

Book offers insight into detective's life

Joseph R. Thomas/CNS

While *Blue Blood*, at 562 pages, is sometimes burdensome and, on occasion, coarse and vulgar, it plays well in this period of infatuation with reality for it is stuffed with the sights, sounds and smells of police work in urban America, the specific setting being New York's battle-weary streets.

Written by Edward Conlon and published at \$26.95 by Riverhead Books, this part-memoir, part-history stands out from others in that Conlon not only writes from the inside — he is a detective in the city — but also writes with the skill one would expect of the Harvard graduate that he is.

Here and there, references to the writings of St. Augustine help put Conlon's life in perspective: an Irish-Catholic cop educated at a Catholic school (Regis) and coming from a line of cops (which explains the title), one of whom was corrupt and one, his father, having moved from the New York force to the FBI.

That *Blue Blood* is filled with the daily details of police work on patrol or as a member of various special squads is at once a strength and a weakness.

It's a weakness because the case-by-case, almost day-by-day account of partners worked with, drug deals monitored and informants cultivated while coping with stupefying regulations and contrary superiors is sometimes just plain tedious. But it's a strength because much police work is tedious: vertical patrols in housing projects, and special assignments such as sifting through tons of stinking muck at a landfill searching for body parts and identifiable artifacts following Sept. 11, 2001.

As for the occasional coarseness and vulgarity, big-city police are constantly dealing with coarseness and vulgarity: domestic violence, beatings, knifings, sex crimes, shootings, drug deals gone awry and

BookReview

Blue Blood
By Edward Conlon.
Riverhead Books,
(New York, 2004).
562 pp., \$26.95.

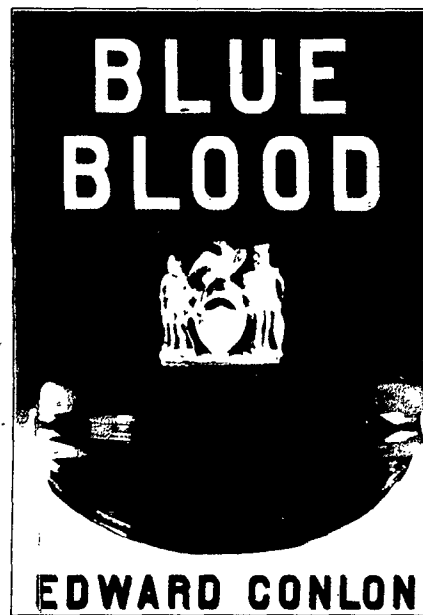
Reviewed by Joseph R. Thomas

people who make their living on the streets. Conlon's beat was the Bronx, not Manhattan's tony Upper East Side, so his story reflects the sordid realities of the area.

What keeps depression at bay for the reader are the human touches: concern for the well-being of the down-and-out and for vulnerable informants, and Conlon's view that each police intervention, regardless of whether it results in an arrest and conviction, somehow improves the life of a battered neighborhood.

And then there are the bizarre incidents that are exasperating at the time but become humorous tales in the telling, such as the zany scene that follows Conlon's attempt to corral an out-of-control cat that led an elderly apartment dweller to call police. As a teller of tales, Conlon is the equal of legendary Irish word-smiths, knowing when to embellish, when to wink and when to understate the case.

His book will have its strongest appeal, however, for those intrigued



with police procedures and jargon: how the police are trained, how they communicate, how they plan and execute a bust, how a warrant is obtained, how a "perp" is turned into an informant, how a prisoner is grilled, how a lineup is structured.

The tone is set in the opening paragraph dealing with Conlon's introductory patrol when a tipsy derelict in a foam cowboy hat calls out,

"There's a new sheriff in town."

There is also the high quality of much of the writing with Conlon recalling, for instance, how as a trainee he had to repeat a police mantra about courtesy and respect, reciting it "daily in gym, just as my high school track team would say a Hail Mary before a meet."

And here is Conlon shedding light on detective work: "More than anything else, what a detective does is talk — to witnesses, victims, perps — and talk them into talking; you chose your own words as you chose your own clothes."

Frequently enough, however, those words are lies designed to get a reluctant fish to bite. One wishes that Conlon, with his Jesuit training, would have addressed the obvious question posed by the traditional ethic that the end never justifies the means.

But then his book would have been even longer so that particular question is one of the few that Conlon doesn't answer.

Thomas, retired editor in chief of *The Christophers* and a former diocesan newspaper editor, is a frequent reviewer of books.

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