

Whole Truth

Narrative nonfiction, biographies, and the quirky bits in between.

by Jenna Schruer

Cutting Edge

A warning: the faint of heart—or anybody eating lunch—should move on. This one ain't pretty. But if you're done with lunch and you're even mildly fascinated by tales of true crime or science (or you regularly tune in for *C.S.I.*), we've got your book. Penned by Mark Benecke, a German forensic scientist lovingly called "Maggot Man" in the press, *Murderous Methods: Using Forensic Science to Solve Lethal Crimes* (Columbia University Press) is the perfect bridge between the solved-in-an-hour world of TV crime and the dense academic journals scientists hunker over. Originally published in Germany, *Murderous Methods* gives readers an inside look at the methods forensic scientists use to solve some truly disturbing crimes. For a book filled with death, dismemberment, and its fair share of ick, it's a pretty lively read.

Benecke was determined to give readers a true look into the world of forensic science—not the dolled-up version offered by TV shows or the science-nerds version that, quite frankly, it's easy to conjure up when you think of microscopes. "Most people think that my work is mostly about dissection, microscopes, tubes, forceps, monochromatic light, etc., which is not true," says Benecke by email. "My assistants and I need to think like juridical people, like police people, like people in prison, and so on, too, and not only in science terms."

Clare Wellnitz, Columbia's publishing director and director of rights, admits to "a certain fascination for those TV shows [like *C.S.I.*]." Two years ago, after a first read of Benecke's book in German, she decided it was the right title to help beef up her house's trade science list—especially since the book's blend of crime, history, and science would appeal to the general reader.

Ever wary of turning readers off with too much jargon, Benecke stayed far away from technical terms in the book—opting instead for language that would keep the narrative flowing. "[I] always had my mother, father, brother, and sister in mind, who all have no idea what forensics and biology exactly is about," he says. "I thought if they would not only understand the book but also like to read it (without being polite to me, I mean), than that would be good."

Another expert in the field, Lawrence Kobilinsky, Ph.D., a professor of forensic science at New York City's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says that Benecke's book is the perfect primer for those interested in the true story behind solving true crimes since it doesn't go so in depth that "a layperson would be lost. The strength is that he's dealing with some very well known serial killers and people are interested in this kind of crime." Of all the cases in the book, Dr. Kobilinsky says he found that of a Canadian husband-and-wife murder team the most fascinating—especially since the wife was recently released from jail.

Benecke says there's plenty more blood, er, info worth spilling and that *Murderous Methods* fans won't be left hanging: He's working on the follow-up. "The craziest stuff I did not even tell—that's for the future book," he says. "I guess writing helps me to stay sane in all that sad blackness and insanity."



Defining Dedication

Blame it on *Gulliver's Travels*. When Craig Conley was writing his graduate school thesis, he spent quite a bit of time in the library looking at the many ways Jonathan Swift's work had been edited throughout its history. "[I was] scanning and looking for what wasn't there and it made me look at text in a new way," says Conley. His work with *Gulliver's Travels* led to a 15-year (and counting) quest to find definitions for the shortest words possible—those of a single letter. In many religions, "letters are the building blocks of creation," says the self-described "lifelong student of comparative religion." In *One-Letter Words: A Dictionary* (HarperCollins), Conley offers up hundreds of definitions for every single letter of the alphabet.

The collector's dedication to the search was also driven by the *you can't do that* attitude of many people he met along the way. "It seemed like an impossible task. People would pull me aside and say there are only two one-letter words," says

Conley. Beyond that, he really can't explain it: "Even stranger than the mysterious workings of inspiration are the mysterious workings of dedication."

After an early 1990s search for a book agent went nowhere, Conley put the dictionary up online. "It exposed it to a lot of feedback and encouraged me to look for an agent again," he says. San Francisco-based Ted Weinstein signed on quickly. Though the publication of the print edition necessitated an

end to the free online version of *One-Letter Words*, access to Conley's other works in progress, including the *Dictionary of All-Consonant Words*, *The Dictionary of All-Vowel Words*, and *Magic Words: A Dictionary* are available at www.blueray.com/dictionary.

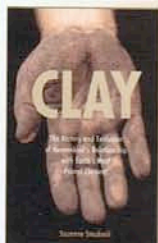
Some dictionary purists might quibble with Conley's definitions. "I was definitely treading new ground on this. Most of the definitions are new territory," he says. His source material was "very piecemeal" and included old unabridged dictionaries, a wide variety of other reading material, popular culture, and a shoebox or two—one definition of E is "A shoe width size (narrower than EE, wider than D)." Along the way, Conley's grown ever more fascinated with the ever-changing English language. It's "growing and evolving at such a pace it's difficult to keep up," he says. "The first use [of a new definition] is idiosyncratic but then comes into the vocabulary." For anybody who doubts his devotion to the new word order moving ahead, take a look back in time at Shakespeare. The Bard "coined upwards of 1,500 words," says Conley.

Like a novelist who grows fonder of a character over time, Conley has grown "partial" to the letter-word X. "It has the most definitions," he says, including "a kiss" at the end of a letter, a "precise point on a map or diagram," and "a person or thing of unknown identity." Sounds A-OK to us.

ONE
LETTER
WORDS
a
DICTIONARY
by Craig Conley

Elemental Reads

Do you take cold drinks or your favorite coffee mug for granted? Two books about ice and one all about clay might have you giving each a bit more thought. Just a touch of the enthusiasm the three authors have for their subjects is sure to awaken the curiosity within you. "One thing I found fascinating is how much of our history has been intertwined with clay," says Suzanne Staubach, author of *Clay: The History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's Most Primal Element* (Berkley). We broke these reads down to their essential elements to help you figure out which you'll want to read in front of the fire this winter.



Title: *Clay: The History and Evolution of Humankind's Relationship with Earth's Most Primal Element* (Berkley)

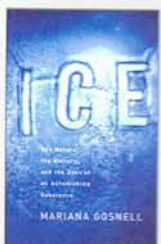
Author: Suzanne Staubach

Why she wrote it:

A bookseller at the UConn Co-op, Staubach has been a potter for 30 years and, she says, "the one thing about potters is they're often very bookish people."

What's inside?

What do Benjamin Franklin, the Tang Dynasty, the Romans, and modern toilet manufacturers have in common? Clay, of course. This is the perfect read for detailaholics; *Clay* is packed with information.



Title: *Ice: The Nature, the History, and the Uses of an Astonishing Substance* (Knopf)

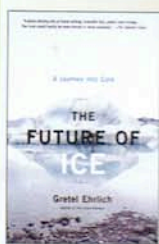
Author: Mariana Gosnell

Why she wrote it:

"I happened to be looking at an ice cube floating in a glass of iced tea one day when it came to me: hard water—what a concept!" (from the introduction)

What's inside?

From lakes to space (and beyond), Gosnell goes into incredible detail about the history, science, and purposes of ice. Her writing makes this much more than an informative text—it's also an entertaining one.



Title: *The Future of Ice: A Journey into Cold* (Vintage)

Author: Gretel Ehrlich

Why she wrote it:

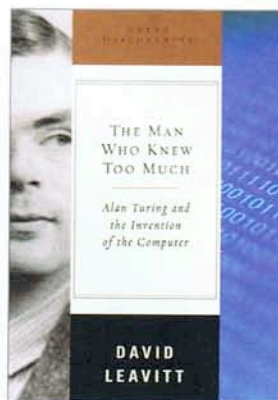
"I had been living in a tent on a glacial moraine facing Wyoming's Wind River Mountains for six months. Summer had just ended, and two feet of snow arrived with nighttime temperatures dropping to an unseasonable twelve below zero. When my cell phone rang, I was wrapped in two sleeping bags feeling miserable. [The caller] asked where I was. I told him. 'Perfect,' he said, then asked if I would write a book about winter and climate change." (from the introduction)

What's inside?

Ehrlich doesn't just detail what it's like to experience some of the coldest places on earth—she takes you there. Travelers beware: She might get your wanderlust worked up. Before you know it, you could end up trying to mimic her 1,000-mile boat journey from Tromsø, Norway, to the Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen. Bundle up—it's a bumpy ride.

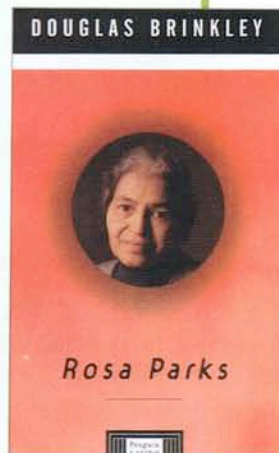
Another Beautiful Mind

Don't let the numbers scare you. Novelist David Leavitt's portrait of Alan Turing, the mathematician who helped create the earliest computers, is loaded with figures—but even mathaphobes should push on through. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (W.W. Norton) is an intriguing look at a brilliant and eccentric man who, because of England's mid-20th century laws against homosexuality, never received the public credit he deserved for his contributions to science and his work to help defeat the Nazis. Instead, Turing, who was gay, was arrested in 1952 and, after enduring horrendous treatment by the government, committed suicide in 1954 by eating a cyanide-laced apple. For another look at Turing's life, read *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (Walker & Company).



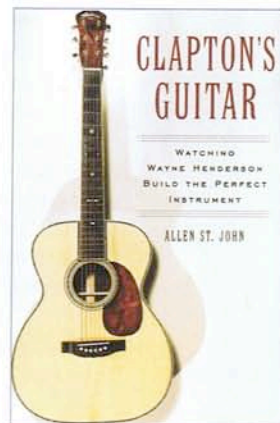
Beyond the Moment

Here's what most kids learn about Rosa Parks in school: After a full day of work as a seamstress, Parks refused to give up her seat to a white woman on a public bus—though local Jim Crow laws required she do so. Her refusal sparked the movement that ended segregation in the south. But, of course, Ms. Parks's life was about much more than one moment in time—no matter how important that moment was. She didn't just take a seat toward justice; she stood up for it her whole life. Now out in paperback, Douglas Brinkley's *Rosa Parks* (Penguin) is a deeply researched biography of an inspiring subject.



Get Hooked

"Like many guitar builders, Wayne Henderson has a waiting list. But unlike most builders, it's not on paper, a computer, or a dry-erase board. I came to realize, as I spent time with Wayne, that The List is in his head. There are fewer than three hundred Wayne Henderson guitars in existence and behind each one is a tale of patience and perseverance on the part of the buyer. If getting a Henderson guitar is a guitar picker's idea of heaven, then it's only naturally fitting that it's preceded by an indeterminate period in purgatory. Wayne Henderson doesn't build guitars so much as bestow them."—from *Clapton's Guitar: Watching Wayne Henderson Build the Perfect Instrument* by Allen St. John (Free Press)



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