

# **Unnatural Death: Confessions of a Medical Examiner Study Guide**

**Unnatural Death: Confessions of a Medical Examiner  
by Michael Baden**

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## Plot Summary

In this biography Michael Baden explains the ends and out of a medical examiner. Baden gives the history of ME's dating back to the 1100s when a coroner was not much more than a tax collector. His duties were to investigate suspicious deaths to make sure they were not suicides; if they were, any money would go to the king instead of the deceased person's family members. Baden describes how over time the need to understand how, why, where and when a person died helped the office of coroner to evolve into what is now known as a medical examiner. Even to this day the law varies from state to state on whether or not there is trained medical examiner or coroner in office.

Baden delves into some of his more famous cases such as John Belushi, Elvis Presley, and John F. Kennedy to explicate the need for the ME's office not only in determining the cause of death but also the time of death. The answers to these questions allow for an understanding of who is responsible for the crimes. In the JFK case, Baden talks about how the mishandling of evidence and the autopsy early on led to conspiracy talk for years to come. With all three of the cases, the public is so star struck by the men that they cannot accept the simple facts of the case; they want to believe that something more sinister happened to cause their deaths. In the John Belushi case, time of death is very important because the only person to see him before he died claimed that he must have given himself the lethal injection after she left. Baden and his team are able to prove that she was in fact the one to give Belushi the lethal dose. In Elvis's case, Baden gives an unexpected new theory, that he does not necessarily believe that drugs were what killed Elvis. Baden believes that Elvis's already bad heart was the cause of death.

Baden looks at cases involving multiple murders and why they kill. People do not usually kill for no reason at all, and a good medical examiner can look at all the information and tie all the pieces together to solve some of the cases. He shows how if the ME is doing his job correctly, the wrong person is not blamed for the crime. Baden shows how important the job of a medical examiner is in this day and age. Throughout all the many cases Baden discusses in this biography, he is always showing how the answers are always there if the ME takes the time to look. It just takes an ME who is willing to look for the truth no matter where it takes him.



# Chapter 1-3

## Chapter 1-3 Summary and Analysis

In chapter one, Baden explains that when dealing with the untimely death of famous people, the public often wants to believe there is something more to their death. He notes cases like Marilyn Monroe, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the most famous John F. Kennedy. In all these cases these untimely tragic deaths are shocking, yet the findings so simplistic the public cannot or will not accept the conclusions. There has to be something more sinister behind these deaths.

After heading up the Select Committee on Assassinations, Baden and eight other medical examiners (ME) are looking into the JF Kennedy assassination. There has been so much talk of a conspiracy that Baden and his team have gathered to set the record straight and prove once and for all what really happened in Dealey Plaza.

That would not prove to be so easily done, because when President Kennedy was taken to the Dallas hospital, no autopsy was allowed to be preformed on him. Instead, the FBI basically steals the body and takes it back to Washington. Baden explains that although this may sound like the beginning of a cover-up, it is not. The FBI is at this point just not sure what is happening. The President has just been killed and they are not sure if Johnson's life is endangered or not. Their main thought is to get everyone out of Dallas and back to Washington as quickly as possible, but Mrs. Kennedy will not leave without her husband's body, so the FBI steals his body and leaves for Washington.

Baden explains that through his investigation years later, he learns that both men who were involved in the president's autopsy had never done an autopsy involving a bullet wound before. Neither ME knew that the other did not know what he was doing, and since neither man spoke up, both thought they were doing the autopsy correct. In the process, crucial things were overlooked, such as the exit wounds and bullet paths.

Baden also explains how these mistakes early on do not mean that years later one cannot find the answers. Baden and the other ME's examine all the evidence and photos including the president's clothing. They are able to talk with some of the doctors from the Dallas hospital as well as the Washington ME.

In the end, Baden and his team of ME's are able to do what should have been done years earlier, prove through forensic science that there was no second shooter. To this day, there are still many who can not believe that a man of Kennedy's standing could have been killed by the likes of one man, Lee Harvey Oswald. They want to believe there was more to the story, but Baden and his team believe they have proven that it was just as simple as that, one man did this horrible thing.



In chapter two, Baden talks about how he decides to become a medical examiner. When Baden begins medical school he is not sure which field of medicine he wants to go into. Baden soon finds himself drawn to forensic pathology, under his mentor Milton Helpert, the chief ME at Bellevue.

Baden talks about some of his early cases while going to school at Bellevue and moonlighting in the morgue. He tells how just like in everyday life the rich are given better treatment. On one of his first cases he is called to one death in the projects. While on his way, he is called and told to go to a high class dinner first where a rich lady has died during dinner. The lady who has died is believed to have suffered a heart attack; Baden does a quick check of her throat and finds a piece of broccoli lodged in her throat. When Baden finally gets to the death in the projects it is a baby who has died of pneumonia that has gone untreated. Baden notices that in the case with the rich lady there were police cars with lights everywhere pointing him to where the lady was, and once on scene there were people there to tell him where to go, but in the projects there were no cops, no lights, only one officer sat on the stoop pointing the way to a dead baby.

Baden talks about the fact that at this time ME's were at the bottom of the medical profession. Doctors believed that if you became an ME it was because you could not make it as a good doctor. Baden wanted to prove them wrong. He felt like he was making a difference, and he liked the fact that he could examine a body and know what had happened. He also enjoyed being able to tell people the cause of death, natural or unnatural, and know he was correct.

In chapter three, Baden explains not only how an autopsy is performed but also what an ME looks for while doing an autopsy. He explains what each of the organs look like in a healthy human versus in someone sick or murdered. Baden tells the difference in the appearance of the brain, for instance, in someone who has been killed by being hit in the head as opposed to falling and dying from hitting their head in the fall.

Baden also talks about the differences in humans all together, how even though we are basically made the same, our bodies do not work the same. He gives the example of two runners. Baden says doctors once believed that running helped keep your arteries clear of plaque because when Clarence De Mar died of cancer his arteries were almost without plaque. Years later, when Jim Fixx dies of a massive heart attack, that theory is no longer valid because Fixx had been running for seventeen years.

Baden talks about what common poisons ME's look for in an autopsy. He says that most are not caught on the basic toxicology screening and more advanced screenings are not done unless there is reason to suspect poisoning. He gives the clues the ME should catch from a basic autopsy, basic red flags to identify the exact poison. Such clues include the bitter almond smell inside the body left by cyanide poisoning. The only problem with that is that only about forty percent of the population has the right genes that allow them to smell that particular scent. Carbon monoxide turns the skin and blood cherry-pink.



Baden also talks about the three different ways to determine time of death. He explains the factors can change these readings and how they are important. One of these ways is livor mortis; the red blood cells begin breaking down after a person has been dead eight hours. If a person dies lying on their back, there will be skin discoloration on their back. This allows the ME to tell if the body has been moved after the person has died.



# Chapter 4-6

## Chapter 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter four deals with the history of medical examiners. The first mention of the office of coroner is in 1194. In those days the reason for needing a coroner was to make sure the person who had die did not commit suicide. If this was the case, any material belonging to the dead person would go to the king. The coroner was more or less a tax collector. He was not even in the medical field, his only qualification needed to be loyalty to the king. This was the case for many years. The coroner was not paid in most cases and if he was, it was not much. The whole idea of autopsies was a grotesque concept and forbidden by religion. The first recorded autopsy is performed in 1665, when Franis Carpenter beats his servant, Samuell Yeoungman in the head. Yeoungman dies two days later and an autopsy is performed on him to determine if Carpenter murdered him. The jury and coroner decided it was not murder, as Yeoungman died because he did not see a doctor for his injuries.

As the years pass on, the need for a coroner who is actually a doctor becomes clear after the Jack the Ripper case in 1888. At this time most of the coroners are robbing graves and buying bodies to do autopsies for research reasons. Some coroners, if not all, do not care or do not understand what can be learned through autopsies. They just want the money they receive, by this point the coroners are being paid per body they sign a death certificate for. One doctor is pulling bodies out of the river, signing the death certificates as John Doe then throwing them back in the river only to pull them back out again, getting paid multiple times for the same body. Soon after the Jack the Ripper case Scotland Yard begins using the hospital pathologists in murder cases.

It is not until 1914 that the United States replaces the coroner with a medical examiner in New York City. This first chief ME at Bellevue Hospital Laboratory is Dr. Charles Norris. "The rest of the country continued the old ways." Pg53 To date it is still a state by state system, not all states have a forensic pathologist ME.

Baden's mentor, Milton Helpern, is the third ME at Bellevue, he took over in 1954.

### Chapter Five Manhattan Postmortem

#### City Politics

In August 1978 Baden is named chief ME in New York. The problems that come along with this promotion prove to be more than he could have imagined. Politics play a huge role in all elected positions and the ME's office is no exception. After not even a year Baden see's that the DA's office and the major have decided that he is not playing the political game. The DA's office expects the ME to help them strengthen their cases by any means necessary. Baden does not do things that way. He does his job the way it is suppose to be done and if his findings help the DA's case then great, if not , that's not



his problem. Baden lets the autopsy tell him what happened, he does not let the DA's office tell him what they need the autopsy to prove, and this is where the trouble begins.

The DA, Robert Morgenthau, and Baden's boss, Reinaldo Ferrer, the health commissioner send letters to Major Koch evaluating Baden's performance. Both men want Baden removed from the chief ME's office because he is not helping them. The letters they send Major Koch have several examples of why Baden is not working out. Koch shows Baden the letters and allows him to explain each example, which he does. None of the acquisitions question Baden's competence of the job, most of them boil down to Baden refusing to change cause of death to suit the DA's cases.

Koch demotes Baden on the bases that he cannot have his ME and DA not getting along. Baden sues the Major for wrongful termination. It takes three years to get a ruling but finally Baden is found to have been wrongfully terminated. Koch and the new chief ME, Elliot Gross, appeal the ruling and win.

Baden does not try to overturn the ruling instead he takes a job in Suffolk County in 1981. In 1986 Governor Cuomo's director of Criminal Justice asks Baden and a forensic dentist, Lowell Levine, to start the New York State Police Forensic Science Unit.

## Chapter Six Earthly Remains

### Identifying the Dead

In this chapter we learn that even in this day and age indentifying the dead is still not always an easy task. Circumstances as well as good intentioned people sometimes get in the way.

This is the case of the Eastern Airlines flight 66 in 1975 that crashes while trying to land in New York. The people first on the scene make the process of identification much harder by moving the bodies and removing all personal possessions. Baden explains that in mass disasters most people are identified from their fingerprints or dental records, if all else fails they try to use the bones.

Baden tells another story of a headless, handless woman who was found. The ME who first did the autopsy on her gave her age in the mid 20's. This is what the police used to try to find her identity. When no one came forward to claim her, they asked Baden to take a second look at the body. Baden found the woman's age to be closer to 50, the first ME was mistaken because the woman was in such good physical shape, but Baden looked closer and notices that her ovaries were shrunken. This only happens after a woman reaches menopause, therefore her age had to be at least 50. Baden also noticed a scar under the woman's breast. Baden also examines the woman's stomach contents to find out what she last ate. With this new information a woman calls claiming she believes the woman to be her sister. The police interview the woman and find out the two sisters had eaten a meal together just before she disappeared, and the stomach contents matched, as did the scar under the woman's breast. Just getting the correct age of the victim helped to finally identify her and give her family closure.





Baden also notes that often the way in which people try to cover up their crimes is what allows the ME to identify the victim easier. He tells of the case of a body of a man who was found missing some of his fingers, and the one that was left was burnt. The killer thought that burning the body would keep the ME's from being able to identifying him, however, all it did was preserve the print. From that one burnt finger Baden was able to pull one perfect fingerprint, identifying the victim.



# Chapter 7-9

## Chapter 7-9 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, Baden discusses the ways in which to find time of death and why that can be important. One case he works on where time of death is important is the John Belushi case.

John Belushi supposedly died of a drug overdose he gave himself while he was alone in a hotel room; however none of that added up to Baden. Cathy Smith, Belushi's friend who was with him earlier in the day, said she gave him an injection early in the morning and then Belushi took a shower then lay down and went to sleep. Smith claimed that Belushi was sleeping when she left him a few hours later. When Baden ran the all the standard test to determine time of death, they all came back with different times, so Baden had to take them all into consideration when trying to decide what actually happened. He was sure that the injection Smith claimed to have given Belushi early in the morning could not have been the dose that killed him. Baden said that if it were the dose that killed Belushi he would have been dead within two hours, and none of the times of death showed that to be the case. Baden believed that Smith had given Belushi another injection shortly before she left, and that was the dose that killed him. By Smith's own words, Belushi had taken a shower earlier that morning, Baden said that if that were the first dose that killed him, he could not have woken from a coma to take a shower then lay back down and fallen back into a coma and died. Smith was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and served fifteen months in jail.

Another case is that of a diamond dealer named Pinchos Jaroslaswicz, who disappears after a meeting with two men, Shlomo Tal and Pinhas Balabin, in Tal's office. When Jaroslaswicz's body is discovered eight days later in Tal's office, the same office the police have already searched several times over and never found the body. The body is only found after Balabin tells the police where it is. When they do find it, the body does not show any signs of decay that would normally be on an eight-day-old corpse. The police believe that Jaroslaswicz was killed just a few days ago and then brought back to the office after the police had already searched it. When Baden is called in to autopsy the body, he explains that the way in which the body was stored is what kept it from decaying as normal. He says that the body being left on the cold tile floor, in addition to being wrapped in plastic and tied securely is what kept the body from decaying. Baden is able to determine through autopsy that the body has in fact been dead eight days, and the officers who searched the office admit that they never looked in the location where the body was ultimately found because they did not think that Jaroslaswicz's tall frame would have fit in such a small space.

Baden explains that when taken as a whole rigor, livor, and alor mortis, along with common sense, provide a fairly accurate time of death. Sometimes just using one method does not give time of death as accurately as when combining all three.



During chapter eight, Baden examines multiple murders and why people kill. He also stresses the importance of communication between departments and agencies in solving these cases.

The first case he talks about is Mary Beth Tinning. Tinning is the mother of nine children, all of which die under strange circumstances. If Tinning had only had two or even three of children die, the authorities may have never realized what was really going on, but by the time she is caught, all eight of her birth children and one adopted child have died. When Tinning's first child dies, Tinning has two older children, and the baby, Jennifer, dies just nine days after she is born. The doctors say that Jennifer died of meningitis. The puzzling part of Jennifer's death is that the meningitis is older than nine days. Baden later learns that Tinning wanted Jennifer to be born on Christmas Day and used a hanger to start her labor; the old hanger is what gave Jennifer meningitis. Within two months, both of Tinning's older children are also dead. The doctors give vague reasons for both children's deaths. Tinning gets pregnant five more times, and one by one these children also die from what the doctor's rule as SIDS. Then Tinning adopts a boy who also dies. Finally Baden is called in because of the number of children dying in one household. When Baden looks at the file he sees that no one questioned Tinning about any of the deaths, they only consoled her over her losses. This is why Tinning was killing her children: she was thriving on all the attention she was getting from the loss of her children so she continued to have children and kill them. She also tried to kill her husband at one point also. Mr. Tinning was aware of the attempt on his life but choose to stay with his wife anyway.

When Tinning is questioned with the fact that her children could not have all died from SIDS, she first confesses but then later recants. She is tried and convicted of the death of her last child and is appealing the conviction.

The .22 caliber killer, also known as the Buffalo Slasher, is another case where if the different agencies had been working together they could have made the difference in catching the killer sooner and in the process saved lives. This killer changed his weapon of choice but not his victim profile. Had the agencies been working together they would have seen that all the victims were black men about the same age and build with thin mustaches. Baden is the first to connect all the cases together and instrumental in finding the killer, Private Joseph C. Christopher. It is believed by some that Christopher was actually gay and the men he was killing were the men that were bringing up these feelings in him. In essence, he was trying to kill the thing he thought was stirring up his homoerotic feelings.

In chapter nine, Baden discusses cases that are difficult to prove from the autopsy alone. He explains that in a smothering case, the ME can not be sure it happened because it leaves no signs. He goes on to say that with a drowning or falling from a height, it can be difficult to determine if it were accidental or murder without the benefit of the clues left behind at the crime scene.

In the first case, Baden looks at the case of Paul Fried, who was found dead in his home. Fried's wife Catherine told police she had been afraid that her husband would



take his own life and had been meeting with a psychiatrist to discuss her husband on the day he died. The police found a suicide note, and the autopsy showed Fried had large amounts of alcohol and barbiturates in his system. His death was ruled a suicide. Fried's adult daughters did not believe that he had killed himself and they called Milton Helpern to do a second autopsy.

The body had already been embalmed, but Helpern was able to determine pinpoint hemorrhages in the eyes and bruises on his neck, but still this only changed the autopsy to read "cause undetermined". Fried's daughters were satisfied with this.

Years later, a man who had worked for Catherine Fried came forward and confessed that Catherine had told him that she had killed her husband. Catherine had told him she put a pillow over Fried's face and sat on it. She had killed him in the early morning hours before her meeting with the psychiatrist and made it look like he had taken an overdose of pills and alcohol.

When Baden looks over the case again, he sees Helpern's autopsy makes notes about the hemorrhages to the eyes and the bruising, along with the fact that body was found on the floor rather than the bed and that the toxicology reports showed that the alcohol and barbiturate levels were too low to cause death. This leads Baden to believe that Catherine had in fact killed her husband.

Catherine was found guilty; however, had it not been for the confession of her former employee no one would have known she had killed Fried. She almost committed the perfect murder.

In another case Dr. Jasclevich begins killing the patients of a fellow doctor because the hospital brought the new doctor in to help Jasclevich. All the deaths were attributed to post operative complications or heart attacks. The red flags were raised when Jasclevich was found to have visited all the patients before they died, and while he was on his vacations no deaths took place.

The suspicions were taken to the hospital board, which then checked Jasclevich's locker and found needles, syringes, and eighteen bottles of curare, the bottles almost empty. The board then got in touch with the DA. Jasclevich said he would resign if they promised not to talk to the press. He claimed the curare was for an experiment he was working on, and the hospital and DA agreed to his terms.

Years later, a newspaper man found the story and got an informant to support the whole story. Baden was called in to re-examine the case when the DA decided to press charges. Braden found traces of curare in one of the bodies, and they learned the experiment Jasclevich claimed to have been working on was false. Jasclevich and his attorneys managed to convince the jury he was not guilty and he skipped the country the next year while he was being investigated on seven malpractice suits, including operating on cancer on a patient who did not have cancer, fraud and neglect.



# Chapter 10-12

## Chapter 10-12 Summary and Analysis

In chapter ten, two young men, Robert Travis and Larry Peters go to their boss, Dr. Brown's, house to steal gasoline. The men mean no harm to Dr. Brown and wait for her to go to bed before driving up her driveway to steal the gas. While Peters is getting the gas, Travis decides to go into the house to steal her gun. Dr. Brown catches Travis and he hits her. Dr. Brown falls down. Travis, believing she is dead, panics and tells Peter's that he found her dead and that she had once told him to burn down the house if he ever found her dead. Peters and Travis burn Dr. Brown's house with her inside.

Peters tells people in the community that he was at Dr. Brown's house the night she died, so the police are questioning him about what happened. By the end of the interrogation, Peters tells the police that he had seen Dr. Brown dead before they started the fire and then blames the entire thing on Travis.

In the beginning, the medical examiner believed that Dr. Brown had been alive when the fire started because he found soot in her windpipe and he was told the fire was an accident. This was before Peters confessed to starting the fire with Travis. Then there was the matter of the fracture to Dr. Brown's skull, which indicated to the ME that she had been killed before the fire was started, but both scenarios could not be true. They ask for Baden's help. Baden found none of the other telltale signs of carbon monoxide poisoning in Dr. Brown's body. When he examined the head fracture, he concluded that it was not the cause of death either, just a result from the fall when Travis hit her. Baden read Travis's original statement to police. Travis said he hit Brown once and she collapsed, Baden concluded that because Brown was in such an advanced state of heart disease, the blow from Travis is what killed her, not because he hit Brown so hard, but because her heart could not take the stress of the entire situation. Travis was indirectly responsible for Brown's death. This case is awaiting trial and the two men are in jail.

In another case, a young woman, Daphne, is found dead after her car has been abandoned. The medical examiner could not find a cause of death. Her family believed her boyfriend had something to do with her death, but the police could never prove he had any involvement.

Two years later, Baden is asked to evaluate several cases this particular police department has not been able to solve, Daphne's happens to be one of them. While reading her file, Baden notices drug involvement that no one seemed to have followed up on. Baden also learns that she was at a party free basing cocaine the night she died. Daphne's friends had told a few people that she had died at the party and they had panicked and moved her body. The police had heard the story but did not believe it; however, Baden thought the story sounded true. Baden is able to get body fluids from the hospital and he finds traces of cocaine in them. Daphne's family refuses to believe



she had overdosed at a party. Baden said, "murder was more comforting" than an overdose.

In chapter eleven, Baden explains that, at this point in his life, most of the time when he is asked to review an autopsy it is because someone believes a mistake has been made with the original findings. A lot of the time this goes back to a medical examiner going along with a police theory instead of coming to their own conclusion. ME's sometimes do this when they do not have clear findings of their own.

The cases in this chapter deal with the ME's trying to solve murders that never actually happened. This case deals with a woman, Gail Morris, who is found dead in a Volkswagen. She lived locally and was known to spend her time drinking and keeping the company of Leonard Barco. The police believe Barco was responsible for Morris's death, because he was the only one seen with her the last weekend of her life. Barco confessed to having a fight with Morris but said he did not kill her.

The medical examiner could not determine a cause of death, but did notice bruises on Morris. The ME took the word of the police and listed the death as "beating and strangulation" without any pathological proof. The ME thought the police had the wrong time of death and insisted that Morris was killed on Friday night, even though people in the town said they had seen her with Barco later in the weekend.

The police managed to get Barco to confess to the murder, with help of the autopsy findings, but even with their help Barco could never get the day Morris died correct. Morris's sister told the police she did not believe her sister was killed on Friday night because she had seen Morris's car on Saturday and she did not see a body in the car. The police could not explain this.

For eight months Barco is in jail, and then his public defender asks Baden for help. When Baden reviews the case, he learns that Morris was a drug addict and she was also an epileptic. There was no evidence that she was taking any medications for the epilepsy. Baden found no evidence that Morris had been murdered either. He concluded that there was enough alcohol in her body to cause an overdose. He also found other evidence, such as unhatched maggot eggs, to prove the time of death matched Barco's original story. In the end, Barco was cleared and released from prison, thanks to Baden.

Chapter twelve describes how in September of 1971, a riot breaks out in the maximum security prison of upstate New York known as Attica. The prisoners soon take control of the prison and beat a guard into a coma. They have forty hostages.

The whole thing lasts four days, and the troopers are sent in to retake the prison. Governor Rockefeller does not want any of the guards going with the troopers as he is afraid the guards will be looking for revenge. Some of the guards do sneak in with the troopers. During the retaking of the yard, the prisoners take the hostages and hold knives to their throats. None of the prisoners have guns. After the troopers open fire and the dust clears, thirty-nine people are dead, including thirteen hostages. When the hostages are brought out they have bloody blindfolds around their necks, leading most people to



believe the prisoners had killed them. There were too many bodies to all be sent to the same hospital, so the bodies are sent to different hospitals. They find out most of the hostages have been shot in the head and none of them had their throats cut.

Baden is called in to look at the hostages; no one wanted to accept that the hostages were killed by the troopers and not the prisoners. When Baden takes a look at the bodies he finds the hostages were not killed intentionally by the troopers, but nonetheless by the troopers and not the prisoners. Because of his work on this case in 1974, Baden becomes a member of a review board that monitors the deaths of inmates. In the past, there were no medical examiners in the prison, only coroners. The coroners almost never ordered autopsies be performed on the inmates; instead, they took the word of the guards as to cause of death. This review board made conditions much better for the prisoners and forced the guards to take suicide threats seriously.





# Characters

## Michael Baden

Michael Baden is the only main character in this book. He is one of the country's leading forensic experts. Baden likes the public side of forensic pathology, the instant gratification that comes from doing an autopsy and knowing the diagnosis right away appealed to him. The fact that reporters covered a lot of his work added to the importance he felt about what he was doing.

As a medical student, Baden began spending most of his time in the morgue. Milton Helpren was the man who became Baden's mentor. During his years in medical school and as a resident, Baden worked in the ME's office with Helpren. Soon he realized pathology had chosen him, and he was spending all of his free time in the ME's office.

Baden is very aware of the importance of a good medical examiner. He is trying to show new medical students the importance and the advantages of choosing forensic pathology as their field of medicine. He is trying to overcome the past and present misconceptions of the ME's office. He is always intent on upholding the integrity of the office, no matter the personal consequences. He refuses to lower his standards just to please his superiors. This costs Baden his job as chief medical examiner in 1979 when the District Attorney's office expected him to go along with their conclusions concerning cause of death. When Baden would not make the changes the DA's office wanted, they helped to get him demoted. This, however, helped Baden's career rather than hurt it, because the trail that came from the demotion gave Baden the reputation of being very honest and creditable. He was asked to head up many committees, such as the Select Committee on Assassinations, in which he looked into the John F. Kennedy assassination. He was also a member of a medical review board to monitor the deaths of prisoners. He has been a consulting forensic pathologist to the US Department of Justice, the Department of Veteran Affairs, the FBI and the Russian Government.

## Milton Helpren

Helpren is the chief medical examiner at Bellevue when Baden is going to medical school. Helpren is the man who gets Baden excited about forensic pathology and helps him choose this path of medicine.

## Commander James J. Humes

The ME who performed Kennedy's autopsy. Commander Humes was not trained for this job and had never done an autopsy on anyone with a gunshot wound before Kennedy.





## **Samuell Yeoungman**

The first man autopsied. He was believed to have been murdered by his boss, Francis Carpenter in 1665 in Maryland.

## **Dr. Charles Norris**

Norris is the first chief ME and head of Bellevue Hospital Laboratory in New York. He is chief ME from 1918 until 1935.

## **Robert Morgenthau**

Morgenthau is the DA of Manhattan when Baden is chief ME. Morgenthau helps to get rid of Baden because Baden refuses to lie about the cause of death to help Morgenthau secure a conviction.

## **Reinaldo Ferrer**

Ferrer is Baden's boss when he is chief ME; Ferrer is also the health commissioner.

## **Bernard Spilsbury**

Scotland Yard's first full time forensic pathologist in 1800s.

## **Mary Beth Tinning**

The woman who killed all nine of her children just to get sympathy from her friends and neighbors.

## **Cathy Smith**

Smith is the woman who was with John Belushi when he died. She is convicted of giving Belushi the lethal dose of drugs.

## **John Belushi**

The actor who died of a drug overdose.

## **Robert Travis, Jr.**

The young man who accidentally killed his employer by scaring her to death.



# Objects/Places

## Parkland Hospital

Where Kennedy was taken after being shot in Dealy Plaza. Parkland Hospital is also where the second bullet was found after it fell out of Connally's thigh.

## Mayflower Hotel

This is where Baden goes to meet with Connally during the 1978 presidential campaign. Baden was looking at the scar from the second bullet, and he believed that one bullet hit both the president and Connally. This meeting proved to Baden that this was the case because the scar was sideways.

## Belleview

This is where Baden did his residency for medical school and where he decides to pursue forensic pathology. It is also the first hospital in the United States to have a trained ME. This happened in 1918, with Dr. Norris.

## Chateau Marmont Hotel, Las Angeles

This is where John Belushi was living in 1982. This is where he died of a drug overdose on March 4 1982.

## Maryland

This is where the first recorded autopsy was performed on Samuel Youngman.

## Hotel Elysee in Manhattan

This is where Tennessee Williams died in 1983.

## JFK Airport

This is the location of the crash of the Eastern Airlines Flight 66 in 1975.

## **Riverdell Hosptial**

This is the hospital that had two nurses that were killing patients to try and shed light on the fact that more nurses were needed at this hospital. The hospital changed its name twice after the trial, but eventually had to shut down because of all the negative publicity.

## **Cambridge, New York**

Dr. Brown, who was accidentally killed by one of the boys who worked for her, lived here.

## **Attica**

Attica is a prison in upstate New York, that had a riot that lasted four days in late summer of 1971.



# Themes

## Integrity

The integrity that Michael Baden has is unmatched. When he first begins his career as a medical examiner, he does so because this is the field of medicine that most piques his interest. Overtime, however, the veracity he feels for his chosen profession is what drives him. The medical examiner's office is the least respected of the medical community. Baden is determined to bring respect to the office and hopes more young doctors will be willing to become medical examiners.

In the years leading up to Baden's decision to become a medical examiner, the office has been held by unqualified men. In the beginning, they were not even doctors, but rather tax collectors. Over the years, the office has been besmirched by the years of coroners who were nothing more than grave robbers. Baden realizes the importance of the ME, and believes that if used to obtain honest answers to how, why, when, and where as well as who has died, then the office of ME is a very essential part of the legal process.

In 1978 when Baden is chief ME in New York, his integrity is what ultimately costs him his job, and in the process brings into the forefront that Baden is a man of great integrity, no matter what the personal cost to him may be. In 1978, the DA wants to use the ME's office to help strengthen their cases. Baden is all for helping put away criminals, but not at the cost of falsifying death certificates. Baden feels this would be setting the ME's office back to the days of coroners being glorified tax collectors. Baden feels that if properly done, the autopsy should tell what happened, not the other way around, and he refuses to bend the rules to suit the DA's office. The DA and Baden's boss, Reinaldo Ferrer, go to Major Koch to try and get Baden demoted. The Major gives Baden the chance to defend himself, but then demotes him anyway. None of the charges that the DA or Ferrer bring against Baden have anything to do with his competence, only that he will not change cause of death and does not work well with the DA's office. Baden sues the Major and wins for wrongful termination, but then the Major appeals the ruling. Baden takes another job in a neighboring county instead of fighting the suit further.

After the lawsuit, Baden is even better known for his integrity, and is called in time and again on high profile cases because of his integrity. People know Baden will get the truth of any case no matter what the circumstances.

## Information

Baden uses his history as a visiting professor to teach the reader what a medical examiners job consists of in the book, *Unnatural Death, Confessions of a Medical*



Examiner. Baden's unique approach to this book informs the reader of several aspects of the medical examiner's office.

Baden informs the reader of the different methods of poisoning a person. He discusses the ways to detect the different commonly used poisons, such as the bitter almond smell that cyanide leaves in the body, as well as the dark scarlet color it leaves the skin and blood. He explains that carbon-monoxide poisoning turns the skin and blood cherry pink. He also talks about time of death, how to determine it, and why it is important to know time of death. In the case of John Belushi, time of death was a very informative. Baden showed that in some cases you must use all the methods of determining time of death, livor, algor, and rigor mortis, as well as common sense to determine the time of death. Belushi's case was important in determining when he died because the police needed to know if Belushi's friend, Cathy Smith, had been the one to give him the lethal dose of drugs before he died. Because of Baden's findings, Smith was found guilty and sentenced to fifteen months in jail for her role in Belushi's death.

Each case Baden discusses explains a different method of death and what the medical examiner's office needs to know and do to be able to solve each case. However, Baden does not limit his information to case studies alone. He also uses this book to inform would-be medical students to pursue forensic pathology as their chosen field of medicine.

Baden is intent on enticing young doctors into forensic pathology, and he uses this book to inform them of the importance of the job. Baden discusses the lack of qualified, well-trained medical examiners. He explains that not all counties in the United States have a medical examiner; instead, they have a coroner who does not have the same qualifications or medical background as a medical examiner. He tells the history of the office and explains all that has been learned with each new phase of forensic science. He also explains all that can be learned from forensic science other than the basics like cause of death, time of death, etc. Baden explains that through forensic science, medical examiners find ways to prevent deaths, such as was the case with the airplane seats. A medical examiner noticed that during a plane crash, the seat construction was cutting off people's feet. The medical examiner brought this fact to the attention of the FAA and the seats were redesigned. Baden is very hopeful that the information contained in this book will entice young medical students to follow his footsteps into forensic pathology.

## History

History is another theme of this book, although it does not play as large a role as the other two. Baden discusses the history of the medical examiner's office, as it began as a tax collector for the king and then over time evolved into the modern day coroner/ME. Baden discusses the historical cases that helped to shed light on the need for a more qualified individual in the office of county coroner. One of the first autopsies to be preformed during a murder trail was that of Samuell Yeoungman. He was beaten to death by his boss; the autopsy showed the beating did not kill Yeoungman immediately.



The jury ruled that Yeoungman caused his own death by not seeing a doctor for his injuries.

Baden also talks, briefly, about historical cases that he has been involved in solving. One of the most famous is that of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Baden is called in to take another look at the autopsy files. Baden's work on this case helped to answer the question of whether or not there was a second shooter. Baden's research proved that Lee Harvey Oswald was the only shooter. Baden was also involved in proving that James Earl Ray was the only person responsible for the shooting death of Martin Luther King, Jr. Some people believed that one of King's gun shot wounds pointed to the fact that someone closer to King was actually the one who killed him. Baden and his team are once again called in to review the case, and they prove that Ray was the only shooter in this case as well.

Another historical case Baden worked on was that of Elvis Presley. Years after Presley's death, Baden is asked to review the autopsy files. Baden came to the conclusion that Presley's death was more likely caused by his already bad heart, and not the drugs. Baden explains that for someone who had been using as many drugs for as many years as Presley had, the amount found in his body was not lethal. The more likely cause was that Presley had a heart attack, especially since Presley's heart showed signs of a previous problem. Presley's death certificate was never changed because one cause of death was as likely as the other, and therefore each ME would have to determine for themselves

Throughout this book, Michael Baden uses what he and other medical examiners have learned in the past to try and improve his profession. Whenever advances in technology are made, they take a second look at some of these historic cases to make sure they have the right answers.

# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of this book is told from that of the author, Michael Baden. He uses his background as a visiting professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Albert Einstein College of Medicine as he tells the stories in each case. Baden explains these cases and the importance of what is learned from each of them. For example, the Belushi case is a lesson in the importance of time of death as well as the effects of drugs in the body. He also uses this case to discuss the fact that each person's body processes drugs differently and how a medical examiner needs to look at all the facts when determining the time of death. These cases seem to have come straight from Baden's lesson plans. The reader is given an inside seat to Baden's classroom, having the advantage of his tutelage first hand, as he takes the reader through each case.

Baden's first hand account of this information lends to the overall authenticity of the book. This could not have been as powerful had the stories been told from anyone other than Baden himself.

## Tone

The tone of *Unnatural Death, Confessions of a Medical Examiner* is mainly informative. The author Michael Baden uses cases he has been involved in to explain not only the job of a medical examiner, but to also stress the importance of the job itself. Baden discusses the different methods a medical examiner uses to find cause of death, time of death, as well as whether the death was a murder or due to some other case.

Baden manages to keep the book mostly informative, with very few of his own personal views coming into play. The only exception would be in regard to the way the office of the medical examiner is viewed. One can see a slight combativeness come up when Baden discusses the way fellow doctors view his profession. Baden explains that other doctors see the medical examiner as a doctor who could not make it as a "real" doctor. Baden has fought throughout his career to change this viewpoint.

## Structure

This biography by Michael Baden is comprised of twelve chapters, each chapter with its own sub chapter. The chapters have between ten and twenty pages each, with the exception of one that has thirty pages. There is no plot; instead, Baden uses case by case examples to give the overall view of the job of a medical examiner.

The chapters are not written in chronological order. Instead, Baden uses each chapter as a stand-alone case study to show the different methods ME's utilize to solve cases, the history and evolution of the modern ME, and various lessons that he has learned



from these case studies. One example of some of the different methods used by an ME is time of death. Baden uses the case of actor John Belushi's death from a drug overdose to show the importance of knowing the time of death. By finding Belushi's time of death, Baden is able to prove that Belushi's friend Cathy Smith was responsible for the actor's death by giving him the lethal injection of drugs.

This book is unlike most biographies in that it does not tell Baden's life story. Baden gives only brief pieces of his personal life. He mentions only the reasons why he chose forensic pathology for his specific field of medicine. Although the cases Baden describes in this book are very interesting on their own, one would like to know a bit more about the man himself. The only insight one gets into Baden's personality is his integrity for his job.



## Quotes

"The country could accept the myth of the Lone Ranger but not its underside, the lone assassin." Chap. 1, p. 5

"I could make a difference there. I had a vision of practicing medicine in a way that would touch thousands of people, that would improve the lot of humankind rather than just individuals" Chap. 2, p. 32

"The way people die is a reflection of the way they live." Chap. 3, p. 33

"If we do our job right, one group of people or another will be offended, and we can become a political liability in the next election." Chap. 4, pp. 55-56

"We were the only ones who were autopsying healthy people." Chap. 5, p. 59

"The announcement of a mass disaster is like an invitation to a party." Chap. 6, p. 83

"If you are slipping into a coma, you don't break for a shower and then slip back into it." Chap. 7, p. 95

"Nobody sits there and allows himself to be jabbed in the head with a screwdriver." Chap. 8, p. 121

"A perfect murder is like a perfect scam-only the killer, the mastermind, knows how it was done or even that it happened." Chap. 9, p. 140

"It was a lark, a Tom Sawyerish prank, no malice intended." Chap. 10, p. 167

"In a murder, medical examiners who can't figure out the cause of death tend to go along with the police theory." Chap. 11, p. 187

"Before anything else can be done there must be a change of attitude - a recognition that a problem exists and an appreciation of the value of forensic pathology." Chap. 12, p. 215



## Topics for Discussion

Give two reasons Baden decides to go into forensic pathology.

Give at least three examples of how the mishandling of the Kennedy case helped to fuel the conspiracy claims.

What are two of the three ways to determine time of death?

Which poison leaves the smell of bitter almonds in the human body?

In the case of the headless, handless woman how does Baden learn the identity of the victim?

When Baden is chief ME in New York, why does the DA and Baden's boss, Ferrer, want him demoted?

In the case involving the two boys stealing gas from their boss, Dr. Brown, what is Dr. Brown's cause of death?

In the case of Gail Morris, the woman found in the Volkswagen, how did common sense play an important role in determining time of death?

What was one positive thing that came from Attica?

Who was the first recorded autopsy performed on and why?