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Book Reviews: Technical Books Section

...AN IMPORTANT BOOK ON MICROBIAL FORENSICS ...We can go on and on about the various aspects of the book but that won't serve the purpose as it is one book that has to be read, whatever small your interests are in the field. So we would just say that go ahead and go through this book, it will be a highly enriching experience for one and all...

Microbial Forensics, 1st Edition, by Roger G. Breeze, Bruce Budowle, Steven E. Schutzer. Hard Bound, 6" x 9".
Elsevier Academic Press, 30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA. Publication Date: 2005, 448 pages, ISBN-10: 0120884836; ISBN-13: 978-0120884834. Price £80.00, $129.95, € 125.00.

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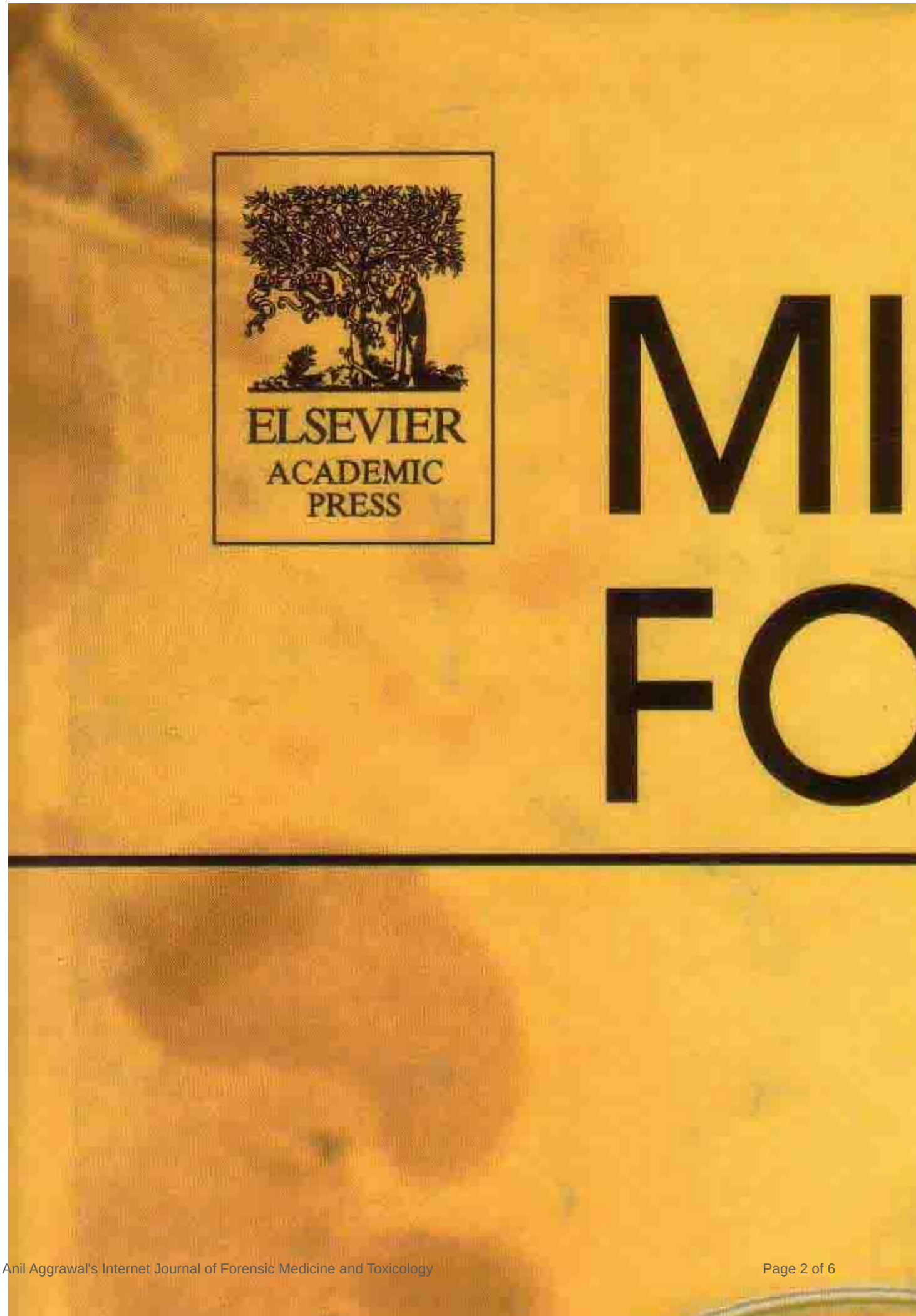
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Forensic microbiology is a new field. In fact it can be called the discipline of the 21st century. Although there have been reported cases of use of biological materials a weapons during war (see e.g. in book), it is only during the last decade or so that the field has gained some importance. The attack on the world trade center and the use of anthrax as a weapon in its aftermath has led to the recognition that forensic microbiology has to be developed into a highly scientific and accurate science, like DNA fingerprinting, very quickly so that it can be used as an effective means to take care o any such future attacks. But eth amount of progress made in this regard can be fudged by the fact that even today (almost five years after the anthrax letter attacks) many leading physicians whom we have come across believe that forensic microbiology is the other name for forensic entomology. When this is the state of affairs of medical professionals, what can one say about general public? To remove such myths and to develop and popularize forensic microbiology, there was an urgent need of a book on this subject. This much felt need has been met by this excellent book that will go a long way in telling everyone what is forensic microbiology.

Forensic microbiology was considered to be dealing with taking microbiological samples during autopsy (or before it, as the case might be) to find the microbial pathogens present in the body and to find their role, if any, in causing death. But the anthrax attacks of 2001 changed the whole scenario. That was the time when it was realized that finding pathogens in dead bodies (in natural diseases) was only a minor role of forensic microbiology. Its major role lied in investigating terrorist attack, or military conflicts, involving biological weapons. It is this role of forensic microbiology that has been given the maximum thrust in the book.

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Normally books are too basic (if written for beginners) or too advanced (when written for experts). In either case they are of use only for a limited audience. Microbial forensics is one piece of literature that does not suffer from either of these drawbacks. Call it the uniqueness of the subject (it being pretty recent with not much research having been conducted in it) or the ability of the authors (in putting together topics in correct detail so that they are relevant to everyone involved with the subject) or a combination of both, the end result is a product that wound not disappoint anyone as far as the content is concerned. It has got something for everyone. While the first half of the book, dealing mainly with the types of pathogens, i.e. bacteria and viruses, the epidemiologic and other investigations in an outbreak should be of interest to the beginners; the second half dealing with various topics like forensic genetic analysis, bioinformatics, population genetics etc. should suit the tastes of the experts. In addition to this there is also a chapter titled “Quality Management in forensic laboratories” that describes the methods of managing the quality of the laboratory so that its results can be admissible in the court of law. This, we felt, is one of the most important aspects in any forensic investigation. Any investigation, no matter how efficiently or meticulously done, comes to a naught if its results cannot be produced as evidence in the court of law. In such a scenario, spending large sums of money in the field won’t serve any purpose if the procedures are not standardized and results accurate. To complement this chapter there is the appendix which describes in details the organization and working of a forensic science lab so that it maintains the quality standards that are essential in any forensic investigation.

We can go on and on about the various aspects of the book but that won't serve the purpose as it is one book that has to be read, whatever small your interests are in the field. So we would just say that go ahead and go through this book, it will be a highly enriching experience for one and all.

Review by -*Puneet Setia and Avneesh Gupta*





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