

## **Working Stiff: 2 Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner** Discussion Questions

by Judy Melinek, MD & T.J. Mitchell

**Author Bio:** (<http://www.pathologyexpert.com/working-stiff-book/>)

**Judy Melinek**, M.D. is a graduate of Harvard University. She trained at UCLA in medicine and pathology, graduating in 1996. Her training at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in New York is the subject of her memoir, **Working Stiff**, which she co-wrote with her husband. Currently, Dr. Melinek is CEO of PathologyExpert Inc., and works as a forensic pathologist in Oakland. She also travels nationally and internationally to lecture on anatomic and forensic pathology and she has been consulted as a forensic expert in many high-profile legal cases, as well as for the television shows E.R. and Mythbusters.



**T.J. Mitchell**, Judy Melinek's husband, graduated with an English degree from Harvard and has worked as a screenwriter's assistant and script editor since 1991. He is a writer and stay-at-home Dad raising their three children in San Francisco. *Working Stiff* is his first book.

### **Characters:**

- **Judy Melinek:** Assistant Medical Examiner performing her 2-year forensic pathologist fellowship in New York City from 2001-2003. Considers herself a "Death Investigator and Eyewitness to Death."
- **T.J. Mitchell:** Judy's Husband. Met in college. A stay-at-home dad.
- **Danny & Leah:** Judy and TJ's children.
- **Dr. Vernon Armbrustmacher:** OCME's brain specialist. Neuropathologist.
- **Russell Dunn:** Veteran mediolegal investigator.
- **Dr. Susan Ely:** Senior Medical Examiner.
- **Dr. Mark Flomenbaum (Flome):** Deputy Chief Medical Examiner.
- **Dr. Doug Freeman & Dr. Stuart Graham:** Forensic pathology fellows with Judy.
- **Dr. Charlie Hirsch:** Chief Medical Examiner.
- **Dr. Monica Smiddy:** Senior staff member at the Medical Examiner's office. Helped Melinek with the World Trade Center Bombing identification.
- **Amy Zelson:** In-house anthropologist. Determines whether discovered bones are human or animal.
- **DMORT** – Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams – Provide manpower during mass casualty events
- **Medicolegal Investigators (MLI's):** 1st responders to an untimely death from the Chief Medical Examiner's Office.
- **OCME** – Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

## Interesting Things/Quotes

- Autopsy means “See for yourself.”
- Workplace accidents automatically require a full autopsy. Unexpected fatalities are usually the result of something dangerously mundane or something predictably hazardous.
- In only 1% of cases is the ME brought in to testify in court.
- “The dead body is not my only patient. The survivors are the ones who really matter. I work for them too.”
- September 11<sup>th</sup> bombings:
  - They identified the 1000<sup>th</sup> victim on April 29, 2002.
  - Medical Examiner’s Office stopped being in charge of identifying victims on May 7, 2002.
  - After 1 year there were 1,344 death certificates issued by judicial decree and 1,389 certificates issued by identification.
- Dr. Melinek kept a journal & notes every day which is the basis for this book.

## Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. This book was set up by topics (death by drugs, murders, hospital deaths, etc.) not chronologically. Did that help or harm the book?
3. Does *Working Stiff* have a story arc, or is the book just a collection of interesting death stories? Does it matter? Does a memoir need a structural arc?
4. Dr. Melinek began her medical career as a surgical resident, but her quality of life suffered due to her 108-hour-workweek schedule. Do such rigorous training programs ultimately benefit doctors? Patients?
5. Would you have the courage to quit your surgical rotation with no other options available?
6. What is the most interesting forensic fact you learned in the book?
7. Do you think you could have remained an optimist while working as a ME/forensic pathologist?
8. How did hearing about the details and organ removals make you feel about autopsies, in general? Did reading the book make it harder/easier? More understandable? More or less desirable?
9. Is it believable/understandable that it might take months to get a finished death certificate/report (and that the death certificate is pending until then)?

10. If asked the question “Did he suffer,” would you tell the truth or lie to family members?
11. Melinek never really mentions her mother, but mentions her father and his suicide multiple times. How do you think his suicide affected her and her career choice?
12. Melinek speaks a lot about suicide. What do you think about her ideas on it? Do you think her handling of the topic is biased?
13. Melinek says that she constantly sees signs of disease and impending death in random strangers. If you could see signs like that, would you tell them?
14. Which story (or set of stories) affected you the most?
15. What role does New York City play in the book? Is the City a character? How (apart from her work after the World Trade Center disaster) would training in another city have changed the story?
16. What role does the theme of parenting play in the book? Does being a parent make Dr. Melinek a better medical examiner? Was T.J.’s role as a full-time stay-at-home dad important to the story? How does being a parent influence how you do or your colleagues do their job, or affect others you work with?
17. How is the authors’ portrayal of forensic pathology different from its portrayal on television?
18. What did you think of the lines “Your faithful golden retriever might sit next to your dead body for days, starving, but the tabby won’t. Your pet cat will eat you right away, with no qualms at all. Like any opportunistic scavenger, it will start with your eyeballs and lips. I’ve seen the result.” Did it make you look differently at your pets?
19. Many reviews and press events about **Working Stiff** list Judy Melinek as the sole author, even though the book is co-authored by T.J. Mitchell. Do you think this is due to his role as a homemaker? Would Judy’s appearance in the media standing by her writer-husband detract from her status as a strong female media figure?
20. Melinek and Mitchell have not yet written any other books/memoirs, but if they did, would you read them?

## References:

- Book Browse – [https://www.bookbrowse.com/read-alikes/index.cfm/book\\_number/1230/stiff](https://www.bookbrowse.com/read-alikes/index.cfm/book_number/1230/stiff)
- Goodreads – <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18775327-working-stiff>
- Pathology Expert (Dr. Judy Melinik’s blog) -- <http://pathologyexpert.blogspot.com/2014/09/stiff-book-club-discussion-questions.html>

---

**If you liked Working Stiff, try...**

- [Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers](#) – Mary Roach
  - [Internal Medicine: A Doctor's Stories](#) – Terrence Holt
  - [One Doctor: Close Calls, Cold Cases and the Mystery of Medicine](#) – Brendan Reilly
  - [Dead Center: Behind the Scenes at the World's Largest Medical Examiner's Office](#) – Shiya Ribowsky
  - [Never Suck A Dead Man's Hand: And Other Life \(and Death\) Lessons from the Front Lines of Forensics](#) – Dana Kollmann
-