



Death in a Nutshell: Frances Glessner Lee's 'Nutshell Studies in Unexplained Death'

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ABSTRACT

Frances Glessner Lee's miniature models of murder scenes are tiny marvels of making. They are durable teaching aids in forensic science, and have attracted biographical and poetic attention. What is their interest for life writing, and why?

Keywords: miniature, murder, forensic, gaze

Death is a mystery to the living: how will you die? When will you die? Every day healthy people assume that that day will not be their last. As the radical poet Heathcote Williams said when he was hospitalised, 'I can't die yet—I'm in the middle of writing something'. (He died soon after.) Death also comes in mysterious ways, with murder, suicide and accident muddled up as possibilities. Different legalities apply, and sorting them out is usually the job of professional investigators. But how do they know what to look for?

A fascinating survival shows how an amateur taught professionals to spot clues, recognise signs and recreate narratives that could explain unexplained deaths. Frances Glessner Lee (1878–1962) was a wealthy woman with a highly intelligent interest in forensic science, encouraged by a friend of her brother who told her tales of crime scenes he had encountered. At the age of 44, Glessner Lee began to make a series of miniature dioramas, each featuring a grisly death and each a marvel of making. With astonishing skill in a range of crafts, working on an eye- and hand-challenging scale of one inch to a foot (2.54 cm to 0.3 m), she

represented scenes that were composites of actual court cases. She called them Nutshell Studies to express the purpose of a forensic investigation: to ‘convict the guilty, clear the innocent, and find the truth in a nutshell’.

Endowing Harvard with a library and a chair in forensic medicine, Glessner Lee inaugurated seminars for what became known as HAPS, or Harvard Associates in Police Science: the seminars were to help train those investigating murder to do a better job, and for the different agencies involved to communicate better with each other. The dioramas provided model crime scenes; investigators were given witness statements and 90 minutes to study the scene. The point was not to solve the cause of death so much as to establish systematic and accurate ways of identifying evidence. It helped, suggested Glessner Lee, to move your gaze clockwise, methodically assessing everything through each thing and its relation to other things. She researched cases, blended details, attended autopsies and became one of the leading figures of forensic science—and this at a time when neither coroners nor police investigators had effective training. Over a longer time frame, her work contributed significantly to the improvement of forensic science, leading eventually to what those in the trade call the CSI effect, meaning a level of public confidence in forensic science so great that it can create unrealistic expectations of what forensic science can actually explain.

Glessner Lee has attracted attention for a number of biographical reasons: as a woman prevented by class expectations from entering a profession; as a privileged woman whose dioramas reflect assumptions of class and race from her era (her models are all white, mostly inhabiting dingy worlds run down further by alcohol and drugs); and as a woman whose scenes make visible recurrent violence against women, especially in their homes. She is also acclaimed as an extraordinarily gifted maker: in her tiny dioramas, metalwork, knitting, crocheting, modelling and painting are consistently and impressively worked on a challenging miniature scale. These are not figures with stage backdrops: they are models whose lives are fully and materially realised. Cupboard drawers can be pulled back to show contents, underclothes reveal patches, lights work, windows open. She had help from a carpenter, but otherwise all the inventiveness was hers. She had made miniatures before and referred to herself simply as a hobbyist; her associates in professions acclaimed her as one of the great criminologists of the time.

When the Department of Legal Medicine at Harvard closed in 1966, the dioramas went to the Maryland Medical Examiner’s Office in Baltimore, where they continued to be used. In 2017–2018, the dioramas were exhibited at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, creating new interest, including interest in Glessner Lee herself.

The Nutshell Studies can be illuminated in different ways by life writing. Glessner Lee's own life story has much of interest for feminism, and her dioramas draw on real-life crime where accurate forensic reconstruction could establish the truth about violent ends. Justice turns on life narrative: trying to make murder look like something else is a common ploy of murderers, and recuperating truth fills the place where victims cannot speak. There is something sad about Glessner Lee's whodunnits: that the corpse might have willed their own death is not always fiction. A continuing 'readership' of forensic personnel and interested admirers means Glessner Lee's remarkable achievement overflows a story of belated recognition in professional advancement: something else is going on. Is it to do with scale? Literary critics have noted the appeal of the miniature—arising in the West from illustrated manuscripts, the term embraced books and portraits, prime media of life writing. Glessner Lee's figures are sometimes referred to as dolls, gesturing to the alluring world of the uncanny associated with dolls. Is the dioramas' attraction to do with puzzle solving? You can see the dioramas online (lovingly curated by Erin N. Bush, for instance) but nowhere is any 'solution' revealed, because they are still used in teaching. In a world of constant spoiler alerts, that's unusual. It's a silence of narrative that makes your or my first impressions as fresh as when the dioramas first appeared. It is also a silencing of narrative, which in a world of incessant 'story', allows other responses to be articulated, and standard ones to be frustrated: 'not knowing is killing me', says one irony-free post on a Reddit thread about the withholding of solutions. Responses include awareness of complication, in mixing categories of aesthetic pleasure, respect for the dead and what one might call the play of a death drive, condensed into 'morbidly cute'. 'I love miniatures. This is one of the most morbidly cute (if those words can even work together) things I've ever seen' (TheBestVirginia, 2015), says one post; 'I love tiny things and morbid things', says another, (TillyThyme 2015), adding 'the interactive aspect of the sight is so fun (fun? Is that the word...?)' Morbidly cute turns out to be a known category, describing for instance a lens offered by Snapchat in which two cartoon characters fire on you: 'If you make a motion to stop them, they die in a morbidly cute animation. It's essentially like an AR version of the game's boss battles, featuring you or someone in your video as the "boss"'. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/21/17146344/snapchat-snap-cuphead-lens-ar>.

'Cutely morbid' appears to have a little more traction, though again associated with outline representation—Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* is cited as a starting point in graphic fiction (Berlatsky 2008). But Glessner Lee's figures are—like us—three dimensional, and their human interest has been recently re-recognised. As Linda Cooley observes, 'In the past few

years, several women have produced new work about Glessner Lee and the Nutshell series, from Carol Guess's poetry collection, *Doll Studies: Forensics* to the play in progress, *Nutshell*, by C. Denby Swanson, to Susan Marks's 2017 film *Murder in a Nutshell: The Frances Glessner Lee Story*' (Cooley 2018). Marks thinks the significance of Glessner Lee's achievements has yet to be understood. As she puts it in the trailer for her film, 'People still don't get it—they still don't get what she's done'—and she plans a biographical film as a sequel. Carol Guess's poems about the Nutshells—a kind of ekphrasis—explore how they create unease and yet educate: reviewers have particularly liked her phrase 'tenderness in looking' to describe the power of attention the Nutshells create, reflect and require. Certainly, the Nutshells offer much to work with in relation to theories of the gaze. But you are also looking at death. The material surround in one sense explains a particular death; it also particularises it. Even the repetition—there are 18 Nutshells surviving of 20 that Glessner Lee made—instances more particularity than generality. Are they tied to forensics, to being a teaching tool to solve murder mysteries? What can they say about death in general? Freud thought that death was unrepresentable (even with some contradictions, as Liran Razinsky explains), and that perversely we want causality to distract from rather than focus on mortality: "our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causation of the death—accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray an effort to reduce death from a necessity to a chance event" (Carel, Havi, 2006 (173), quoting Freud SE 14:290; FS 9:50). The Nutshells exist precisely to model causation, and yet they exceed that function. Could they be a template for a way of looking at death with a sympathy for morbidity that forecloses the caricature of cute in favour of dispassionate sensitivity?

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