



Cruel Death

M. William Phelps

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"Phelps is one of America's finest true-crime writers." --Vincent Bugliosi

"Phelps is the Harlan Coben of real-life thrillers." --Allison Brennan

It was Memorial Day weekend, the start of the summer season. Thousands headed to Ocean City, Maryland, to enjoy its scenic beaches, lively boardwalk, and trendy nightclubs. Among the bright-spirited vacationers was a couple with a much darker idea of fun. Erica Sifrit, a former honor student, was packing a gun in her Coach bag. Her husband, B.J., an ex-Navy SEAL, was trained in violence. What started as a chance encounter with another couple ended with two dismembered victims buried in a Delaware landfill. M. William Phelps updates this modern-day "Bonnie and Clyde" saga to create a haunting account of money, madness, sex, and murder. . .

Praise for M. William Phelps

"Phelps's writing reads like a mystery novel." --*Suspense Magazine*

"One of our most engaging crime journalists." --Katherine Ramsland

Includes 16 Pages Of Dramatic Photos

Cruel Death Details

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From Reader Review Cruel Death for online ebook

Lady ♥ Belleza says

This case has been featured on TruTV, it has either been on more than one show or I have watched the same show multiple times, which is possible. This is a case where the details were hard to discover, one where you are left shaking your head.

Erika and B.J. seemed to have it all together, she a beloved daughter, he was a navy seal, somewhere it all went wrong. There is no way to know exactly what happened, or why Erika and B.J. started killing, what was behind the little game they played, but Phelps does his normal excellent job of bringing out the facts of this case in an engaging and interesting way.

I recommend this book to true crime fans.

Rachel Aranda says

This book definitely shows that some people should never meet. The crime is senseless and horrifying all so people can have a "thrilling feeling" to have sex and feel alive in general.

Heather says

I am on a true-crime reading kick and I would have to say that this book was written about two of the most gruesome murders that could ever be imagined. The author didn't hold back so be warned that this story is graphic. And it really needs to be told in a graphic way or you would not comprehend the depravity of the murderous couple and their acts of violence. Phelps is becoming my "go-to" author for true crime books and this one does not disappoint!

Diana says

Another true crime story, my guilty pleasure -- a palate cleanser, if you will, between serious books. This one, however, was almost too gruesome for me. It's hard to imagine two more vicious individuals than Benjamin and Erika Sifrit, who could give Hannibal Lecter a run for his money. Phelps' attention to detail is remarkable; however I think he could use a better editor. (The third time I read "she could have cared less" made me cringe.)

SenoraG says

Another winner from M. William Phelps! I thought when I read about the murder of a couple who were tied to an anchor and tossed overboard a boat was the worst that I had read but Cruel Death wins hands down! I can not fathom what happens in a persons brain to even cause them to think about murdering innocent people but dismembering them? As if cutting up a person is not enough read this quote from Erika:

"...and my family will end up exactly like those people. Cut to pieces and him jerking off to the body parts..."

Can it be any sicker? Personally I don't care whose idea it was or who was the leader, in my opinion both of these people are monsters who need not see the light of day again.

Mr. Phelps is one of my favorite true crime authors. Cruel Death like his other books reads more like a horror novel than a nonfiction book. He gives us the background on these two sickies and honestly, it's proof to me that good families have bad kids regardless of how well they are raised. We can not always blame the family life for how people turn out.

I think the author did a tremendous job of showing the unconditional love of Erika's parents, especially her father Mitch. My heart goes out to him. He was so proud of his daughter and had such high hopes for her. Now he has to live with knowing what she was involved in and/or guilty of.

I thought the book was very well researched. I enjoyed reading about their trials even though I was shocked at the light sentence BJ received. I do not agree with it but the author did a good job of explaining the reasons why the jury reached their decision based on what was presented to them.

Yes, I am a true crime addict and M. William Phelps is always high on my list. While this was one of the most disgusting cases that I have read about the overall way the story was told was top notch.

Lisa Maddox says

A reader from Maryland

I lived in Salisbury which is about a 45 minute drive from Ocean City(without summer traffic) and remembered when this murder happened. It was worse than horrific. As a resident at the time, it seemed to me that the media pointed some of the blame on the victims for being crazy and wild tourists. It was enlightening to learn more about these people and am now sorry I didn't dig deeper into what the media was saying at the time.

Patricia says

True crime books are very scary, these are REAL people, not fictionalized. This book almost made me sick in some places, the things these people did were horrific. A very well written true crime book.

Lynda Kelly says

This will be my final time of reading books by M William Phelps, I reckon. I have never picked one up yet without mistakes in and remember I'm paying for these and I'm fed up with it now. He needs to pay more attention to detail instead of numbers if you ask me.

Again in this book he did all that jumping around with dates which always make his books pretty confusing at times. We learned very little about the victims in this terrible case and the promised photos weren't even included so this time I had to Google to see who I'd been reading about. I had to wonder why all of the bodies weren't recovered. This was never explained and I found that quite the oversight....and I was baffled about

the retained bullets and who they were taken from as well.

The mistakes throughout kicked off with missing words again like to/of/a then rogue hyphens or spaces added or missed-like in sur veil-lance or gan-ister or for ward, then we could've added a space in anyway when it was needed, we had apostrophe errors and at one point he mentioned Mitch testifying at his daughter's murder trial as opposed to her trial for murder !! There's a difference. There's also quite the difference between a witness spanking or speaking !! Finally, in the 2014 update the author refers to Carrie Campbell, who till then was Carri. Just extraordinarily sloppy with little regard for the paying customer. Both BJ and Erika were clearly a couple of mentalists enabled by rich parents once again. We hear of this a lot with thrill killers both here and in the USA. Given way too much and totally over-indulged they think they're untouchable and can do just as they please to whoever they please all their lives. I am pleased they ended up how they did.

♥ Marlene♥ says

[I do believe that they wanted to kill someone. That it was in their plans and it was not an accident or a case of they stole their purse. Not really understanding the 911 call but what the author said probably worried about the shots being fired although not so sure.

I know my dad would do anything to help me but he would not be in constant denia

Jeannie Walker says

The couple killed in this story happened by chance to meet up and momentarily befriend a sadistic pair of lovers who killed them and dumped their bodies in a landfill. The unsuspecting, innocent couple didn't have an inkling of the danger they put themselves in until it was too late.

I am glad the murderous lovers were caught and brought to justice for their gruesome acts.

The book might conjure up graphic images that could keep you awake at night.

Jeannie Walker (Award-Winning Author) Jeannie Walker

Fighting the Devil: A True Story of Consuming Passion, Deadly Poison, and Murder

I Saw the Light - A True Story of a Near-Death Experience

Forever in My Heart - A True Story of Coincidence and Destiny

Thomas, The Friendly Ghost

The Rain Snake

Shawna Corner says

I had a hard time getting through the first few pages of nothing but descriptions.

Jazmine says

This is a very interesting case, but the writing style of this book kills it. The author seems to ramble on and

on about details that don't seem very pertinent to the case at all. Details can make a books stronger but there is a limit to when it becomes too much, and this is it.

Leanna says

Believe it or not, I know Erika. I attended a neighboring school to her high school. My extended family is very close with her extended family in business. I remember reading about this horror story in our local papers and hearing the coverage on our local news stations. With every detail, I lost touch more and more with reality... how could someone my age, with a similar upbringing as me, and living in the same town (practically) as me commit such a horrific crime? I vaguely knew of BJ, too. It's borderline surreal and completely insane.

I have never purposefully picked up murder mystery or a thriller... let alone one that is actually a biography... but I had to choose this one. I want to know, why and how could Erika ever be a part of this.

SPOILER ALERT

Is it normal to have your heart race the first time you pick up a thriller? I've never read this genre before, so I'm not sure if the cold sweats and heart palpitations as I cracked open the cover are normal ;-)?! I decided to take it slowly and read the entire introduction and forward. I almost choked when Phelps said, "there are parts of this book the victim's families should not read," and then nearly fainted when he mentioned that parts were "too gruesome" for him to even continue, requiring him to "walk away" and even wonder if he could "ever finish". Deep breath, time to reflect on Part I: "Memories Are Like Rain Drops"...

The introduction of Geney, Joshua, Erika, BJ, and the detectives of the OCPD was well done, I thought. I was able to relate to all and even build a relational sympathy for each of the first four... a little tougher to build the same for Detective Bernal, but still enjoyed reading how his passion for the crime started as an almost ethereal occurrence. Perhaps there is more on Bernal later, as Phelps peppered us with "The case that eventually cost him his job." Interesting to see how that progresses.

I'm not quite sure how I can "take sides" at this point. Phelps has done a masterful job spreading the wonderment of who-done-it or who's-to-blame evenly between Erika and Beej. With our home town media during the trials, the same was true. Local papers and television stations would take turns hanging each in crude effigy, repeatedly, and as often as they could. To this day, I'm not sure what or who to believe... neither does all of Altoona.

Speaking of Altoona, it was almost surreal reading in a published novel the places I frequent often when I am home. The Logan Valley Mall, Memory Lane, the apartment building and even the local Hooters all gave me a tiny chill as I understand more and more that this was my back yard... a mind game let me forget, for awhile, but the book is rushing it back with a tidal force.

Speaking of mind games, I wish Phelps would shed a deeper light on the mental illness that he only alludes to in the passages. I strongly feel that our society is undereducated on the ripple effect of mental illness and how it is the fuel for many criminal fires. I'm not taking the stance that, "Erika & BJ were sick, so they shouldn't be blamed." I'm taking the stance that, "Erika & BJ are to blame, and they are both mentally sick. Let's understand this illness so that others that are diagnosed with the same mental afflictions can be helped before another 'Geney & Josh' need to pay the price." Phelps oozed a sexy story of Xanax snorting and macho Military Dissociative Disorder, but didn't expound upon it much. I'd love just a slice of, "Experts say these are the marking of early criminal behavior and recommend ... intervention ... treatment ... blah blah

blah” but perhaps there’s more to follow on this during the trial section of the book?

Time to reflect on Part II: “Snakes, Crocodiles, Drugs, Murder”...

It’s definitely time for me to point out the obvious white elephant in the room. I had given Phelps the benefit of the doubt throughout Part I, but now, it’s time to admit: his writing technique is subpar. Ugh, painful at times. I know it must be difficult to balance creating a story through actual facts, but come on, this is high school essay caliber. At first I thought, “maybe he’s having trouble with incorporating court testimony within his fictionalized filler.” As the paragraphs trudged on, it was evident that he has an extremely limited vocabulary, particularly when it comes to adjectives, and he has the worst continuity of timing (perhaps he shouldn’t have “walked away from writing” the passages, as he references in his Forward). I counted 3 sentences, alone, in “Fish tales” where he ended with prepositions. I know I’m far from a perfect writer, but if you are publishing a book, I’d somewhat expect there to be an editing team within your publishing house that makes a few content suggestions. This is petty, yes, but it is truly distracting me. He’s redundant and shocking in the most inappropriate ways.

For example, during “The Inconceivable”, I was shell-shocked when I blatantly read that BJ was “having sex with Geney’s torso”, “he was butt-ass naked”, “masturbating”. There was no build-up to these horrific acts at all. I was riding the crescendo of the purse incident, and even felt a climax with the murder scene, but these aftershocks were gruesome and didn’t seem grounded. I’d like to rely on the Flosser experiences with thrillers and be open to the possibility that there just isn’t any other way to write a thriller. Is this the case? How does Steven King, Thomas Farris, and others balance this horror with appropriate fit within context? I’m not saying Phelps should have, literally, “spared the gory details,” I just wonder if he could have made these details more relevant to the intensity of the moment? Help me, Flosser thriller fans, what is the answer(s)?

Now, after venting, I think I should mention that there were excellent moments in the story during Part II. I really appreciated the addition of Erika’s quote during the opening paragraphs of “The Real Me”. In my book, it is p. 31 where she states, “Because I didn’t think anyone else would want me.” Erika was a behemoth whale in the tiny puddle of Blair County (home of Altoona, Holidaysburg). She was the beauty queen, the Olympic medalist, the fashionista, the rich girl, the ever loved. When she left for college, realty set-in and there was a realization that she is a guppy in the Atlantic Ocean. How crushing to have your performance equal your entire worth for the first 18 years of your life and then have it vaporize in the course of a few university semesters. The book hasn’t addressed it, but I feel this could truly explain her mental instability, her propensity to hyper-control her situations. It’s no wonder she was riddled with anxiety, her entire worth, in her opinion, was gone. To BJ, this blood in the waters and he was the shark. Just like he was broken in the Navy, he wanted to break and control something, too. To complete his SEAL cycle, to be what he always wanted, to be a killer. Now, he had a companion that would not only understand, but never leave as long as he gave her worth, though twisted worth it was. Could this also explain the three-week courtship leading to marriage? They both desperately needed each other to feel whole again, why not race to Vegas? What a mess.

Finally, my pulse was accelerating as I read “Killer Wife” through “Guns Don’t Kill People...” (chapters 28-31). I know I gave Phelps a ton of grief in the beginning of this email, and my opinion has not changed... his technical skills are awful... but his ability to suck me into these chapters is a mystery. I was impressed that, even though I knew there wasn’t another set of murders, he kept me turning the pages with increased intensity as I wondered what would happen to Karen and Todd! How sinister to think that Lainey and Beej were setting up yet another couple in almost the identical way.

Who’s with me that Erika hid her purse in the dryer/washing machine when she & BJ brought home Karen & Todd?

Onto Part III and IV...

Erika is simply absurd. Clearly, she is mentally incapacitated on so many different levels. When we arrived to the section in Part III where she was communicating with male inmate, Jimmy, I was appalled by her behavior. She completely disassociated with her criminal actions, not to mention showed zero remorse for anything she has done (from petty theft all the way up to slaughtering Geney and Josh). Then, to take it to the next level and engage in "paper sex"? Absurd.

Wait, my mistake, that was only half-way absurd... MITCH GIVING MR. CHOCOLATE \$50 MONEY ORDERS EACH WEEK, now that's 100%, full blown, asinine absurdity.

This book should be mandatory reading by all Altoona residents. Here we were, bombarded with Erika stories that depicted a meek upper-class girl that simply got with the wrong man, at the wrong time, with the wrong drugs, with the sweetest parents. Granted, Mitch and Cookie didn't have the best reputation around Blair County, but they were far more tolerable than other heavy weights with cash. Thankfully, this book helps us all to understand Erika was severely mentally ill. I even began to take BJ's side a bit...

Then, I took his side A LOT when Erika entered the room to take her polygraph. I couldn't believe what she was saying. I went from thinking, before the book, "Isn't it odd that she got the bulk of the charges?" to starting to read the book and thinking, "Hum, quite the Bonnie & Clyde/Sid & Nancy/Mickey & Malory thing happening here" to now thinking, "That little murderer was more in control of this situation than anyone ever thought!" Cutting Geney? Suggesting that she was the one that assisted in the decapitations? Forcing her friends to rehearse lies on her behalf? Just when I thought my stomach couldn't curl, swirl, churn, or flip more... it did a complete somersault as Part III drew me closer to BJ and further away from certifiable Erika.

He was either a criminal mastermind or a controlled puppet... either way, lawyer-ing-up and claiming, "Talk to my wife" has put BJ in ultimate control over the outcome of this situation. As my father would say, Erika suffers from "diarrhea of the mouth and constipation of the brain!"

By the end of the book, I grew more desensitized to Phelps' writing style. Wish I could say the same for the crime...

Aaron says

One of my guilty pleasures is true crime stories. I can watch shows like "48 Hours" all day. I'm fascinated by the forensics and the investigation process.

Recently, I was watching "Forensic Files" and thought that the subject matter was familiar. Then, crime writer M. William Phelps started speaking and giving his take on the murder involved. It was then that I figured it out: I had downloaded this particular book (by this particular author) for free. The case was interesting enough ("Forensic Files" focuses mainly on the science of solving and doesn't say so much about the perpetrators and victims), so I decided to go ahead and read the book.

Wow. This might be the most gruesome crime that I've ever known anything about.

The book centers around a young married couple (Ben and Erika Shifrit) that are arrested while breaking into a Hooters retail shop. When apprehended, police officers find in Erika's purse, the driver's licenses of a couple that had recently gone missing. Turns out that Ben and Erika were the last ones to see this couple

alive.

Forensics can tell you what happened, but it doesn't necessarily tell authorities who did what. That's where this book becomes the most interesting. Both parties claim that the other did it and that they were along for the ride (Erika claiming that she was afraid of Ben and Ben claiming that he was protecting Erika). This book delves into both possible scenarios. Neither one is any less stomach churning.

If you're a fan of true crime books, then I recommend this particular crime highly. Phelps' writing, though, leaves a lot to be desired. His style is engaging. His facts are straight. But he delves a lot into "opinion territory" and needs an editor to help him correct phrasing that is just...wrong (The phrase "she could have cared less" is used at least three times).

This is, I warn, one of the most disgustingly gruesome murders I've ever read about, made all the more gruesome by the story being true.

Lori says

I used to read true crime stories all the time but lately I just can't get into them like I used to. This particular story I watched on Forensic Files (I'm a little addicted to that show) and on a whim looked to see if I could find the book written about the case.

This one is interesting, with details well told. The crime is horrific and perpetrated by seemingly normal people which is always creepy. The author does a good job but there is a real need for an editor. It is very distracting to read errors in a finished book - "she could care less" GAH!! NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!
