

Don't jam me up

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Robert Jackall

STREET STORIES

The world of police detectives
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and the cagey follow-up of the investigating detective.

Some stories are played for humour (there's a thief who always takes Fridays off so he doesn't get "jammed up" – arrested – during his party-heavy weekends) and many provoke an uncom-

engages the heart in ways that scriptwriters dream of. When a rookie policewoman is found dead of gunshot wounds in a field in Brooklyn, the veteran detective Vincent Carrera catches the case. Anguished and enraged, Carrera stands over the victim, who is

curled into a fetal position on her left side, her blue-and-white-striped white polo jersey soaking up the pool of blood that streamed from the gunshot wound on the left side of her face and the lethal bullet crater in the back of her head, and he said: "Sweetheart, I never met you, but, by Jesus Christ, I'm gonna find out who did this to you if it's the last thing I ever do."

Carrera tracks down the shooter. The re-creation of events leading up to the killing (the unarmed man disobeyed the policewoman's order to freeze and, after a struggle, killed her with her own gun) gives Jackall a chance to raise issues of appropriate use of force: is it ever right to shoot an unarmed man?

Jackall's final chapters include a hand-tipping attack on the *New York Times*, which Jackall characterizes as the "indignant scourge of the police even when overwhelming evidence favours the police's version of events". This is one of the many signs of affection that Jackall shows for the detectives with whom he has spent so much time. Academic analysis might have made *Street Stories* of narrow, if valuable, interest to the legal and academic communities. Well-told tales of true crime, buttressed by clearly wrought descriptions of life on the street, turn it into something rarer: a fascinating peek into a world most of us would not want to inhabit -- but can't resist wanting to hear about.

Early in his engaging study of New York City detectives, *Street Stories*, Robert Jackall distinguishes between the "field-work" he did with police during the 1990s and the usual pursuits of journalists, novelists and screenwriters when they undertake such research. Jackall was there "to understand the structure and meaning of their [detectives'] work". He set out to answer such high-minded, academic questions as "What are the structure, social psychology, ways of knowing, and occupational ethics of official investigative work?" and "How do officials charged with important investigations determine 'truth'?" He may even have succeeded in this arid-sounding endeavour. But not to worry. "The Professor" (as detectives fondly referred to Jackall) has for the most part left scholarly terminology in the classroom. He delivers instead a series of unadorned tales of crime and pursuit that screenwriters and journalists would be happy to get their hands on.

In kaleidoscopic paragraphs, Jackall sketches the Brechtian world where the Midtown North precinct detectives ply their trade.

The precinct jumps with action every day. Well-organized rings of high-class prostitutes roam the Sixth Avenue hotel corridor looking for midwestern businessmen flashing Rolexes ("I can spot a John a block away"), whom they French-kiss with atropine-smear lipstuck to immobilize them and turn them into easy pickings. Con men offer a checking service (with stamped receipts) at Saint Patrick's Cathedral for tourists' valuable cameras and video equipment.

Jackall then launches into an account of the investigation by a fledgling homicide detective of the senseless murder of a tourist on New Year's Eve. Marauding teens had terrorized revellers and one had sucker-punched a seventy-one-year-old man, who collapsed, cracking his head on the sidewalk. A seemingly unrelated robbery leads the detective to interview crooks who meet on Thursdays and Fridays at a Brooklyn shopping mall, where they trade stories and team up to head into Manhattan to "get paid" – slang for committing a robbery. At the mall the detective hears talk of someone "catching a body" (killing a victim). Careful questioning turns up a youth called Smokey and results in the eventual unravelling of the crime.

Street Stories is full of street slang. Detectives "catch" cases. They interview "mutts" and "mopes". Mopes break easily under interrogation; mutts are liars – "harder, cockier, tougher, more self-assured". The detectives threaten to "put a jacket" on recalcitrant suspects – put word out on the street that the suspect is a snitch. Robbers look for a "print", a wad of money visible in someone's pocket. Drug dealers who mess up get "jointed" – chopped into pieces that are spread around the city to make identification difficult. Jackall digresses occasionally from the crime case-study structure of the book, encapsulating a statistical analysis of subway crime and providing a concise description of a crime scene unit at work. A brief history of the uses of finger-printing illuminates the investigation of the gruesome rape and murder of a fifty-five-year-old woman, whose assailant is caught seventeen years after the crime owing to the computer updating of the New York City fingerprint-matching system