

Prof's personal style gains her access to 'What Cops Know'

In her story-telling Irish family, the dinner table always set the scene, said Connie Fletcher. When sister Julie joined the Chicago police force in 1979, her narratives began to outshine those of the other siblings.

"Julie would come to the table with these incredible stories about what she had seen on the street," recalled Fletcher, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and author of the forthcoming book, *What Cops Know*. "Julie is a sergeant now, but before that she worked in violent crimes and on a tactical team that orchestrated undercover cops in drug buys and raids and in decoy prostitution work. She also has been trained as a hostage negotiator. Through Julie's stories I began to see that police officers know a lot about crime and about human nature."

Her interest piqued by her sister's narratives, Fletcher set out to record other police stories. "My book grew out of an article about my sister's tactical team that I wrote in 1987 for *Chicago Magazine*," she explained. The magazine excerpted a chapter of *What Cops Know* in its November 1990 issue. "A literary agent from New York read the article and asked that I put together a book proposal, sample chapter, and table of contents. Three publishers proved interested in the project."

"As a rule, police officers don't trust reporters," Fletcher continued. "So my sister helped me make connections. Several lieutenants who read and liked the article also made introductions on my behalf."

Kitchen table ambience

Fletcher received official Chicago Police Department permission to embark on the project, with the stipulation that she interview police off-duty. Fletcher used that stipulation to reproduce her familiar and favored "kitchen table" ambience: she met with 135 police officers in restaurants or their own homes, often after shifts of duty that ended at 2 a.m.

"When I spoke with partners or with groups of cops, the interaction really felt like sitting around with my family," Fletcher said. "Most of the officers prefaced the interview by saying they didn't have much to tell me; three hours later, they would admit with surprise that more had happened than they realized."

"All of the police officers I interviewed were terrific storytellers," she continued. "They told beautifully crafted stories with suspense, a climax, and a moral. They spoke vividly about their work."

The officers also exploded any stereotypes she may have had about police, Fletcher said. "They all were intelligent, perceptive, and sensitive. The homicide people said they all cry—and that anyone who says otherwise is a liar. The officers on major accident investigations see horrible and gruesome things—and go home at night and give their children an extra hug. I heard so many cops say they are so thankful for what they have. They may have to act callous on the job, but they really don't

feel that way. Many admitted that drug busts in front of children affect them deeply: they hate being the bogey man who knocks down the door and takes daddy away."

In *What Cops Know*, Fletcher focuses on police who work in Area 6, a 22.4-square-mile area along the lakefront bounded by the Chicago River on the south, Howard Street on the north, and the Kennedy Expressway, roughly, along the western edge. She describes this area as a "microcosm of crime," the most socially and economically diverse police jurisdiction in the United States.

Her book, Fletcher said, differs from other police books in its focus on different areas of police work; officers from areas such as violent crimes, property crimes, narcotics, and street beats provide anonymous narratives. Fletcher wrote an introduction for each chapter, and contributors are identified at chapter's end. "While they didn't want the general public to know who said what, most of the police officers I interviewed were pleased to have their stories included," Fletcher noted. "They said, 'This is my only chance to have my story immortalized for my children and grandchildren.'"

Street smart

"I became much more street-smart as a result of writing this book," Fletcher admitted. "Cops see so much—they are aware of everything, all the time. Every officer I interviewed would escort me to my car, and then watch me get in and drive safely away. 'One less robbery statistic,' they used to joke."

"I also learned that narcotics are so pervasive that they have revolutionized every aspect of crime," she said. "Addicts are so desperate. There now are more sloppy burglaries and shoplifting; the days of careful burglary have passed. And the police officers told me that particularly vicious murders often are committed by cocaine addicts. There also is a tragic amount of child sexual abuse at every level of society. A child sexual abuse specialist told me that within every square mile of any metropolitan area in the United States, there is someone looking to have sex with a child."

Fletcher, who teaches journalism at Loyola, began her own journalism career through freelance writing while employed as an adjunct professor of English literature at Northwestern University, where she received her Ph.D. After years of regular contributions to many well-known Chicago publications, Fletcher was selected from a field of competitors to teach at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. In 1986, she joined Loyola's communication faculty. "I received my undergraduate degree from Loyola in 1970, so this really felt like coming home," she said. "I can see myself as an undergraduate in so many of the students I teach."



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Her research for *What Cops Know* brought together Fletcher's interests in narrative, rhetoric, and ethnography. "This work has translated into scholarly papers and articles," Fletcher said. "I presented a paper on police narrative to scholars at the International Communication Association conference at Trinity College in Dublin last June. They loved the stories as well as the narrative aspects."

What Cops Know will be published in January 1991 by Villard Books, a division of Random House, in the United States, and by McDonald Publishing Co. in the United Kingdom, with an international distribution including Australia, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, the Republic of

Ireland, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, and the Republic of South Africa. It has been accepted by the Literary Guild and by the Doubleday Book Club. *People* magazine intends to review the book in January, and Fletcher will begin a 12-city tour to promote the book in February. The prime-time television show *Top Cops* plans to dedicate a future segment of the show to the book.

Fletcher also is a co-author of the book, *Who Runs Chicago?* (St. Martin's Press, 1979), a collaboration with *Chicago Tribune* reporters Michael Kilian and F. Richard Ciccone that made predictions about the future of the city after the death of Mayor Richard J. Daley.



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