What we've been reading...

The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science

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Amanda Knox's murder conviction reversal occurred more or less contemporaneously with my book club's reading of *The Killer of Little Shepherds: A True Crime Story and the Birth of Forensic Science* by Douglas Starr. Starr's narrative hardly rivals other page-turning nonfiction like David McCullough's *John Adams*. Based on the life of serial killer, Joseph Vacher, in late nineteenth century France who "slaughtered more people than the infamous Jack the Ripper," and the man who ultimately solved Vacher's crimes, Dr. Alexandre Lacassagne, then head of the legal medicine department at the University of Lyon, *Little Shepherds* stands on its own as a vivid, often gory, exposition of the development of early forensic science.

Little Shepherds opens as Vacher, who had severe emotional issues since childhood, shoots a woman with whom he is obsessed, but hardly knows, and himself. Both Vacher and the woman survive the shooting, but Vacher suffers permanent facial deformities that make him memorable, a fact that becomes important in unraveling his crimes. As a result of the shootings, Vacher is committed to two different asylums and treatment by alienists – antecedents to present day psychologists and psychiatrists. Vacher's treatment has little effect. Killing innocents becomes his avocation upon his release from the second asylum, although he does write lovely letters about and to one of his treating doctors.

According to Starr, nineteenth century France saw an enormous rise in crime rates from street gangs, the dispossessed, and the criminally insane who escaped from asylums. At the same time, a group emerged that took a scientific, logical approach to crime. This group viewed crime as a problem to be solved. Lacassagne was in the forefront of this group of early criminologists. He developed many new techniques in crime scene analysis such as how to match a bullet to a gun, how to determine whether a dead body had been moved, and techniques to perform autopsies. Lacassagne even wrote a medical thesis on putrefaction which helped investigators determine when death occurred.
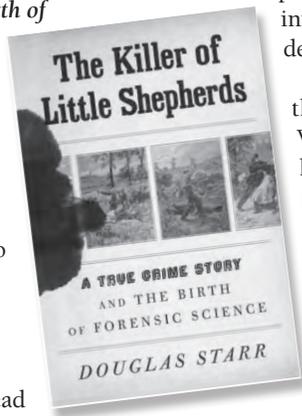
Starr follows parallel tracks through most of the book: Vacher systematically commits horrific crimes throughout the French countryside, and Lacassagne systematically solves other crimes through the application of the logical methods he devises. In virtually every instance in which Vacher kills, the police invariably resort to old methods of investigation. Starr suggests that French investigators frequently attempted to solve crimes by rounding up some likely suspects and jailing them until one would plead to the crime. Yet in most instances, Vacher is present when the body is discovered or a witness remembers a vagabond around the time a killing occurred, memorable because of his facial deformities. Even after Lacassagne proves that Vacher is a serial killer, and Vacher is convicted of the crimes, many of the falsely accused continue to be persecuted by the investigators and neighbors.

While reading about the repeatedly-botched *Little Shepherds*' investigations, the reader will likely make comparisons to modern day criminal investigations and dismiss the *Little Shepherds*' investigations as being a long time ago, more than a century before the development and use of DNA evidence as an effective forensic tool. And then there is the case of Amanda Knox, a case that I have followed casually for the last four years. I confess that I know exactly nothing about criminal law and criminal investigation, and yet this case has nagged on me. The police, and later the prosecutor, had a theory about Knox which did not add up even from my casual observation. The theory ran along the line that the victim had to have been killed by more than one person – there were too many wounds and the crime was too horrific. Knox was involved with her boyfriend in a satanic cult. The theory was interesting, but weird. As I understand it, the DNA of both Knox and her boyfriend were found on the knife that killed the victim. Then we heard a lot about "cross-contamination" of the DNA evidence. Knox's case first called to my mind that maybe DNA evidence is not infallible. Whether we understand or not how DNA becomes cross-contaminated, I suddenly glimpsed the idea that DNA – the stuff of life itself – tells us not much of anything if the evidence itself is not carefully taken from a crime scene and carefully preserved. Especially in light of the evidence about her coerced confession, Knox's problem with the prison guards, the DNA evidence is even more troubling. Knox was at the crime scene. We know that because she was a roommate of the victim. That does not mean, however, she murdered her roommate.

In *Little Shepherds*, Lacassagne not only helps to unravel the extent of Vacher's crimes, but his culpability for the crimes as well, and he does so using what by his day's standards were the most advanced forensic science available. With Amanda Knox, in a crime that occurred only four years ago, the police had at their disposal the most sophisticated forensic evidence available: DNA. And yet, with the advantage of hindsight, the infallibility of DNA evidence is questionable. DNA evidence may simply prove you were there, or it may simply prove that an investigator just carelessly put together two separate, different pieces of DNA evidence in the same bag. After reading *Little Shepherds*, I am impressed how far forensic science has advanced. I also know that I am not entirely convinced that modern, iron-clad forensic evidence is so very iron clad. Maybe DNA evidence which is not properly gathered and properly preserved is not more meaningful today than locking up one or two of suspects in jail and hoping someone cracks was more than a century ago. ∎