



## Some books about forensics, medicine and crime

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### Book Selector

Advances in forensic science, such as the use of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) for identification, have made it a major tool of modern criminal investigation. Crime fiction has followed suit and details of forensic work frequently appear, particularly in realistic police procedurals. Some crime writers, however, have focused on this, with a pathologist or other forensic scientist as a main character. Medical thrillers are a closely-related genre, with both science and blood-and-guts scenarios generally well to the fore.

Patricia Cornwell is the doyenne of forensic crime fiction. She was a police reporter and worked for some years as a computer analyst in a medical examiner's office. Her first novel, **Postmortem**, was rejected several times before finding a publisher; but it went on to win the Edgar, Creasy, Anthony and Macavity Awards. Cornwell has also won the British Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger. Her series character is forensic pathologist Dr Kay Scarpetta, who first appeared in **Postmortem** and has featured in all of her novels so far, apart from the three Judy Hammer police procedurals, **Hornet's nest**, **Southern cross**, and **Isle of Dogs**. Recent Dr Kay Scarpetta titles include **Blow fly**, where much of the focus shifts to other series characters, and **Trace**, in which Dr Scarpetta looks into the mysterious death of a teenage girl.

Like her protagonist Temperance (Tempe) Brennan, Kathy Reichs is a forensic anthropologist who works for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in North Carolina and its equivalent in Quebec, Canada. She is also a professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina. The details of Tempe's work with bones, charred corpses and other grisly human remains are not for the squeamish, but the author's expert

knowledge of her subject adds considerable depth and supplies the reader with fascinating information about how much can be learned from such remains. The first title in the series was **Deja dead**, followed by **Death du jour**, **Deadly decisions**, **Fatal voyage**, **Grave secrets**, **Bare bones** and **Monday mourning**.

An author who has been compared to Cornwell and Reichs is Karin Slaughter. Her series stars medical examiner and paediatrician Sara Linton, together with Sara's ex-husband, Police Chief Jeffrey Tolliver, and Detective Lena Adams. Graphic and gruesome forensic details are a feature in **Blindsighted**, **Kisscut**, **A faint cold fear** and **Indelible**.

When Scottish journalist and television scriptwriter Peter May turned to writing crime fiction, he created an unusual pair of protagonists in Chinese police detective Li Yan and American forensic pathologist Margaret Campbell. The stories, including **Chinese whispers**, **The killing room**, **The runner**, and **Snakehead**, certainly employ forensic science in investigating often horrific crimes, but perhaps the main attraction here lies in the Chinese settings and in the complexities of the relationship between the two main characters.

Erin Hart has written two novels featuring American forensic pathologist Nora Gavin and Irish archaeologist Cormac Maguire, both set in the West of Ireland and blending crime and gothic thriller elements. **Haunted ground** starts with the discovery of a severed head in a peat bog, but is it the relic of an ancient ritual or evidence of a modern crime? The sequel, **Lake of sorrows**, has a similar scenario, but this time with two bodies found in the peat bog.

Some forensic scientists explore the mind of the criminal rather than the body of the victim to help solve crimes. Popular thriller writer Val McDermid has a series starring clinical psychologist and criminal profiler Dr Tony Hill. The latest title is **The torment of others**, following **The last temptation**, **The mermaids singing**, and **The wire in the blood**. (Her other series feature journalist Lindsay Gordon and private eye Kate Brannigan.) In McDermid's **Killing the shadows**, Professor Fiona Campbell, a psychologist who helps the police track down murderers using psychological profiling and computer technology, has her hands full when a serial killer starts targeting writers of crime thrillers. Ridley Pearson's **Lou Boldt** series has forensic psychologist Daphne Matthews, together with cop John LaMoia, as prominent secondary characters, but in **The art of deception**, they take centre stage. **Sanctum**, by Denise Mina, places forensic psychiatrist Susie Harriot in an unusual and singularly unpleasant position

when she is convicted of murdering a serial killer who was one of her patients.

In **A fatal cut**, by Priscilla Masters, a succession of bodies found in the grounds of a hospital reveal an unusual killer who performs 'surgery' on his victims. There is growing friendship between Detective Inspector David Forrest, the police officer in charge of the case, and Dr Karys Harper, the pathologist doing the post-mortems. But is manipulative forensic psychiatrist Barney Lewisham really trying to help the police or is he aiming to outwit them?

Robin Cook is one of the best known (though in my view certainly not the best) writers of medical thrillers. His latest title, **Marker**, features New York medical examiners Laurie Montgomery and Jack Stapleton (who last appeared in the 1999 title, **Vector**) and the prospect of a serial killer on the loose in the hospital system. Cook has been writing for over 30 years. His more recent titles include **Seizure** and **Shock**, which are medical thrillers, and **Abduction**, which is science fiction.

Tess Gerritsen practised as a physician and began writing as a form of relaxation from her work. She later became a full-time author. She has produced some light romantic suspense tales, but is generally known as a writer of popular medical thrillers. Many of these star Detective Jane Rizzoli and forensic pathologist Dr Maura Iles. In **The surgeon** a doctor turns serial killer, and in its sequel, **The apprentice**, there is another series of horrific murders for Rizzoli and Iles to investigate. Both feature authentic hospital backgrounds and forensic details - as well as grim and gory deaths. In **Body double** Maura Iles returns from a forensic pathology conference in Paris to find that a body has been discovered outside her house, and the dead woman is the spitting image of herself. **The sinner** involves grisly murder in a cloistered convent, and once again Detective Rizzoli investigates while Dr Iles follows the forensic clues.

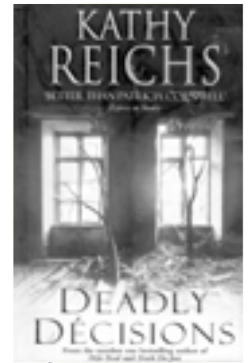
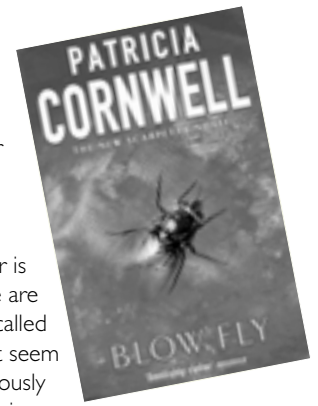
Gerritsen has also written some stand-alone titles. In **Gravity** she adds a bit of science fiction to the mix. Dr Emma Watson boards the International Space Station to do a study of living beings in space. Instead she finds herself trying to halt a deadly and gruesome new plague before it kills all the astronauts and spreads to earth. **Bloodstream**, in which Dr Claire Elliot moves to a small town with her teenage son and instead of peace and quiet finds violence and horror, and **Under the knife**, in which anaesthetist Kate Chesne encounters both love and murder, are reprints of older titles.

In Ken McClure's **Wildcard**, Steven Dunbar of the Sci-Med Inspectorate must investigate after a traveller on a flight from Africa dies of

what seems to be Ebola. But Dunbar soon discovers that the cause of the devastating haemorrhagic fever is a new virus. There are also too many so-called wildcard cases that seem to occur spontaneously - and the epidemic is getting out of hand. Steven Dunbar also features in **Deception**. When he is asked to investigate an argument between a corporation experimenting with genetically modified crops and an organic farmer, he opens up a hornet's nest. Michael Palmer has written a number of medical thrillers. In **Fatal** people develop different sets of strange and horrible symptoms - what is the link between them?

**Unnatural causes**, by Leah Robinson, is set in a large university hospital in New York. A nurse, Gary, dies under suspicious circumstances and his friend, Dr Evelyn Sutcliffe, tries to find the killer. There is plenty of blood and gore, but Robinson, a trained emergency medical technician, also provides a very authentic setting and a gripping tale. Harry Kraus's **Could I have this dance?** is both medical thriller and Christian fiction. Surgical intern Claire McCall wrestles with various problems, including a malpractice suit, the possibility that she has a genetic disease, and the discovery that someone wants her dead, but finds strength in her faith. Peter Millar's **Bleak midwinter** tells of a mysterious outbreak of the Black Death in modern Oxford and the shocking facts that come to light when local reporter Therry Moon and American student Daniel Warren investigate. In **The last Nazi**, by Stanley Pottinger, Dr Mengele's foster son is living in America under a false identity. He's a doctor running a fertility clinic but behind the scenes he's working on a deadly virus with special genetic markers that could kill the world's Jewish population.

Medical, pharmaceutical and genetic research provide rich veins for thriller writers to mine. In **Expiry date**, by David Michie, the results of some ground-breaking





medical research go wrong and an attempted cover-up shows no regard for people's lives. In **Genesis II**, by Paul Adam, genetically modified potatoes could spark off a deadly plague. In **Clinical trial**, by April Christofferson, a new vaccine is being tried against a deadly virus threatening the Blackfeet tribe. Dr Isabel McClain supports the trial and persuades people to have the vaccine, little realising that it has been contaminated with smallpox. Professor Carlo Bacci develops a drug that creates loving emotions in Michael Cordy's **True**. Surely this can't be a bad thing - or can it? An illegal designer drug and its effects feature in Alan Glynn's gripping debut thriller, **The dark fields**. Patrice Matchaba, a Zimbabwean-born doctor now living in South Africa, has written a medical thriller about AIDS research, drug companies and high finance called

**Deadly profit.**

A genetic researcher's attempt to discover a cure for AIDS features in **The shadow chaser** by John Matthews.

What about the real-life forensic scientists? There are some fascinating books on them and their work. A popular-level overview of forensic science, how it works and what it can do is provided in the profusely-illustrated **Crime scene: the ultimate guide to forensic science**, by Richard Platt.

**Hidden evidence: the story of forensic science and how it helped to solve 40 of the world's toughest crimes**, by David Owen, shows how forensics developed over the centuries from ancient China to the modern world. Forensic pathologist Michael Baden and Marion Roach provide an in-depth yet accessible look at autopsies, blood spatter analysis, the use of DNA data, identifying

remains from bones and teeth, and more in their gruesome but riveting book **Dead reckoning: the new science of catching killers**. In **Forensics: true crime scene investigations**, by Zakaria Erzincliglu, a forensic scientist describes his own work, looks more broadly at forensic science and its uses, and discusses a variety of cases, contemporary and historical. NE Genge's **The forensic casebook: the science of crime scene investigation** ranges over almost every aspect of the subject, including examples of where fiction writers got it right and where they were completely wrong.

Forensic anthropologist Bill Bass has spent a lifetime with dead bodies, many of them in a remarkably unpleasant state. He founded a special facility at the University of Tennessee to study exactly how, and how quickly, corpses decompose under various conditions. This outdoor forensics laboratory, nicknamed the Body Farm after the Patricia Cornwell title it inspired, has made a major contribution to the development of forensic science.

Writing with journalist Jon Jefferson, Dr Bass describes his work and some of the interesting cases he has handled in **Death's acre: inside the legendary Body Farm**. Studying decaying corpses sounds like the ultimate nightmare to the average lay person, but while there are certainly some grim details, they are well handled and not sensationalised, and this readable book also has its lighter moments. A forensic anthropologist working in a different field is Clea Koff, who has investigated mass graves and genocides in various troubled parts of the world. She describes this in **The bone woman: among the dead in Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo**. Helena Greenwood was a pioneering DNA scientist and her work ultimately helped to solve her own murder - 15 years after her death. Samantha Weinberg tells the remarkable story in **Pointing from the grave: a true story of murder and DNA**.

John E Douglas, who founded the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Investigative Support Unit, has been described as the originator of criminal profiling and the inspiration for the character of Jack Crawford in **Silence of the lambs**. He offers a mix of profiling theory, true crime cases and cautionary advice in **The anatomy of motive: the FBI's legendary mindhunter**

explores the key to understanding and catching violent criminals, co-authored with journalist Mark Olshaker. Earlier titles in stock by Douglas and Olshaker in similar vein are: **Obsession: the FBI's legendary profiler probes the psyches of killers, rapists and stalkers and their victims and tells how to fight back**; **Journey into darkness: follow the FBI's premier investigative profiler as he penetrates the minds and motives of the most terrifying serial killers**; and **Mindhunter: inside the FBI's elite serial crime unit**.

South Africa's own criminal profiler, Micki Pistorius, is a psychologist whose doctoral thesis was on serial homicide and who spent six years as head of the investigative psychology unit of the South African Police Service (SAPS). She shares some of her knowledge and experiences in **Catch me a killer**, **Stranger on the street: serial homicide in South Africa** and **Fatal females: women who kill**.

Criminal psychologist and profiler David Carter takes an unusual angle in **Mapping murder: the secrets of geographical profiling** where he explores some notorious crimes and considers parallels between the criminal's psychological journey and the actual path he follows. In a serious but still quite accessible book, **Dark truths: modern theories of serial murder**, Christopher Kurtz outlines five different, though interrelated, theories of serial killings. For each, a prominent serial killer is discussed as an example. Nigel Latta, a New Zealand forensic psychologist who works with sex offenders, gives a vivid account of some of his cases in a lively and readable, if often disturbing work, **Into the darkness: unveiling the predators among us**. Forensic psychiatrist Helen Morrison, acting as a consultant for various American law enforcement agencies over the years, has interviewed and studied many serial killers. In **My life among the serial killers: inside the minds of the world's most notorious murders** she writes of her experiences.

All these books have yielded a remarkable number of dead bodies, but Mary Roach can tell us what to do with them. In **Stiff: the curious lives of human cadavers** she describes how corpses have been treated and how they have been used in medicine, science and research, and for other purposes. She manages to be entertaining and often amusing without being irreverent and makes a macabre topic interesting.

