

True Confessions

Oral histories of black law enforcement officers.

Reviewed by Peter Moskos
Sunday, January 11, 2009

THE THIN BLACK LINE

True Stories by Black Law Enforcement Officers Policing America's Meanest Streets

By Hugh Holton

Forge. 318 pp. \$25.95

The stories police officers tell each other often don't amuse outsiders. While fellow cops laugh, an outsider is left thinking, "Is it funny that a man bleeds to death?" or "You took crutches away from a one-legged homeless man?" But police don't tell these stories to entertain outsiders. A story is more than a way to bond over a beer after work; it's an essential tool of the trade.

Stories provide sense to situations that lack it. Laughing at gore, the softness of human flesh and the misfortune of others isn't necessarily a sign of an uncaring cop. Gallows humor is a way to compartmentalize, to maintain one's sanity, to reserve empathy for situations in which emotion might be more productive.

Before I was a police officer, I loved the TV show "COPS." But after a few nights in a police car, I realized that "COPS" wasn't the real deal. The dialogue was stilted, on guard, seemingly self-censored for the more politically correct masses. *The Thin Black Line*, a collection of 28 oral histories of black law enforcement officers in U.S. cities from coast to coast, is similarly restrained. I'm certain these officers have great stories to tell. They just don't tell them here.

Apparently, *The Thin Black Line* was still a work in progress when its author/editor, Chicago Police Capt. Hugh Holton, died in 2001. Maybe Holton, a novelist and police officer for 32 years, had a different vision for the final shape of these stories, which are sorely lacking in context. Maybe he intended to explain how, where and when he selected the officers and interviewed them. Posthumously, many things aren't clear.

Three accounts, for example, come from Chicago police officers named Holton: Hugh, his father and a third man. But we're never told if the latter has any relation to the first two, and we don't learn if, or how, police work is passed down between generations in African American families. Holton himself downplays his father's influence on his chosen vocation. Perhaps it doesn't matter.

What does matter is the sense that these officers aren't telling all. Holton's father says, "I also worked during the 1968 [Democratic] political convention." And? That's it. If I remember correctly, something important happened there.

Still, *The Thin Black Line* is revealing. The blandness of these interviews reflects two overarching truths about policing: Blue tends to overshadow white and black, and much law enforcement work is, to be honest, boring. For a collection of stories told by black law enforcement officers, the theme of race is surprisingly absent. Perhaps they simply didn't want to go on the record talking about it.

Philadelphia police officer Roger Tucker is one exception: "To some extent," he says, "I believe that I was hired to keep black people in their place." It's a shame that Tucker, who sees police officers as "basically hired mercenaries . . . enforcing the majority laws on a minority community," wasn't placed in the same room with Los Angeles probation officer Robbie Robinson, another narrator, who prides himself on getting kids out of a "hopelessly gang-infested environment" by sending them -- I think he's serious -- to prison.

The Thin Black Line does a better job with gender. Chicago police officer Tanya Junior says she did not seek a career in law enforcement but simply saw the police force as her best job opportunity. She thinks she has "an aptitude for police work" but readily admits she's not passionate about her job. "Despite the dangers and the risks," she says, "I made a commitment long ago to not let my job change me. I don't fool myself into thinking that I have more power than I do, simply because I'm a police officer." Junior is one of eight women whose first-person recollections are included in the volume. For them, more than for the men, policing seems to be a job and not a calling.

Yet, overall, the reader is left feeling cheated. One after another, whether they have something to tell or not, the officers seem to respond to the same half-dozen or so questions about their family background, their funniest story and their most dangerous moment on the job. Lost in transcription are speech mannerisms, individual idiosyncrasies and a sense of place. The greatest disappointment is that these dedicated men and women never really come to life.

The challenge of writing up an interview is to bring out a true picture of the individual. The challenge of an oral history is to present individuals in a way that collectively paints a larger portrait. Holton may have been a very fine police officer and successful crime novelist, but Studs Terkel he ain't. It's a safe bet that somewhere, at this very moment, the officers featured in *The Thin Black Line* are telling far more revealing and entertaining stories than the ones found here. Those are the stories I want to hear. ·

Peter Moskos, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, is the author of "Cop in the Hood."