

Reviewed by Dr Oh Jen Jen, Deputy Editor



CRACKING MORE CASES

by Dr Henry C. Lee,
with Thomas W. O'Neil

"Experience is a wonderful thing, when you find out that you have made the same mistake again."

– Dr Henry Lee, at several crime scenes

I find true crime novels depressing. They reveal the darkest depths of the human condition and involve despicable acts which have widespread, irreversible and distressing ripple effects.

This is further compounded when the victim is a defenceless child and the crime brutally savage, or worst of all, when the perpetrator is never brought to justice.

Cracking More Cases features one such incident, namely, the infamous 1996 murder of cherubic pre-schooler JonBenét Ramsey, an event that sent shockwaves through the idyllic, wealthy suburbia of Boulder, Colorado, and became an international media sensation.

While the book itself discusses five diverse homicides, the Ramsey killing takes centre stage, with painstakingly detailed reconstructions of the crime scene, investigative process, power struggles, legal tussles and journalistic interference.

I have been fascinated by this case for more than a decade, partly because of the inexplicable motive behind it, but mostly because of the Ramseys' bizarre family dynamics (deftly camouflaged by a façade of blissful contentment) and the massive bungling by local police.

Although Dr Lee's expertise lies in forensics, his collaboration with writer O'Neil offers a panoramic view of the murder, with shocking insights into JonBenét's sad existence, a strange family conversation heard during the 911 call, and of course, the many loopholes within the American legal system.

Dr Lee's sharp analysis of the forensic evidence provides a vital complement to the whole story. He was brought in to consult on the case, and gives firsthand accounts of what he observed. Considering the mountain of information available, piecing it all together in a coherent manner is no small feat, and I found myself reading certain paragraphs more than once in an effort to orientate myself.

Still, the experience reaps its own rewards, when you arrive at the same conclusion as Dr Lee with regards to suspects (he offers a profile, but stops short of dropping a name).

The other sensational murder revolves around the high society of Greenwich, Connecticut, where powerful political figures and business tycoons mingle. In 1975, teenager Martha Moxley was found brutally bludgeoned to death near her home, but her killer would not be convicted until 20 years later.

I did not find the forensic analysis as interesting as that for the Ramsey case. Rather, I was more intrigued by the revelations surrounding the drug-and-sex-infused lifestyles of these privileged families, and the semi-tragic circumstances of Michael Skakel, whose mental unhinging destroyed the lives of those close to him.

"I have found the American justice system to be full of pitfalls, complexities, and even some contradictions..."

Dr Lee is a world-renowned expert who is regularly interviewed by Larry King on CNN. While I



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have watched him on TV and read about him on the Internet, neither provides an adequate understanding of the man himself.

This novel, however, fulfils that role very well. He is far from detached (despite the clear advantages of remaining emotionally neutral), often making comments that reflect the deep sympathy he feels for the parties involved. He expresses the highest regard for detectives, prosecutors and fellow forensic pathologists, highlighting the sometimes insurmountable obstacles they face in their duties, and the admirable perseverance they display. Such anecdotes offer a valuable behind-the-scenes perspective that few outsiders are privy to, and which no meddling, self-serving reporter can distort.

Dr Lee also ventures into the field of social commentary, making an astute observation in the Lisa Peng case, where a rich Taiwanese businessman's wife is erroneously labelled a suspect in his mistress' violent murder. Dr Lee cautions men to learn to "control our desires and temptations" to curb a "destructive social phenomenon".

"... the world is full of pitfalls and injustices. We, as citizens, simply have to do our best to right the wrongs and to move forward to a better world for our children and their children."

Such a statement, spoken by someone of lesser stature, would come off as clichéd. But by the time you reach the last chapter, you will have no doubts about Dr Lee's sincerity, passion and empathy.

Having had a few personal encounters with the late Prof Chao Tzee Cheng during my medical school days, I draw many similarities between these two great men, who are legendary in their tireless quests for justice, and who will forever be remembered fondly for being generous and kind to everyone they meet. ■

Editor's Note:

Dr Lee's other novels are available from Amazon.com. He also appears on *Trace Evidence: The Case Files of Dr Henry Lee* on Starhub digital cable's Foxcrime channel.

Also recommended: *The Cases That Haunt Us* by John Douglas.