

Cold Case Research: Resources for unidentified, missing, and cold homicide cases

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Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2013

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The literature on cold case investigations tends to fall into two genres; practical resources for cold case investigators or true crime public interest books dramatically depicting unsolved murders for an interested public. While this book falls firmly into the former category, designed to be a useful resource for cold case detectives, it nevertheless also manages to successfully straddle the latter camp, by providing interesting case study examples of cold case investigations and investigations into missing persons and the 'unidentified dead'. It is this mix of practical resources and vivid case study examples that sets this book apart from other similar texts. What is also exceptional about this book is the focus on research methodologies as invaluable tools to assist investigators and progress old and cold cases. Pettem is successfully able to highlight the value of traditional old-fashioned detective work, along with the value of new modern resources which would not necessarily have been available to detectives involved in the original investigations, to the success of cold cases. For detectives tasked with old and cold cases the success, or otherwise, of their investigations is in being able to combine modern techniques and technologies with traditional old-fashioned detective skills, making the benefits of this book for investigators immediately apparent.

As with most practical investigative resources currently available, it is written about and therefore most helpful for, an American investigative audience, with most of the resources irrelevant to UK investigators including, for example, two chapters devoted to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NaMus), widely used in America but not in the UK. Although, on reading this chapter it seemed to me that such a system would be a useful resource for investigators charged with locating missing persons in the UK. Indeed, there were a number of chapters, which while pertinent only to the US, provided much food for thought on what is lacking in the UK and how similar resources might be applicable beyond the US. In particular, a chapter extolling the value volunteers can bring to cold case investigations brought to mind a number of potential opportunities that could, but are not currently, explored in the UK, such as the use of retired professionals and interns interested in a career in criminal justice. Other resources such as the use of playing cards detailing unsolved homicide victims and handed out to prisoners in an effort to elicit information on the unsolved crimes, documented in a chapter entitled 'taking advantage of the media', seemed to me to be a particularly good example of 'thinking outside the box' that could be used to assist cold case detectives elsewhere. Indeed, the author notes that it is a resource also tapped into in Australia. That said, it is worth remembering that the problem of unsolved homicides is far greater in the US than the UK and so such innovations are perhaps more urgently required.

Where this book also differs from others of a similar nature is its extensive coverage of resources pertinent to investigations into missing persons and unidentified victims, to which several chapters are devoted. I am not aware of anything similar written for these investigations in the UK, which is a great pity as a resource such as this could be an invaluable help to detectives, and would be of interest to those within and outside of policing, especially as investigations into missing persons appear to be growing in prominence.

There are, however, some crossovers which investigators from outside of America will recognise the value of; such as recreating case files where original documentation is missing (a problem which also plagues UK cold case investigators), the value of the media to cold case investigations, newspaper searches and the use of social media, where again Pettem provides some helpful, although at times I felt rather obvious, advice on how to best utilise these resources.

Pettem brings an unusual and fresh perspective on cold case investigations. She is not a cold case detective, though she is not entirely an outsider to police investigations, having been instrumental to the identification of a previously unidentified victim and being a volunteer in the Detectives section of the Boulder Police Department, she is an historical researcher. It is this background and experience, coupled with the interviews she has conducted with officials within policing and relatives of the victims (described as co-victims by Pettem), which provides such a unique and insightful perspective on the value of research, traditional investigative skills, modern technologies and victim care to the resolution of long term unsolved cases. Indeed, her concern and consideration for the victims and co-victims in these crimes is evident throughout the book. As noted earlier, what is also evident throughout is the importance placed on utilising traditional detective skills to progress these investigations, something similarly noted by my own research on cold case reviews.

Overall, I enjoyed this book. It is an easy to read book brought to life by the use of case histories and vivid examples of cold cases, missing persons' investigations and the investigations to identify the 'unidentified dead'; some cases successfully detected years later, and some not, but each serving to demonstrate the use and value of the resources under discussion. Each chapter concludes by offering a useful summary of the resources outlined during the chapter, (though the concluding chapter reiterating these resources felt like unnecessary repetition) and many of these resources provoked in me thoughts of how they might be made of use to UK investigations. Nonetheless, it is quite clearly best placed as an investigative tool for American law enforcement officials, cold case investigators and cold case unit managers. A UK audience will find it of interest but of far less practical use than their American counterparts. Nevertheless, to discount it entirely would be a pity as there is much that can be learned from the methods she advocates regardless of the country of origin.