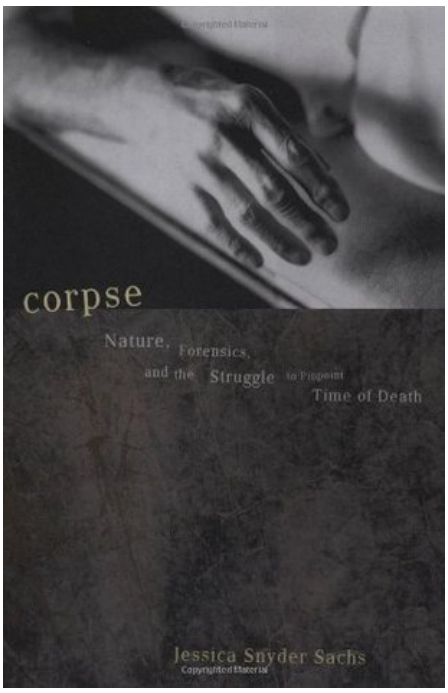


# Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death

*Jessica Snyder Sachs*

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**Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death** Jessica Snyder Sachs
In this book, Sachs accompanies an eccentric group of entomologists, anthropologists, biochemists, and botanists - a new kind of biological "Mod Squad" - on some of their grisliest, most intractable cases. She takes us to the ultra-bizarre Body Farm in Knoxville, Tennessee, where scientists watch bodies decay in order to learn the secrets of decomposition and death. She also takes us into the courtroom, where "post-O. J." forensic science as a whole is coming under fire and the new multidisciplinary art of forensic ecology is struggling to establish its credibility." In the end, Sachs reveals death to be not a single moment in time, but an elaborate dance, as insects and microbes colonize a corpse, and efficiently - even gracefully - return it to the earth. The story of the 2000-year search to pinpoint time of death. Corpse is also the terrible and beautiful story of what happens to our bodies when we die.

## Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death Details

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| ISBN | : | 9780738207711 |
| Author | : | Jessica Snyder Sachs |
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# From Reader Review Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death for online ebook

### Melissa Dally says

Covers the forensic aspects of death in a few new and unusual ways. Can sometimes get dry and you start thinking "bugs AGAIN" but overall was a very interesting read.

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### Rebecca Martin says

I glanced through this book and thought, "Hmm, this looks like too much science for me," but then I sat down and read the first 70 pages without looking up. This book is really a history of how researchers in different periods, from the early Greeks and the Chinese, have thought about and defined the moment of death. This history is told through stories and is definitely geared to the lay reader. The last third of the book enters the modern era (20th c. into the 21st) and so anyone who watches *CSI* will know much of what is revealed here, but the story of how different fields (anthropology, biology, botany, entomology) have come together to create "corpse ecology" is still very interesting and much more complicated than I would have thought.

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### Cynthia Fountain says

Interesting and informative.

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### Victoria says

For hundreds of years, scientists have been studying various ways to be able to tell what time of day someone died. The book “Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death” by Jessica Snyder Sachs explains many of these methods in great detail. By using real life public cases Sachs is able to explain and expand on how the detectives and police officers were able to determine who committed the crime. The main ideas that these methods are based off of are algor, livor, and rigor mortis. These are the change in temperature after death, the decoloration of the body after death, and the stiffness of the muscles body after death. Along with time of death, the book describes the various different things that one can find from a corpse, specifically bones of a person who has been dead a long time without being discovered. Besides what is physically wrong with the corpse, the book explained how the amount of bugs and larvae and the ages of these insects can help uncover time of death.
If I were to give a score to this book, I would give it a 4 out of 5. I am really interested in forensic science and I believed this book would help expand on my knowledge and liking of the subject; however, at first I was never able to get really into in the book. When discussing one certain murder, Sachs would talk about many scientists’ different theories on the best way to pinpoint the time of death and I thought it was very confusing and did not have any flow to the story which made me have to keep going back and rereading who believed what. Once I really got deeper into the book I was not able to set it down. It was such an engrossing book because it had many interesting facts that I had not even considered before I read the book. What I

found most interesting is the different factors that someone is able to tell, just from a corpse, such as gender, age, weight, height, etc. however time of death is still an unknown factor in most cases. Another thing that really interested me was the different factors that the surrounding area of the corpse had on the decaying. For example, the amount of sunlight, the pH of the soil if buried, how humid the area is, etc. I would give it a 4 out of 5 because while it was a tough road to get the information at first, it was worth learning all of the cool facts.

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### Claudia Piña says

Bien desarrollado, con partes muy interesantes y quizá muy detallado en cuanto a entomologia.

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### Bettie? says

Description: *When detectives come upon a murder victim, there's one thing they want to know above all else: When did the victim die? The answer can narrow a group of suspects, make or break an alibi, even assign a name to an unidentified body. But outside the fictional world of murder mysteries, time-of-death determinations have remained infamously elusive, bedeviling criminal investigators throughout history. Armed with an array of high-tech devices and tests, the world's best forensic pathologists are doing their best to shift the balance, but as Jessica Snyder Sachs demonstrates so eloquently in Corpse, this is a case in which nature might just trump technology: Plants, chemicals, and insects found near the body are turning out to be the fiercest weapons in our crime-fighting arsenal. In this highly original book, Sachs accompanies an eccentric group of entomologists, anthropologists, biochemists, and botanists--a new kind of biological "Mod Squad"--on some of their grisliest, most intractable cases. She also takes us into the courtroom, where "post-O.J." forensic science as a whole is coming under fire and the new multidisciplinary art of forensic ecology is struggling to establish its credibility. Corpse is the fascinating story of the 2000year search to pinpoint time of death. It is also the terrible and beautiful story of what happens to our bodies when we die.*

Opening: **THE TYPICAL AMERICAN goes into the ground injected with three to four gallons of preservative.**

Hope you weren't eating your tea when you read that opening. If history of science is your bag then this will be an interesting read. Many famous cases are looked at from a modern perspective, and I love it that Bernard Knight, a modern day crowner, is quoted often, his most high profile case was Fred and Rose West.

Okay as a reference item yet I couldn't recommend on.

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### Jess Van Dyne-Evans says

Astounding and interesting, although I bogged down a bit in the classifying bug section, which took up most of the middle of the book.

### Jeremy says

i need to re-read this book. very good.

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### Clare Fitzgerald says

Those who know me know I read some pretty morbid stuff, both fiction and nonfiction. This is why one of my friends saw fit to lend me her copy of Jessica Snyder Sachs' Corpse: Nature, Forensics, and the Struggle to Pinpoint Time of Death.

I fear my reputation may be more hardcore than I actually am, though, for I definitely had to stop eating at several points during this book, and I love to eat when I read.

This book presents a short but, as far as I can tell, fairly comprehensive overview of the measures by which scientists, medical examiners, and other people in the death business have tried to determine time of death. It begins with short histories of the three "clocks" that medical examiners use in the immediate postmortem period--rigor mortis, livor mortis, and algor mortis--and all the ways in which they can be unreliable. The book then moves into the mid- and later twentieth century and the development of forensic entomology--the study of all the bugs that feed on corpses, and their life cycles and migration patterns and such, in order to determine time of death by assessing what bugs are on a corpse and what stage of their life cycle they are in. This part of the book is FANTASTICALLY gross, full of descriptions of roiling masses of maggots and buzzing swarms of blow flies. The entomologists interviewed for the piece all seem like really smart, interesting characters, but the descriptions of some of the research they did--especially that conducted at "the Body Farm"--and the cases they helped solve are really kind of stomach-churning. I usually like to put in one or two interesting tidbits I learned when I'm reviewing nonfiction books, but in this case I feel that maybe I shouldn't.

I think the maggots also got to me a bit more than other gross stuff gets to me because they always made me remember that time I came home from being gone for the weekend and one of my idiot roommates in Somerville had thrown meat in the garbage and left it there for a few days, so then when I went to throw something away, the kitchen garbage was a giant roiling mass of maggots. THAT WAS A GREAT SURPRISE. Kiddos, if you throw any kind of organic waste into your kitchen garbage, empty it frequently, even if it isn't full.

After all the bug stuff the book moves on into forensics and plant studies, in which ecologists try to identify the time of death of a corpse by the state of the plants immediately surrounding (especially "crushed under" or "growing over") it. This part of the book had the most fun, non-stomach-turning, Sherlock Homes-y bits in it, as usually the local flora of an area was already being studied as part of general ecological field work, and the forensic application was mostly about matching up the clues to determine, for example, what year a rope was tied around a tree branch.

After this section we get back into the realm of gross with a lot of stuff about bacterial studies and "drip zones," which is fancy science talk for "where a dead body's juices sink into the ground." This is apparently still a baby science, or at least it was when this book was published, but it's racked up a couple of interesting

cases.

Overall this is an A+ book for anyone who likes gruesome murdery things to test how much they can handle.

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### dejah_thoris says

At first, Sach's conversational style had me wondering if I'd learn anything new, but I was pleasantly surprised that I did! This book covers the history of the various branches of forensic science that are used to determine time of death. I've recently had a forensic science MOOC, so I already knew a great deal about forensic entomology and its applications. What I didn't learn much about in that course was its history. Sachs also covers the history behind the 3 types of mortis and forensic anthropology and botany very well. (The last being a very exciting science I'd like to learn more about because I've read lots on forensic anthropology too.) The cases mentioned are very intriguing and the style is very conversational. Having it in paperback helps too. If the topic is somewhat interesting to you, I definitely recommend reading it.

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### Sydney says

Go ahead: Ask me anything about blow flies and maggots. I know all about them now—which is not exactly what I was expecting from this book. But interesting stuff nonetheless.

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### Eileen Zong says

I would give this book four and a half stars. Jessica Sachs possesses the ability to weave dramatic writing with otherwise dry and convoluted topics. On its own, two hundred or so pages of pure forensics information would bore me to death (where I could then become a statistic in that very same field of writing, how ironic). However, the author knows this and avoids it by providing historical context with each topic: tales of scientific mishaps from the Greeks and Romans to 20th century America lighten such heavy content. Sachs' anecdotes prevent the book from becoming a boring textbook. Admittedly, Corpse contains some grisly, graphic descriptions and may not be for the faint of heart or squeamish, but I didn't find it to be too disturbing. The author handles the subject of death and forensics with creative ease, and even those that are particularly fidgety or easily distracted (like me) can become absorbed into the pages. However, unless you are an avid fan of forensics, the book can be a little hard to read through. There is a plethora of complicated information and scientific vernacular that can slow down the reader. At times I had to put it down and pick it up after a short break so that I wouldn't get too confused with what I was reading. That's the only reason I'd give the book 4 stars instead of 5. Perhaps those with some forensic science background will find Corpse an easier read. Despite all this, I found the book very interesting and informational, especially as an amateur author that tries to dabble in different genres like murder mystery. I would recommend it to anyone who likes crime shows like Sherlock or CSI or is just interested in learning about forensic investigation!

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### Catten says

If talk of maggots and decay turns your stomach, stop here. You probably won't enjoy this book.

But if you're a forensics junkie, run out and get Corpse right away. It's not only packed with interesting cases and people; it's the best book I've come across, in terms of clear writing and good research.

Jessica Snyder Sachs, a former editor of Science Digest, is a freelance science and health writer. She has a knack for making the gruesome fascinating and the mundane intriguing. And it all revolves around the hunt for the elusive moment of death.

By determining the time of death, police can show whether a suspect could have been at the scene.

There are a variety of methods to finding time of death. The most familiar deals with what Sachs calls the "triple stopwatches of death:" rigor, algor, and livor mortis. Most people know that rigor is when the muscles become rigid. Algor mortis is the change in body temperature as the victim cools and livor mortis - or lividity - is the settling of blood in the lowest points of the body. These three methods are not very reliable because so many factors affect their timetables. Ambient temperature, whether the body is covered, uncovered, clothed, in water, buried, animal activity, and weather are among the factors influencing changes in the body. Stomach contents can sometimes prove helpful, but pre-death activity can affect the rate the stomach empties. And in the case of partially or fully decomposed bodies, what is one to do?

In my last article, I talked a little bit about forensic entomology. Sachs dives into the history and current practices of this incredible and often-overlooked field. Dr. Bill Bass shows up, as well as several of his protégés and colleagues. The stories are riveting.

Here is an example:

Paul Catts, a former professor of entomology at Washington State University, was asked by Tacoma police to help when they discovered the decomposing body of a 34-year-old man who had been shot in the neck in his apartment, which was locked from the inside.

There were signs of a struggle, yet the only gun, found in a nightstand, was unfired and didn't match the victim's bullet.

Investigators collected the only evidence they could find: a handful of maggots.

Catts found that two generations of blowflies had hatched. Using the predictable three weeks per generation, Catts estimated that the body had been in the room at least six weeks.

Searching police reports, detectives ran across a nearby party in Catts' timeframe in which one enthusiastic partygoer had fired several shots into the air. Ballistics experts matched the bullet to the gun and traced the bullet's path from the party, to a metal beam of an adjacent garage, where it ricocheted into the victim's bedroom.

Sachs writes, "Clearly, death had not been instantaneous, given the apparent signs of struggle."

Ugly. But what a way to solve a crime!

Sachs also looks at forensic botany, a field I had never heard of. Plants apparently serve as fairly reliable witnesses, if properly interpreted. Advances in reading chemical markers have also been made and though the chapter discussing this area is short, the science sounds promising.

Accuracy is vital in the field of forensic ecology, and Sachs reviews the efforts of leaders who have made impressive discoveries, emphasizing caution and conservative estimates.

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### Monty says

A very enjoyable read for anyone interested in this kind of subject matter. Lots of facts, figures, and great historical and contemporary information, and yet it never feels like a textbook. Excellent.

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### Janine says

If you are interested in forensics, taking a course at uni or college in forensics, and/or the science behind CSI or NCIS etc. This is an excellent introduction to using nature to assist with establishing the time of death in situations where a coroner can't establish one.

I myself found the botany interesting, as I have an interest in herbalism as well as being a scientist. My verdict. A must have on your bookshelf!

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