The Body Farm Short Guide

The Body Farm by Patricia Cornwell

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Contents

Characters

As the discussion of religious themes suggests, The Body Farm deepens Scarpetta's complexity. Her defense mechanism is her self-control. This novel both shows that the cost of that control is kindness and civility and signals that the control is weakening. Typically cold with others, Scarpetta appears rude when she and a local doctor visit a judge to get an order to exhume Emily's body. Scarpetta begins to state her reasons without introducing herself, and the judge wants the introduction. She easily forgets humane graces.

After commencing to sleep with Wesley, she deals with her welter of emotions by being acerbic and unkind to him, scolding him for his manners in a restaurant. Part of her fear is that he does not really care for her, so she uses gruffness to protect herself from being hurt. And she strives to avoid admitting her emotions. Late in novel, in a scene with Wesley, she cries but says she does not know why. Actually she has many reasons but refuses to acknowledge any of them. She has so distanced her emotions that she can no longer equate a feeling with its physical manifestation. The images she uses as she describes nature further signal that the insulation she seeks is breaking down.

A richly composed scene at a shopping mall in northern Virginia reveals both her steely control and the cracks in her armor. First, she confronts Carrie Grethen with tough-guy threats worthy of Chandler's Marlowe — "I will personally track you down. You will be haunted by me the rest of your wretched life." After Carrie stalks away, Scarpetta notes the man who follows and then speaks to her. Scarpetta locks eyes with him — Gault — and they recognize each other. Scarpetta tries to walk away calmly, but then dashes into the parking lot, desperate to escape him because she knows his sadistic work. She immediately calls Wesley; characteristically, she analyzes her actions as she goes and realizes that what she has to say is best not said over a car phone. This fine sequence dramatizes her toughness, the efforts needed to maintain that toughness, and her panic when it nearly fails her.

Social Concerns

Patricia Cornwell's fifth novel sends Scarpetta, Marino, and Wesley to a new setting, rural North Carolina near Asheville, a locale close to Montreal, where Cornwell grew up. Black Mountain (a real place) seems frozen in time: rural, quaint, friendly, seemingly immune from the wretched crimes Scarpetta has witnessed in the more urbanized center of Virginia. Yet the town is not immune; the unusual wounds on the body of a murdered eleven yearold girl recall those on the body of a Richmond youth whose killer, Temple Gault, eluded capture at the end of the previous novel Cruel and Unusual (1993). Thus the overmatched local police force, unprepared for such an outre crime, turns to the experts from Richmond for assistance. When another death occurs, due to what looks to be autoerotic death syndrome, the investigation overwhelms the local officials; they lack both the practical and emotional tools to cope with what they face. In contrast, Scarpetta and company are hardened and analytic.

Cornwell brings the horrors of contemporary crimes into what had been a safely insulated setting, and she again defines through Scarpetta the mentality that is necessary to resolve such violations.

As has been a hallmark of the series, Cornwell portrays the modern technology and psychology of crime-fighting.

An axiom of the tracking of serial killers is that the killer becomes fetishistic about his methods; thus a particular kind of injury inflicted on victims who are widely apart geographically may suggest a single killer. This axiom is what brings Scarpetta to North Carolina, as the murderer of Emily Steiner employed the methods of Temple Gault. In a type of scene that has become standard in the series, Scarpetta instructs the local doctor who performs autopsies on the usual cluster of traits in autoerotic death syndrome and explains how their second victim varies enough from expectations to make his death seem suspicious. Such scenes let readers share the current knowledge in the criminal investigation field and teach them that each detail of a crime scene is revelatory. As is often true, Scarpetta's medical knowledge picks out the most salient detail in Emily's death: Emily's high sodium and potassium levels cannot be explained by the story Emily's mother told about a murderous intruder. The two main technologies in the novel, however, represent opposite ends of the experimental spectrum. The FBI Academy features a new computer system, CAIN, that can track and match traits of unsolved killings from anywhere across the nation (as long as law enforcement officials send in the information). Such a system can greatly speed investigations. But the crisis in the novel is that the system may have been violated by one of the serial killers the FBI is tracking — Gault. Contrasted to this cyberage tool is old-fashioned experimentation, that is, trying some process to see what will happen. This is the procedure at the eponymous facility at the University of Tennessee, which allows corpses to decay according to selected circumstances to study the results.

Scarpetta has the Body Farm replicate the circumstances of Emily's body to test a theory on how long and in what condition the killer hid the corpse.

More so than almost all the other current mystery writers, Cornwell's work appeals to contemporary science.

Techniques

The principal technique of the novel is the spare yet resonant voice Cornwell has evolved for her character, as passages quoted and discussed earlier in this article show. Three more passages can elaborate particular traits of this voice. Her description of Mrs. Steiner echoes the style of Chandler's Marlowe: "She unbuttoned her coat and lightly shook her shoulders to get out of it. She glanced away as she took it off as if she were accustomed to giving anybody interested an opportunity to look at breasts no matronly clothing could hide . . . Denesa Steiner was flaunting herself. She was very competitive with women and this told me more about what her relationship with Emily had been like." Scarpetta goes beyond the Marlowe-like, sardonic attention to the body to process how the information relates to the case.

Scarpetta is always working, always alert to the revelatory specific. While keen in observation of others, she grows distant from herself. The following passage, similar to ones quoted earlier, reveals her emotional insulation: late in the novel, conferring with Wesley about the computer break-in, she admits, "Both of us paused, waiting for a personal word from the other.

But I did not know what else to say. So much was inside me." Always spare in self-revelation, the flat style records how Scarpetta shrinks from open displays. Instead she sublimates her anxieties into a professional demeanor, but then exposes her fears in bizarre views of the world and nature, as quoted above and as evident in the following line: "I got up at four and sat on the porch in the cold, looking at the stars.

The Big Dipper was almost directly overhead, and I remembered Lucy as a toddler worrying that it would pour water on her if she stood under it very long." Her weary sensibility contorts her memories and all she sees into odd images of threat. Scarpetta's detached, clinical voice works well when she explains the novel's scientific background. Such passages contrast with her evocative yet resistant voice when she discusses personal events.

Themes

As the earlier Body of Evidence (1991) presents a series of fractured relationships, The Body Farm presents a series of unrequited loves, continuing Cornwell's hesitant, suspicious portrayals of human interaction. Emily had a crush on a boy from her church, but he plays a cruel adolescent prank by getting her to go somewhere to meet him, then not showing up. Creed Lindsey, the janitor at her school, likewise has a crush on Emily despite their vastly different ages, and he becomes a suspect in her death as he is known to watch her.

Lucy, Scarpetta's niece, now 21 and an intern at the FBI Academy while she finishes her undergraduate work at the University of Virginia, enters a lesbian affair with Carrie Grethen, a co-worker. (Cornwell here continues her sensitive treatment of homosexuality begun in Body of Evidence.) But that relationship too is destined for trouble as Carrie uses Lucy to get closer to the FBI computer and implicates the innocent Lucy in a computer raid. Happy romances are very unlikely in Cornwell's work, and in turn the characters seem always alone and vulnerable.

Romantic tension occurs as well among the series' main trio, a daring departure from earlier portrayals in which Scarpetta, Marino, and Wesley interacted as supportive and loyal coworkers. Marino is especially testy around Scarpetta, and Wesley cautions her, "Marino has feelings for you he can't handle, Kay. I think he always has." Scarpetta responds with frostiness, "They're best left unacknowledged." Thus Marino joins the novel's collection of unrequited lovers. Feeling unappreciated, he finds solace in the dangerous arms of Emily's mother.

Meanwhile, Scarpetta and Wesley commence an affair, a tense relationship because not only are they close colleagues, but he is married. Cornwell quite deftly shows how the usually steely Scarpetta tries to maintain her emotional distance as she also admits that she loves Wesley. She does not want to talk to him about her feelings, yet she needs to deal with him. Wesley clearly wants to continue their romance. Cornwell takes risks in presenting these entanglements. The series up to this book has stressed the professionalism of these characters. Here she broaches the thorny problem of whether such friendships and close working relationships are possible among men and women without there being romantic feeling. Cornwell even allows Scarpetta to think, "I had always known our path one day would lead to this." The novel leaves the matter unresolved, leaves open the question how these three can manage to work together again.

As the affair between Scarpetta and Wesley progresses, Scarpetta thinks of the crimes they have investigated together, of how often the serial killers inflict sexual intercourse as an act of violence. Even during love-making, Scarpetta thinks of how knowledge of horrid violations of women has inhibited Wesley, as if the killers' "collective sins had cost him the right to enjoy a woman's body as he was enjoying mine." They decide to banish from their intercourse the words "devour" and "overpower" to emphasize that for them sex is not about dominance (as it so often is with the monsters they track). Scarpetta

says pithily and suggestively, "The words of our new language came easily, and we had gotten fluent fast."

Just as the affair reveals Scarpctta's views of sex, the novel offers the fullest insight thus far into Scarpetta's psyche. Indeed, this may be the most ambitious book in the series in its full dissection of Scarpetta's world view.

In 1991, after publication of the first two Scarpetta books, Cornwell commented in The Writer about her style: "My writing is dark, filled with nightscapes and fear. Isolation and a sense of loss whisper throughout my prose like something perpetually stirring in the wind . . . My story is people who carry on in a world that is hard and cold and sharp around the edges." The first novel in the series opens with a pale visage that haunts Scarpetta in her dreams. Scarpetta has not been able to move beyond a vision of the world colored by her knowledge of violence.

She is not cynical, but sad, burdened by foreboding. Images of evil, similar to the white face, continue to oppress her. In The Body Farm she has attained the height of her profession; for once unperturbed by politics, she has the regard of the FBI and the friendship of an influential senator. As she has never been more praised, she has also never been more depressed.

She sees others always with suspicion. Lucy complains that "it's inevitable in light of what you do professionally that you're going to think the worst about everyone." But Scarpetta tends to be right in her thinking. Disliking Carrie Grenthen from first meeting her, Scarpetta is unsurprised by Carrie's treachery. Dubious of Mrs. Steiner's story upon first hearing, Scarpetta confirms in her investigation that the victim's mother is a victimizer.

These triumphs of insight do not satisfy Scarpetta because they only confirm her troubled and dismal world view. Killers often use duct tape, so often that the FBI maintains a bank of samples. Thus Scarpetta cannot see duct tape in a store without thinking of the nefarious uses killers have made of it.

These obsessions lead Scarpetta to her most poetic voice in the series. As the book opens, she awakes at Quantico: "Plumbing above and below me groaned, and one by one other rooms went bright as sharp tattoos from ranges I could not see riddled the dawn. I had gone to sleep and gotten up to the sound of gunfire." The passage yokes together the usually positive image of the dawn with the noise of training on the shooting range, as if the violence goes on regardless. She selects the anthropomorphic"groaned," suggestive of human suffering, to describe pipes. Her observations of nature have a troubling edge: "The sky was faded denim blue, trees hinting of how brightly they would burn when fall reached its peak." Although the autumnal change in leaves is often called a "burn," the word suggests more than a color change. Later she describes the morning: "When I arrived at 6:15, dawn bruised the horizon and I could see my breath." Twice she presents natural phenomena in violent terms — burn and bruised. She sees the outer world through a dark glass that reflects her expectations of pain and suffering.

Such figurative language has appeared before in Cornwell's work. The letters of Beryl Madison in Body of Evidence have similar examples of the pathetic fallacy, yet the passages quoted above directly recall the style of a sequence in Cornwell's biography of Ruth Graham, A Time for Remembering (1983). As a seventeen-year-old in 1937, Ruth Bell fled with her family from their home in China to avoid Japanese aggression. While the family was on a boat with other escapees, a fellow American who had mental problems killed himself by leaping into the water. Cornwell describes Ruth Bell's vision: "Beyond, the dark water and starless sky bled together like black ink. A long needle of light pricked the water's surface . . . The atmosphere became sinister." In other places Cornwell directly quotes her subject's diaries, but not here; the images are Cornwell's, using the same violent (and medical) sorts of terms Scarpetta will later use. In none of these passages does nature offer consolation.

The resolution of the case reaffirms Scarpetta's view that the world is hideous. After all, she has exposed hidden evil in the least likely person and discovered that the still uncaptured Gault may have gained access to the FBI computer. Scarpetta has earned for herself no relief: "The cause and effect of evil spread out like a tree that blocked all light inside my head. It was impossible to know where the wickedness had started and where it would end, and I was afraid to analyze too closely if one of its twisted limbs had caught me up." These lines echo the musings of Raymond Chandler's Marlowe as he realizes at the end of The Big Sleep that he now partakes of the "nastiness" that encompasses his case.

The novel gives Scarpettaa final trial when Lucy disappears from a Newport, Rhode Island, clinic where she is recovering from a head injury and alcohol abuse. Frantic, Scarpetta goes to Newport. Too upset to do the logical thing and hire a private detective, Scarpetta herself seeks Lucy in places such as restaurants likely to hire college-aged workers. Predictably, the search yields no results, until the weary Scarpetta unburdens herself to two strangers who direct her to a Catholic shelter where she does find her niece. These events employ a striking coincidence, that when Scarpetta, who is always suspicious of others, is most despairing, fate sends her to the kind strangers who will point her on the right path. This fortunate encounter stands as a possible corrective to Scarpetta's otherwise dark vision.

Cornwell has subtly worked into the book several religious references and unsuspected lessons. Scarpetta attends Presbyterian services in North Carolina, ostensibly to meet one of the townsfolk. She knows he will be there because his wife has volunteered the information. Scarpetta thinks, "I was amazed as she divulged this information without asking who I was, and I was touched again that there were still places in the world where people were trusting." At the church she observes that the "[s]tained glass windows depicting the miracles of Jesus glowed like jewels, and fieldstones flecked with mica seemed dusted with gold."

This uplifting beauty sharply contrasts with how Scarpetta sees the bruised and burned natural landscape. She accepts communion. After the service, she compliments the minister's sermon, "I have always loved the story of the importunate neighbor." Cornwell

leaves readers to induct what that story is and what significance it bears, for it cannot be a randomly-chosen reference.

Indeed, Cornwell invests all of these gestures with significance. At the church, Scarpetta joins with a secure and well-intentioned community, bonding with them as she accepts their communion. The reference to the sermon likely invokes the story in Luke 11 of the persistent friend who needs provisions and thus continually tries to rouse his tired and dismissive neighbor. The friend gets what he needs, and Jesus exhorts his listeners, "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). In a very short time after hearing the sermon, Scarpetta will persistently ask for the whereabouts of her niece.

For the first time in the series, Cornwell gives this novel an epigraph: "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep" (Psalm 107:2324). On the wall of the shelter in Newport are further lines from the same Psalm: "For he maketh the storm to cease so that the waves thereof are still. Then they are glad because they are at rest and so he bringeth them unto their desired haven." On the walls of the facility the verses fit well, as the Catholic Church maintains the place to benefit out-of-work fishermen. The question for the novel is how these lines, which frame the entire action, gloss the trials of Scarpetta and Lucy.

In her labor on the sea of strife, Scarpetta has not seen the wonders of the Lord in the abyss of human behavior. She believes that she has seen the sprouting and branching of the tree of evil. The hovering question is where and how she can find the hand of the Lord in the sequence of events set off by the murder of Emily Steiner. Perhaps Scarpetta cannot.

Yet the religious references in this novel lead again back to A Time for Remembering. The escape from China gave the teen-aged Ruth Bell lessons both in the mercy of God, as the clouds hide the fleeing party from Japanese planes, and in the violence of nature — "Her description of the suicide, in contrast, portrays a savageness in nature and reduces man to a faceless pawn in a random universe." Ruth Bell Graham witnesses too much suffering to abandon this view of nature. But the centerpoint of Ruth Graham's belief is that God gives the strength to cope with the troubles. A key illustration of her faith appears near the biography's closing, during Ruth Graham's 1980 trip back to China. There she visited a former pastor, who had just been released from prison, and his wife: "There was no bitterness or complaining, no hatred for the perpetrators of their suffering. They were at peace.

They were grateful to God, not because He had shielded them from pain, not because He had prevented the loss of their human rights and for a while even the loss of each other, but because He had given them the strength to bear it all." What Scarpetta needs is that strength, for she seems to be breaking under the weight of the suffering and deception she constantly sees. Nothing now gives her strength save her own failing emotional resources.

Cornwell wisely scruples to be overtly religious in a crime novel. While referring to her Catholic background, Scarpetta does not discuss her beliefs.

Clearly she does not make the leap of faith made by Ruth Graham. Yet the religious aspects of the novel provide resonance. They signal that The Body Farm is about much more than the solving of a crime; the novel is about how people get by in the cruel world.

Key Questions

Several contexts beyond the detective genre can be fruitful starting points for discussion of The Body Farm: literature and science, especially psychology; regionalism, especially writing about the rural South; and the use of religion in literature. As is always the case with Cornwell, she addresses mainstream issues as she tells her story: professional relationships between the sexes, difficult family relationships, if reasons exist for an optimistic world view. And this may be the best-suited of the Scarpetta novels for discussion of Cornwell's style. Readers could linger over particular passages and especially consider the religious allusions.

1. What do you make of the romantic triangle that develops among previously loyal compatriots Scarpetta, Marino, and Wesley? Is Cornwell suggesting that men and women can or cannot work closely together without experiencing sexual attraction? Is what happens in this novel particular to these characters, or suggestive of what happens in life? What could be the future for these characters? Could they resume working together?

2. Aside from saving him to use in future books, why does Cornwell allow Gault to remain at large? How do the failure to track him and his possible violation of the FBI computer fit with Cornwell's thematic concerns?

3. The crimes in Cornwell's novels often point to social phenomena. What issues does she evoke here by her portrayal of evil within the family unit?

4. Aside from a change in locale, what does Cornwell gain by setting the crime in rural North Carolina? What sets Black Mountain apart from Richmond, and from the Virginia countryside setting used in All That Remains?

5. What is the importance of technology in this investigation? For instance, could the murders be solved without the experiment at the Body Farm?

6. What do you make of the religious references — the epigraph, the church service, the reference to the importunate neighbor, the Catholic house of relief? (As suggested above, the biography of Ruth Bell Graham offers the richest gloss on the unexpected religiosity in the novel).

7. What do Scarpetta's descriptive passages reveal about her? What do you conclude about her from the way she sees nature and the world around her?

Literary Precedents

This novel places the hard-boiled ethos, an outlook bred in cities, into a rural area. Of the Scarpetta novels, this one bears the closest connections with Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled masterpiece The Big Sleep (1939). Chandler is justly renowned for his colorful and evocative metaphors and images, and for the weary tone of the narration. In both of these stylistic aspects, The Big Sleep and The Body Farm offer rich comparisons for reading and discussion.

Other contemporary mystery writers have used settings very similar to Black Mountain, rural communities with small police forces unused to violence and needful of help from outsiders to deal with the visitations of crime. North Carolina-born Sharyn McCrumb uses such a place in her Macavity Award winning If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O (1990). Stuart Woods's celebrated Chiefs (1981) depicts the search for a serial killer across five decades in the history of a Southern town. Both books offer interesting contrasts and comparisons with The Body Farm. Joan Hess's Maggody series provides a much more humorous take on the country crimes investigated by her heroine, local police chief Arly Hanks.

Related Titles

The third Scarpetta novel All That Remains (1992) offers Cornwell's fullest treatment of the investigation of serial murder. The killer preys upon couples.

His career lasts for years, and the novel dramatizes the months-long ordeal of Scarpetta's involvement. Through Scarpetta's personal detection, the authorities gradually focus on a good suspect.

This novel introduces to the series a much broader political dimension than before. One of the victims is the daughter of the federal Drug Czar, and the killing may be linked to the Czar's activities. Or the deaths may be the work of a rogue military man who is being protected by the federal government. The fourth novel Cruel and Unusual continues to exploit the possibility of wider political corruption through Scarpetta's delving of how officials in Virginia's government are somehow linked with the release of a murderous prisoner — Temple Gault, whose presence haunts The Body Farm.

This fifth novel turns back from the social criticisms of the third and fourth to focus much more directly on Scarpetta herself. While the other books are depressing comments on the state of society, The Body Farm allows Scarpetta to look inward.

Readers who appreciate strict chronology in a series will find troubles explaining Lucy's age. In Postmortem (1990), Lucy is ten, and in The Body Farm she is twenty-one, although the novels were published only five years apart. While readers can ignore the publication dates, the plot of The Body Farm explicitly occurs two years after the events of Cruel and Unusual, but in those two years Lucy has aged from seventeen to twenty-one.

While it leaves some issues unresolved, 1995's From Potter's Field seems to conclude the three-novel sequence about the quest for Temple Gault. The plot commences two months after the events of The Body Farm with the discovery of another corpse that bears the literal marks of Gault, found this time in New York City's Central Park. The proximity of the body to the subway system brings New York's Transit Police into the investigation as key players, an unexpected and original agency for Cornwell to include in her novel.

The victim was a street person, a youngish woman with a shaved head and a mouth full of expensive gold-foil restored teeth: These aspects do not fit together. Finding out the truth of the anonymous victim's life is the chief mystery of the novel. The hunt for Gault is more thriller than mystery. His actions become more outrageous and more directly threatening to Scarpetta.

Although Scarpetta finally meets Gault's parents, the novel includes surprisingly little psychological probing of Gault's life. The usual trio from Virginia, augmented by computer wizard Lucy, try to anticipate his next move and then to snare him in an elaborate trap that involves the computers for the New York subway system.

This novel is less evocative in its language and less daring in its plot than its immediate predecessor. The focus in From Potter's Field is finding Gault, but Cornwell does indulge in some interesting subplots which pick up on issues raised in earlier books.

Cornwell continues both her interests with the FBI's computer technology and her well-rounded portrayals of homosexuality. Scarpetta is often angry, and even succumbs to a severe panic attack, factors which continue Cornwell's concerns with the tolls of Scarpetta's work. Wesley and Scarpetta continue their affair without moving toward any resolution. Marino has become captain of an impoverished Richmond precinct and has returned, at least outwardly, to seeing Scarpetta as a colleague and not as an unrequited love. If The Body Farm presents these characters (Lucy included) with crises whose resolutions could be turning points, From Potter's Field shows the characters settling back into routines, accommodating to the hard results of their previous adventure.

Cornwell continues to probe the precarious status of women in authority through Scarpetta's encounters with two officers, encounters which do not advance the plot but which provide depth to Cornwell's social concerns.

Colonel Paul Tucker, Richmond's recently appointed black chief of police, behaves in a forward manner with Scarpetta. He frequently arranges to be with her one-on-one and asks that she call him by his first name. Scarpetta thinks, "I did not tell him he could call me Kay, because after many years of being a woman in a world such as this, I had learned." He later uses her first name anyway, and responds to her rebuke with his own challenge: "'If I were white would you let me call you Kay?'" In such exchanges, Cornwell continues her series-long exploration of what constitutes professional behavior between the sexes (and readers surely realize that Scarpetta and Wesley have crossed a professional boundary). In contrast to her reticence with Tucker, Scarpetta quickly bonds with Commander Frances Penn, the high ranking officer in the New York Transit Authority who directs the New York investigation into the murders. Scarpetta urges Commander Penn to call her Kay, and the two share an evening of personal conversation that Scarpetta and Tucker surely could never have.

Cornwell further contrasts these portrayals of relationships and friendships by having Marino tell Scarpetta, "'You're the only woman friend I got .

. . But you're more like a guy . . . I can talk to you like a guy.'" Scarpetta thanks him — with or without irony readers will have to judge. Scarpetta's relations with Wesley, Marino, Tucker, and Penn taken together offer a rich insight into the state of relations between the sexes in the professional arena.

The novel also introduces new subjects for Scarpetta's investigations. So far in the series, the cases have concerned secure, respectable victims from the middle or upper classes. Yet her job surely exposes her to society's nether regions. From Potter's Field opens in such a region as Scarpetta and Marino probe a shooting in Richmond's drugweary housing projects. And Gault's choice of victims in New York leads the investigators into the dismal world of the homeless who lurk in the subway system.

These frankly depressing strata of society have been absent from the series until now. By including them, Cornwell expands her social commentary and gives her novel a downbeat realism.

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