

BOOK REVIEW

The quick and the dead

Author: Cynric Temple-Camp, Harper Collins Publishers 2020
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Cynric Temple-Camp is perhaps the James Herriot of anatomical pathology. The Quick and the Dead is his second book, a fascinating anthology of stories from his life as a provincial pathologist in New Zealand.

Originally from South Africa, his stories include his own personal experience with the putzi fly that will make your skin crawl, a tale of decomposition in a mysterious death due to obscure natural causes that will make your stomach turn, and a few tragedies that are just a little bit too close to home.

Cynric Temple Camp was one of the pathologists investigating the case of the police officer killed in Rongotea in 2002. Incidentally, I was studying for my BMLSc at Massey University at the time, and lived just down the road from that particular crime scene. I remember being unable to get home one night, as police officers had blocked off all the access roads due to an armed defenders call out. I never knew the exact details, but Cynric Temple-Camp revealed exactly what occurred that fateful night when one police officer lost their life and another ended up fleeing from a crazed seventeen year old gunman.

For the medical scientist, this book provides the missing link, a very special piece of the jigsaw puzzle of pathology, a glimpse into the sampling of process and backstory behind taking a sample of vitreous humour from the eye, that we load onto the analyser; the patient's symptoms and story behind that bone marrow aspirate, and the reason behind some of the weird and wonderful samples that we cut and stain in histology.

While the author freely admits he is no psychologist, the text is laced with gently posed questions that really get the reader thinking. Why do some people commit crime? Does two wrongs make a right? Why do some criminals go on to commit even more crimes? Why is our justice system so poor at rehabilitation? Why do some people dice with death and get away with it (the quick) and others not even roll the dice... and end up dead.

These questions are asked with no judgement, no solutions, we do need a better system, but all I can conclude, as a scientist, reader and individual, that I too, have no answers. I cannot fix the system. I cannot fix anyone else. All I can do, is fix myself and enjoy every single day of my time, amongst the quick.

Reviewed by: Elaine Booker, BMLSc, SCL Invercargill
