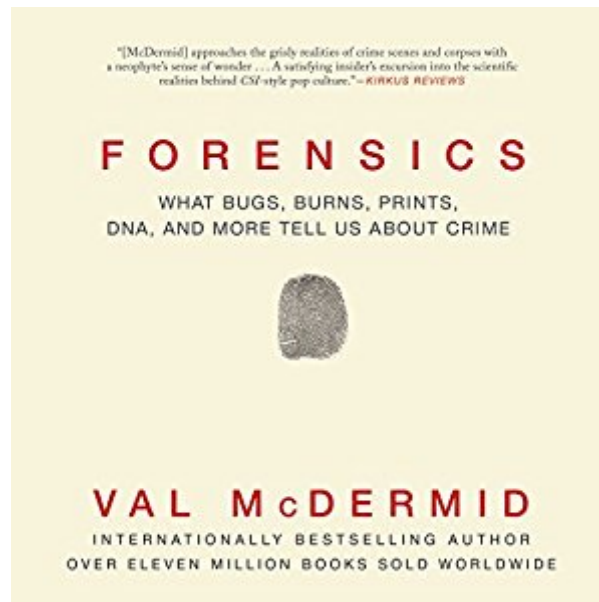


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# Forensics: What Bugs, Burns, Prints, DNA, And More Tell Us About Crime



## Synopsis

The dead talk - to the right listener. They can tell us all about themselves: where they came from, how they lived, how they died, and, of course, who killed them. Forensic scientists can unlock the mysteries of the past and help serve justice using the messages left by a corpse, a crime scene, or the faintest of human traces. Forensics draws on interviews with some of these top-level professionals, groundbreaking research, and Val McDermid's own original interviews and firsthand experience on scene with top forensic scientists. Along the way McDermid discovers how maggots collected from a corpse can help determine one's time of death; how a DNA trace a millionth the size of a grain of salt can be used to convict a killer; and how a team of young Argentine scientists led by a maverick American anthropologist were able to uncover the victims of a genocide. It's a journey that will take McDermid to war zones, fire scenes, and autopsy suites and bring her into contact with both extraordinary bravery and wickedness as she traces the history of forensics from its earliest beginnings to the cutting-edge science of the modern day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If the study of forensics were put on a chart, it would look like human population. It would flatline for thousands of years, then suddenly take off about 200 years ago, and shoot straight up in the 21st century. Val McDermid leverages that parabolic curve in her crime fiction. Her research is meant to make her stories exciting, amazing and authentic. But as in everything, truth is stranger than fiction, and Forensics is amazing because it traces these astonishing developments in depth. The level of

sophistication seems to rise almost daily, changing the nature of investigations, the rate of convictions, and the very process of justice. Cold cases can be revived and solved, and the wrongly convicted can go free. Sometimes. Along the way, it is inevitable that the reader learns some odd facts: -dead bodies absorb arsenic from surrounding soil, making the claim of arsenic poisoning suspect. -hair grows about a centimeter month, allowing scientists to track drug consumption. -the iPhone 5S has a specialized location chip that runs off reserve power. People have reported their iPhones continuing to track their movements for four days after the battery has died and the phone shut itself off. -thanks to various insatiably curious scientists, we know the thickness of facial flesh and can reconstruct faces from skulls. We can determine the size and shape of an entire body from a bone fragment. We know what bugs consume dead human flesh, when they do it, what stage of life they were at the time, and can pinpoint the time of death by them. -the study of blood splatter has come to the point where we can reconstruct everything about the scene from it. Tiny splatters of DNA-worthy blood are now expected and found in places no one ever looked before. -women are 85% of forensic psychologists. -the British police hire scientists and psychologists to solve crimes, creating profiles from the clues at the crime scene. They help narrow the list of suspects and focus searches. And add their own errors and prejudices. Forensics would do Sherlock Holmes proud. It makes a continually changing and fascinating read. The successes, failures and abuses of the system share space with the human sloppiness and mistakes that land innocent people in prison for life " or worse. McDermid demonstrates them concretely and fairly. She obviously both loves and appreciates it all, and it shows. David Wineberg

I received this book for free via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review. This is a great book that I found it difficult to put down. Author Val McDermid discusses several areas of forensics, both from a scientific and legal perspective. Her writing is crisp and well-paced and she writes in a very conversational style. That this book was fun to read despite the gruesomeness is a tribute to McDermid's skill as a writer, a skill that made her a best-selling crime novelist. I also read Nigel McCrery's "Silent Witnesses: The often gruesome but always fascinating history of forensic science," that I also enjoyed very much. The major difference in the two books is that McDermid's emphasizes legal aspects while McCrery's emphasizes the science. Aside from this, I loved both books and cannot recommend one over the other but if you are interested in forensics then I can recommend that you read both, even though there is some overlap.

What a fascinating read! Val McDermid is always been one of my favorite mystery writers. So when this is out, I jumped at the chance of finding out about the science behind the investigations. It was an utterly interesting read! This book covers various aspects of forensic science from fingerprints to genetic fingerprinting. As well as explaining the science, McDermid puts the science into context with crimes both historical and more modern. It's easy to read with plenty of well-researched examples of each area into which she delves. Absolutely adore her writing style - it is neither overly technical nor dumbed down. Highly recommended.

When I see a book entitled "Forensics", I am expected a mostly scientific work, or at least a book that conforms what I expect from a mass market science book. This book just didn't quite measure up to that standard, and I found it somewhat disappointing.

**The Good Stuff**

Val McDermid is a well-known crime writer, and her writing style is easy, and somewhat fun to read. She can explain complex topics in very simple language, For example, she does a nice job explaining the PCR amplification technique used to identify and match very small amounts of genetic material. There is a nice mix of stories in the book-everything from 19th century murders to more modern crimes. The book shows how some of these techniques have been invented and improved upon over the years.

**The Not-So-Good Stuff**

I found the book too informal for my tastes. Modern forensics is a very demanding science, and relies on multiple technologies and very precise techniques and practices. But McDermid writes more like this is a crime novel, hand-waving away some of the very preciseness that makes forensics the remarkable science that it is. As a brief example, there is a note of a ballistics report that indicates that a machine-gun jammed. But no reason is offered as to how this was determined. McDermid uses quite a few direct quotes and testimony from forensic experts, but doesn't provide much background for the reader to evaluate these experts. For example, Niamh-Nic-Daoid is mentioned as an expert on arson investigations and is quoted quite extensively in the book. There is, however, little in the book to establish her qualifications or expertise. A little internet searching reveals her credentials, but her expertise should have been established before her opinions were quoted.

**Summary**

The book is a reasonable book, and certainly factual, but it just didn't capture my interest the way I had expected. I found myself asking too many questions of the narrative which it never answered. I am normally a fan of science-based non-fiction, but this work just came up a bit short for me.

**Disclaimer**

I was able to read an advance copy of this work through the courtesy of the publisher and NetGalley

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