The Pickton File

By Stevie Cameron

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Stevie Cameron turns her renowned analytical eye from the "crooks in suits" of her previous books to the case of Vancouver's missing women and the man who has been charged with killing 27 of them, who if convicted will have the horrific distinction of being the worst serial killer in Canadian history.

It's a shocking story that may not be over anytime soon. When the police moved in on Pickton's famous residence, the "pig farm" of Port Coquitlam, in February 2002, the entire 14-acre area was declared a crime scene -- the largest one in Canadian history. Well over 150 investigators and forensics experts were required, including 102 anthropology students from across the country called in to sift through the entire farm, one shovelful of dirt at a time.

A woman who is considered by many to be this country's best investigative journalist, Cameron has been thinking about the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside since 1998, when the occasional newspaper story ran about families and friends of some of the 63 missing women agitating for action -- and being ignored by police and politicians. Robert William "Willie" Pickton has been on her mind since his arrest, that February five years ago, for the murders of two of the women, Mona Wilson and Sereena Abotsway, both drug-addicted prostitutes from the impoverished neighbourhood where all the missing women had connections.

Living half-time in Vancouver for the last five years, Stevie Cameron has come to know many of the people involved in this case, from families of the missing women to the lawyers involved on both sides. She writes not only with tireless investigative curiosity, but also with enormous compassion for the women who are gone and the ones who still struggle to ply their trade on the Downtown Eastside.

"We had no idea [in 2002] how massive the investigation would be. We had no notion that the police would sift every inch of dirt on the Pickton farm, a process that lasted from the spring of 2002 to late 2004. We did not foresee the broad publication ban that would prevent any word printed or broadcast of what was being said in court in case it influenced a potential juror. We couldn't know that there would be, by 2006, 27 charges of first-degree murder against Pickton and that the police would continue to investigate him on suspicion of many other deaths. And we didn't know that the police and other personnel involved in the case, under threat of ruined careers, were forbidden to talk to reporters. In blissful ignorance, all I could do was begin…"

--Excerpt from **The Pickton File**

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for Stevie Cameron:
"The finest investigative reporter in the land."
--Maclean's

About the Author
Stevie Cameron is the multi-award-winning author of four bestselling books, including **The Last Amigo**, **Blue Trust** and **On the Take**. She is a graduate of UBC and lived in Vancouver for several years. She heads up an Out of the Cold program, where food and shelter are provided to more than 250 homeless men and women in Toronto, where she now lives.

PROLOGUE

“No! Oh no–no!”

With a shriek of grief and shock, Charlotte Frey tore herself out of her seat in the courtroom and fled, followed by her adult son, Ricky Frey. They had been sitting quietly in the families’ section, listening to Crown prosecutor Derrill Prevett’s opening statement on the first day of the trial, when Charlotte suddenly realized that it was her Marnie he was describing. Or rather, what was left of Marnie–a jawbone with three teeth, recovered from a pile of sifted dirt.

As the day progressed, we learned that a few of Georgina Papin’s hand bones had been uncovered under the floor of the slaughterhouse, that Brenda Wolfe’s jawbone had turned up in a cistern beside the slaughterhouse, and that the severed heads, hands and feet of Andrea Joesbury and Sereena Abotsway had been discovered in plastic buckets in a workshop garage near Pickton’s trailer. For hours on end, police officers took the stand to describe blood and body parts, smells and filth and decay, dying pigs and one horror after another. The public recoiled and protested; newspapers and television backed off. Every media outlet warned about the unpleasant content of their stories; most buried them on back pages or cut them back to a few minutes on the nightly news.

The *Toronto Star*’s Rosie DiManno protested strongly. “This strikes me as unworthy,” she wrote at the end of the trial’s first week. “While newspaper editors make decisions of taste and merit every day, it is not the media’s job to protect the public–or victims’ families–from painful revelations, especially those exposed in open court as evidence.“

I made the same argument against evidentiary self-censorship to my own paper during the Paul Bernardo trial, which altered the journalism landscape on trial reporting. His victims lived and died with the horrors; the least we could do was not avert our eyes, or filter out repugnant details. We are not entitled, in my view, to an amelioration of wickedness, massaging facts for decency.

“Murder is always indecent. Some murders may be more grotesque in their execution than others. But a child starved to death, a teenager dismembered, an old woman raped and stabbed–these are no less hideous than prostitutes butchered and fed to the hogs. I won’t accept a hierarchy of evil in the slaying of human beings.”

I agreed with every word she wrote.

But she wasn't running the newsrooms of the country; nor was I. Two weeks after the trial began, it was a back-page story and only the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Vancouver Province*, the *Globe and Mail* and the Canadian Press were covering it on a daily basis. Most broadcasters and other media reported only when a story was too sensational to pass up. Even then, I often had to hunt to find them. But the row of white tents that went up in Begbie Square for the television and radio broadcasters is still there, waiting for the reporters to come back each time a big story breaks in this case. The tents won't come down until a verdict is reached.

There is still plenty to learn. The forensic evidence alone–how it was collected and handled, and what it revealed–has been riveting. The size of the investigation and how the farm became Canada's largest crime scene is just as interesting. We have learned that the police originally arrested three other people in February 2002, all of whom were Willie Pickton's friends. They included Pat Casanova, a friend who helped him for many years with the butchering of pigs; Lynn Ellingsen, a woman who had lived at the farm with him for a short time; and Dinah Taylor, another woman who had been a close friend. They were arrested before he was, but were eventually let go, and it is expected that they could be key witnesses in the trial. We have heard that some police officers had suspected Willie Pickton in the missing women case since 1997, the year thirteen women disappeared from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Twenty-seven others disappeared between 1998 and his arrest in 2002.

Over these early weeks, we watched the defence try to show that their client is slow. That he is easily manipulated. That others could have been involved. This last thrust is especially fascinating. It has become clear that part of the defence strategy is to look for the other guy–and the other guy they seem to have in mind is Dave Pickton. By late March, the defence lawyers had raised Dave's name many times. They got the task force officers to admit that Dave had been a suspect, and that he had been followed; indeed, they suggested, he is still a suspect. The witnesses agreed: yes, he is. One officer testified that in March 2005–three years after Willie's arrest–the police had Dave under surveillance for almost two weeks. We still haven't heard exactly why, but most people following the case can't understand how Dave could live and work on the same property as his brother for so many years and not be involved. Or at least, not know what his brother might have been up to. A few days later, however, this was corrected: Dave Pickton is no longer a suspect.

The parade of witnesses, most of them police officers, continues. They explain their work taking blood samples, testing fingerprints and matching DNA, interviewing people, trying to get to the bottom of this terrible story.

Back in 2003, I attended almost every day of the months-long preliminary hearing, which is held to determine if there is enough evidence to proceed to trial. That is where much of the evidence we are now hearing was first brought to the court's attention, but a strict publication ban meant we couldn't share anything we'd learned. The first of two trials is now well under way, but there are still legal restrictions on reporters. We cannot report any information that could influence the jury during the trial; to do so would risk a charge of criminal contempt of court. And we cannot report anything that is still under one of the many publication bans issued in this case. All we can report is the evidence the lawyers have put before the jury in this trial.

Given these restrictions, what I've tried to do in *The Pickton File* is tell you how I went about trying to capture the back story–from speaking to people on the Downtown Eastside to watching the investigation at the pig farm in Port Coquitlam. I took pictures wherever I went. *The Pickton File* is about how this story began, and how it developed into the largest criminal investigation in Canadian history.

One: Getting Started

It was early April 2002 and Linda McKnight, my literary agent, was on the phone with the news that the publisher of Knopf Canada wanted to know if I'd be interested in writing a book on the sensational Pickton serial murder case in British Columbia.

"Yes," I said.

"Not so fast," Linda said. She pointed out that it would mean a move from my usual areas–politics and white-collar crime–and that it was a story unfolding in Vancouver, not in Toronto, where I lived, which would mean moving to the west or frequent commutes.

Neither agent nor publisher could have known that the story of Robert William Pickton, a fifty-two-year-old pig farmer from Port Coquitlam, had been on my mind since his arrest two months earlier, on February 22, 2002, for the murders of Mona Wilson and Sereena Abotsway, two drug-addicted prostitutes from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Not only were three subsequent charges laid on April 3, 2002, for the murders of Jacqueline McDonell, Diane Rock and Heather Bottomley, but Pickton was also the prime suspect in the disappearance of dozens of other women from the same area. Every day since the arrest, I had been following the story in the *Vancouver Sun*'s online edition, and I knew this was not just a deeply disturbing case, but a fascinating and complex one.

My interest in the missing women went back further, to 1998, when I had begun to see the occasional newspaper story about the families and friends of the women, who were agitating for an investigation–and being ignored by police and politicians. At that time I was the editor of Elm Street, a national magazine I'd started in 1996, and in 1999 I asked Daniel Wood, a feature writer from Vancouver, to investigate the situation. Several weeks later, he turned in a brilliant piece–the first comprehensive national story on the missing women of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, which concluded that the police appeared to be doing nothing about the disappearances of more than sixty women.

When Linda called, I knew right away that this was a book I had to do, more than anything because it was an astonishing and powerful story. I had worked with homeless and poor people for many years at my church's Out of the Cold shelter program in Toronto, an experience that gave me the confidence to think I might be able to win the trust of the Downtown Eastside community. Then there was Vancouver itself. I had lived in the city for years, and had gone to the University of British Columbia. (In fact, I'd met my future husband, David Cameron, in a political science class at UBC in the early 1960s.) I knew the city well, and still had many relatives and friends there.

And though I knew people would ask why I was moving away from politics and white-collar crime, I was quite frankly sick of the same old frauds, the same corrupt politicians trying the same old scams, almost always successfully–and when they were caught and charged, they almost always emerged with very few penalties because of political interference and incompetent policing. What particularly concerned me was the bland assumption that there was a big difference between white-collar and blue-collar crime and that a slap on the wrist–a couple of m...

Users Review

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