provide considerable detail on the crime scene and the responsibilities of the first officer, points in an investigation that heavily influence the likelihood of success. Typically the investigator arrives on the scene after others have had a chance to secure it or, on the other hand, to confound useful

investigative efforts (I am reminded here of a homicide that occurred at a site with several inches of snow on the ground. The snow, of course, made it difficult to locate “tangible” evidence. So the enterprising on-site officers used a blow torch to melt the snow in order to improve the fruitfulness of their search).

There are 999 pages in this work, the last 54 of which include a very useful glossary and an index. I didn't count the large number of illustrative photographs, whether in color or black and white, but I did calculate the approximate coverage of broad topics. The volume breaks down like this. The first section, five chapters, is devoted to coverage of the characteristics and importance of the initial crime scene, the duties of the first on-scene officer (typically a patrol officer) and the responsibilities of the initial investigator(s). It's important to note that these topics generally receive only minor attention in many investigation-related books; here, fortunately, 124 pages are given to them. That is about 13% of the substantive material, a real improvement on what is typical.

Subsequent to the first section there are 10 chapters covering topics which, in general, can be seen as technical issues. For example, crime scene photographs and sketches, scene searches for evidence, establishment of time of death, identification of the deceased, modes of death, suicides, sex-related homicides and homosexual killings are all given separate chapters. Coverage of death notification and the treatment of “secondary victims” (e.g., surviving family members) is also provided. These chapters, considered along with a separate related chapter on evidence collection, account for about 46% of this book. While there may be something of “technical” importance that is not found in these pages, I don't know what that would be, unless it might be a clear description of DNA analysis and consideration of the importance of the autopsy. Not unsurprisingly, thorough coverage of both of these topics is presented in two separate chapters.

The remaining 40% of this book covers topics that are not all conceptually related. For instance, identification of suspects, criminal personality profiling, narcotics-related homicides, and attention to a topic of special interest to the author of this work, “equivocal death investigation” all get full chapter coverage. There are two other chapters devoted to topics that ought to be of special interest, since their value is often underestimated in investigations and perhaps for that reason, they are treated much more cavalierly in real life than ought to be the case. The first of these is how to deal with the news media. While it may not appear that this issue needs a lot of attention, those who have been confronted by the media in cases of high public interest will recognize that the material in this chapter, if anything, understates the case. The second chapter deserving special consideration is also the book's final chapter, supervision and management of an investigation. Experience shows that in policing this topic is recognized for its importance but along with a

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related concern, the training of investigators, it is, in reality, too often treated somewhat indifferently. Perhaps the author of this work agrees with that assessment; that might be why this important topic is placed last. All of the important detail that precedes it can be seen and understood in a context begging for significant oversight by those with the experience and sound judgment to ensure that in the end, everything fits together properly.

Imagine a world in which a child will kill its own mother. Now, imagine a world in which a mother will kill her own child. In such a world, just like the one we all live in, criminal behavior seems at times to defy all logic. In such a world anything is possible. That is why every homicide investigator ought to have a copy of this

book in her hands. While this book is an improvement in some details from previous editions, it is, like the earlier volumes, the seminal work on this topic. There is not a better one on the market. This edition, more so than before, shows that not only does the author really know his topic but, more important, he continues to strive to share his knowledge with others who are charged with the important task of investigating homicides. This is an essential volume that every homicide investigator, and every person involved in the practice of that investigative process, ought to commit to memory. Well, maybe that's asking too much. Get a copy and keep it close at hand.