

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO COLD CASES

By Deborah Colcutt

WHAT would you get if you crossed TV's *Cracker* and *Silent Witness* with comedy legend Victoria Wood? The answer is Dr Lindsey Fitzharris and her fascinating new series which puts six infamous deaths under the microscope. Bubbly and blonde, Fitzharris is as effervescent as the laboratory tests she oversees as her team try to unravel the lives and final moments of, among others, drug lord Pablo Escobar, escapologist Harry Houdini, US actress Brittany Murphy and Rolling Stones founder Brian Jones. If it sounds slightly gruesome, that's because it is.

But Fitzharris's boundless enthusiasm and genuine wide-eyed interest prevent her screen debut with the Smithsonian Channel's "Curious Life and Death Of..." series becoming macabre or mawkish.

Take tonight's episode, which looks at the death of notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar who died in a shootout in December 1993.

Fitzharris and her team secured privileged access to those on the ground in the hunt for Escobar, including Drug Enforcement Administration agents Steve Murphy and Javier Pena – now famed for their portrayal in the hit show *Narcos*.

They bring into focus this larger-than-life cocaine kingpin who, when he was finally gunned down on a rooftop, was an unkempt, overweight shadow of his former self.

But who fired the kill-shot? It comes down to who was there, what guns they had and where they were situated in the killing zone.

"A lot of people think that because of *Narcos* on Netflix and they might think there is nothing new to say about Pablo Escobar," said Fitzharris. "But we interviewed his son, who was the last person to speak to him before he was shot, allegedly by the Colombian police."

FITZHARRIS's ballistics expert oversees a gripping re-staging of the series of shots that took down Escobar, works out which weapons could have caused his wounds and re-enacts the shootings at a rifle range.

Escobar's son, Sebastián, believes his father, the seventh richest man on the planet, turned a gun on himself. But Fitzharris has another expert who disagrees and says the drug baron was too injured to shoot himself.

"He is adamant that his father would never have allowed himself to be taken prisoner. He believes that Pablo Escobar took that kill shot deliberately," says Fitzharris, who confides that Sebastián told her he would go with her verdict of how his father died.

It is easy to forget that Fitzharris is a novice to presenting given how effortlessly the 38-year-old American, who lives and works in the UK, seems to have taken to TV.

"I had to prove myself," she says. "We were given six episodes and so I hope there will be more and we can return as there is an endless list of people I want to investigate. I see myself much more as a storyteller than a historian these days. I love engaging the public with history."

The show, which is available to watch again, has a bit of everything: forensic science, true crime and history.

"We look at the curious deaths of people in the past,

Years on, certain notorious deaths remain surrounded by intrigue, from drug lord Pablo Escobar to Stones founder Brian Jones. Now historian Lindsey Fitzharris puts them under her microscope...



NOTORIOUS: Fitzharris investigates who really shot drug lord Pablo Escobar



"One of the episodes is reopening the case against Lizzie Borden, who allegedly took an axe in 1892 and killed her father and stepmother."

"She was actually acquitted in 1893 by an all-male jury who couldn't conceive that a woman would do this. As forensics advance, we can look at these cases under a completely new lens."

Chicago-born Fitzharris – a medical historian and author who has a PhD in the History of Science, Medicine and Technology from Oxford University – and her team carry out virtual autopsies and ballistic tests in their quest for the truth.

"I don't think we've reached the pinnacle of advancement in terms of what we can do to solve crimes," she says. "But it's getting harder to avoid police detection, which is a wonderful thing."

Another fascinating episode in the docu-series features the story of Houdini's death and how history has provided a different ending for the magician.

"A lot of people think that he drowned doing a trick in the water torture chamber," says Fitzharris. "A lot of movies came out after he died and they said that he died doing this trick. But it's a myth."

Fitzharris also re-ignites debate that still surrounds the mysterious death of Rolling Stones founder and guitarist Brian Jones. She sheds new light on the case of Jones, found dead aged 27 in the swimming pool of his East Sussex estate in July 1969 shortly after being kicked out of his band.

His death was ruled a drowning, officially labelled "death by misadventure" due to his history of drug and alcohol abuse, which had enlarged his liver and heart.

Jones's new manager at the time claimed that because the police made numerous mistakes in their investigation they had to drop a planned manslaughter charge against a builder who was working at Jones's house at the time and was in the pool when he died.

"I think out of all the episodes we shot for this series this is the most explosive case because of the conclusions we come to," says Fitzharris.

"We bring together so many lines of investigation, from the cops' misconduct, insight from (ex-Scotland Yard detective) Brian Hook and Dr Judy Melnick, one of America's top medical examiners."

"One of the most startling things is that Brian Jones's liver was so enlarged it was the size of a newborn baby, so would he have lived, long-term, if he'd survived that night?"

"Also several witnesses changed their testimony later on and there were people who said they weren't there but who were there. It was not necessarily a cover-up but it was misconduct on the part of the police."

"There was a lot of motivation, at that time, to say it was drug-related as a warning they didn't do the footwork they needed to do. I think it was a miscarriage of justice and I think it was foul play. There was even a deathbed confession."

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The series also investigates the death of US actress and

singer Brittany Murphy, who ostensibly died of pneumonia aged 32 in December 2009. It later emerged she was dosed up on various prescription and over-the-counter medicines. In a bizarre twist, her British-born husband died five months later of the same causes.

Both deaths sparked claim and counterclaim and controversy still surrounds them.

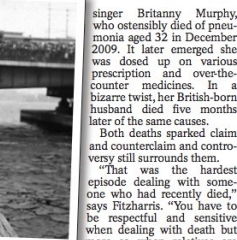
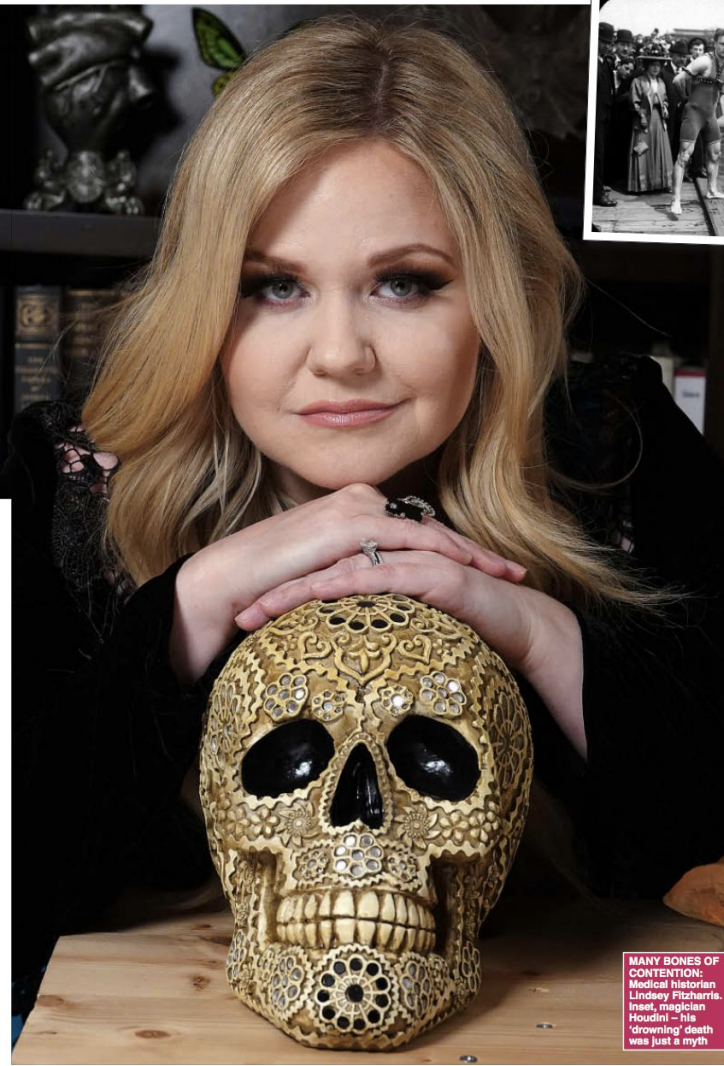
"That was the hardest episode dealing with someone who had recently died," says Fitzharris. "You have to be respectful and sensitive when dealing with death but more so when relatives are still alive."

The new series is tapping into a voracious public appetite for real-life crime, in the form of podcasts and dramatisations. So just what is our fascination with death?

"I think that in the past we interacted with the dead in a much more visceral way. Women especially cherished the dead, they dressed the dead body for burial and today we don't really interact with death in that way, it's all very clinical and medical, done behind closed doors," says Fitzharris.

"So our morbid curiosity has increased in that sense. Before anaesthetics, people would buy tickets to watch the life and death struggle of surgery play out before them."

"A lot of different cultures believe a person continues to occupy a space, they've not completely gone and you can have a relationship with them after they're dead. We don't have that. We need to assess the way we die and have the difficult conversations with loved ones before that moment."



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IT'S an obsession shared by Fitzharris, whose fascination with death started with her grandmother who effectively raised her and her brother after their parents divorced and her mother had to return to work full-time. Granddaughter and grandma went ghost-busting together.

"Unsurprisingly, I was a strange child. My grandmother, who's 90, took me ghost hunting in cemeteries in Chicago," says Fitzharris.

"She definitely instilled in me a morbid curiosity which came from a place of being fascinated with medical history. I would go and ask the cemetery guard endless questions about the people on the headstones. He thought I was a really weird kid!"

Fitzharris got married at the Tower of London – where else – because one of her friends is the Raven Master. Her wedding photos show her and husband Adrian Teal – one of the caricaturists involved in the *Spitting Image* reboot – posing outside the haunted White Tower.

"I don't believe in ghosts but the Beefeeders talk about echoes of the past, which is a lovely way of saying the Tower saw a lot of horror and sadness and there are people who pick up on it. I have been to the Tower 30 times, I love it and every time I go I learn something new."

An anglophile, Fitzharris plans to stay in Britain.

"Despite the Chicago accent, I've been here for 18 years and it's hard to relate back to America as my home now," she laughs.

"Besides, no one does gruesome like the Brits, especially the Victorians."

● *The Curious Life and Death Of...* is on Mondays at 8pm on Smithsonian Channel (repeats throughout the week)

MANY BONES OF CONFESSION: Medical historian Lindsey Fitzharris. Inset, magician Houdini – his 'drowning' death was just a myth



EXPLOSIVE: What was uncovered about Brian Jones's death in pool?



"What would you get if you crossed [British] TV's Cracker and Silent Witness with comedy legend Victoria Wood? The answer is Dr Lindsey Fitzharris and her fascinating new series which puts 6 infamous deaths under the microscope. Bubbly and blonde, Fitzharris is as effervescent as the laboratory tests she oversees as her team try to unravel the lives and final moments of, among others, drug lord Pablo Escobar, escapologist Harry Houdini, US Actress Brittany Murphy and Rolling Stones founder Brian Jones. If it sounds slightly gruesome, that's because it is. But Fitzharris' boundless enthusiasm and genuine wide-eyed interest prevent Smithsonian Channels' The Curious Life and Death Of series becoming macabre and mawkish." Express (UK)

The Curious Life & Death Of...



