

Keep 'Em Guessing
October Write Brain
Presenter: Kim Bjorndahl
By Laura Pellerin

Our speaker for October's Write Brain, Kim Bjorndahl, spent the last 15 years at the Colorado Springs Police Department in Metro Forensics. Colorado Springs has around 25-30 homicides per year; El Paso County's yearly homicides exceed 40. Some of them are so "un-newsworthy," they are not even reported in *The Gazette*.

Our job as writers is to get even jaded readers interested. Kim likes suspense novels, but like most readers, she reads the first page before she buys the book. She says we have to engage our audience right away.

She shows us her first picture: something is buried in the snow. Something with blood on it. The setting is obviously a dark, snowy winter's night. We can see tire tracks. What are the possibilities for a writer's first page?

In another photo, we see the same snow-covered bundle in an open field, and a footprint. (But wait—if you say "footprint," a forensics investigator will assume the person was barefoot. We need to call it a "shoe imprint.")

Can we tell if there is a crime yet? Can we tell if the body is a female? Is she partially clothed? We can see that something was dragged in the snow.

Kim explains that these photographs are used by the prosecution to tell a story. In a court of law, between the defense and the prosecution, the best storyteller wins the case.

Thick and fast, surmises come from various attendees: if the tire tracks don't continue off to the right, she might have been offloaded from the back of a pick-up or an SUV. Looking at statistics, it's sexual assault. Pants are pulled down from the body. A suggestion from Kim leads us to the possibility that "she" might have been discovered by a date to be a "he", which leads to a discussion as to whether or not a cross-dresser would wear a bra. Now we're calling the body a "he". It looks like a tire track runs across "his" head. One female attendee participates with an, "Oooooo."

Another photo reveals that nobody tried to bury the body. We still think the body was dragged by a car. The sparkly top indicates the victim wasn't dressed for an evening in the field, so our guess is that the body was transported from somewhere else.

Kim shows us a photo of the face, and we all agree: it's a guy—a babyfaced one—wearing a padded bra. It looks like rope is trailing from the wrist. His hair doesn't look natural. What is that injury to the neck—rope burn? "Oh, my gosh. Look there on his abdomen..."

What type of crime do we have? It's looking more like gay bashing, or a sex-related crime. The next photo is of the wound on the neck. What caused it? A blunt object, an axe, an ice pick? No, an ice pick would be too small.

"What are your thoughts?" Kim asks. The Write Brainers have many and toss them out, faster than I can take them down: it's a bashing crime, with more than one perpetrator; barbed wire fencing; a vampire; could the body have been dumped and then attacked by animals? But animals would have left more blood. Could be a disagreement between two transvestites, which is why someone made it look like a hate crime; if more than one person dragged the victim, they would have picked the body up and carried it, leaving no trail; the body must have been pulled by a vehicle instead of a person.

Just when we thought we knew what happened that dismal night, Kim shows us a picture of the cleaned-up female corpse. Now we see the flesh-slicing injury to the neck. The audience reaction comes swiftly.

Q: What kind of weapon causes injuries to the neck? A handgun?

Q: Why was no blood visible in the snow?

Kim: It started snowing after she bled out.

Kim: What crime(s) were committed— if any?

A: Homicide, murder, sexual attack, manslaughter.

Kim: Ideas? So what's going on?

A: She was killed, dumped, then dragged. Maybe they were trying to remove tattoos, or it was an explosion, or... But it wasn't any of these. The last photo revealed the culprits, shot and laid out in the back of a pickup truck: two loose wolf hybrids. The victim had been caring for them as a favor to a friend and hadn't secured them properly. Despite all our wild imaginings, there'd been no crime at all.

Kim's point in using this intriguing exercise was that, as mystery writers, we lead the readers down the path of the story we want to tell, but we have to pique their interest enough to get them to go in the direction we are leading them. Basically, her whole presentation did just that. She led us down a lot of dead ends by giving us false clues, and then shocked us with the twist at the end.

After the break, we got our hands dirty. We watched one participant take a dental stone casting of another participant's shoe imprint. Groups of seven tested cards with different stains to find traces of blood. We collected the samples with a Q-tip dampened with phenolphthalein and hydroxide. If the blood test stick turned green within a second or two, the presumptive test is positive for blood. (Kim confessed later that the "cards" we'd used were paint chip samples from a local hardware store.)

Kim shared lots of other tips (including this advice: based on what she's seen in her work, don't sleep on top of motel bedspreads!). But the most useful take-away was simple, and clearly demonstrated with those photographs: keep your reader guessing, and he'll keep reading.

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