Jim Fraser: Forensic science: a very short introduction

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The “Very Short Introductions” book series published by Oxford University Press is designed to give general readers a fascinating and readily understandable account of complex subjects and will ultimately encompass around 300 titles. Professor Jim Fraser, Director of the Centre for Forensic Science at the University of Strathclyde, has a broad background and wide experience in forensic teaching, research and practice. He now provides a clear and exciting glimpse into the world of forensic science as a realm of complex activity at the interface of science and law. The reader is held spellbound by references to famous criminal cases in British legal history as well as to popular movies such as Quentin Tarantino’s “Pulp Fiction”. The book is enjoyable and delightful to read, and the topics can easily be grasped and appreciated even by non-expert readers. It comprises 130 pages organized into 9 well-written and well-structured chapters (Introduction, Investigating crime, Crime scene management and forensic investigation, Laboratory examination, DNA, Prints and marks, Trace evidence, Drugs, Science and justice) and is enriched with 18 black and white illustrations and 17 tables, some quite comprehensive. The short but up-to-date reference list is a valuable tool for gathering further information.

While some important facets of forensic science such as DNA analysis, fingerprints and bloodstain pattern analysis are presented in great depth, clarity and detail, others such

as post-mortem examination, forensic autopsy, reconstruction aspects of violent deaths, and forensic odontology are not included in this edition. As Professor Fraser aptly states, the exclusion of whole areas is due to the necessity for selection. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to consider adding a short chapter on the principles and practice of forensic autopsy in future editions. Since mainly American and British forensic practice and methodology are explained, a forthcoming edition could perhaps also contain a chapter on general forensic practice in other European countries.

To sum up, the author gives an account of the techniques used and the challenges faced in forensic science. Answering questions like “How is a crime scene investigated?” or “How does DNA profiling work, and how can it help solve crimes that happened 20 years ago?” not only provides interested non-experts with useful information but is also an excellent way of presenting our complex discipline to the public.

Considering the limitations inherent in a series of small-format books spanning a wide range of topics from history, philosophy, and religion to science, technology and medicine, this small but excellent volume is sure to fan the flames of a growing fascination with our discipline and will give interested readers a deep understanding and broad grasp of the complex and multi-faceted field of forensic science.

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