

Book review

The Forensic Psychologist's Casebook

by L. Alison

(Willan; 2005; 410 pp.; ISBN 1 84392 101 4; £26.50 (pbk))

This collection addresses where and how forensic psychologists can and may contribute to criminal investigations. As you perhaps might expect from Alison, the emphasis is on investigative psychology, which many people continue to associate, or even equate, with offender profiling. That indeed features heavily in this book, but there is more. In his preface Alison advocates a pragmatic or case based approach, which he explains is: 'examining single cases and presenting material that was informed both by scientific rigour and due consideration to the specific idiosyncratic details of the case' (pp. xix–xx). Thus, practising forensic psychologists take an example of a case they worked on and use that as the basis for explaining what they do and how they do it. I am very much charmed by that idea and wish that had been the approach throughout.

Alison, as author or co-author involved with no fewer than 10 of the 16 chapters particularly honours this paradigm, and therefore the book's title, in Chapter 12. Chapter 12 is about establishing the probability that amnesia, alleged by a defendant in a case involving a road traffic accident, was genuine or a case of malingering. The style of that chapter, descriptive in the main text with evaluative comments in boxes, works well. To be picky, it is a bit of a shame that the boxes regularly go across pages unnecessarily. In Chapter 13, Canter does the same, but he intermingles description and evaluation. His is a highly readable

tale of a case of 'suicide or was it?' and, apart from highlighting the nature of Canter's involvement, it reminds us how criminal investigation can be reminiscent of story telling. In addition, and this is no small matter, both Alison and Canter are to be congratulated for their critical attitude towards some of their own judgements with the benefit of hindsight. In the area of offender profiling that is most welcome — the field is known for individuals glorifying their own efforts, and it is good to see that this volume does not follow that tradition of sycophancy.

Both Alison and Canter's chapters do exactly what the book promises to deliver and are certainly of interest to professionals in the field, aspiring forensic psychologists as well as the large numbers of criminology students who are keen to separate the sense from the nonsense in the area of profiling. Many of us who teach offender profiling as part of a criminology or criminal justice course will appreciate the inclusion of an actual profile. Chapter 10 by Alison, Goodwill and Alison is useful in the first place — it presents guidelines for profilers, but the inclusion of the profile will no doubt enhance the book's overall value as a teaching aid. It is in these chapters that the book, so to say, 'does exactly what it says on the tin': it provides exactly what you want from a book that calls itself the *Forensic Psychologist's Casebook*.

I find that Nina Cope's chapter on crime analysis also manages to fit into the casebook

approach, with a number of case studies in boxes. In chapters such as this one, the link between theory and practice is indeed successfully made. Other chapters appeal to the same audience but not in a casebook type of way. Barratt's chapter offers clear advice to the would-be forensic psychologist and Ormerod and Sturman's chapter on advice for expert witnesses is also clear and constructive. Some chapters are of interest for different reasons. Alison and Canter's chapter on the Rachel Nickell inquiry pleasantly surprised me. The debacle of the Colin Stagg undercover operation is one of the field's most rehearsed tales but the chapter does offer insight at a fine-grained level that I think many readers will appreciate. The Ogan and Alison chapter on Jack the Ripper will no doubt be keenly read as well.

The volume consists of many chapters of interest for one reason or another. Some talk directly to those with an ambition to work as a forensic psychologist, whereas others are seemingly addressed to the academic rather than the practitioner. You must appreciate Alison's ambition to produce a book that speaks to both audiences; and I would say that it is pretty much a success at that. Having said that, I am not convinced that the use of the term 'Casebook' is entirely justified by the content, as some chapters fit that remit better than others. Equally I am not sure that I understand the rationale behind splitting the book in two parts: Part I is called The Context of Criminal Investigation, and Part II goes by the name Advising on Investigations. Many a

chapter, it seems to me, could equally well have fitted in either.

Away from the profiling area, Fritzon's chapter on interviewing vulnerable witnesses is interesting and it highlights the difficulties involved. But in addition, I would have liked to see Fritzon contribute more explicitly to the casuistic theme of the book by providing us with a chapter, like Alison's Chapter 12, on her involvement in a particular case of arson. That is also stuff worth showcasing.

Generally, though, I am sure that the book will do well. The subject matter never fails to catch the eye, even though the contributors consciously do not play to the cameras, which is to their credit. It is academically sound and provides for plenty of casuistic texture and flavour as well, which will go down a treat with students in criminology as well as in psychology.

I would like to see Alison undertake a Casebook, Volume II, with a bit of theory but particularly with a lot of cases described and analysed in an engaging, reflective and self-critical fashion. That might not only please an already existing audience but might also go some way to convince the sceptics within academia and law enforcement that the field of investigative psychology has a real contribution to make to our understanding of offending behaviour as well as to our ability to detect it.

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