

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Sex-Related Homicide and Death Investigation: Practical and Clinical Perspectives*

REFERENCE: Geberth VJ. *Sex-related homicide and death investigation: practical and clinical perspectives*, 2nd edn. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2010, 759 pp.

This book, a supplement to the very popular and widely acclaimed *Practical Homicide Investigation* by the same author, focuses on death investigations but with a more limited perspective—only deaths that involve, as the title suggests, sex-related motives or means. Given that about 16,000 homicides are reported each year in the United States, it would be fair to ask how many of them are “sex-related?” Put another way, why be concerned about sex-related deaths if they are not a frequent or, at least, a regularly occurring case type coming to police attention. Why devote an entire book to the topic? Truth be known, there are no reliable national statistics on the frequency of sex-related deaths. (Note: The word deaths is used here instead of homicide because some, maybe many, sex-related deaths are, or seem to be, inadvertent.) There is a reason for this. Some homicides, not sexually motivated, may appear to be so because the offender staged the scene to mislead investigators. And, of course, it is possible that investigator or other error leads to the classification of a homicide as being sex-related when, in fact, it was not.

The scene of a homicide is the most important criminal event that comes to the attention of police and other forensic investigators. A careful and intelligently guided examination of the crime scene and of the forensically analyzable evidence found there give direction to and often determine the success or failure of the investigation, prosecution, and conviction. It is clear, however, that there are some crime scenes that are difficult to evaluate, requiring very experienced and skillful interpretation. Especially prominent in these difficult instances are sex-related deaths as discussed in this book. Certain of these crimes are made all the more difficult because the offenders are extremely clever, very careful, and they go to great lengths to confound investigative efforts. These are, although not exclusively, the offenders often referred to as serial killers. Although these persons may be extremely sadistic and depraved and may kill for reasons and in ways that are difficult to understand, their patterns of behavior sometimes can be deciphered and that can lead to their apprehension. Such killers have “signatures” and highly experienced and savvy investigators, such as this book’s author, know that though, unfortunately, not all investigators do. In addition, because these killers often engage in crimes across jurisdictional boundaries, linking crimes by them in one jurisdiction to others in another jurisdiction is neither easy nor common; linkage blindness is the term to be applied here. Of course, this book’s

author, Geberth, a leading authority on these issues, is aware of all of this. And he is aware that more and better information in the hands of those who investigate sex-related, serial killings can be an enormous assistance. Serial killing is not the focal point of this book but be advised that if, as an investigator, what motivates killers who have, say, odd, sexual desires is one of your weak spots get a copy of this book. Read the opening two chapters, human sexuality and sexual deviance and the investigative significance of fantasy in sex-related crimes. (Be forewarned: There are statements and pieces of information in these chapters with which I am sure there is some disagreement. If the reader finds fault with some of the material here do not despair. The material is presented to provide context, a perspective which, although perhaps not shared by those with a less-practical objective, reveals the author’s experience-based perceptions of how an investigation in the circumstances that pertain here ought to be pieced together.) Then try to put that information into perspective; read the next chapter, a self-reported journal of a serial rapist and the 13th chapter, the chronology and assessment of the BTK killer. The latter investigation spanned more than 30 years. There are other case studies scattered throughout this book but a 30-year investigation that involved multiple murders of a “particularly heinous, atrocious, or cruel” (p. 635) nature is extraordinary. Investigators can do better than this. Geberth knows this; if only what he has to say about such events were commonly understood and shared knowledge, he would be pleased. And, there would be a better record in these crimes than is now the case.

Aside from the somewhat sensational, serial-killer stuff, what else is in this volume. Well, I would not characterize any of it as “normal fare,” given some of the bizarre cases presented and the many illustrative, color photographs, but there are multiple chapters, important ones, on crime scene investigation, the collection and preservation of physical evidence, criminal personality profiling, and offender “signature” information. While one can find adequate treatment of these topics in other investigation-related volumes, what is evident here is the special treatment of them as is necessary in crimes that are sex-related.

For investigators of offenses captured by the title of this book, it is to be noted that the sometimes hard-to-distinguish offenses motivated by different sexual interests are given strong and explicit attention in this book. For instance, there are entire chapters devoted to cases of interpersonal violence and sex-related domestic violence, rape and sodomy, lust murder and deviant-oriented assault, child homicides and abductions that are sex-related, sex slave and torture cases and, in the final and very interesting chapter, psychopathic sexual sadism. That is not to say that there are

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not other sex-related deaths that come to the attention of the police but this book would appear to cover the great majority of them. When we are able to categorize such offenses better than is now possible and when we have useful statistics on their distribution, Geberth will be there to tell us how to deal with them.

An advisement: This book is not a substitute for the author's other, more general volume on homicide investigation. Because sex-related deaths are different, in their characteristics and in their demands for investigative prowess in advance of "ordinary" homicides, this book has to be seen as a supplement to others on investigation. Let me say this in another way: No killer, like the BTK offender (or, for that matter, the Green River Killer et al.), ought to go undetected for years; we can do better. If you are an investigator, you can do better. Read this book. Make Geberth the angel on your shoulder; you know, the one who tells you, even when she is

not really there, to change course when you are wrong and to keep going when you are right. If you are a police investigator, this book belongs in your left hand; in the other hand, keep a copy of a more general one on homicide investigation. If that happens to be the one by Geberth, good for you. You are on the right track.

In closing, note that this book has 759 pages. I do not know how many color photographs are included; many. There is a lot of very useful information here. And, much of it you will not find anywhere else. If you do it will not be up to the standard that is set here. I am sure there are good points not included in this book about sex-related deaths, I am just not experienced enough to know what they are. It is likely though that Geberth is already working on the next edition in which he will include such material. For now, this book is the one I am convinced is the best practical guide to investigating sex-related deaths.