

BOOK REVIEW

On forensics and true crime

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B Umadathan. Priya K Nair, transl. *Dead Men Tell Tales: The Memoir of a Police Surgeon*, HarperCollins, 2021, 394 pgs, Rs 251(paperback), ISBN:978-9354224294

"The dead tell stories. But to listen to these silent stories, a forensic surgeon has to be fully alert, with all his senses fine-tuned," notes Dr B Umadathan in his gripping memoir which could easily pass for a detective novel. Fondly remembered as the "Sherlock Holmes of Kerala," the author worked as a police surgeon, and was professor and head of the department of forensic medicine at several government medical colleges in Kerala. Translated into English as *Dead Men Tell Tales* by Priya K Nair, and published by Harper Collins, the retired forensic surgeon's memoir was initially published in Malayalam as *Oru Police Surgeonte Ormakurippukal*. Apart from being a record of Dr Umadathan's career of over 30 years as a forensic surgeon, *Dead Men Tell Tales* garners attention as a comprehensive work that explains the technicalities of the trade without relying heavily on esoteric jargon. In the few instances where the author resorts to technical terms, he provides a detailed explanation to benefit the lay audience. Thus, halfway through the work, readers are already familiar with terms like "exhumation," "photographic superimposition," "toxicology analysis", etc.

Apart from familiarising readers with the discipline, the memoir also discusses some ethical challenges faced by forensic surgeons. One chapter is devoted to the story of a surgeon who fabricated an autopsy report, without even conducting the procedure, on the persuasion of family members of the deceased and concerned authorities. The forged autopsy report stated that the victim had died of a head injury sustained after an accidental fall in a state of inebriation. However, the facts revealed later pointed towards

murder and that too, a patricide. The eldest son of the family had put an end to the abuse by his alcoholic, wife-beating father. The author utilises this episode to illustrate the need for surgeons to remain objective, despite facing an ethical quandary.

The memoir dedicates entire chapters to cases the author had been associated with. One such infamous case, the Chacko murder case, continues to be popular as the culprit Sukumara Kurup remains a fugitive even after 30-odd years. The case, which included insurance fraud, gained much traction in popular culture and was adapted twice for the screen. The author, however, stresses the relevant forensic aspects, such as photographic superimposition, which played a crucial role in solving the case by aiding in the identification of the victim, Chacko. It was one of the first cases in Kerala where photographic superimposition was used, and the author describes how the procedure was conducted. The author also discusses other controversial cases he encountered, such as the untimely death of yesteryear Malayalam actress, Miss Kumari, and the dread-inducing serial killings by Ripper Chacko. Despite the sensational element in these cases, Dr Umadathan reports them without exaggeration, and with the precision and clarity that befit a forensic surgeon.

His commentaries on cases are often accompanied by annotations from classic medical texts to substantiate the inferences drawn. The author cites John Glaister's *Medico-Legal Aspects of the Ruxton Case* and Alfred Swaine Taylor's *Principles and Practices of Medical Jurisprudence*, among others, along with the memoirs of other forensic pathologists, giving the book an academic quality. This memoir is a valuable book of reference for students of forensic medicine.

A separate yet significant conversation in the memoir concerns mental health and the role played by psychological disorders in causing suicides. Dr Umadathan writes on psychosomatic disorders which are essentially caused by mental health issues. He mentions that stress and anxiety can, over a period of time, be manifested as physical conditions like warts and acidity. However, severe mental health ailments, such as depression, can be triggered by chemical and hormonal imbalances in the body. In his detailed account of depression, the author criticises the general taboo in Indian society on addressing psychological disorders, and the associated stigma which compels the patient to seek treatment covertly. The author addresses this

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stigma by drawing parallels with developed countries, where death by suicide is regarded as a grave social issue, with extensive psychiatric studies being carried out and action plans implemented to prevent the same. The inclusion of such

diverse themes makes the memoir a comprehensive yet interesting read, which successfully dissects different aspects of forensic medicine, while leaving room for personal history and social commentary.