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By Liz Scheier | Mar 10, 2023

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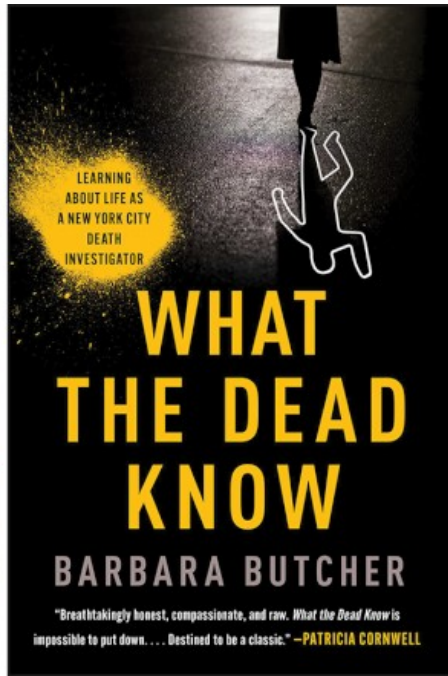


photo:Robert Grasso

Barbara Butcher

“Dead men *do* tell tales. You just have to listen,” Barbara Butcher writes in her debut memoir, *What the Dead Know* (Simon & Schuster, June). In 1992, Butcher, newly sober, began a career as a death investigator with the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. She spoke with *PW* about her two-plus decades on the job.

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What are people surprised to learn about the Medical Examiner's office?

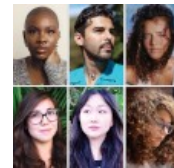
The depth of what we do at the death scene—when it's not a natural death we do a parallel investigation, getting information for the police. I've had a call where police say, we're up in the Two-Four precinct, guy's got a hole in the front of his head, he's been shot. But I get there and he stinks of alcohol, he's fallen down the stairs, hit a corner with

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a stone coping and a sharp point. Why were there 20 shell casings? I followed through the back door to the alley and it's a shooting range for kids; they stand in the hallway and shoot at targets out the back door. It was an accident, not a gunshot.

What was it like working at the 9/11 morgue?

One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic. It's overwhelming—you can no longer process it. I lived in a trailer on 30th Street where all of us worked, night and day, recovering body parts. Sometimes they had a wedding ring, a manicure, a piece of clothing that we could use to identify them. Those things are deeply personal, and yet so overwhelmingly routine when 3,000 people are dead. 9/11 ruined everything, including this job. It ruined my sense of power and control, my sense of equanimity, of safety in the world. I was dealing with the families, who were so angry. Anger is a good substitute for unbearable grief.

How else did your work change you?

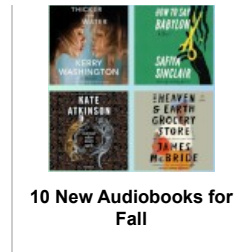
This is a memoir of my life as an addict, a recovering alcoholic who struggled to stay sober throughout this work. I ultimately came out the other end better, able to live a life with beauty, creativity, and enjoyment. I could bemoan being an alcoholic, but being an alcoholic got me that job. The Employment Program for Recovered Alcoholics sent me to vocational training, where they gave me a bunch of tests and said: you should be a poultry veterinarian or a coroner. If you work with puppies or kittens you'd always be upset that they were sick, but chickens have those beady little eyes: no one gives a shit about chickens. I figured I'd work with the dead. That way I won't get upset: they're already dead.

What inspired you to tell this story now, eight years after retirement?

When everything locked down during Covid and the world turned off, I felt a sense of urgency: I didn't want everything I learned about people and about life to be lost. I saw the evil that lurks in some people, just a small percentage of the population. I met serial killers, rapists of little girls, sadists and kidnappers and torturers and every damn iteration of horror, every horrible way to die. It skews your view of life, of course. They call it first responder syndrome—if you see horrible things all day every day, you come to feel that that's the way life is. You have to surround yourself with beauty. Writing this book was an act of creating beauty. It's not a beautiful book, but I hope that the humanity comes through.

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A version of this article appeared in the 03/13/2023 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: 'No One Gives a Sh*t About Chickens'



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