

Postmortem Discussion Questions

by Patricia Cornwell

Author Bio: (<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/826-postmortem-cornwell?start=1>)

Before becoming one of the most widely recognized, respected, and read writers in contemporary crime fiction, Patricia Cornwell worked as a police reporter for the Charlotte Observer and as a computer analyst in the chief medical examiner's office in Virginia. During this period of her life, Cornwell observed literally hundreds of autopsies. "Most of these crime scene shows...are what I call 'Harry Potter' policing," she said in a candid, heated interview. "They're absolutely fantasy. And the problem is the general public watches these, 60 million people a week or whatever, and they think what they're seeing is true."

Cornwell introduced medical examiner Kay Scarpetta in her first novel, *Postmortem* in 1990. *Postmortem*, Cornwell's debut book, is the only novel by a first-time author to ever win five major mystery awards in a single year. There are currently 22 books in the Kay Scarpetta series. In addition, Cornwell writes more lighthearted cop capers in her "Andy Brazil & Judy Hammer" series. She also has written a number of nonfiction books, including a Scarpetta cookbook.

Characters:

- **Kay Scarpetta** - Chief Medical Examiner - Richmond, VA.
- **Pete Marino** - Detective Sergeant in the Richmond Police Department. In charge of investigating the murders in *Postmortem*.
- **Alvin Amburgey** - The County Commissioner and Kay's boss.
- **Bill Boltz** - The Commonwealth Attorney and Kay's semi-secret boyfriend.
- **Dorothy Farinelli** - Kay's sister and mother of Lucy. Writes children's books, but doesn't have much time for her daughter.
- **Lucy Farinelli** - Kay's ten-year-old niece. A computer genius.
- **Norman Tanner** - Director of Public Safety
- **Abby Turnbull** - Reporter. Obtains an inside information on the murders.
- **Benton Wesley** - FBI Profiler.

Victims

- Brenda Steppe
- Patty Lewis
- Cecile Tyler
- Lori Anne Petersen - a young doctor
- Henna Yarborough - sister of Abby Turnbull

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Discuss Kay as a character. Is Kay likable, admirable, and/or capable of friendship and intimacy?
3. Do you think Cornwell sacrifices character development for plot?
4. Did you find the descriptions of Scarpetta's "new technology" distracting, quaint, or helpful?
5. Cornwell actually worked in a medical examiner's office before writing this book. She is often critical about how the ME and crime labs are depicted in the media. Did this book change the way you see those offices?
6. Scarpetta's frustration for the lack of evidence in the killings is obvious throughout the novel. What more could she have done to further her investigation? What would you have done in her situation?
7. What evidence is found and how was it processed?
8. Scarpetta's evidence is compromised. What, if anything, could she have done to avoid this?
9. The Scarpetta series has a number of detailed/gruesome descriptions of Kay's work in the medical examiner's lab. Do you feel the graphic details add to or detract from her story telling?
10. Kay is undermined by her boss multiple times. Does this plotline make the story better or does it detract from the story?
11. What do you think Kay should do, if anything, about her boss without jeopardizing her job?
12. Throughout the novel Scarpetta underscores her difficulty in spending time with Lucy because of her demanding job. Why do you think Scarpetta decided on career over family? What decision would you make in the same situation?
13. Talk about Lucy and her relationships with both her mother and her aunt. Does Lucy intrigue you or irritate you? Why was she added to the book's plot?
14. There was very little chance of the reader determining who the killer was. Does this help or harm the story?
15. What do you think about the idea that someone can choose to kill without ever meeting their victim?
16. Cornwell says she received criticism from women who felt it was wrong for Kay to be rescued by a male. What do you think?

17. When Cornwell first wrote *Postmortem* in the late 1980's, publishers objected to Kay's role as a medical examiner, an unusual - and inappropriate - role for a woman. Nearly 20 years and 22 books later female medical examiners are no longer unusual. How did we get here - and what was gained...or lost along the way?
18. Critics have also raised questions about the possibility of Cornwall's books, particularly this one about a serial killer, spawning copycat crimes. Cornwall defends her books, pointing out that, historically, copy cats have been spurred more by TV coverage of school shootings than by books. Do you agree or disagree?
19. Who was your favorite character in the book? Why?
20. Will you read other books in the Kay Scarpetta series?

References:

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