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**REVIEW: CORONER'S JOURNAL: STALKING DEATH IN LOUISIANA**

**RESEÑA: DIARIO DEL MÉDICO FORENSE: ACECHO DE MUERTE EN LOUISIANA**

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Louis Cataldie, author of *Coroner’s Journal*, has had a long, intense, eventful, and even astonishing career as coroner of East Baton Rouge Parish. He was more recently appointed Louisiana State coroner, and subsequently responsible for the medical response oversight and coroner's duties arising from the human devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. The author notes that his office is simply "responsible for investigating the time, cause, and manner of death (p., 27)" in the case of persons dying from unnatural causes or under suspicious circumstances. In
essence, it is the body itself which is the evidence the coroner examines, analyzes, and preserves.

A medical doctor, the author calls upon other scientists to aid in the solving of open cases. For example, forensic anthropologists can determine age and sex, and be somewhat certain of race through their study of a victim's bones. Forensic entomologists, on the other hand, can often aid in determining the time of death of a cadaver, whether the body was stored and moved at a later time, and also the temperatures and the weather during the deterioration of the body, by studying the stage of development and succession of insects found on, in, or near a human corpse.

The author's passion is to show dignity for the dead. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina he stated, "All I want to do here is to assure the survivors that dignity for the dead is my only agenda (p., 20)." News reporters who asked Dr. Cataldie to predict the number of casualties from Hurricane Katrina, found that he was resolute in his unwillingness to speculate. He stated that each body found would be treated as an individual human being, and that he refused to speculate on the number of individuals who would be found.

With his office and morgue in the capitol city of the state of Louisiana, the author describes Baton Rouge as a little big city. He explains that while the city and the parish are rather low in population, Baton Rouge has big city crime problems, not the least of which is homicide. His parish office investigates approximately 2,000 deaths per year. Of these deaths, approximately 60 are homicides and 30 are suicides.

For such a well known and successful coroner, Dr. Cataldie is humble: His own shortcomings and mistakes in his early calls to murder scenes he tells with self-deprecating humor. He speaks of his emotional reactions relating to human pathos while struggling to maintain scientific objectivity. Being on call continuously, he wonders and worries about the effects his work may have upon his family.

In the chapter entitled, What Are the Odds?, the author struggles with the issue of sudden death, and the difficulty of explaining sudden death to the survivors. Dr. Cataldie highlights the uncertainty of sudden death by citing cases which include accidents, an innocent sitting in a barber's chair, and a woman electrocuted in the bathtub due to the faulty grounding of appliances. In most of these cases the victims had no forewarning of danger; the survivors were totally surprised. In one case, those surprised were the author and the police investigators, for the victims were shown to be neither human nor victims.

In the chapter, Too Young to Die, is devoted to the deaths of babies, children, and juveniles. It is here that Louis Cataldie struggles most with his thoughts and emotions. It seems to him that somehow the death of a child is especially tragic; and the brutal murder of a child, or the dumping of a live baby in a garbage dumpster, is abominable. Dr. Cataldie argues for the official creation of a mandatory critical incident stress debriefing for all early responders to scenes of the deaths of children.

The unique mental health laws of the state of Louisiana give the coroners of that state special responsibilities and duties beyond the task of investigating suspicious or unnatural deaths. "The coroner's mental health responsibilities include the issuing of orders to have people picked up for psychiatric evaluation and the actual commitment of people to psychiatric facilities (p., 119)." Dr. Cataldie's office handles approximately 3,000 psychiatric cases per year. This is an enormous load since the coroner is also expected to conduct pre-release interviews of patients in psychiatric care.

The author also discusses suicide and the special issues relating to deaths by suicide. He explains that the coroner must determine whether the apparent suicide is
a murder staged as a suicide, is an actual suicide, or whether it is an accidental death. If the apparent suicide is in actuality a murder, evidence must be sought to identify and to apprehend the perpetrator. On the other hand, if the death is accidental, information of that fact is more readily processed by the survivors than either of the other findings.

In the final half of the volume, the author first discusses reasons given for typical homicides, many of which are of a ridiculous nature. Next, he offers murder cases as illustrations of the varied themes. Finally, Dr. Cataldie, who has investigated the murders of victims of four distinct serial murderers in East Baton Rouge Parish, discusses the process of victim discovery, his investigations and analysis, the progress made toward the identification of each of the serial murderers, and the effectiveness and efficiency of a law enforcement serial murder task force (once it was organized and functioning).

The author displays deep understanding of the ways of serial murderers. He also showed his willingness to contact thematic experts to help him, and to help law enforcement, solve these serial homicides. For example, at one point Dr. Cataldie asked Dr. Bill Bass of the Body Farm at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville for aid in determining the time of death of a serial murder victim whose body had lain for days in cool water. And he has called upon the expertise of The Bone Lady (p., 44), Dr. Mary Manheim, an accomplished and professionally-recognized forensic anthropologist, and upon the expertise of Dr. C. Lamar Meek, a renowned forensic entomologist, upon regular bases.

In producing the Coroner's Journal: Stalking Death in Louisiana, Louis Cataldie has added a valuable tool for educating students of criminal justice in the scientific and forensic investigation and analysis of suspicious or unnatural deaths. While written in a style understandable to the layperson, the depth and breadth of information contained raises the work to the level of academic overview. The many cases explained by the author give life to the volume; each case read leads to the excitement of discovery. Thus once its reading is begun, the Coroner's Journal: Stalking Death in Louisiana is difficult to put down before its reading is complete.