

THE INSIDE STORY

—CASE SOLVED

On Location

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Homicide School, Sgt. Derek Pacifico
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I was privileged to have been able to attend and cover the Writers' Homicide School on June 2 and 3 in Santa Monica, California. The class was taught by Sgt. Derek Pacifico, a homicide detective at the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department. Actually, "previously of" is a more accurate description, as Pacifico just retired from that position, where I'm sure he will be missed.

Pacifico's career started at the jail, where he spent three years. He then went through a six-year stint as a patrol officer, and was then promoted to homicide detective, where he employed his skills for six more years before spending the next seven as sergeant. He now uses his twenty-two years of experience to teach novelists and screenwriters in a two-day lecture.

The class was definitely an eye-opener. It's amazing how we authors pen things incorrectly in our novels. According to Sgt. Derek Pacifico, most readers will not even realize many of the things we get wrong, but as a homicide detective, he would love to see more



reality. For this reason, he gave us the tools during this crash course to better portray crime scenes and the ensuing investigations.

Nicole Jones—screenwriter and associate producer of *The Scribbler*, which is in filming now, and writer of *Privacy*, a thriller that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival—said she attended in hopes of gaining insight into crime scenes and lingo to make sure she's accurate. Katherine Ruppe, a writer of screenplays who has a suspense thriller titled "A Killing Frost" under option, also said she wanted to make sure she was using authentic information and was hoping to get some new ideas.

With these hopes of acquiring educational material, we all sat through this intensive seminar on what really happens in the life of a homicide detective. Starting with the basics such as rank structure and penal codes, he made his way into the more interesting territory of crime scene containment. This has to do with the detectives' and crime scene investigators' roles.

Signs of death was another hot topic. It's not just rigor mortis they look at, but other facets of the body's condition as well. Ah...and then there are the gunshot wounds. Whether shot from up close or further away, detectives can assume the



position of the shooter by several different means. This was something authors can definitely stand to learn about and employ when writing those types of scenes.

Do you know the difference between murder and homicide? Attendees do now because Pacifico explained it. Penal code 187. Purpose, cop shooting, justifiable and lawful are just a few words of explanation I'll tease you with.

But that's just one small part of what we learned. Using real case studies with actual crime scene photos—I had to actually close my eyes on one photo—Pacifico didn't just lecture on how someone was killed but had us all participate in trying to figure it out ourselves. He gave us the tools and asked that we apply them and attempt to "detect" that which detectives investigate and see on an almost daily basis. We all tried and we had some great responses, some of which were on the "mark," but detectives, we are not...that is, in real life. In our books or scripts, that's a different story.

An investigator doesn't just try to prove guilt—he/she must look closely at everything, no matter how big or small to determine who, what, where, and how. What about "why"? I can't tell you that, but you will learn it in class.

Pacifico spoke of evidence, GSR (gunshot residue), tire tracks—how they actually compare them, latent prints, warrants, and many other crime scene techniques. The importance of fiber analysis and what it can tell you, comparative science, and the chain of custody were other subjects he touched on.

He also showed actual interviews and interrogations. I believe the whole class—including myself—was surprised to learn they were not what we thought. There is much more to it than civilians realize. I can't tell you everything, but I can say detectives have a whole system they utilize before they even get to the interrogation. They can tell if someone—whom they just met during that particular investigation—is lying or not. How, when they don't know this person? Good question, and Pacifico tells you this answer and much more.

During the lecture, Pacifico stated that "guns don't kill people, shot placement does" and I don't want that placement to be somewhere on my body for giving away everything he taught in class. That's why you'll notice a bit of vagueness. You'll have to attend one yourself and I'm not the only one

who thinks you should.

Film editor Stephen Myers—who is currently working on the ABC show *The Secret Life of an American Teenager*—said he found this class to be "helpful" and liked the "realism and authenticity." Andrew Zinnes, co-author of the "Documentary Filmmakers Handbook" and the "Guerilla Film Makers Pocketbook" from the Film Maker Junction hosted this event and said this course was "...priceless..." and it was "...an eye-opening look at how much psychology is used in law enforcement and how it can be portrayed inaccurately on TV."



Tyler Ditts, a writing teacher at Cal State-Long Beach and author of "King of Infinite Space"—the first in a series about a homicide detective in Long Beach "...likes his presentation..." and the fact that "...it's his specialty to talk to writers." Ditts came for the same reason as all of us—authenticity and accuracy in our writing—and left realizing that "...looking at the photos...[we] jumped to a lot of conclusions and it was a lesson not to assume."

Pacifico will continue teaching this and many other courses across the country. Using his years of experience, he is penning his own novel. It's to be based on an unsolved case of his, but obviously adapted as fiction. It promises to be

as good as his presentations and we at *Suspense Magazine* can't wait for its release.

Personally, I would recommend this class to any aspiring or published author writing genres where there are crime/murders and/or investigations and interrogations taking place. It's packed with real information, some of which will stun you. This class is worth every penny you spend and more. He gives very valuable information and a mini do-it-yourself instructional toolkit so that we as authors can pen accuracy instead of what we see on television.

Suspense Magazine thanks Derek for his valuable time and allowing us to cover his Homicide School. To find out more about Sgt. Derek Pacifico and to find dates on upcoming classes, please visit: <http://www.crimewritersconsultations.com/>. ■