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Written In Blood

The Remarkable Casebook Of One Of Britain's Top Forensic Scientists

Mike Silverman
Bantam Press, £16.99

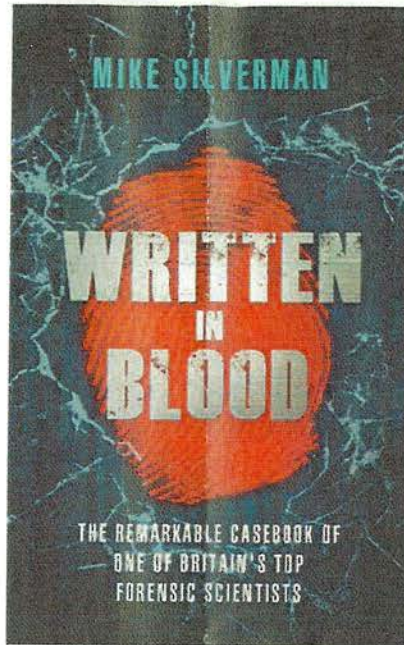
901 **T**HIS BOOK IS not for the faint-hearted. Don't expect to tiptoe into the shallow end and ease yourself into the gory details. From the first page, Silverman gives you a sharp shove between the shoulder blades and sends you face-first into the pool.

With the metallic scent of blood rising from the pages, Silverman recounts a personal journey through 35 years of game-changing advances in serology (the study of blood serum), fingerprinting and DNA analysis. Giddy with the implications of catching criminals using ever-tinier samples, the police initially thought their problems were solved. Almost overnight, cold cases were cracked and swathes of suspects eliminated from enquiries. But it wasn't all plain sailing. Rapists changed their pleas from 'never met the woman' to 'she consented', and courts expected TV fiction-inspired results.

Silverman describes his work with the scientific detachment of many a forensic scientist. There's a faint amusement at the fright and disgust of 'lay people' – his girlfriend for example, when he brings home a jar of decomposing flesh and maggots from a crime scene – and much of the book's appeal lies in its shock factor. Each case is almost joyously described, sparing no intimate or gratuitous detail.

However, more alarming than the bloodshed, is the story of the inevitable

“More alarming than the bloodshed is the inevitable commercialisation of forensic science”



commercialisation of forensic science and the resulting monetisation of justice. As fast as labs could perfect DNA amplification techniques, they became commodities, subject to patents, copyright infringement and market competition. Suddenly, the Forensic Science Service was under pressure like never before to produce accurate and speedy results every time, and turn a profit to boot.

The impact of having to pay for every single test meant police sent fewer samples to the labs and relied more heavily on evidence they thought would be a 'sure thing', undoubtedly compromising investigations. In turn, labs often threw unnecessarily advanced techniques at samples in order to secure competitive results and generate income, or risk being undercut or outbid. And eventually, that's exactly what happened.

Silverman makes a convincing case that prioritising profit over 'locking up bad guys' was doomed from the start. His prognosis for forensic science in the UK is bleak, and ultimately he asks what price we have to pay for justice. But whatever you do, please don't have nightmares.



DR ANNA WILLIAMS is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Science at the University of Huddersfield

MEET THE AUTHOR



Mike Silverman

What are your particular areas of expertise in forensic science?

I joined the Scotland Yard Forensic Science Laboratory full-time in 1979 and ended up specialising in sexual assaults and murders – or more specifically in bloodstain distribution analysis. This involved looking at blood splashes at crime scenes and identifying the sequence of events that led to them.

What's the general procedure when you're called to a crime scene?

First, you have to make sure the scene is properly secured so that there's no contamination. Then, as a Scenes of Crime Officer, you start looking for everything from fingerprints to suicide notes to blood, hairs and fibres. If I go as a forensic scientist, though, I'll have been called in after that stage to look at the blood splashes. I'd mark them up, test them, draw them and then do calculations to identify the point of origin. If it's a battering-type attack, there'll be a single point where the splashes have come from. You can also identify how many blows were made with the weapon, and whether any arteries were cut.

What scientific breakthrough has had the biggest impact on forensics?

I think nobody would dispute that it was DNA [profiling]. This meant you could find blood, semen, saliva or just the touch of a fingerprint at a crime scene, analyse the DNA, run it through the DNA database and come up with a name. Now, thanks to advances like the 'polymerase chain reaction' [an amplifying technique] we can get DNA from samples that are invisible to the naked eye.

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