*The Dollhouse Murders*

*The Dollhouse Murders* is an interesting book, full of mystery and suspense. It is well written and entertaining to read, and the photographs of the dollhouses used to illustrate the story have a way of drawing in the reader. But beyond the entertainment value of this little book of death, there lies a truly edifying and educational masterpiece. Thomas Mauriello crafts a series of narratives detailing a vast array of crime scenes which not only entertains and engages the reader, but hints at the curious nature at the heart of police work. It is not enough that a detective merely look at the evidence left behind, but rather they must look through it to see what is not present and why.

It is the infallible rule of police work that every answer brings another question to be asked. Mauriello does an excellent job of illustrating the need for an insatiable curiosity and a keen analytical mind among police detectives, whose job it is not only to identify and catch the suspect, but to unearth the motive behind the crime. Many a criminal has gone free at the hands of a jury who could not convict despite an overabundance of physical evidence simply because they could not understand why a person would do such a thing. This is probably the most difficult task an investigator of crime, particularly murder, must face. Putting oneself into the mindset of a criminal and not only interpreting but also understanding what it is that motivates their actions may be one of the most difficult tasks given over to law enforcement.

The cause and effect nature of everything within a crime scene is apparent to those who investigate them with open eyes and more importantly open minds. The open door, the knocked over table, the blood here, and the lack of blood there…these are all clues which must not only be recognized but interpreted. Interpretation of a scene and the series of events which triggered each clue within the scene is a difficult task, complicated by the involvement of human beings. Humans are curious creatures not only in their habits but in their motivations as well. One man may be motivated by hunger and trade his watch for a sandwich, another facing the same motivation might kill a pizza delivery man, while yet another might go look for a job with which to earn the money to buy food. This variance in the reactions of humans makes police work chaotic in nature and extremely difficult at times.

Mauriello does an excellent job of showing the complex nature of the crime scenes and the investigations they spawn. By giving character to the detectives he writes about, he allows the reader to identify with them and through them with the crime scenes they investigate. The reader may very well find him or herself tensing up as a piece of evidence is recovered, or a sigh of relief as a suspect is identified, so intense is the emotional attachment that Mauriello develops.

The idea that a crime scene is a fragile and non-permanent thing, which has a life of its own and can be easily destroyed, is presented well within *The Dollhouse Murders*. Because every person who comes into a crime scene has the potential to alter it, documentation is the key to crime scene preservation. The earlier and more thoroughly a crime scene can be photographed and diagramed, the less likely it is to fall victim to un-recoverable alteration. Detectives, who are often among the last to arrive at crime scene, regularly have their work inhibited by well-meaning patrol officers, medical personnel, witnesses and do-gooders. The movement of a single object within a crime scene can lead investigators down dead-end roads and waste valuable time and manpower investigating things which never happened. The emergency medical technician who arrives first and kicks in the door to render aid, but fails to let anyone know that he was the one who forced entry, might lead investigators to believe that a home-invasion had occurred when in fact the victim’s wife was the true culprit. *The Dollhouse Murders* makes it clear that crime scene preservation is an important skill to master for all those involved with the investigation of criminal and non-criminal acts alike.

The profile of the Kitchen investigation shows the importance of thorough investigations. By presenting a case in which an answer is found but not one that completely satisfies the curiosity of the detective involved, Mauriello hints at one of the ever-present downfalls of police work. Cases stay with you, no matter how minor or severe, solved or unsolved, they come back up within the investigators memory forever. In this case, the victim is determined to have died as a result of choking on her own food while alone in her home, her injuries a result of falling and the suspicious dangling phone the result of an attempt to call for help. But the fact that a answer has been found and the case closed is not enough for some investigators, because we are trained to look beyond the surface. In this case, those nagging feelings of doubt in the cases resolution are most likely fueled by the overly clean crime scene and the unlocked front door. The idea that someone might have been responsible for Mrs. Washington’s death and cleaned up the crime scene, leaving only those items which might hint at an accidental death behind, then fled the residence but have been unable to secure the door from the outside must surely venture into the detectives’ mind on sleepless nights.

Perhaps this is the most important lesson taught by The Dollhouse Murders, that curiosity and inquisitiveness are the lynchpin in any investigation, because without them the evidence can only lead you so far. Mauriello doesn’t continue with the case of the Kitchen, but how different might the outcome have been if Mrs. Washington’s daughter had been found to have immediately sold off the house, cashing in a huge life insurance policy, and moving to a non-extradition country? Would the investigation have continued on and pushed further into her background and relationship with her mother? Would the result have been the same or would someone have been charged with the death? The questions are never-ending, the answers fraught with the peril of more questions. And that’s just what Mauriello appears to be trying to convey with this book. The process is just part of the process.

References

Mauriello, T. P., & Darby, A. (2004). *The dollhouse murders: A forensic expert investigates 6 little crimes*.

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