

Postmortem Study Guide

Postmortem by Patricia Cornwell

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Plot Summary

Post Mortem by Patricia Daniels Cornwell is a novel that follows the life and career of Dr. Kay Scarpetta, a forensic pathologist and the Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia.

Kay Scarpetta is a full-blooded Italian, petite blonde, divorced professional who lives in the west end of Richmond. Throughout the course of the book, Kay shares her home with her ten year old niece, Lucy. Lucy is a genius, precocious, and troubled by the upbringing she receives from her mother, a writer who is more interested in men and creating fictional characters than she is Lucy. Kay attempts to fill some of Lucy's needs although it difficult since Lucy and her mother live in Miami.

Post Mortem involves the brutal rapes and slayings of five women throughout the Richmond area. Each woman is stalked, strangled, raped, and asphyxiated. There seems to be no discernible pattern in the killings, no common thread between the victims. As Chief Medical Examiner, it is Dr. Scarpetta's job to learn as much as possible from the victims' remains in hopes of catching the killer.

Dr. Scarpetta is forced to work with Sergeant Pete Marino, who heads the police investigation into the murders. Marino is a career cop originally from New Jersey, loud, crass, and vulgar. Scarpetta does not like Marino. The other half of Marino's team is Benton Wesley, a psychological profiler with the FBI. Wesley has worked with Marino in the past and makes a vain attempt to convince Scarpetta that the cop will do a good job.

During the investigation into the gruesome murders, Scarpetta must deal with the wrath of her official boss, the Dr. Alvin Amburgey, who serves as the Commissioner of Health and Human Services. It is apparent that Amburgey despises Scarpetta and everything the Chief Medical Examiner represents. Both doctors are new to their respective jobs and already Kay can tell that the tenure under Amburgey, who she refers to as a jealous doctor, will not be pleasant.

The story begins with the third victim in a series of brutal murders. Marino and Scarpetta arrive on the scene and from the beginning Scarpetta worries that Marino's opinions on the case threaten to stall the investigation. While Marino is convinced that the husband murdered his wife, Scarpetta remains open to other possibilities.

The murders begin to escalate as their frequency increases. Amburgey blames this on Scarpetta, saying that the Chief Medical Examiner's office must be leaking sensitive information to the press. As evidence mounts against Scarpetta, the doctor begins to doubt her own abilities and suspects that Amburgey is going to make sure she is fired.

All signs continue to point toward Scarpetta as the information leak. Bill Boltz, the Commonwealth's attorney and Scarpetta's beau, begins to appear as if he may be responsible, at least in part, for the murders. In any case, Boltz is hiding something.



Kay becomes completely immersed in the case and struggles to spend time with Lucy. Lucy acts irrationally and has frequent outbursts, which Kay knows are related to her lacking home life in Miami and the fact that her mother has eloped once more. Lucy wants nothing more than to live with "Auntie Kay".

The case progresses with clues beginning to tie together. Kay is shocked to find out that Bill was responsible for date rape involving a local reporter but is relieved that he is not the murderer.

Kay and her team crack the final clue and are ready when the killer breaks into her house. During an attempt on Scarpetta's life, Marino shoots and kills the rapist, a young man who chose his victims through calls made to the 911 emergency dispatcher.

One of the Scarpetta's technicians uncovers sabotage enacted by Amburgey in an attempt to have Scarpetta fired. Reporter Abby Turnbull who threatens to reveal his illegal activities eventually confronts Amburgey.

Kay is ready for a much deserved vacation and decides to take Lucy back to Miami.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins with a phone call that wakes Dr. Kay Scarpetta from a sound sleep at 2:33 A.M. The person on the other end of the line is Sergeant Pete Marino, a career cop with the Richmond policed department. Marino informs Scarpetta that another murder has taken place and that she needs to be on the scene immediately.

Kay Scarpetta is the Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia. As the Chief, Dr. Scarpetta is expected to handle to highest-level cases in the medical examiner's office. Normally, the medical examiner on call would take the case but the pattern suggests that this latest killing is the fourth in a series of sexually motivated crimes.

Scarpetta arrives on the scene to find Marino and a crew of police. Details are quickly relayed and Scarpetta meets Matt Petersen, the victim's husband. The victim, Lori Petersen, is a thirty-year-old medical doctor who has been slain in her bed. Scarpetta views the scene, examines the body, and orders that the victim be taken to her office for a thorough examination.

The fact that Lucy Petersen was a doctor has a surprising affect on Scarpetta. It is horrible to realize that so many years of training have been rendered worthless by a few minutes of pleasure for a sexual predator.

The details of the crime scene leave both Scarpetta and Marino suspicious. The window that had been used as an entrance was the only window unlocked in the house. It was also the only window that the suspect tried.

Upon leaving the crime scene, Scarpetta and Marino pass Bill Boltz, the Commonwealth's attorney who has just arrived. There are hordes of paparazzi outside the Petersen home, waiting to get a comment from Scarpetta or Marino. Among the television reporters is Abby Turnbull, a ruthless woman who will stop at nothing to get a good story.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The character of Dr. Kay Scarpetta is immediately portrayed as a no nonsense woman who is in full command of herself as well as the position as Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia. Scarpetta responds to Marino's call with nothing more than a sense of duty, coupled with anger over the rapist's ability to strike once again even though the police are frantically searching for his identity.

The relationship between Scarpetta and Sergeant Pete Marino seems to be strained and maintained only through a sense of duty. Scarpetta dislikes Marino's character and



crass mannerisms. The fact that Marino is a career cop helps some but not much. Marino also seems to have a low opinion of Scarpetta and the rank that she holds.

The unanswered questions at the crime scene have both Scarpetta and Marino wondering about the husband's potential involvement. There are things that simply don't add up. However, it is impossible to make any determination without evidence. The evidence will have to be collected at the lab and analyzed by Scarpetta and her staff before any telltale signs can be uncovered.

The presence of Abby Turnbull and colleagues angers Marino and is an annoyance to Scarpetta. While the reporters are simply doing their jobs, the "in your face" attitude and accompanying actions is invasive.

As Marino walks Scarpetta to her car, the doctor can't help but wonder what the cop is thinking and perhaps more importantly, why he sneers whenever they have a conversation.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Dr. Scarpetta arrives at the Medical Examiners office, located in what the doctor refers to as the "Hospital for the Dead". The office is located next to an abandoned railway station where remnants of the station appear to have been left exactly the same way as on the day of its last use.

Waiting for Scarpetta is Neils Vander, a fingerprint examiner. Because of a new order put in place by Scarpetta, Vander is required to be present whenever there's a sign of another strangulation victim.

Scarpetta calls home to speak with Bertha, the housekeeper, and to check in on Lucy. Lucy is still asleep. Scarpetta feels guilty because she and Lucy had plans to visit Monticello, plans that were ruined by the murder.

Scarpetta and Vander drink coffee while waiting for the laser to warm up. The laser can detect fingerprints and other materials that are invisible to the eye, even with the aid of a telescope. Scarpetta locates a number of fibers and removes them with the use of forceps. The body of Lori Petersen is examined an inch at a time to make sure nothing is missed during the process. Present on the body is a white residue with sparkles in it. Scarpetta and Vander recognize the residue from the previous murders and still have no idea what the substance is or for what purpose it is used. The search continues with the largest find being fingerprints on Petersen's clavicle. The findings surprise both Scarpetta and Vander, who know that the woman would have been stripped before the fingerprints were placed on the body, but there seems to be no reason why this would be so.

Scarpetta leaves Vander and instructs the guards outside to get in touch with Marino. The order is that Marino is to call Scarpetta as soon as possible. Scarpetta waits in her office but the phone doesn't ring. The doctor is convinced that Marino is enjoying the fact that she is waiting for him. Eventually, Marino calls and says that Matt Petersen is still being interviewed. Marino suggests the white sparkle material may be from greasepaint, since the suspect is currently in a play at college.

Scarpetta remains in her office, preparing to dictate Lori Petersen's autopsy report. The doctor decides that no one should read the report, not even Rose, her long-time secretary. Scarpetta begins to type. Along the way, the doctor reveals that there was seminal fluid left at the scene, most likely useless since all previous cases have proven the suspect to be a nonsecreter, one whose semen does not reveal blood type or DNA information. Scarpetta also reveals that the murderer is escalating in behavior, becoming crueller with each murder. Lori Petersen had been harmed before the sexual assault began. Several fingers were broken and three ribs on the left side were fractured.



Scarpetta seems to be the only one in the office who is concerned with the lack of security. In an attempt to make it slightly safer, the doctor employs the use of a chain and padlock to strengthen the front door. The door is rattled violently as someone tries to get in. Then there is silence. The elevator doors open and Scarpetta brandishes a pair of scissors just in case. The man in the elevator is security and is surprised to see Scarpetta. The man says that he just came on duty and was not the one at the door.

Scarpetta arrives home and relieves Bertha of her duty. The doctor had been away from home all day and Lucy is still in Scarpetta's office, banging away on the computer. Bertha asks Scarpetta about the murder and says that she hid the newspaper from Lucy so the girl wouldn't have to read about the crime.

Bertha leaves and Scarpetta goes to the office to seek out Lucy. Scarpetta knows that Lucy will still be upset. After watching Lucy for a few minutes, Lucy speaks and wants to know why her aunt is watching her. Scarpetta apologizes for the ruined day. Lucy says that she would rather be at the computer anyway and has taken it upon herself to initialize Scarpetta's databases. Scarpetta knows that initializing the databases means that they have been completely reformatted. Lucy reassures Scarpetta that all of the information is safe and the computer is working better than before.

Conversation goes to the current murder. Lucy found the newspaper and is terrified that Scarpetta is going to be killed, just like Lucy Petersen. Scarpetta and Lucy have a long talk and Scarpetta tries to reassure Lucy that she will be fine.

Scarpetta returns to the lab to meet with Vander. Results from the fingerprint scan have arrived, showing that the partial prints belong to Matt Petersen, Lucy's husband.

Late in the evening, Scarpetta's phone rings. There is background noise but nobody speaks.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The relationship between Scarpetta and Vander proves that they have been working together for a long time. There is a sort of routine and unspoken understanding of what needs to be done.

Scarpetta continues to be annoyed with Marino. The doctor is trying to understand Marino's behaviors and why he insists on being condescending and rude toward her when every effort to be courteous has been made. During the phone conversation with Marino, Scarpetta tries to remain professional and curt.

The shaking of the door has spooked Scarpetta, who has been having dreams of being watched. The arrival of the security guard is startling, but Scarpetta doesn't tell the guard about the door. After finishing Lucy Petersen's autopsy report, Scarpetta returns home to Bertha and Lucy. Scarpetta has contemplated sending Lucy back to Miami, but the child has been planning the trip to Auntie Kay's all year and to send her back now would seem cruel.



Lucy spends the day hiding out in Scarpetta's home office. Bertha watches over her but Lucy makes it clear that she doesn't want to be disturbed. While Lucy is prone to fits and tantrums, the behavior seems to have taken a turn for the worse. It's different somehow and Bertha is concerned. Scarpetta wonders how she will be able to handle it.

Lucy finds the newspaper, and it is clear to Scarpetta that part of the new behavior is fear. Lucy tries to hide it and comes off as being combative. The dam bursts when Lucy asks about the murder. Scarpetta didn't want the girl to know about the latest crime but decides to deal with it head on. Lucy doesn't seem to believe that there are people in the world who harm others for no reason. Lucy is terrified that Auntie Kay will also be killed. After all, Lucy Petersen was a doctor and although doctors are good people, she was still murdered. Scarpetta makes an attempt to calm Lucy and explain. Scarpetta wants nothing more than to make Lucy feel loved. Scarpetta's only sister is Lucy's mother, a woman who views Lucy as inconvenient.

Scarpetta returns to the lab to find Vander has the results of the fingerprint scan. Neither seems to be terribly surprised when the fingerprints turn out to be Matt Petersen's. Petersen's explanation will be interesting, especially if he claims the prints were left while trying to revive his wife.



Chapters 4-5

Chapters 4-5 Summary

Marino arrives at the lab and presents Scarpetta with Matt Petersen's fingerprint card. Scarpetta is glad to have the card even if Petersen's fingerprints have already been matched. One thing that bothers Scarpetta is why Petersen's fingerprints are already in the system. Was Petersen involved in a crime? Vander suggests there may be other reasons; for example, Petersen may have applied for a taxi license in the past.

Marino and Scarpetta go to the doctor's office to discuss the interview with Matt Petersen. The interview is lengthy and Marino presents Scarpetta with two micro cassette tapes that contain the bulk of the interview. It's obvious that Marino suspects Petersen. Scarpetta agrees that there is something wrong but is convinced that Petersen did not murder his wife.

The interview details Matt Petersen's first meeting with Lori at a Harvard party. Marino asks a series of questions about the couple's courtship, infidelity, work, and personal interests. Petersen's answers are very detailed and Marino is openly suspicious.

After Scarpetta finishes listening to the interview, she and Marino discuss Petersen's involvement in the crime. Marino is convinced that Petersen is the murderer, part of his reason being the elaborate answers. Scarpetta explains that Petersen is an American literature student and that words are his business. If a painter were being questioned, it would be likely that the suspect would paint a picture.

Marino doesn't agree with Scarpetta's logic. Another issue is that Petersen claims to have smelled a peculiar sweet smell upon entering the house. Several theories are tossed around trying to determine what could have caused the smell. Because Petersen found Lucy shortly after the death, Scarpetta begins to wonder if the smell could have come from the killer.

Scarpetta meets with Benton Wesley, an FBI profiler. Wesley and Marino are partners in law enforcement's new task force, Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP). Scarpetta is wary of Wesley but it is apparent that the man is one hundred percent professional. Scarpetta's dislike of Marino is growing.

During the meeting, Marino becomes more and more volatile as Wesley profiles the killer. When Wesley mentions that the killer most likely holds a blue-collar job, Marino explodes with anger. Marino has taken the blue-collar comment to heart as if it was directly aimed at him. Marino leaves the room and Wesley agrees that Petersen cannot be exonerated yet even if Wesley doubts the husband committed the crime. Scarpetta is angry with Marino, but Wesley defends him to Scarpetta.

Scarpetta returns to her office and is told that Margaret, the programming analyst, wants to see her. Margaret reveals that someone hacked into the computer looking for Lori



Petersen's records. There are very few people who have access and this news is extremely disturbing to both Margaret and Scarpetta. Scarpetta plans to keep Petersen's file out of the system in case the hacker tries again.

Chapters 4-5 Analysis

It bothers Scarpetta that there is a correlation between Lori Petersen's murder and her husband's fingerprints. While all suspects must be taken into consideration, Scarpetta knows in her heart that Matt Petersen is not the murderer.

Vander is surprised at the fingerprints found on the victim and eagerly reproduces the prints for a scan through VICAP. Scarpetta has faith in Vander's abilities and leaves him to do the work.

Marino and Scarpetta clash again at the meeting in the medical examiner's office. It is clear that Marino has some form of resentment toward Scarpetta and the murder suspect. The interview between cop and suspect contains an edge that shows Marino has already convicted Petersen before all the evidence has been collected. Scarpetta wishes Marino would not be involved in the case and would like to avoid working with him in the future. Marino reminds Scarpetta of the old boys club and the harassment that she was forced to endure throughout medical school. There were always people wanting to make it difficult for one of the few women at Johns Hopkins and later on in professional life. Scarpetta is determined to rise above.

Benton Wesley intrigues and intimidates Scarpetta. Wesley is FBI to the core, from the white starched shirt to the Florsheim shoes. Wesley has a master's degree in psychology and is an excellent profiler and teacher. Scarpetta knows she is working with the best.

Marino's actions in the meeting with Scarpetta and Wesley show that the seasoned cop has personal issues. Scarpetta, aside from being offended by the outburst, resents being confronted with Marino's issues and is afraid that he will jeopardize the case. Wesley assures Scarpetta that Marino may have issues but that the behavior will not let the murderer go free.

The incident with the computers has unnerved both Scarpetta and the programming analyst. The system has been carefully designed so that access to records is strictly limited. There is no way of knowing if this is the first time a break in has occurred. Both women feel as if they are dealing with a ghost.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Scarpetta is distracted by the computer break in and has a hard time concentrating. The doctor wanders into the serology lab where she meets Betty, the chief serologist. Betty is a long timer at the medical examiner's office and has seen it all. While Betty relays details of the samples being sent to the New York lab, Scarpetta's mind keeps straying back to the hacking attempt.

Evidence, albeit circumstantial, keeps mounting against Matt Petersen. Scarpetta dreads Marino's reaction, a sort of "I told you so" sneer as well as gloating openly. The murder weapon has Petersen's prints all over it, which could be explained by the fact that Petersen owned the knife. But the presence of the fingerprints and the sparkly white substance are too much of a coincidence. Scarpetta's visit to the tool marks and firearms lab doesn't clear up any of the mysteries. Frank, a former army technician, doesn't have much more to tell Scarpetta at this time.

Scarpetta keeps returning to the peculiar smell in the Petersen house. Lori Petersen was a doctor and therefore trained to detect and identify certain odors. Scarpetta has the ability to determine elevated blood alcohol or the presence of certain poisons, simply by the smell.

Scarpetta thinks about Dr. Cagney, her predecessor as Chief Medical Examiner. By all accounts, Cagney was a card-carrying member of the old boys network and a staunch homophobic. Cagney was hardened by the job but remained well respected. It was a shock to everyone when the doctor dropped dead of a heart attack while preparing to watch the Super Bowl. At times, Scarpetta could still feel the man's presence in his former office, even though she'd had it gutted and redecorated upon her arrival in Richmond. The only thing of Cagney's worth keeping was Rose.

Scarpetta waits for half an hour to see the Commissioner of the Health and Human Services Department. The doctor is aware that she is under constant scrutiny by Commissioner Amburgey. Inside the Commissioner's office is Norman Tanner, the Commissioner, and Bill Boltz, The Commonwealth's attorney. Scarpetta is angry that Boltz had been evading her since the Petersen murder.

The three men address the issue that there have been leaks to the press. Scarpetta is immediately defensive, protesting before any accusation has been made. The information in the press is said to have been from a medical source. Scarpetta vehemently denies that any information is coming from the Medical Examiner's office. There have been discrepancies in the media stories that show the information could have come from various sources.



Scarpetta learns that the city is worried about litigation in the Petersen murder. It is on record that Lori Petersen dialed 911 and was immediately disconnected, presumably when the killer severed the phone cord from the wall. The 911 dispatcher is supposed to rank this type of call as a number one priority. It was ranked as a number four. Because of the low ranking, it was forty-five minutes before police drove by the Petersen residence. Lori Petersen was already dead.

Due to the sensitive nature of the 911 fiasco, Scarpetta is ordered to release no information to the press except through the commissioner's office. Scarpetta has done nothing wrong and feels that her authority has been usurped. It is clear that Abby Turnbull, the news reporter, is the one who is doing the most damage to the investigation. The commissioner asks who is able to access information in Scarpetta's office. Scarpetta reveals the hacking attempt and admits that no one knows if it has happened before. The commissioner makes a request to see the reports on the four strangling cases. Scarpetta agrees but insists that the men read them in the medical examiner's office and that no copies are to be made.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Scarpetta can't stop thinking about the hacking attempt. It makes no sense to either her or Margaret. The passwords cannot be guessed at and none of the deputy chiefs have access. Scarpetta fears that the initial information leaked to the press may have been obtained via her office database.

As evidence against Matt Petersen mounts, Scarpetta becomes uneasy. Scarpetta is convinced that the murderer is not Petersen, even if the evidence points in that direction.

Meeting with the commissioner is not a pleasant task for Scarpetta. It is obvious to her that the man watches the medical examiner's office intently, as if waiting for Scarpetta to make a mistake. It is this behavior that leaves the medical examiner wary and defensive. The suggestion that the press leaks have come from her office leaves Scarpetta angry and frustrated. Scarpetta has done an outstanding job with the press, yet the commissioner has taken over some of the power of her office, leaving the doctor insulted and resentful. The commissioner explains that the killer's escalation in the murders is due to the media attention and as the media attention grows, the killings will surely continue.

Not only has the commissioner gone over Scarpetta's head, but he has also consulted another profiler other than Wesley. Scarpetta is sure that Wesley will be on her side in this instance and assumes that the profiler will be equally annoyed at the politics involved.

Scarpetta manages to exercise the small amount of authority in her power by insisting that the men return to the medical examiner's office to review the case records.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Amburgey, Tanner and Boltz examine Scarpetta's records. Afterward, the group goes to Margaret's office to review previous reports of the strangulation victims. Scarpetta is shocked to see that a tan belt is listed as being the item used to strangle one of the victims. This is the same item that was listed in the media reports. The report confirms what Scarpetta fears most; that the information leaked to the press had come from her computer. Scarpetta rationalizes that the press could have obtained the same information from a member of the rescue squad but doesn't believe it.

In light of this new information, Amburgey orders Scarpetta to have the passwords changed on the Medical Examiner's databases.

In order to burn off the stress of the day, Scarpetta returns home to her kitchen. Cooking is the best way to relieve stress. It's also productive. Lucy assists Auntie Kay in making spaghetti, learning some of the skills that her own mother has neglected to teach the young girl.

Lucy thoroughly enjoys the process but begins to sulk when Bill Boltz comes to dinner. Boltz and Scarpetta have been dating for some time, but Lucy, having had bad experiences from her mother's constant dating, is resentful. Bill quickly wins Lucy over, and by the end of the evening he has captured Lucy's heart.

Lucy goes to bed and Kay and Bill discuss the meeting regarding the case. Scarpetta believes that Amburgey is trying to run the show because the man is a medical doctor who believes he knows a lot more about forensic medicine than he actually does. Scarpetta finds out that Bill knew about the meeting and she is angry that he didn't warn her beforehand. Bill says the news had come about the previous day and he didn't want to cause any worry.

The conversation turns to Abby Turnbull. Everyone involved in the case believes that Abby is somehow responsible for the information leaks. It is well known that Abby is a ruthless reporter. Bill shares a bad experience he'd had with Abby and believes that Abby is seeking revenge. Kay finds it hard to believe that Abby is evil enough to sacrifice the lives of women to get even with a man simply because she was the object of rejection.

The conversation between Kay and Bill turns angry and the pair decide to call it a night before things are said and the evening ends in a fight.

Marino arrives at Scarpetta's office and says he wants to take the doctor on a little tour. The tour turns out to be a drive to each of the four crime scenes. There seems to be no common denominator between the victims' neighborhoods or anything else. Also, the fact that the third victim was black leaves everyone puzzled. Marino suggests that the



killer was after a friend of the third victim's. A stunning blond woman was close friends with the third victim and spent a great deal of time at the house. Scarpetta considers this theory.

Marino suggests several times that the killer could be a delivery man for a florist. It makes sense to Marino. The cop also points out that one of the victims was treated in the same ER where Lori Petersen worked. It's a thin connection, but the only one they have.

Scarpetta and Marino discuss the press leaks. Scarpetta learns that Amburgey has put a gag order on the cops. The cops may contact Scarpetta for information but are not permitted to reciprocate. Scarpetta is furious. Not only has the Medical Examiner's credibility been tarnished but now she has also been taken out of the loop on her own investigation.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Scarpetta resents the intrusion into her office and the files on the four crimes. The men act as if Scarpetta isn't even in the room, an act that serves to infuriate the medical examiner even more. The realization that the autopsy report on one of the victims was incorrect puzzles and angers Kay. It makes no sense how such a thing could happen. Although Kay doesn't want to admit it, it looks as if the information printed in the media has come from her office after all.

It is clear that Amburgey has taken over as lead on the investigation, all but pushing Kay out of the way.

Bill Boltz goes to Kay's house for dinner. Lucy reacts poorly to Bill's arrival. It is obvious that Lucy is jealous and Bill's appearance makes the girl feel unwanted. Kay knows that it's due to the fact that Lucy's mother considers the girl to be an inconvenience and interference in her love life. Kay assures Lucy that she is wanted. Bill makes a great impression on Lucy and all is well.

The conversation and escalating anger between Bill and Kay does nothing to remedy the current situation. Kay is furious with being watched and is convinced that Amburgey is out to get her. Bill agrees but tells Kay not to add fuel to the fire by proving Amburgey wrong.

Kay is doubtful about Abby Turnbull's involvement and is especially reluctant to believe that the woman would be so vindictive simply because Bill rejected the reporter's sexual advances.

Scarpetta's dislike of Marino is at a new level. Although Marino's behaviors and attitudes offend Scarpetta, the doctor can't put a finger on exactly what bothers her about Marino. The cop runs down the case with Scarpetta and gives explicit details about how he would have committed the crime. Marino's many years of experience shows and Scarpetta finds Marino's description is horrifying and accurate.



Marino reveals that Amburgey has placed a gag order on the police and Kay is to be shunned. Scarpetta is growing more furious by the minute. In Scarpetta's mind, Amburgey has gone too far. When Scarpetta has an outburst about it, Marino reminds her that they are taking the tour together so it's obvious that he has chosen to ignore Amburgey's commands. Scarpetta begins to fear that she will be fired. Marino agrees that it's a distinct possibility.

Scarpetta considers Marino's idea that the third victim was a case of mistaken identity. Although there seems to be no pattern to the killings, the change in race puzzles investigators. If the killer was after the victim's friend but chose to take the opportunity as it presented itself, the murder would make more sense.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Scarpetta returns home to find Bertha waiting for her on the doorstep. Bertha warns Kay that Lucy has had a terrible day. When Kay sees Lucy, it is apparent that Lucy is angry and sullen. Kay tries to talk to Lucy but the conversation turns sour. Kay realizes that taking the modem out of her office was an insult to Lucy. Lucy is hurt because Kay removed the modem and didn't explain. Lucy knew where the modem is hidden and shocks Kay by saying it is in the closet next to Kay's .38. Lucy says that her mother's old boyfriend used to let her remove the bullets from his gun and let her play with it. Kay is horrified.

Kay explains to Lucy about the break-in at her office and how the information that was leaked is very sensitive. Lucy is angry that Kay suspects her of the break-in. Lucy and Kay resolve the issue about the modem. Just as the problem is resolved, the phone rings. It's Kay's mother. Kay doesn't want to speak to her mother because it will be apparent that something is wrong. However, Kay takes the call. After trying to convince her mother that nothing is wrong except for exhaustion, Kay learns that her sister, Lucy's mother, has gone to Vegas to get married. Kay tries to hide her shock from Lucy. This isn't the first time that something like this has happened. No one knows when they will return from Vegas. Kay tells Lucy about the marriage and Lucy runs off. Kay sits with Lucy until she falls asleep.

Bill arrives at Kay's house. As Kay greets Bill at the door, a car that is approaching the house extinguishes its lights, shifts into reverse and careens away. Kay is not expecting company.

Marino appears at the morgue and goes into the usual routine of harassing Wingo, one of the technicians. This makes Kay angry, but Marino won't stop. Once again Kay tells Wingo to ignore Marino and find a way to not get upset over the crass remarks.

Wingo turns over the cadaver on which he's been working to Scarpetta and begins to clean out the refrigerator where samples are kept. Wingo finds a folder and is obviously upset. The folder is labeled as one of Lori Petersen's labs. Scarpetta is stunned. All of Lori Petersen's samples have been hand delivered to New York for testing at a private lab. Where had this folder come from?

Scarpetta runs through all possible scenarios. It is routine to print out more than one set of labels if there is a large number of samples to be taken from the victim. In some cases doubles may be taken. Scarpetta says that it's not possible for extra labels to be used on someone else's case. Scarpetta is extremely careful about keeping labels with the victim's file. Rose confirms that the extra labels are still in the Petersen file.



Scarpetta approaches Betty in serology. Betty runs preliminary tests on the swabs Wingo found in the refrigerator. The results don't match the previous tests. Scarpetta becomes increasingly worried, particularly after she remembers the conversation she had with Bill about credibility. Wingo knew that finding the additional samples threatens the chain of evidence and Scarpetta's credibility. This mix up could cause a killer to go free.

Marino suggests that someone else put the samples in the refrigerator. The refrigerator is left open at all times and gaining access wouldn't be difficult. Obtaining labels would be the difficult part. Marino suggests they dust for fingerprints. Betty says there won't be any prints since Kay wears gloves in the morgue. Kay says that she doesn't wear gloves when applying labels. Marino says that no other prints should be on the samples and it may be a way to find out if the samples were planted in order to discredit Scarpetta.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Kay is angry with herself for the way she handled the modern incident with Lucy. There are times when Kay forgets how to handle the child who acts like an adult. Lying, even by omission, was never the way to handle things. Kay recalls her own mother lying about her father's leukemia and how the lies were resented. Just as things seem to blow over, Kay's mother calls with the news about Lucy's mother eloping with a man twice her age. This is not unusual behavior for Dorothy, the other daughter. Kay is angry, particularly since this action didn't involve Lucy and now Dorothy may not even be in Miami when Lucy is due to return home. Kay decides that she will accompany Lucy back to Miami.

Kay feels hopeless in dealing with Lucy's anger and hurt perhaps because she feels the same way. Dorothy never should have had a child and Lucy needs to stop being punished.

The extra samples at the morgue pose a great problem for Scarpetta. It is clear that Wingo doesn't want to turn them over to Scarpetta because it means that she may have screwed up. Wingo admires Scarpetta and certainly doesn't want to be the one to point out such a huge error. Scarpetta is baffled. Suddenly, Scarpetta can't remember how many samples she took from Lori Petersen. Is it possible that she made such a huge error? Scarpetta is notoriously careful and follows procedure to the letter. How could this have happened?

Betty's findings on the new samples offer little comfort. Scarpetta knows that once the commissioner discovers the error, she will be fired. It almost as if the man has been looking for a reason to remove her from office.

Marino's suggestion that the samples were planted doesn't make sense to Scarpetta. The Medical Examiner can't see how it could be accomplished. It would explain a lot and fit in with the conspiracy that someone is trying to undermine Scarpetta's professionalism and credibility. The group decides to dust for fingerprints.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

Scarpetta learns that the only fingerprints on Lori Petersen's card belong to her. There are smudges that suggest someone else may have handled the folder, but the fact offers little consolation. Theories are tossed around between Scarpetta and Vander.

Also present on Lori Petersen's folder is the glittery residue that has been found on all four victims. It is discovered that the same glittery residue is found in the hand washing detergent used throughout the morgue and offices. Borax seems to have the same properties as the residue but proving that the detergent is the residue may be impossible.

Kay begins to think of the people who had access to the files. Other than Scarpetta, Wingo, and Betty, the only people outside the staff to have access were Amburgey, Tanner, and Bill. Scarpetta doesn't want to suspect Bill of being involved in the crime. It doesn't make sense that Bill would try to sabotage his own case. Still, the thought unsettles Scarpetta.

Bill arrives at Kay's house for dinner. While Bill grills steaks and chats with Kay, Kay finds her thoughts wandering. When Kay tells Bill about the file tampering, Bill becomes angry and tells Kay that she needs to leave it at work. The rest of the evening is spent with Kay in her own world and Bill and Lucy chat about unimportant things.

Scarpetta expects to get a call on the weekend saying that there has been another victim. The only call that comes is another one from the person who doesn't speak. A call comes in from Marino on Monday morning saying that there has been another victim.

The fifth victim is thirty-one-year old Henna Yarborough, a journalism professor at the local university. Henna had been killed over the weekend but the body wasn't discovered until Monday. The crime scene indicates that it was the same killer and that Henna had been strangled and raped.

An outburst from downstairs interrupts Marino and Scarpetta as they view the scene. Marino leaves to find out what the problem is and is surprised to see Abby Turnbull. Marino brings Abby up to Henna's bedroom where Scarpetta is preparing to order removal of the body. When Scarpetta sees Abby, shock overtakes her. There is no way a reporter should have been allowed at the crime scene.

Scarpetta takes a look at Abby and knows by the way the woman is dressed that this is personal. Henna was Abby's younger sister. The screaming had started when Bill Boltz told Abby she couldn't enter the house.



Scarpetta and Marino sit down with Abby to ask routine questions. Abby claims that the police have screwed up again by not responding to a 911 call that she had placed the previous week. Abby was being followed and she was scared.

Marino confesses that it was a plainclothes cop who was following Abby, which is why the police took almost two hours to respond to the call. Abby is angry and wants to know why she was being followed.

Marino explains that the tail was a way to find out where Abby was getting the information for her stories. Marino had deduced that the information had to be coming from Bill. The theory was confirmed when Abby was seen with Bill at dinner and then Bill's car was parked at Abby's house all night.

Abby protests and claims that she wants nothing to do with Bill. According to Abby, Bill had drugged and assaulted her. As Scarpetta listens, she recalls the few occasions when she was alone with Bill and how aggressive he was in trying to seduce her. Scarpetta knows in her gut that Abby is telling the truth.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Scarpetta feels helpless in trying to figure out where the residue may have come from. After a run around, Scarpetta gets a list of companies in Richmond who use the same detergent. The list is not helpful.

It is apparent that Scarpetta is beginning to crack under the weight of the investigation. The medical examiner hasn't been sleeping and is completely preoccupied with the case. When Wingo analyzes the killer and his possible motives, Scarpetta snaps at him. Later, Scarpetta apologizes to Wingo and realizes that he isn't injured. Rather, Wingo is worried about Scarpetta. Scarpetta isn't the only one who thinks her job is on the line.

Scarpetta's uneasiness increases after Bill's outburst at dinner. Kay admits that she is obsessed with the case but can't help focusing on the details. The thought that Bill may be involved is not a thought Kay wants to entertain, but red flags are beginning to appear.

Lucy's willingness to be a part of dinner with Bill shows that she is trying to recapture the feeling she once had with Kay. Lucy is avoiding the reality of her mother's new marriage and has convinced herself that she isn't going to return to Miami. Lucy hints that she wants to live with Kay and that it will be nice when Kay marries Bill.

Kay's sense of dread is heightened when the anonymous caller strikes again. The call she was expecting, one regarding the killer's latest victim, doesn't come on the weekend but arrives on Monday.

Scarpetta feels sick that there has been another victim. The case is taking a turn for the worse and Scarpetta isn't sure what can be done over and above the usual procedure.



The appearance of Abby Turnbull throws Scarpetta off track. The Chief Medical Examiner is stunned that Marino would bring a reporter to a crime scene. When Scarpetta discovers that Henna is Abby's sister, shock turns to remorse. It's true that Scarpetta has a low opinion of Abby and Abby is well aware of the doctor's opinion. However, when Abby says she doesn't blame Scarpetta for thinking she deserves it for what she's written about the others, Scarpetta is taken aback. Scarpetta explains that Abby's actions don't matter one bit at this point and no one deserves to have such a horrible thing happen to a family member.

Scarpetta is surprised when Marino reveals that Abby was being tailed. Surprise turns to shock when Marino says that Bill must be the one leaking information. Marino's accusations about Abby and Bill's relationship make sense but Scarpetta knows it's much worse than that. Marino has fingered the killer and deep in her gut Scarpetta knows it. Suddenly, so many loose ends and peculiar coincidences make perfect sense.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

Marino visits Scarpetta at the morgue. The cop wants to go for a ride and tells Scarpetta to call home. Scarpetta has no intention of going but in the end agrees. The ride takes the pair to Abby Turnbull's house. The house is empty and will probably stay that way. Marino points out several items at the crime scene, including the fact that there is a sign on the fence warning people to beware of the dog. Abby and Henna didn't have a dog. Marino surmises that the killer knew there wasn't a dog because he had been in the house on a previous occasion. All of Marino's comments and accusations are obviously directed at Bill Boltz. While Marino speaks, Kay becomes increasingly upset. Scarpetta wills herself not to cry or become hysterical. Finally, Scarpetta says that the killer can't be Bill. Marino says he knows about Scarpetta's relationship with Bill and now that Bill is a suspect, it's police business. Scarpetta is at war with herself because she doesn't want to believe that the killer is Bill, yet some of his previous actions make Scarpetta doubt Bill's innocence.

Marino is relentless in questioning Scarpetta about her relationship with Bill. Scarpetta reacts with fury, in part because her privacy has been invaded and in part because Marino's accusations are forcing Scarpetta to believe that Bill may be guilty.

Scarpetta pays a visit to Dr. Spiro Fortosis, a forensic psychologist. Scarpetta must verify the information given to her by Amburgey. The information is fairly accurate even if it is exaggerated. Scarpetta learns that the latest murder has drastically changed Fortosis' opinion of the killer. Fortosis now predicts that the murder is educated, leads a fairly normal life, is a psychopath but is not psychotic or insane. Scarpetta remembers Marino's outrage over the assumption that the killer must be blue collar.

Dr. Fortosis is an old friend of Kay's and the Medical Examiner takes the opportunity to discuss all of the troubles that she's been having relating to the case, the press leaks, and Amburgey's accusations. Fortosis gives sound advice but regretfully can't fix the situation. The doctor warns Scarpetta to be extremely careful and not to let the stress cause any mistakes.

Scarpetta waits until Henna is removed from the morgue before she calls Abby Turnbull to arrange a meeting. Abby agrees to the meeting and knows that Scarpetta has more to talk about than Henna's cause of death. Scarpetta wants Abby to help trap the killer.

Benton Wesley arrives at Scarpetta's office. Wesley must be part of Scarpetta's plan. The plan is to trick the killer into thinking that the Medical Examiner and police have uncovered a link from the murderer to his victims. Scarpetta keeps thinking about the peculiar odor Matt Petersen mentioned. Scarpetta has made the determination that the strange odor is caused by a metabolic disease. This information will be published in a



story that Abby will write for the newspaper. Tests will be able to confirm that there is a genetic metabolic defect present in the killer's DNA.

A long discussion takes place between Scarpetta, Wesley, and Abby. The hope is to unhinge the killer, induce paranoia, and enrage him to the point where a mistake is made.

Marino interrupts Scarpetta's meeting with good news. A local homeless man has found a bloody jumpsuit about a block away from Henna and Abby's house. The sickly sweet smell is present on the jumpsuit and Scarpetta knows she's on the right track. The jumpsuit is sent to the lab for analysis.

Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Scarpetta becomes increasingly annoyed over Marino's actions. The fact that Marino knows where Scarpetta lives and also knows about the relationship with Bill is unsettling. Scarpetta wants no one to know about her personal life.

The visit to Abby's house proves Marino's theory that the killer must have known that there wasn't a dog on the premises. It wouldn't fit the pattern of the other murders. Marino's gruff and confrontational manner make the conversation worse for Kay, who is already struggling with the possibility that Bill may be the rapist and murderer. As Marino fires questions, Kay struggles not to overreact or lose her temper. Kay finally snaps at Marino, and completely shaken to the core, is returned to her car at the Medical Examiner's office.

Scarpetta's visit to Dr. Fortosis is two-fold. It is important that Scarpetta confirm Amburgey's side of the story and to get Fortosis's opinion on the most recent developments. Because Fortosis is a colleague and trusted friend, Scarpetta feels safe discussing her problems with the man. Fortosis' advice doesn't ease Kay's mind to the degree she would like, but it does prove to be helpful.

When Fortosis asks Scarpetta if there is anyone on the staff at the Medical Examiner's office she can trust, Scarpetta replies that the staff is very loyal. Fortosis asks again if there is someone Scarpetta can trust. If the killer is going to be caught, then Scarpetta can't afford to trust people she doesn't know well.

Abby's visit to Scarpetta's office is standard procedure when the Medical Examiner is prepared to reveal the cause of death to the family. Abby is completely shaken, angry, and exhausted. Scarpetta finishes the explanation of Henna's autopsy and assures Abby the best she can that Henna wasn't alive for very long after the attack began. Abby says she knows that there is more to the meeting than to reveal the cause of death.

The plan Scarpetta has devised is dangerous and somewhat risky. However, Scarpetta feels that revealing information in the newspapers, even if it's somewhat vague, will cause the killer to act. Benton Wesley is doubtful at first but eventually comes on board with the metabolic defect and mental impairment angle.

Marino's arrival with the bloody jumpsuit gives Scarpetta and the team some hope and the jumpsuit is immediately analyzed.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Scarpetta is unable to sleep and eventually gives up. The exhaustion is taking a toll on the doctor and it is beginning to show. Once at the lab, Scarpetta decides to review all of the case notes again in case there is something that has been overlooked along the way. The connection to the hospital where Lori Petersen worked keeps coming back to Scarpetta. One of the victims had a previous injury and Scarpetta begins to wonder if the woman had been treated at the same facility. Scarpetta tracks down the victim's sister and asks about the injury. The injury to the victim's elbow had occurred ten years prior and was treated at a hospital in Fredericksburg. The sister couldn't remember the name of the hospital. Scarpetta quickly discards the idea. On a hunch, Scarpetta asks the sister if she is black. The sister is baffled and says that she is black. Scarpetta asks if the victim spoke the same way, with a cultured voice. The sister turns angry and says that she did. Scarpetta's apology falls on deaf ears.

As Scarpetta enters the serology department, Wingo and Betty are huddled together. When they notice Scarpetta, the pair acts strangely and Wingo stuffs a plastic bag into Betty's coat pocket. Scarpetta tries to ignore the strange transaction but eventually asks Betty about it. Betty simply says that Wingo has asked her to do some work on the side.

The jumpsuit is still being analyzed. The blood on the jumpsuit is consistent with the last victim but it will take DNA tests to make a confirmation. The fibers at one of the crime scenes are consistent with the jumpsuit but Betty says that the fabric is extremely common and it probably won't benefit the case.

At home, Lucy keeps talking about Kay's gun. Kay is increasingly worried about the questions and once again warns Lucy about the danger of weapons. Suddenly, Lucy has an outburst, calls Kay a "stupid ass" and says that she will probably die because someone could take the gun away before Kay could shoot. Kay doesn't tell Lucy that she has had training, and instead tries to calm the girl.

After a while, Kay has an idea and talks to Lucy about trust. It's important for Kay and Lucy to revitalize their relationship, particularly since Lucy is going through such a difficult time. Kay tells Lucy that she trusts the girl more than anybody else in the world. Lucy is shocked and thrilled. Kay approaches the subject of the computer break in at the Medical Examiner's office. Lucy immediately protests, saying that she didn't do it. Kay knows this is true and asks Lucy to help her figure out who was responsible for the break in. Kay feels somewhat silly asking a ten year old to complete such a task, but with Lucy's genius, it couldn't hurt.

Lucy's many hours of playing at Kay's computer has paid off. Using her own knowledge as well as an instruction manual, Lucy shows Kay how easy it is to get inside the computer in her office. The technique is so simple that Kay hadn't thought of it. Neither



had Margaret. There are other things that Kay learns from Lucy and it all leads to one conclusion. It is likely that the information in the Medical Examiner's office database was altered to reflect information in one of Abby's stories. If Kay can prove it, this would mean that the leaks did not originate from Scarpetta's office after all.

Scarpetta calls Margaret and finds that there may be a copy of exported data that could prove the case. After speaking with Margaret, Scarpetta calls Abby. Scarpetta wants to know the name of Abby's source regarding the tan belt being used as the ligature on one of the victims. Abby won't give a name but tells Scarpetta that it was one of the rescue squad members. Scarpetta relays the hypothesis regarding the computer break in.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Scarpetta feels like she is grasping at straws with the hospital connection. The Chief Medical Examiner feels even worse after she unwittingly insults a victim's sister by asking if the woman was white. Scarpetta clearly thinks that the black woman was known only by voice and that the killer could have mistaken her for a white woman.

The incident in the lab with Betty and Wingo upsets Kay, as it seems yet another secret is being kept from her. The information regarding the jumpsuit offers little consolation since DNA testing will take weeks or even a month to come back from the outside lab.

Kay's relationship with Lucy improves. Lucy continues to express fears about Auntie Kay's safety. Lucy views Kay as the stable influence in her life and the thought of losing her aunt is unbearable. The thought is even more unbearable because of Dorothy's erratic behavior. Kay thinks about Dorothy's career as a children's writer and finds it ironic that Dorothy's readers often praise her for the attention to detail and nurturing the writer provides to the juvenile characters. Meanwhile, Lucy is ignored and suffering for it.

The idea to ask for Lucy's help regarding the computer seems frivolous in the beginning. After a while, Kay realizes that it was a brilliant idea, since Lucy has figured out the way to access the Medical Examiner's database. Lucy takes Kay through the process step by step and shows exactly the way the break-in could have occurred. Kay has a realization that the hacker, who may be the killer, could have altered the information on the autopsy report. If Kay can prove that the information in the autopsy report was altered after Abby's story appeared, then the Medical Examiner's office would be off the hook for leaking information to the press.

Margaret raises Kay's hopes even more after she says there may be an export of the data still in existence. Kay gets confirmation from Abby that the information printed in the newspaper did not come from the Medical Examiner's office.

Kay begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel.



Chapters 15-16

Chapters 15-16 Summary

Marino arrives at Scarpetta's office carrying the morning newspaper. The cop is furious about the story relating to the new DNA link to the killer. Abby's name doesn't appear on the byline but they all know who wrote it. Also included in a sidebar next to the article is an explanation of DNA fingerprinting.

The popular consensus is that the killer has seen the article and hasn't shown up for work that day, afraid that someone will connect him to the body odor. Both Scarpetta and Wesley tell Marino that the story isn't the pressing issue at the moment but agree that perhaps the killer will make a mistake because of rage.

Later in the day, Kay calls Bill's office to find that he has gone out of town and will not be back until the beginning of July. Kay knows that Bill won't be able to face her regarding the crime he committed against Abby.

Scarpetta understands why Margaret was ambivalent about printing out the exported data on the strangulation cases. The exported data was compressed so that the entire export had to be printed out. The printout runs the length of the building and it takes Scarpetta a long time to find the data relating to the case. On the printout Scarpetta finds the original autopsy report, proving that she had been right about the file being altered during the computer break in.

The issue of the voice keeps haunting Scarpetta. The doctor is beginning to believe that the killer didn't see the victims; he only heard their voices. Scarpetta, Wesley, and Marino begin to figure out how the killer could have talked to each victim. The list of possibilities would be endless. Scarpetta also suggests that the killer probably works an evening shift, which would account for the times the victims were attacked.

During the conversation, Scarpetta's inner voice keeps saying that she is overcomplicating the issue. For a minute, Scarpetta wonders if the killer could be a cop, maybe even Marino. After a few minutes, Scarpetta discards Marino as a suspect but begins to formulate other ideas. Scarpetta asks Marino for tapes of calls made to the police when the bodies were discovered.

It is revealed that Matt Petersen is off the hook since the suspect passed a polygraph and the only item that fluoresced under the laser was a non-granular type of greasepaint that did not contain borax. Petersen isn't the killer.

Scarpetta and Marino go to police headquarters where Scarpetta is given five large reel-to-reel tapes of calls made to 911. After many hours of studying the tapes, Scarpetta realizes that each of the victims had, for one reason or another, made calls to 911 in the days and weeks before she was murdered.



Scarpetta calls Marino and plays a tape of the call to see if the cop recognizes the voice speaking to the victim. Marino says he will look into it.

Scarpetta can't sleep. Under the pillow next to her, Scarpetta has placed the .38 Ruger for protection. Scarpetta spends the night tossing and turning and wakes to a sickening smell and the feel of someone brushing up against the bed. The killer has broken into Scarpetta's bedroom. As Scarpetta devises a way to get the gun, the killer searches for cords to bind Scarpetta. The killer is sweating profusely and seems confused. In one swift movement, Scarpetta gets the gun and rolls off the bed. As Scarpetta screams and points the gun at the killer, Marino shoots the man four times. Scarpetta later realizes that her gun was not loaded.

The killer is Roy McCorkle, a twenty-seven-year-old worker at police headquarters. McCorkle worked there for just under a year, which explains why his fingerprints were on file. When Scarpetta played the tape for Marino, the cop recognized the voice as McCorkle's since the killer often worked as a police dispatcher.

The plan to catch the killer had been put in place by Marino and Scarpetta. Unbeknown to Scarpetta, Marino had suspected that the Medical Examiner would be a target, especially after the latest story appeared in the newspaper. Marino later tells Scarpetta that Bill had asked him to keep an eye on her because of the mysterious car that appeared one night in the driveway.

The killer was dead. Yet, the question of the hacker was still unsolved. After another set up, the calls to Margaret's computer were traced to Amburgey's home. Scarpetta knows that it was Amburgey who hacked into the computer database and altered the file to make it look like the Medical Examiner's office was responsible for the leaks to the press. Amburgey had nothing to do with the murders; the man simply despised Scarpetta and wanted to have her removed from office.

Wingo approaches Scarpetta with some interesting news. Amburgey was a staunch anti-smoker who had recently introduced a no smoking policy that would take effect the next year. Wingo says that he has proof that Amburgey is a smoker. Scarpetta is shocked and says that Wingo must be mistaken. Wingo states that he often meets a friend for lunch and it is common for them to sit in the friend's car talking afterward. The friend parks two rows away from Amburgey and it is Amburgey's habit to sneak out to his car twice a day to smoke, being careful that there are no witnesses. Wingo took the opportunity to retrieve one of Amburgey's cigarette butts and asked Betty to test it in the lab.

Completely exhausted, Scarpetta bursts into hysterical laughter. Wingo goes on to say that the tests prove that Amburgey's blood type is AB, a very rare type that was also found on the mislabeled PERK tests for Lori Petersen. A corroborating story from a security guard further proves that Amburgey was attempting to frame Scarpetta.



Bill calls Scarpetta to say he's glad that everything worked out and that she's okay. Bill also says that after giving it a lot of thought, it's best if he and Kay no longer see each other. Kay is relieved.

Abby drives Kay and Lucy to the airport to catch a plane to Miami. Kay desperately needs a vacation and doesn't want Lucy to go home alone. Kay intends to find out what's going on with Dorothy and to make sure Lucy is well taken care of in the presence of the new stepfather.

Abby admits that Amburgey had slyly left information on his desk regarding the press leaks implicating Scarpetta. After all was said and done, Abby approached Amburgey and told him that she knew about the hacking and file tampering as well as the other illegal acts the commissioner had performed. Scarpetta dreads returning to work with Amburgey as commissioner. Although Abby won't say exactly what happened, she does tell Kay not to be surprised that when she returns to Richmond she may find Amburgey gone.

Chapters 15-16 Analysis

The realization that the killer must have spoken to the victims is what eventually breaks the case. Each victim had called 911 for one reason or another, which is when Roy McCorkle set his sights on the women. Addresses showed that the women most likely lived alone, which made them perfect targets.

The killer's entrance into Scarpetta's house was almost a sure thing but didn't quite go as Scarpetta or Marino had planned. Marino said that Scarpetta didn't have the gun trained on the killer and in the end it didn't matter since Marino had fired the four shots thirty seconds after McCorkle entered the bedroom. Neither Scarpetta nor Marino ever intended to tell anyone that the killer's life could have been spared.

Scarpetta later realized, but would never confess, that she had been so upset that the gun was never loaded before bed that night. Scarpetta is thankful that Lucy managed to sleep through the whole incident up until Marino fired at the killer.

Scarpetta was on the mark when she diagnosed the killer with the metabolic disease. It was well known at police headquarters that McCorkle had a compulsion about washing up ten or twelve times per shift.

Wingo's finds regarding Amburgey proved that the commissioner was guilty of trying to frame Scarpetta. Although Scarpetta was constantly telling Wingo that he needed to be less sensitive, it was Wingo's soft heart that led him to have Amburgey's cigarette butt tested. Wingo couldn't stand to see Scarpetta treated so badly, even if the commissioner was the Medical Examiner's boss.

Kay is greatly relieved when Bill breaks it off over the phone. Kay knows in her heart that she could never look past the man's crimes and would always wonder what other things the man may have done.



Going to Miami is exciting for Kay and Lucy. There are aspects of going home that Lucy doesn't like, but Kay will spend three weeks with her and together they will do everything a ten-year-old could dream of doing. Also, Kay intends to have a talk with Dorothy about Lucy and perhaps suggest that the girl see a psychiatrist to deal with all that has happened over the past weeks.



Characters

Dr. Kay Scarpetta

Dr. Kay Scarpetta is the Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia. Educated at Johns Hopkins, the petite blond is savvy and smart. Years of being shunned by colleagues in a male dominated profession have made Scarpetta wary and suspicious of the behavior of others.

Scarpetta is always in control whether it's in the office, at home, or in personal relationships, which she seems to avoid. This may be due to a previous divorce or a lifetime spent between medical studies and practice. Regardless, Scarpetta's personal life has strict limits and everything is fine unless it interferes with her priorities. Excessive control at work helps to prove Scarpetta's worthiness as a medical professional and ensures that the work will be at the highest level.

Scarpetta is a gourmet chef who relieves stress by spending hours in the kitchen preparing Italian meals. Kay takes great pride in preparing meals from scratch, relating it to art and cultural traditions handed down through her family. It's important that the family recipes and practices are carried on and even more important since her sister Dorothy has no desire to carry on the family ways.

Kay's relationship with Lucy is unique. Lucy is an injured child who has moved into adulthood at a very early age. Lucy is a genius and at times it's difficult for Kay to remember that she is a child. Kay does everything possible to protect Lucy but falls short when it comes to the girl's home life or balancing work with time spent with her niece.

One of Scarpetta's biggest struggles is learning to accept help from certain people in her life. The people, like Benton Wesley and Pete Marino, are not people Scarpetta has chosen yet must trust to solve the case.

Sergeant Pete Marino

Sergeant Pete Marino is a career cop who hails from New Jersey. Marino is crass and rough around the edges. Marino talks too much, says inappropriate things, and often butts in where he doesn't belong. This behavior gets on the nerves of Scarpetta; because Marino knows it, it seems that he acts out even more. It is clear that there is a form of resentment against Scarpetta, yet Marino doesn't define exactly what it is that bothers him about the Medical Examiner.

Although Marino has a great deal of experience as well as street smarts, his demeanor often intimidates those he comes in contact with and jeopardizes investigations. It is clear that there is animosity and mistrust between Marino and Scarpetta, although the cause is not clear. Marino clearly resents Scarpetta's education and professional



standing. The fact that Marino came from an alcoholic home on the wrong side of the tracks only increases the resentment against Scarpetta, who seems to have a nice home and a life without financial struggles.

Despite all of Marino's shortcomings, he has the reputation of being a good cop with well-honed instincts. Learning to work with others could only improve his image and standing in the law enforcement community.

Marino also tends to act out because of his involvement with VICAP. Being associated with VICAP and FBI profiler Benton Wesley ensures that Marino is a part of the team, despite any protests from Scarpetta.

Lucy Farinelli

Lucy Farinelli is the ten-year-old niece of Kay Scarpetta. Lucy is a highly strung girl who is a computer whiz in the making.

Lori Petersen

Lori Petersen is a thirty-year-old doctor who is the fourth victim in a series of murders.

Matt Petersen

Lucy Petersen's husband.

Mr. Nobody

Mr. Nobody is the name given to the faceless rapist that has attacked and murdered four women.

Abby Turnbull

Abby Turnbull is a persistent television news reporter whose actions often threaten police investigations.

Rose

Kay Scarpetta's long time secretary

Bertha

Kay Scarpetta's housekeeper



Bill Boltz

Bill Boltz is the stunningly handsome Commonwealth's attorney, a widower, and a romantic interest for Scarpetta.

Neils Vander

Neils Vander is an expert fingerprint examiner who works with Scarpetta.

Wingo

Wingo is the shy and sensitive technician who works in the morgue with Scarpetta.

Benton Wesley

Benton Wesley is a psychological profiler for the FBI and part of the task force assigned to work with Marino and Scarpetta.



Objects/Places

Scarpetta Home

Kay Scarpetta lives in a new subdivision in Richmond's west end. The house is large, with a slate roof, and sits on a one acre parcel of land. The view from several of the windows is a wooded lot, adding privacy to the already peaceful neighborhood. The subdivision has security, which makes the residents feel secure in their homes.

Scarpetta's house is open with a large fireplace in the living room, an office, a guest room, master bedroom, dining room and kitchen. The kitchen is Scarpetta's favorite room in the house. The ceilings are high and the room is spacious. Scarpetta's love of cooking shows in the space with a large number of pots and pans. There are few modern conveniences since Kay prefers to make most things by hand. It is also a place where Kay can teach Lucy the cooking techniques of her Italian ancestors.

When Kay isn't at home a housekeeper stays with Lucy. Bertha, Scarpetta's long time housekeeper, is a good fit for the busy medical examiner. During Lucy's visit, Bertha remains on call just like Kay. If Scarpetta needs to go out in the middle of the night, she can count on Bertha to arrive and take care of Lucy and the house.

In the Scarpetta house there is always wine and thought-provoking conversation.

Medical Examiner's Office

The Medical Examiner's office is located in downtown Richmond. It contains labs, offices and conference rooms sufficient for running the daily operations required by the Medical Examiner. The building that houses the office is relatively new. It was built close to 1-95 and a train station that no longer serves the public. The abandoned station gives the area an eerie feeling which seems to be present on the many late nights Scarpetta spends at her office.

The Chief Medical Examiner's Office seems to maintain the presence of its former inhabitant, Doctor Cagney. Cagney was a member of the old boys' network, a man who was both respected and feared. Scarpetta had big shoes to fill after Cagney's death and many people took pleasure in pointing that out. One of the first things Kay did was to redecorate the office. Cagney collected "trophies" from many of his cases, trophies that had been displayed on shelves in the office. Since the office had been left intact after Cagney's death, the trophies seemed even eerier to Kay. The practice of collecting trophies was abhorrent to Kay, as were Cagney's habits of smoking cigars and snacking while performing autopsies.

Even after the renovation, Kay swears she can feel Cagney's presence in the room. This feeling also prompts Kay to question the building's security, which is minimal.



Richmond, Virginia

Richmond, Virginia is the location of Scarpetta's home and office.

Berkeley Downs

Berkeley Downs is a section of Richmond where Lucy Petersen is murdered.

Brookfield Heights

Brookfield Heights is the newly renovated neighborhood where the second victim had lived.

Ginter Park

Ginter Park is the oldest neighborhood in Richmond and home to the third victim.

Morgue

The morgue is the location where the dead bodies are kept and where autopsies are performed.

Serology Lab

The serology lab is the location where blood and other bodily fluids are examined.

Health and Human Services Department

The Health and Human Services Department houses the office of Commissioner Amburgey.

Shenandoah Valley

The Shenandoah Valley is a scenic area in Virginia.



Social Sensitivity

Dr. Kay Scarpetta is a solitary, independent woman, about age forty, divorced, and living at some distance from her family. She holds a leadership role in a traditionally male profession: She is the Chief Medical Examiner of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Most of her superiors and peers are men. She is tough and self-confident but also aware that the men around her often second-guess her decisions. A crisis arises that tests her knowledge of her field and her abilities to protect her position. On the job for under two years, she must weather the emotional and political pressures when a serial killer violates and strangles several young women in their Richmond homes.

The novel obviously appeals to the contemporary fascination with serial killers. Robert K. Ressler, the FBI agent who studied the psychology of such murderers, argues in his book *Whoever Fights Monsters* (written with Tom Shachtam, 1992) that by the 1970s, twenty-five to thirty percent of the homicides in America remained unsolved, a radical increase over previous years. The statistics, which led to the creation of the FBI national computer system for unsolved killings, suggest that these sorts of crimes — usually perpetrated by strangers to the victims and therefore difficult to track and solve — are special to this era, a specialness exploited in both fictional and real-life crime stories. While such killers had existed in earlier times (such as London's Jack the Ripper in the late 1800s), the recent numbers of deaths implied that more of them were out there. Put another way, the statistics suggest that the proliferation of serial murders is a symptom of life in later twentieth-century America.

In this novel and its sequels, Scarpetta battles serial killers with the most up-to-date science. The books teach readers about the techniques of bloodtyping, examination and tracing of fibers, analysis of DNA (which is a pivotal element in Cornwell's third novel *All That Remains*, 1992). In this first novel, examination of the corpse with a laser reveals a glitter on parts of the victim that the killer presumably touched. High-tech science thus yields a clue that turns out to be pivotal as Scarpetta tries to determine the identity of the glittery residue. In addition to physical science, Cornwell includes the current psychological theories about serial killers, views which largely derive from Ressler's research. The novel introduces the recurring character Benton Wesley, an FBI profiler who uses Ressler's method of interpreting the crime scene to decipher the personality of the killer. Cornwell also includes the character Dr. Spiro Fortosis, a veteran specialist in forensic medicine; his and Scarpetta's lengthy review of the cases provides a primer on the analysis of crime scenes, especially the interpretations of how the wounds on the victims betray the personality of the perpetrator.

Scarpetta herself brings a specialized medical knowledge to the investigation. She expertly deduces that a sweet smell lingering at a crime scene is the odor of the killer and that he entered the dwelling after his intended victim did. Such an odor would have alerted the victim, a surgeon who in her job would often depend upon smell, to danger. Scarpetta further links the smell to a specific disease that the killer must have, and uses this information to goad him into revealing himself. Scarpetta is less knowing of her



office computer; she uses it without understanding how it works and thus feels helpless when her files are raided.

Cornwell, who worked as a computer analyst, provides Lucy, Scarpetta's precocious young niece, as the computer expert who explains to Scarpetta (and readers) how the violation of the office computer could have occurred.

In summary, Cornwell is impressively modern in her treatments of medicine, psychology, and technology; this modernity, along with her skill at explaining and dramatizing this new science, accounts for part of her success.

The other big social issue in the novel is the status of women. Although not a doctrinaire feminist, Scarpetta is a feminist pioneer in her assumption of a previously male job. Pete Marino, the veteran policeman who investigates the murders, tolerates her presence at crime scenes and her unorthodox intimate involvement in the case. Scarpetta wonders if he dislikes women or just her, but her skills gradually win his respect. Indeed, the novel is largely about her efforts to earn respect from the solidly male political hierarchy of Virginia's government. Her superiors second-guess her, question her competence, and decline to support her publicly when the pressures on her office mount. As a female administrator, she is alone, without the back-up a good-old-boy son of Virginia would receive from his brethren in a crisis. She does learn that she can trust Marino and Wesley, who with her form a loyal trio to face the crimes in the next books of the series.

The crimes themselves suggest the issue of the status of women. In a novel largely about how a woman proves herself in her profession, the plot involves the torture and murder of professional women. The attacker savagely rapes his victims, presumably seeking to reduce them to sexual objects over whom he has ultimate power. The misogyny of the killer is an extreme version of the anxiety created by the rising social power of women, the anxiety evident in Scarpetta's tense conferences with male politicians.



Techniques

This novel introduces the basic pattern that the plots of the ensuing novels will follow with disappointingly little variation. The book begins with a death, another in an ongoing series.

The narrative then focuses upon how the corpse of the victim becomes a source of valuable evidence. But political pressure complicates the investigation and threatens Scarpetta's position.

Scarpetta finds herself nearly alone against her governmental superiors and the bad publicity, so she bonds more tightly to Marino and Wesley.

Marino develops a very good suspect, but Scarpetta's intrigue with a particular detail that appeals to her medical knowledge sends her in a different direction, and she devises a way to use this detail to flush out the killer. Her efforts place her directly in danger, thus allowing Cornwell to write a violent confrontation as the climax. The use and reuse of the formula plot may be an expected trait of genre writing; what propels the reading of the series beyond the plot and the topical use of serial killers is the engaging personality of Scarpetta. The same could be said of the seven Philip Marlowe novels (1939-1958) by Raymond Chandler.

Cornwell deftly writes long scenes, a rarity among authors. A fifteen-page sequence in this novel shows Scarpetta defensive when summoned to the office of her politically appointed supervisor, where three officials confront her about problems with the investigation.

As the conversation progresses, Scarpetta works into the narrative her analyses of her responses, how well she stands up to these men, what they may be thinking but not be saying. She even recognizes that on one issue she spoke too quickly, introducing a potentially dangerous subject. Scarpetta embeds commentary into the narration. Thus the plot never has to stop to let readers understand her thoughts. (Chandler offers a striking contrast; Marlowe as a first person narrator usually declines to share his thoughts and gives readers only the action of the plot.) Similar scenes are Scarpetta's drive to the various crime sites with Marino and her review of the cases with Fortosis. The impact of this technique is two-fold. It demonstrates Scarpetta's very quick mind and her merciless capacity for self-analysis. And it draws the readers closer to Scarpetta's perspective, rendering her completely trustworthy.



Themes

Family

Dr. Kay Scarpetta is a full-blooded Italian woman with strong family ties. Kay was traumatized at a young age by her father's bout with leukemia and untimely death. As a result, Kay has formed a strong bond with Lucy, her-ten year-old niece and the only grandchild of her parents. Kay's mother constantly laments the fact that there is only one grandchild but that it's probably a blessing that Kay doesn't have children because she works too much and would be a terrible mother.

Regardless of her mother's opinions, Kay works hard to carry on certain family traditions. The preeminent tradition to Kay is cooking with tried and true recipes to create exquisite Italian meals. There are other types of cuisine in Kay's cooking arsenal, but Italian cooking and wines are the doctor's forte.

Although Kay's relationship with her mother is rocky, the relationship with her sister, Dorothy, is worse. Dorothy is Lucy's mother, a self-indulgent woman who has no time for her own daughter. In Kay's mind, Dorothy does almost nothing right and should never have had a child. Because Dorothy refuses to cook, Kay believes that she doesn't even deserve to be Italian.

Despite the familial shortcomings, Kay works diligently at her relationship with Lucy, giving the child as much time and attention as possible. Lucy is not an ordinary child and Kay doesn't treat her like one. Kay remembers when she was treated like a child and will not inflict the same treatment on Lucy.

Although Kay's work is often her life, it is clear that her life would be much duller without Lucy.

Sexism

Ever since Kay entered Johns Hopkins as a medical student, she has been the target of sexism. There were only four women in her class at Hopkins and the male students did everything in their power to make the women's lives miserable. Some dropped out and one had a nervous breakdown. Kay Scarpetta swore that she would succeed.

As the Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Kay Scarpetta has a great deal of responsibility. The doctor has worked long and hard to get to the current level in her profession, perhaps costing her a marriage. As a result, Scarpetta is always in control, very precise in her work, and is considered to be cold by many in her sphere. Scarpetta is not cold but must appear that way in order to gain the professional respect she deserves.



Sexism rears its ugly head in the form of Dr. Alvin Amburgey, the Commissioner of Health and Human Services. Both Scarpetta and Amburgey are fairly new to their jobs. Scarpetta has had big shoes to fill as successor to Dr. Cagney, a revered man who held the post for many years until his untimely death. Although the reason is never completely clear, Amburgey hates Scarpetta to such a degree that he will stop at nothing in the quest to humiliate and discredit the Chief Medical Examiner. However, Amburgey doesn't give enough credit to Scarpetta or her staff who collectively foil his plans.

Intuition

Throughout *Postmortem* Kay Scarpetta has been at war with herself over the investigation of five women who were brutally raped and murdered. As a forensic pathologist, Scarpetta is trained to view scientific evidence and to make determinations based on the evidence. Cases are solved through painstaking work, documentation, and proof. However, Scarpetta's intuition is what eventually leads to solving the case.

Scarpetta is known for over-thinking things at times while ignoring gut feelings about a case. The more Scarpetta ignores her intuition, the further the case gets off course. When the Chief Medical Examiner listens to her own mind, the answers seem to appear where before there were none.

Scarpetta routinely ignores her intuition when it comes to her personal life. Although Kay had been dating Bill Boltz for several months, she chose to push aside signs that something was amiss about the current beau. The few times the couple was about to have sex, Kay backed off and was frightened by the man's sudden aggression. As proof began to surface about Bill's criminal activities, Kay realizes that her intuition may have saved her once again.

Small facts have a way of lodging themselves in Kay's brain and surfacing later. Those small facts often couple with the doctor's intuition to move in a direction other than the one science would have her follow.

Significant Topics

The overriding issue of the Scarpetta series is how Scarpetta views the world. She speaks of forensic matters with calm objectivity and confidence, with a composed veneer that covers internal hauntings and obsessions. The novel opens with a nightmare vision of a pale, deformed face, "an evil intelligence" staring in at her from the stormy night beyond her window. Her job has taught her that evil lurks in the outer world. She cannot leave such knowledge at the office with her files; it follows her, invades her thinking and her dreams. In a later scene with her mentor Dr. Fortosis, both pathologists sit in mute horror after they admit the ferocity of the latest attack, in which the killer repeatedly stabbed the victim's genital area. The only emotional reaction these professionals allow themselves is painful silence. After she returns to Richmond, Scarpetta reveals her unexpressed anxieties as she recoils in fright from a jogger.

Cornwell builds into this and the following novels the realization that Scarpetta's chosen profession exerts a great psychological cost.

Although taking violence as her subject, Cornwell seeks to deglamorize it. First, she avoids describing the attacks; instead, in a flat tone she reports on the state of the bodies, demonstrating that axiom of creative writing classes that specificity can create a greater effect than a host of imprecise adjectives. Here is her description of the first corpse in this novel, a victim of strangulation: "Her face was grotesque, swollen beyond recognition and dark bluish purple from the suffusion of blood caused by the tight ligature around her neck. Bloody fluid had leaked from her nose and mouth, staining the sheet." The passage accomplishes the ironic double purpose of rendering the victim as an object for study and disturbing the readers with facts of the attack. Cornwell states in her Harper's profile that she does not seek to present murder as sexy, a proclivity she feels invades modern crime writing.

She also is concerned that the victim not become a mere body. Although the book begins after the murder, Scarpetta strives to understand the victim's life and presents a rounded portrait of her.

Often in mystery novels, the victim is a flat character, or a villain, or a butt of ridicule, largely a device to get the plot going. In contrast, Cornwell's victims are innocents whose rich and rewarding lives are invaded by monsters. As an implied reproach to readers who may find criminals interesting, Cornwell tries to offer victims who are just as interesting. A scene in the third novel *All That Remains* drives home her point that investigators and readers must remember the humanity of the victims. A college student couple has been murdered, and the press focuses on the girl, because her mother is the federal Drug Czar, and refers to the dead male as "the boyfriend." The dead boy's father disrupts a press conference by insisting that the press learn his name.

Style

Point of View

Postmortem is written in the first person, using the voice of Dr. Kay Scarpetta, a forensic pathologist and Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia.

The use of first person is important in this novel because of the scientific nature of the book. As a medical doctor, Kay Scarpetta must use specific techniques and terminology in her work, something that could not be appropriately described through any other point of view. Additionally, the first person point of view allows the readers to enter into the mind of a highly respected forensic pathologist who details all aspects of her work with murder victims. The procedures employed in the Chief Medical Examiner's office are extremely precise and must be documented in such a way that prosecutors and the victims' families are left with no question that the victim was treated with utmost care and all tests performed were completed with expert precision.

The entire novel is written in the first person, not relying on a third person or omniscient narrator to provide additional or background information.

While a first person narrative often leaves details unavailable to the reader, the first person point of view is appropriate to detail necessary information to the reader.

Setting

Postmortem takes place in Richmond, Virginia. Kay Scarpetta lives in Richmond's west end, in a newly developed, security conscious area. Other areas of Richmond are used throughout the story, such as Berkeley Downs on the south side of the city, Brookfield Heights, a newly restored yuppie neighborhood, and Ginter Park, the oldest neighborhood in the city.

Scarpetta's home is that of an upper class professional, mirrored by the area in which the house is located. Scarpetta lives alone in the large house save for infrequent visits by Lucy. Bertha, a housekeeper, maintains the home for Kay. The most notable features about the house are the slate roof, large kitchen, and view of the woods.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Chief Medical Examiner's Office. Scarpetta's office is located in a nondescript pale stucco building downtown. The building is relatively new, built to accommodate what Scarpetta refers to as "hospital for the dead". The area surrounding the OCME is dismal and almost appears as abandoned as the nearby railway station that no longer serves the public.

Scarpetta's office is newly renovated, an act ordered by Scarpetta when she took over the job as Chief. The morgue and labs on the premises are state of the art.



Although the labs and the morgue are well taken care of and clean, the rooms maintain an eerie presence and are often avoided by anyone who is not required to enter, particularly security guards. The lack of electronic surveillance also makes the occupants jumpy when they are required to work alone at night.

Language and Meaning

Postmortem is a novel in which a forensic lab and crimes scenes is the backdrop. The main character, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, is a forensic pathologist and Chief Medical Examiner of Richmond, Virginia. Throughout the book, the main characters are required to use a large number of scientific terms and definitions to discuss various cases. The details also serve to give the book credibility and factual information.

Part of Scarpetta's duties is to perform autopsies. During this procedure, the exact steps taken are documented. Samples of clothing and bodily fluids are taken from the victims and crime scenes, and each sample is documented and analyzed in the hope that the information gathered is adequate enough to solve the crime.

There are portions of the novel in which the scientific explanations are lengthy and may confuse the reader. Patricia Cornwell does this to add an air of authenticity and tends to keep the lengthy discussions to a minimum in order to maintain the attention of the reader.

The overall effect is that the cases are resolved and each finding is backed up with scientific proof that Scarpetta can take into court, should the need arise. The reader is left with new information and a sense of reality.

Structure

The novel contains sixteen chapters. The novel is presented in one section, following the cases of five women who have been brutally raped and murdered. The chapters follow the story in chronological order. There is a use of flashback on occasion, detailing events from Kay Scarpetta's childhood or memories of conversations she's had with various family members.

The main portion of the story revolves around incidents that occur in Scarpetta's home or at the Chief Medical Examiner's Office. There are pieces of the novel that occur in other locations, such as crime scenes, but those pieces are limited. There are also some short references to Florida, where Scarpetta's mother and sister live.

The chapters in Postmortem are relatively short and easy to follow. As with most mystery novels, Postmortem leaves many questions until the end, when everything ties together in a neat package.



Although the chapters are chronological in nature, Cornwell tends to use different aspects of the story to keep the chapters fresh. This structure keeps the reader interested and assists in moving the story forward.

The total number of pages in the novel is 327. The longest chapter is comprised of twenty-nine pages; the shortest chapter is comprised of twelve pages. The average chapter length is nineteen pages.



Quotes

"I'd begun to dread the hours between midnight and 3:00 A.M. when Friday becomes Saturday and the city is unconscious." p. 2

"A violent death is a public event, and it was this facet of my profession that rudely grated against my sensibilities." p. 7

"The morgue had a distinctive odor, the stale stench of death no amount of air deodorizer could mask." p. 19

"I returned to my office and was so jumpy that when I heard the elevator doors opening across the hall I had a large pair of scissors in hand and was prepared to use them." p. 28

"And during my emptiest moments when I felt the worst about myself, damn if I wouldn't see one of those chinch bug shells that used to litter the lawn of my childhood home. Translucent, brittle, dried out. Dead." p. 38

"According to the computer, and there could be no mistake about it, the latents the laser picked up on Lori Petersen's shoulder were left by Matt Petersen, her husband." p. 45

"Isolation is the cruelest of punishments, and it had never occurred to me that I was something less than human because I wasn't a man." p. 68

"He kills because it's a compulsion, an attempt to fill some need. The more he does it, the stronger this need becomes, and the more frustrated he gets therefore the stronger the urge will become." p. 76

"Though I smugly assured myself it was better to be viewed as a professional than a legend, I secretly had my doubts." p. 102

"When all else fails, I cook." p. 121

"I was just on the verge of blowing up at Marino when his voice was drowned out by the Stryker saw, which sounded like a loud dentist's drill as Wingo began cutting through the dead woman's skull." p. 172

"The victims had become my wards, and their only hope for justice was for their killer to be caught and prosecuted here." p. 194



"I had probed my memory exhaustively, especially during those quiet, introspective times when I was driving to or from work, or when I was out in my yard, tending to my roses." p. 238

"When I examined the contusions, the fractured bones, and the deep tissue cuts, I alone realized the force, the savageness required to inflict the injuries." p. 252

"Psychopaths are anything but stupid. What we want to do is make the guy think we think he's stupid." p. 261

Key Questions

Questions about genre and character apply to any of the Scarpetta novels, although *Postmortem* deserves special attention as the first and most honored of the series. The four contexts of the hard-boiled detective stories, feminist detective writing, the literature of serial murder, and scientific detectives also offer good starting points for discussion of any of the books.

1. How do you respond to Scarpetta?

Do you like her? How would you describe her? How does she endure the horrors she sees as she investigates?

2. How is Scarpetta like or unlike other detectives whose adventures you have read — Poe's Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe?

How does she compare with other classic and contemporary female sleuths?

3. Within the mystery genre, what makes Cornwell unique? How does her book stand out?

4. Do Cornwell's books remain in their genre? Are they good as detective fiction and as mainstream literature?

(Does a genre book ever become "good" literature?)

5. How do you explain the current fascination with serial killers? Why do you think that books and films about such criminals become popular? If FBI researcher Robert K. Ressler is right that serial killers are largely a contemporary phenomenon, what in our society could have brought them about?

Here are some questions specific to *Postmortem*: 1. Are the novel's crimes against women related to the current social status of women? Why does Cornwell have professional women as the victims in a novel about the trials of a professional woman?

2. What is the relationship of Scarpetta to her professional peers, Marino and Wesley? How do these relationships differ from that with Bill Boltz, the prosecutor Scarpetta is dating?(The *Body Farm* will spin her relationships with Marino and Wesley in surprising new directions.)

3. What commentary does Cornwell intend by dramatizing the political intrigues within the Virginia state government?



4. Although clearly Lucy is a device to demonstrate Scarpetta's latent maternal instincts, what other role does the niece play? Why does Cornwell lavish such time on this brainy yet often forlorn character?



Topics for Discussion

What type of career might Scarpetta have chosen if she'd left Johns Hopkins?

How do you think sexism has affected Scarpetta's job and personal life?

How would things change if Kay adopted Lucy?

What reasons might Marino have for being openly hostile to Scarpetta?

Do you think Benton Wesley and Pete Marino are well suited as partners in VICAP? Explain.

Do you think the killer was escalating his behaviors because of media coverage? Explain.

What might have happened if Scarpetta had been fired from the case?

What do you think causes Amburgey's resentment against Scarpetta?

What might have happened if Lucy had been the one to breach Kay's computer security system?

What would it have been like if Kay had confronted her sister about eloping and neglecting Lucy? Explain.



Literary Precedents

As *Postmortem* is a detective genre novel, comparing it to other examples of the genre is an enjoyable game. But clearly Cornwell does not write in the frothy, comic style that characterizes the "classical detective school" of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, or Ellery Queen. In classical mysteries, the killing is an intrusion into an otherwise peaceful setting; solving the crime restores social order. Cornwell's dark setting and her gruesome crimes place her in the American hard-boiled school of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Hard-boiled mysteries occur in dark city-scapes populated by sadistic criminals and marred by deeply ingrained social corruption. The detective is usually a solitary figure, one of the very few who retains a sense of justice. This figure is intelligent, but lacks the eccentric brilliance of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Christie's Hercule Poirot. Rather, the hard-boiled hero succeeds by hard work, usually by placing the self in peril. Such novels are not about flashes of insight (as in the Holmes stories) but about slowly revelatory investigations. Cornwell's work fits the type in the brutality of the crimes, the indications of deep societal disorders, and the commitment of the protagonist. As suggested above, Chandler's Marlowe makes a striking comparison-contrast with Scarpetta.

And the Scarpetta series jarringly contrasts with any novel of the classical period, especially the works of Christie and Sayers.

The contemporary mystery scene features many female sleuths for comparison-contrast to Scarpetta. Another version of the hard-boiled school appears in the work of Sara Paretsky, author a Chicago-based series about private detective V. I. Warshawski.

Much more satiric than Cornwell and Paretsky is Sharyn McCrumb, who like Cornwell has family and career connections in North Carolina and Virginia.

McCrumb created Elizabeth MacPherson, a forensic anthropologist who through eight novels examines corpses and other motley human remains. The contrast with Scarpetta is dramatic and instructive. MacPherson does her sleuthing as an amateur while on scholarly expeditions or family trips; Scarpetta examines crime victims as a profession. MacPherson is perky, humorous, and unmoved by what she encounters; Scarpetta agonizes over her cases. Although both women look at bones, they represent opposite poles — classical and hard-boiled — of contemporary mystery writing. Margaret Maron's series (beginning in 1992) about North Carolina lawyer and judge Deborah Knott mixes the softer classical approach with a treatment of social issues, especially the issue of women's status in Southern society, and thus offers regional and social connections to Cornwell's work.

Whichever of the two general styles the writers employ, contemporary female detectives share a number of traits. They tend to be middle-aged, single (often recovering from broken marriages), childless. They deliberately take on social roles that previously had been thought exclusively male — judge, private detective, medical examiner, anthropologist, local police chief — and thus see themselves as trail blazers. They often

endure difficult relationships with their mothers, who are troubling (if often funny) presences in their lives. Scarpetta fits the type perfectly.

Related Titles

Cornwell says in a 1991 article for *The Writer*, "I decided to write crime novels not because I liked to read them, but because I had been a crime reporter for *The Charlotte Observer*." Her early experiences dealing with police, with crime scenes, and with the contexts of violence (as in her series on prostitution) prepared her to take crime in a Southern city as her subject.

Between work in journalism and fiction came biography. Cornwell's book about Ruth Bell Graham (*A Time for Remembering: The Ruth Bell Graham Story*, 1983) does not present its subject as an appendage of the renowned Reverend Billy, but as a figure of significant interest in her own right. Indeed, the book's original cover jacket neither mentions nor pictures Rev. Billy, giving instead a photo of Ruth Graham.

Thus an unknowing browser could conceivably pick up the book without realizing (until reading the jacket's inside flap) who the subject is. The book's presentation of Ruth Graham as an independent woman even as she is a self-effacing wife of an important man offers tantalizing, if tenuous connections to *Scarpetta*.

The daughter of Dr. Nelson Bell, a Presbyterian medical doctor and missionary who lived in China from 1916 to 1941, Ruth met the Baptist Rev. Billy at Wheaton College and when she married him gave up the ambition to be, like her father, a missionary in Asia. Yet she maintained a striking independence from her husband, who was frequently absent from home on the speaking crusades that made him famous. The most salient indication of her refusal to be merely her husband's attachment is that she remained a Presbyterian, despite early pressure from her husband. She took the usually masculine role of supervising the building of the family homestead in Montreat, insistently instructing the laborers in the unusual look she wanted for the house. Cornwell chronicles Ruth Graham's deep attachments and efforts to help people such as workers at the house, neighbors, and potential converts whom she met on her husband's crusades. In her independence, her skills at overseeing and working with men, and her willingness to bond with others, Ruth Graham is like Kay *Scarpetta*. Although these connections exist, Ruth Graham is surely not a version of *Scarpetta* because Ruth Graham sacrificed her ambitions for her husband, while *Scarpetta* cannot sacrifice her ambitions or career for a man. In the second and third novels, *Scarpetta* resumes a relationship with her law school lover, but again sees it fracture as neither seems willing to make sacrifices in professional life for the other. The clearest signs of Ruth Graham's influence on the creation of *Scarpetta* is 1994's *The Body Farm* (please see separate entry), in which Cornwell invokes a religiosity that recalls the beliefs of Ruth Graham.



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