

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **The nature of life and death**

**Author: Patricia Wiltshire, Penguin Random House 2019**  
**ISBN: 9780525542223**

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Everybody leaves a trace. The world of forensics is not always clear cut. Fingerprints are not always found at the scene of a crime. DNA evidence is not always as forthcoming, or as conclusive as people may think. Yet there is another link. There are more clues. People are more connected to the environment and the natural world than they realise.

Enter Patricia Wiltshire, forensic ecologist. Starting out as a medical laboratory technician, Patricia then became involved in research, diverted into business and marketing before returning to science as a microbial ecologist, and in turn an environmental archaeologist and palynologist. In this book, we follow how the author's life changes one day when she is busy analysing pollen samples from the Neolithic period, when the police request her help on a murder scene. A pioneer in forensic ecology, Patricia takes us through her cases as she trailblazes her way in an entirely new field, helping police solve crimes and paving the way and laying down protocols for those who may follow.

A self-confessed solver of puzzles, Patricia's case might begin with a call in the dead of night and a trip to a crime scene, or it may be like one of those riddles: you are presented with the killer's jeans, Nikes, and a garden trowel. While invisible to the naked eye, these items contain a plethora of pollen granules, dirt, fungus and spores. These can be identified and used to create an image of where the killer has dumped their victim.

This book is an introduction to an important and often overlooked area of science, a window into a whole teeming other world of nature on a microbiological scale. While it is sure to capture the imagination of those who work in microbiology, it will also appeal to anyone who enjoys a gripping murder mystery. As a scientist, I found it fascinating to read about the techniques used to isolate and identify pollen grains, and the techniques used to isolate them from cars, clothing and dead bodies. While the subject matter could have the potential to bog the reader down in scientific detail, the author is passionate and engaging, outlining the techniques used to correlate environmental information in such a way to link criminals to their crimes.

Admittedly this book may not be for the squeamish, and one can take or leave some aspects of the author's personal views and beliefs, the outstanding take home message was for me, one of hope and compassion. It is very important that there are people there to speak for the dead, as they can no longer speak for themselves; that the guilty are held accountable; and finally, that the deceased are reunited with their families so the families can find some sort of peace and closure.

**Reviewed by: Elaine Booker, BMLSc, SCL Invercargill**

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