

# A book about cops as humans ...

**The Blue Wall**  
**Street Cops in Canada**  
 by Carsten Stroud  
 1983 (Seal Books 1984)

review by Jens Andersen

Mr. Stroud spent a year pounding the pavement and riding Tourist Class in patrol cars across Canada, trying to capture the life and character of our street cops, the ones who have the unenviable job of meeting the public. He succeeded magnificently; the stories he unearthed are nothing short of amazing.

Here is Stroud peering over the cops' shoulder as they haul in a weirdo who has a VW full of porn, and uses his car to try to

drive over hookers.

Here is Stroud in a dark alley as the cops drag a tweedy, well-to-do gent out of his sedan where he was just receiving a hooker-administered blow job. The man's pecker does a quick wilt as one cop gives him a lecture he'll never forget.

Here are Stroud and the cops coming within a micron of getting pulped by the clientele of a posh steak house (an incident chock full of terrible and amusing details).

Here is a policewoman telling about a pig of a martial arts trainer who gropes as he teaches. Unlike so many of the stories in the book, this one has a happy ending; a beautiful ending which should warm the heart of any feminist, and all other human beings who relish poetic justice.

Here is a tacky domestic dispute, an attempted knifing, small-time heroin busts carried out more in stubbornness than hope, a TV crew inflating a minor incident of rough handling into an outrageous case of police brutality, crazy and pathetic people wired on alcohol and drugs, and countless other illuminating scenes.

Not all of the book is first-hand. A good deal is standard after-the fact stuff, though it is no less superb for that. The Montreal police technique for nabbing gangster bank-robbers, for instance, is hair-raising enough in theory. You don't have to see it.

The best part of the book is an extended anecdote told by a police officer who worked in a tiny, remote James Bay community. His tale concerns an Indian youth he befriends,

and whom he must later pursue through the arctic wastes for minor crimes.

The poignant details of a native culture poisoned by the white culture, the description of a mind crumbling in the wild without the props of civilization, and of course the Marlow-esque telling of the story, combine to produce something with the feeling and depth of Joseph Conrad at his best.

The book does have some minor flaws. The extensive geographical descriptions that open each section for example, could probably have been dispensed with, or reduced to a sentence or two, to orient Americans who might be under the impression that Vancouver is in the middle of the prairies.

The trace of Mickey Spillane in the writing style might also have been toned down a bit, although not so much as *Saturday Night* did. Last year, when the magazine printed his story of a policeman killed by armed robbers, a phrase about criminals "with ethics of lizards" became criminals "with eyes firmly fixed on the delusion of the main chance." Other blandnesses were also perpetrated.

A heavy dose of clap on the editors responsible, and all such 19th-century gutless wonders!

In fact, some of Stroud's fireworks are quite good. Not all of them fizzle. Let's change that from Spillane-ish to something approaching Raymond Chandler.

In any event, these quibbles disappear when weighed against the book's manifest virtues. There isn't much on the shelves these days to match it.

On the shelves there are plenty of thrillers to titillate shockable yokels. There are hundreds of books on harnessing Christian suction for fun and profit. There are stacks of books disposing of the mysteries of the universe in 200-400 pages of glib generalizations. There are fat romances for fat housewives, epics and heroic adventure novels for fat hubbies, exercise books for the sort of lamebrains who need books for exercising, biographies of Hollywood non-entities, Kennedy books, sex books, pseudo-intellectual pus-boils like Dr. Geoffrey Ursell's *Perdue...* (OK, OK, I'll cut the list short)... shitload after shitload...

Anyway, you get the drift. *The Blue Wall* sort of stands out in this crowd.

A final note: Stroud doesn't intrude himself into the book nearly as much as you might suspect from reading the interview with him. Basically he lets the facts speak his opinions for him. Even when confronted with a horrible academic-radical type who believes that abolishing police forces will bring on the Millennium, even then he keeps his cool and lets her do 95 per cent of the talking.

## Quotable

Carsten Stroud presents an enormous range of opinions from police in his book, impossible to describe or even summarize here. One that stands out is a redneck-cum-intellectual leftist analysis of Indian/white relations, put forth by a Winnipeg cop. It is guaranteed to curl almost anyone's eyebrows, regardless of their political prejudices.

Here are three more random quotes, all from policewomen:

My partner says that working with a woman has made the job much easier. Somehow, when you come up the stairs and two people are at each others' throats, and they see that instead of two cops they have a man and a woman, it kind of shakes them. They get off balance. They don't feel as threatened or invaded. It becomes almost a social thing.

... we don't get a good clientele around this part of town. Rummies. Winos. Hookers from the reserve. Bathing is a yearly ritual for most of them, and it depends on the monsoons, if you know what I mean. It's bad enough watching some floozie peel off a pair of panties that went on during the Diefenbaker government, but to have to check out what was under the panties for dope and guns ... it's too much.

So I get some lip from the big doper from Burnaby, at the (bar) table, in front of every one. I told him to shut up. He said something completely unacceptable. I kicked the chair out from under him. He started to get off the floor so I kicked him right in the balls. Hard.

... It's not just the males who have fight responses built in. As far as I'm concerned, any trained woman will beat any untrained man no matter how much weight and muscle she has to counter.



Photo Tim Kubash

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