Unnatural Exposure Short Guide

Unnatural Exposure by Patricia Cornwell

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

As Dr. Kay Scarpetta, the Chief Medical Examiner of the Commonwealth of Virginia, describes a meal at her home with one of her crime-fighting colleagues, she states, "we talked about fibers embedded in bone and Koss's analysis of them as we carried steaks and wine inside.

We sat at the kitchen table with a candle lit, digesting information few people would serve with food." The contrasts in this passage are the hallmarks of Patricia Cornwall's series about Scarpetta: the everyday versus the outre, small pleasures versus large terrors, professional objectivity versus emotional turmoil. Scarpetta and the recurring cast of the novels examine mutilated corpses and sundry other horrors as their day-to-day jobs. Going to their offices means confronting human carnage and cruelty. They must maintain their outward composure and adjust as though these crimes are everyday occurrences (which for Scarpetta, they are).

They must not let the horrors they see prevent them from enjoying the rest of their lives. They must still be able to enjoy wine and steaks. The challenge is to balance their reactions: They must not become so outraged that they cannot do their jobs, nor so professional that they become calloused.

More so than most other detective series, Cornwell's novels address how the crime-fighters adjust psychologically and emotionally. Cornwell regularly ratchets up the emotional turmoil by sending her heroes in pursuit of grisly serial killers whose handiwork is atrociously vile.

Scarpetta is an expert in such killings and thus must approach the cases with composed demeanor and rational observation. She can indeed discuss fibers embedded in sawed off bone without flinching. But inwardly, she aches over her cases.

By this, the eighth novel of the series, Scarpetta has evolved a tightly wound personality, leavened by her first-person narration. First, she strives for a steady outward calm as befits an expert of her wide renown. She is also a manager, overseeing both the staff at the Chief Medical Examiner's headquarters in Richmond and a network of local medical examiners throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. As a bureaucrat, she is both confident in her management style and vigilant lest she allow herself to falter.

Proud of what she has accomplished, she holds herself to very high standards. Her expertise is of such high value that she frequently visits the FBI Training Academy where she consults with teams that are tracking major crimes.

As a detective and a member of a crime-fighting team, when she examines a crime scene or a corpse, she displays a Holmsian ability to take in and recall a wealth of data. Scarpetta never approaches a case with preconceptions, and she scrupulously avoids easy answers.

Unnatural Exposure commences with discussion of a series of dismembered bodies unearthed at landfills. When another body turns up at another landfill, many people are ready to place this new body into the previous pattern. Scarpetta resists because of what she sees. She can tell from quick examination that the method used to saw off the limbs differs between this new case and the others. Her analysis always relies on observable facts. She adheres to hard science, avoiding the fuzzier psychologizing of FBI profiler Benton Wesley. While Cornwell's novels make heavy use of psychological insights and techniques (made popular in books by retired FBI profilers Robert K. Ressler and John Douglas), the series gives precedence to up-to-date biological, chemical, and technological aspects of forensic science. Scarpetta is principally a scientist whose detective method depends upon examination of physical facts.

The novel opens with Scarpetta haunted by visions of limbless bodies. Her work has invaded her private time; her work insidiously follows her away from the office. Her composure masks an inward welter of feelings. Indeed, few people grasp at the depths of her inner life. One of those few is Wesley, with whom she has had an adulterous affair that has lasted through four of the eight books in the series and now reaches a crisis point because he is newly divorced.

Scarpetta and Wesley have several wellcrafted conversations about her confused feelings toward him. She loves him, but shrinks from commitment. She is shy about public knowledge of their romance.

This novel also involves Scarpetta's efforts to sort out her feelings for her former, now deceased lover. While many mystery novels keep the detective's private life out of the plot, the Scarpetta series explores the relationship between public and private identities. This willingness to explore the characters' lives and not just to present a crime puzzle allows the books to fit comfortably with mainstream novels as well as mysteries.

Toward several other characters Scarpetta reveals her capacity of empathy.

Scarpetta the tough boss also can be emotionally supportive of her staff. She especially takes to Wingo, the manager of her morgue, who confesses to being HIV positive and breaks into tears. At first she puts her arm around him in motherly fashion and lets him weep, but finally grips his shoulders from the front and tells him, "Now is the time for courage, Wingo." While she gives him comfort and support, she retains her composure, not resting her head on her hands until he leaves. This scene with Wingo shows both her own control when with others and her profound capacity for fellowfeeling—traits which seem unlikely to coexist, yet convincingly do co-exist within her character.

In other instances Scarpetta is warm to people in need of help. When an ambitious police investigator makes a hasty arrest in the murder case, the arrested man calls Scarpetta for help, and she responds. Confident of his innocence and impressed by his story of how he cares for his aged mother, Scarpetta visits the mother and arranges for his bail. Interestingly, her police associates see such acts as evidence not of her empathy but of her assertiveness. In the novel's best scene, when she examines the Tangier Island home of a woman killed by a horrible, deliberately induced infection,

Scarpetta is both clinical in her observations and deeply moved by the suffering the woman endured before death. (This scene from Chapter 8 is discussed more fully under "Techniques" below.)

The novel features the usual cast of cohorts for Scarpetta, though they are not as well-developed here as in previous books. Wesley strives to be tender in his dealings with Scarpetta, a nice contrast to his usual neat and steely demeanor. Richmond police captain Pete Marino is less colorful than usual, now that he is over his infatuation with Scarpetta. And Scarpetta's niece, FBI Agent Lucy Farinelli (her surname is mentioned once and has previously been hard to ferret out even for Cornwell's fans) appears with high-tech gadgets for Scarpetta to experience.

Social Concerns

Throughout the Scarpetta series, Cornwell addresses the problem of the glass ceiling: Scarpetta is an extremely qualified woman who breaks into the upper echelons of a bureaucracy and maintains her lofty position through great effort. This novel features a scene (in Chapter 13) which demonstrates where Scarpetta now stands in relation to the men in Virginia's hierarchy. Scarpetta convinces a local sheriff to cooperate in granting bail and releasing an incarcerated suspect just because of her assurance that the suspect is in fact innocent. Such a scene was unthinkable in the first novel, Postmortem, and probably throughout the first four books, because in those early books, Scarpetta held only a precarious status and felt the questioning (and often hostile) glares of Virginia's male power structure. Matters were so tense that some readers legitimately may have wondered how a woman was ever hired as Chief Medical Examiner. Now, in Unnatural Exposure, she has clout, so much so that her personal voucher has the impact of solid truth on a male bureaucrat. Much has changed for Scarpetta.

This novel continues the series' long discussion of women in the upper echelons by placing several women in key posts; this is the first novel in which Scarpetta has a network of female peers.

These women include a forensic pathologist in Dublin; the chief of the DNA lab in Richmond, who has an androgynous name; and the villain, a microbiologist named Dr. Phyllis Crowder. Significantly, these women along with Scarpetta and computer wizard Lucy are scientists.

Feminists complain that even at the end of the twentieth century very few women enter the hard sciences; Cornwell populates her novel with female scientists who function as literary role models.

Gender politics still matter, however.

When in forced quarantine after possible exposure to the mysterious infection on Tangier, Scarpetta clashes with the nurse assigned to her floor. Scarpetta thinks, "I could tell she was one of those nurses who resented women doctors, because she preferred to be told what to do by men. Or maybe she had wanted to be a doctor and was told that girls grow up to be nurses and marry doctors." These thoughts verge on stereotyping the nurse.

In part, these lines demonstrate that the assertive Scarpetta cannot abide being dictated to. Yet Scarpetta also reveals herself as hypersensitive to old-fashioned women who do not value Scarpetta as a role model. Yet this nurse is the only character who bristles at dealing with the high-ranking Scarpetta; the men in the novel completely accept Scarpetta's status and expertise.

Another woman who resents Scarpetta is Dr. Crowder, the killer. Crowder is not the person who has been cutting up corpses in Ireland and Virginia for decades, but she has killed an old woman— her mother!—and sawed and dumped the body in the manner of this highly publicized serial killer. Actually, Crowder plots mass murder through releasing a virus, with the murder of her mother being a test for the virus.

Early on in the investigation of the most recent death, the old woman, Wesley, offers this profile: "I feel this killer is disgruntled, angry, feels a person in power or perhaps people in power are responsible for his problems in life."

Wesley has diagnosed accurately, except for a key aspect. Everyone easily refers to the killer as "he," as if unable to conceive of such malevolence in a woman—a wonderful irony in a novel about women who do the scientific work once reserved for men. Crowder is angry, first over her dismissal from a lab in England early in her career after a virus somehow escaped through the ventilator and killed a female photographer. Crowder complains that because she was at the lab the day of the accident, she was an easy person on whom to place blame. Second, after her long efforts to rehabilitate her status, in Richmond she is passed over for department chair. Interestingly, Scarpetta defends both the male who got the job and the decision to give it to him. Third, Crowder resents other women who have gotten to the pinnacles of success, notably Scarpetta. "You think you're so smart" Crowder says anonymously in a taunting e-mail message to Scarpetta.

Angry that no one recognizes her own skills, Crowder decides to display her mastery of microbiology by creating a new virus, by splicing monkeypox and smallpox. She shouts at Scarpetta in the climactic confrontation scene, "Andresent you. I always have! The way the system's always treated you better, all the attention you get. The great Dr. Scarpetta. The legend. But ha! Look who won.

In the end I outsmarted you, didn't I?"

Actually, Crowder is not so smart. Her virus will not replicate, thus only kills the person who has primary direct contact; people who have contact with the infected person do not become fatally ill; as the virus will not spread without direct contact, it can be controlled.

Crowder's motivations resonate, especially in this series of novels about women in science. She is more than the cliched villain with too vaunted a sense of her intellect, so vaunted that she sends clues to needle her adversaries, confident that she cannot be tracked. Her sense of herself as a marginalized woman is the pivotal factor. She resents the power structure that privileges men above women or that selects only certain women for special status. Yet all around Crowder are women who have broken the glass ceiling and become respected scientists. That she has not joined them gnaws at Crowder. She does not merely lash out, but uses her specialized scientific knowledge to get vengeance on the scientific community by challenging them with her new strain of infection. She even tempts the authorities to discover her identity by sending the

derisive e-mails to Scarpetta. Ultimately, she becomes just another villain who could not sufficiently cover her tracks and was discovered.

What lingers about her is that she is a frustrated female scientist with an angry agenda.

The other big social concern, beyond this treatment of women in the work place, is technological development. As is usually the case in the Scarpetta books, Unnatural Exposure highlights recent developments in forensic science. Readers meet an expert who can deduce the type of saw used in a dismembering by microscopic evaluation of the bone to determine the teeth per inch on the saw. Another expert derives fingerprints from photographs of hands. Lucy presents the most impressive gadget: a video display mounted into a helmet that provides depth to a flat photographic image. Scarpetta wears the helmet and endures a disturbing, seemingly three-dimensional glide through a photograph of the body that was sent by the killer (sent to tease Scarpetta). Scarpetta gains such a sense of the room depicted in the photograph that she immediately recognizes the room upon entering it late in the book.

Cornwell includes a swipe at the federal government by setting the novel during a federal government shutdown due to a budget impasse. Readers may recall the shutdowns in late 1995 and early 1996 during budgetary haggling between President Bill Clinton and the Republican Congress. When Scarpetta needs to call in the federal government to investigate and contain a possible disease-outbreak, the government can barely function. While not taking a partisan stand, Cornwell demonstrates the cost of such squabbles should a real crisis, such as the one in the novel, arise.

Techniques

The most impressive technique in the series is the voice Cornwell has crafted for Scarpetta. Scarpetta conveys both steely control and immense capacity to feel. She withholds her feelings from most others, but not from readers.

The sequence in this novel that best exemplifies this voice is a tour de force: Scarpetta's arrival on Tangier Island to examine the dead woman with the exotic infection (Chapter 8). As she takes in the specifics that will help her investigation, she sees also the emotional significances in the conditions in the dead woman's home. Scarpetta muses as she stands in the living room: "Pillows and blankets were disarrayed and soiled on the couch, and on the coffee table were tissues, a thermometer, bottles of aspirin, liniment, dirty cups and plates. She had been feverish. She had ached . ..." As a good scientist, Scarpetta moves from fact to analysis: the items on the table suggest headache and pain. In the bedroom, Scarpetta stands in the center and takes in the scene, even as the smell of dead flesh envelopes her. She sees pathetic items: "fuzzy pink slippers beneath a chair that was covered with clothes she hadn't had the energy to put away or wash . . .

Stacked on the floor were dozens of mailorder catalogues, page corners folded back to mark her wishes." The woman's ravaged body is worse-looking than Scarpetta expected, disfigured by gray pustules. The woman had covered her mirrors with towels to avoid seeing her demise. Scarpetta thinks, "I imagined her itching, aching, burning up with fever, and afraid of her own nightmarish image in the mirror." This passage is a grimly moving exegesis of this woman's lonely life and death, given more impact by the selection of affecting details, such as fuzzy slippers, dog-eared catalogues, and covered mirrors. The passage has few adjectives beyond words that convey facts: The slippers were "pink," the pillows "soiled." Cornwell gets emotional punch first by referring to quotidian aspects, then by giving a clinical description of the body. Cornwell gets the passage to resonate by having Scarpetta suddenly think of her own mother.

Other smaller points show Cornwell's technical deftness as a writer. Cornwell places her story into real settings; reading the book with a map of Virginia and Maryland's Eastern Shore handy reveals that she is very careful and accurate about locales. She nicely embeds details to be picked up later. For example, the crabs that she buys early in book to serve to Wesley come from Tangier; she will later learn that crabbing is the main industry of Tangier, an industry that could be a mechanism to spread disease. Without drawing undue attention to them, Cornwell populates the novel with many female scientists, so that the villain's complaints when made at the end seem overstated. The concern for his aged, sickly mother manifest by a male character later contrasts with the villain's murder of her own mother.

Themes

The events in the novel continually remind the characters of the need for empathy, especially toward the little people who are affected by large issues. The events on Tangier Island display this theme most forcefully. First, Scarpetta feels profoundly sorry at the suffering of the woman whom the villain managed to infect. Then Scarpetta realizes how terrified of the unknown the naturally selfenclosed and suspicious denizens of Tangier must be when they see helicop ters and workers in safety suits. The government plans to quarantine the Island and perhaps curtail the crabbing industry, the community's lifeblood.

Scarpetta acts as a voice of sympathy in a grim conversation in which officials admit that they may have to shoot islanders who try to take their boats out to get off the island. The quarantine plans are both necessary and heartless, a terrible combination. Scarpetta strives not to be heartless. In her dealings with Wingo, with the wrongly arrested man, and with the islanders, she provides a model for fellow feeling.

The sense of evil's vastness hovers over the Scarpetta series. Here, although the detectives track down the killer of the old woman, whoever was carving up corpses in Ireland and Virginia remains free, perhaps to be tracked and killed in another novel. Similar to the cameo appearances of serial killer Temple Gault in The Body Farm (1994; see separate entry), the chopped torsos are reminders that Scarpetta's job is not finished. She says to Wesley, "It never stops"; he replies, "And I'm afraid it never will. As long as there are people on the planet."

Religion provides an intriguing issue in thinking about the novel. Starting with The Body Farm, Cornwell has included biblical epigraphs for her novels. Her selection for Unnatural Exposure seems apt as it is the passage from Revelation about the opening of the vials with the seven plagues. Yet when Scarpetta tries to snare the still anonymous killer in an Internet chat room, the killer quotes scripture.

Scarpetta later locates the passage in Matthew: the charge by Jesus that his disciples should cast out unclean spirits.

While The Body Farm features Cornwell's fullest use of religion in her work, Unnatural Exposure offers enough references to bring up the question of what Cornwell achieves by the invocations of scripture in her novels.

Key Questions

Unnatural Exposure can fit comfortably into reading series about detective fiction, science in literature, and the status of women in society. Indeed, Cornwell is as effective a chronicler of bureaucratic politics as she is of criminal investigation.

The novel would also be a good starting point for readers new to Cornwell as it is of high quality, includes her signature topics and style, and does not depend on plot lines nor information from earlier books.

1. Does Scarpetta operate from a privileged position? What is the status of women in the novel's scientific community?

2. Describe Scarpetta's outlook. How does she view her world? What is the relationship between her narration and how she presents herself to other characters?

3. Why is Scarpetta good at her job?

What makes her such a respected expert?

Would she make a good boss, that is, would you like to work for her? (Her interactions with Wingo would be relevant for this question.)

4. Describe the motivation of the villain? How does this psychology resonate to other aspects of the book? What is suggested by the villain's use of religious allusions?

5. What comments about governmental authority appear in the book? Consider that the novel takes place during a government shutdown. Evaluate the government's decision to quarantine Tangier.

6. Why is Scarpetta so resistent of a relationship with Wesley? How do her lingering memories of Mark affect her affair with Wesley? What does Cornwell achieve in the last scene with the revelation of the facts of Mark's death?

7. How well does the society of the novel accept diversity, especially the gay and lesbian characters? What sort of vision of the working world does Cornwell present with the presence of so many female scientists, characters with ethnic names, and homosexuals?

8. What are the thematic and emotional impacts of the extended sequences on Tangier Island?

9. Define Scarpetta's traits and outlook as a scientist. What is the role of hard science in the murder investigation?

Literary Precedents

Unnatural Exposure marries the detective genre and the medical thriller. The harried efforts to isolate and counteract a new deadly infection appear in several novels, the most notable being one of the first in the genre, The Andromeda Strain by Michael Crichton (1969; see separate entry). In the mid-1990s, interest in the topic of strange and dangerous viruses was fueled by The Hot Zone by Richard Preston (1994), the real-life chronicle of the 1989 incident in which an American team combatted a contagious African virus. Preston then wrote a novel, The Cobra Event (1997), about biological warfare.

Related Titles

The Scarpetta novels organize themselves chronologically into three categories. The first three (Postmortem, 1990, see separate entry; Body of Evidence, 1991, see separate entry; All That Remains, 1992) focus on how Scarpetta wins the respect of the males who surround her. The crimes in each novel call into question her status and expertise, and in each case she is able to acquit herself by rising to the challenge to snare the killer through her specialized scientific insights. The next three, Cruel and Unusual (1993); The Body Farm (1994, see separate entry); and From Potter's Field (1995), comprise a trilogy about the hunt for the serial killer Temple Gault. In these books Scarpetta stands secure in her position and enjoys a growing reputation. Yet Scarpetta's own psychology becomes more troubled.

These novels probe the problems she experiences relating to others and dealing with her emotions. Especially in The Body Farm, she seems on the verge of succumbing to her neuroses and nightmare visions. The seventh and eighth books (Cause of Death, 1996, and Unnatural Exposure) present Scarpetta as a secure figure of international acclaim. If still unsettled in her relations with Wesley, she seems more self-assured and psychologically stable.

Unnatural Exposure's plot mirrors the plot of The Body Farm, a good choice as The Body Farm is one of the series' finest books. Both books begin with the ongoing investigation of a series of murders complicated by a new murder that is similar yet different from the pattern.

Then the books follow Scarpetta's efforts to get the investigators to focus on this murder as a separate crime. Both books end with the recent crime resolved, but the original killer still at large and likely to kill again, thus setting up sequels. The Body Farm, the fifth novel, was the first to treat Scarpetta as a woman of respect and secure reputation, a portrayal that continues in Unnatural Exposure. These books are the only ones in the series to feature female killers. Significantly, the killings strike at the center of the home, the traditional female realm. In The Body Farm, Denessa Steiner murders her daughter, whereas Phyllis Crowder in Unnatural Exposure murders her mother.

And Cornwell embeds in both novels (more so in The Body Farm) religious references.

The Scarpetta book preceding Unnatural Exposure, Cause of Death, gets away from detection and from medicine with a thriller plot involving the illegal sales of radioactive materials to terrorists. The book culminates at a seized nuclear plant; a robotic device designed by Lucy helps to resolve the stand-off. The book focuses more on technology than on Scarpetta's usual insights. Indeed, at several junctures, other characters have to explain what is happening to her. The reuse of the plot of The Body Farm in Unnatural Exposure returns the series to the medical setting.

Unnatural Exposure continues but does not resolve plot strands left dangling from previous books. Starting with The Body Farm, Scarpetta's affair with Wesley remains stalled. They care deeply for each other, but do not move toward marriage.

In this book Wesley has just procured his divorce, but Scarpetta recoils from committing herself to him. Another strand concerns Lucy. The upcoming trial of Temple Gault's accomplice will expose Lucy's lesbianism. While several people know Lucy's "secret"—indeed, her companion is another FBI agent—the public disclosure at a trial will impact her career.

Cornwell has characters discuss the threats the trial poses several times.

Cornwell interrupted the Scarpetta books to write the nonseries novel Hornet's Nest, published in early 1997. Set in Charlotte, North Carolina (hence the title, as "hornet's nest" is the city's nickname, as in the NBA's Charlotte Hornets), and told in third person, the book divides itself among three main characters. Two are women in positions of authority: the police chief and a police commander. The third is a callow male news reporter. The plot involves a serial killer (Scarpetta's record capturing such criminals may have scared this murderer out of Virginia into North Carolina) and the efforts of the female police chief to hold onto her position amidst the political crisis brought on by the killings. While these topics seem typical of Cornwell, the third person narration renders the material less psychologically insightful than the Scarpetta books. Cornwell described the novel in Newsweek as "satirical"; in tone it diverges from the Scarpetta series.

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