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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section

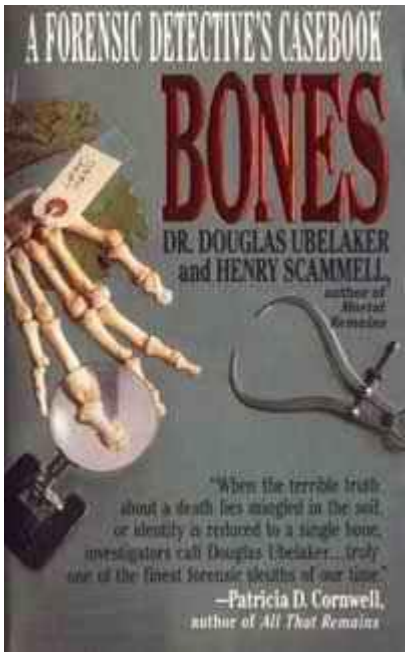
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BONES CAN TALK

Bones - A Forensic Detective's Case Book: *by* Dr. Douglas Ubelaker and Henry Scammell
M. Evans and Company, Inc., 216 East 49th St., New York, New York 10017; 350 Pages including 16 Black and White plates and a comprehensive glossary: ISBN 0-06-109145-6: Paperback edition: Price $5.99

(Click Cover to buy from Amazon)



One of the most effective and interesting ways to impart forensic teaching to the youngsters is through actual cases solved by a forensic expert. It is much better and easier for a youngster to

understand how a particular case was solved by, say, minutely noting the thick vegetation growth inside a skeleton, then by didactically teaching him the various time periods when such undergrowth occurs. The human mind, by its very nature understands things better - especially techniques of crime detection - when related in an anecdotal manner. Perhaps that is why Sherlock Holmes stories sell so well. One of the first forensic experts who used this technique successfully was the forensic giant Dr. Keith Simpson of Great Britain, who wrote the classical "*Forty Years of Murder*". It first appeared in 1978, when Simpson was 71 years old, and today even 12 years after his death (Dr. Keith Simpson died on 21 July, 1985), the book is selling well. Even earlier, in 1959, the old doyen of Forensic Medicine, Sir Sydney Smith wrote the highly popular "*Mostly Murder*", which also is doing well today. Famous cases of forensic experts have been published by professional writers too. The cases of Bernard Spilsbury were published by Douglas G. Browne and Tom Tullet under the name "*Bernard Spilsbury*", the cases of J.M. Cameroon by Tom Tullett under the name "*Clues to murder*", and the cases of Forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow by Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover under the name "*Witnesses from the Grave*". In some cases, the cases of one forensic expert have been written by another forensic expert. The notable example of this category is the book "*Autopsy*" by the famous British forensic pathologist Bernard Knight which gives the famous cases of another great forensic expert Milton Helpern.

View this book on Amazon

One of the interesting cases described in the book. In this case, roots were found growing in the skull, which revealed much information



Some highly successful and notable semi-autobiographical works of forensic experts in various disciplines are "*Unnatural Death- Confessions of a Forensic pathologist*" by Michael Baden M.D., "*Cause of Death*" by Cyril Wecht, "*The Evidence never lies*" by the blood stain pattern interpretation expert Herbert Leon McDonell, "*Dead Men do Tell Tales*" by the forensic anthropologist William R. Maples, Ph.D. and "*Memories of Murder*" by the finger print expert Tony Fletcher. The book under review falls under this category. Dr. Douglas Ubelaker, the author of this book is the curator of anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History at the legendary Smithsonian Institution. He is the regular consultant in forensic anthropology for the FBI laboratories in Washington, D.C. In the book under review, he gives interesting insights into some of his most interesting cases.

The moment one opens the book, one feels the flavor of the beautiful narrative of the author. The stories are told in such effective manner, that one feels as if he has actually been transported to the crime locale itself. Whether you are reading the Palmyra Island case off the coast of Hawaii, or the Goochland case in rural Virginia, you do feel on the spot as part and parcel of the investigating team. In the summer of 1974, two couples went to Palmyra Island, a small uninhabited atoll 1,000 miles south of Hawaii. The elder well-off couple Mac and Muff Graham were allegedly killed by the younger couple Buck Walker and his girl-friend. The girl friend was later acquitted. The author examined the skull of Muff Graham and came out with some interesting conclusions, which ultimately helped nab the killer. A relatively unknown feature the author describes is a peculiar flattened pattern of abrasion on the bones of the face, which is described as "coffin-wear". In the same case, the author tells us that external beveling (chipping of the bone) in the skull can be produced even in an entrance wound, if the entrance wound was a contact gun-shot wound. The classical teaching of course has been that external beveling is produced in an exit wound, and internal beveling in an entry wound. For these nuggets, the book becomes useful even for an experienced forensic expert.

(Click to enlarge)



Another interesting case is of a young woman of twenty from Massachusetts, who was last seen alive in mid-September 1977 and whose skull was brought 6 months later to the police by a man who claimed to have witnessed her murder in a dream. The author comes up with some startling conclusions in this case as well. Sometimes the evidence may be hair thin - literally! In the chapter entitled "Ones that almost got away", the author describes several of such personal cases. In one case the skeletons of a man and a woman were found in a wooded roadside area. The medical examiners could not find anything and handed over the skeleton to Ubelaker. Initially he also was stumped, but later he could find a hair thin cut on the bone of one of the fingers! This was a classical defence wound. on the basis of this important finding, an investigation was started.

The book is not without a fair quota of humor. At many places interesting humorous sidelights encountered in the life of a forensic anthropologist are given. Once, in 1985, some skeletal remains were discovered in grass beside an interstate highway. The vegetation had grown inside the

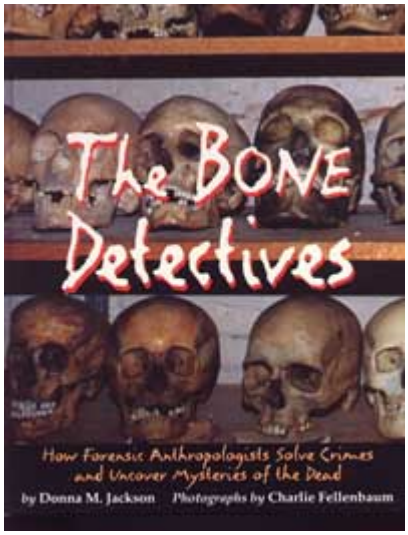
skeleton. The detectives thought it would be best to transport the skeleton along with the scene of crime itself, so as not to disturb the relationship of vegetation with the bones! It included bones, shreds of clothes, soil, plant life, root system and all- in two huge blocks. When the shipment arrived in Washington, Dr. Ubelaker received a phone call from the FBI laboratory and an excited colleague exclaimed over the phone, "you won't believe this one. Along with the bones, they (the detectives) have sent us a couple of acres of Massachusetts real estate"! Dr. Ubelaker went to the FBI lab and found that they had done the right thing. Transporting the skeleton along with the vegetation helped him to differentiate trauma which was the cause of death from the breakage that had occurred due to excessive growth of vegetation. The author informs us that when a root penetrates a bone, it keeps growing, and the expansion can ultimately break the bone into fragments, mimicking other forms of trauma. It would have been very difficult for him to differentiate between the two, had the skeleton not been transported along with the vegetation.

The book is enriched by 16 plates which give photographs of some interesting cases described in the book. In the end there is a useful glossary which can profitably be used even by the uninitiated. All in all a beautiful book which would be enjoyed not only by all persons engaged in forensic work but even by an average reader who wants to know the science behind crime detection. The author has revealed how bones can speak.

Purchase the book by clicking here

The Bone Detectives, 1st Edition, 1996 *by* Donna M. Jackson. Photographs by Charlie Fellenbaum Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020;48 Pages: ISBN 0-316-82935-8: Hardback: Price $16.95:

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I was quite pleased when this nice little book arrived by post. And I read it in one go. It is a highly pleasing book with lots and lots of photographs (appearing almost on every page). The book is on Forensic Anthropology, and is mainly targeted at younger generation. But the cases included in the book are quite interesting and even grown ups would find them illustrative and useful.

The book centers mainly around the real life cases of Dr. Michael Charney of the Forensic Science Laboratory at Colorado State University. The case which is given the widest coverage is the one in which some forty bones along with some other artifacts are recovered from the grounds of a Boy Scout camp near Farmington, Missouri. Other objects which were recovered were some strands of

hair, a pair of tattered blue jeans, pieces of a flowered shirt, remnants of a blue-and-white shopping bag and a metal button with Texwood written across it. The book then goes on to describe how cleverly the police pieces this information together to close in on a Thai woman Bun Chee Nyhuis.

How to measure the skull (one of the illustrative photographs appearing in the book)



Describing the whole deduction process would spoil the fun for most of the potential buyers, but consider this. The investigators discover that Texwood is a jean made exclusively in Hong-Kong. The company makes them exclusively for Asian people. So the investigators knew they are dealing with either an Asian person, or one who had contacts in Asia.

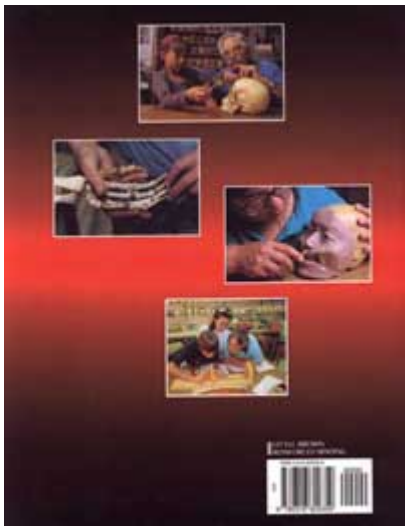
The blue-and-white shopping bag has an interesting logo on it, and the company which makes such bags tells the investigators that they started using this logo in 1979. So they know they are dealing with a person who disappeared after 1979 and not before that.

How to measure the thigh bone (another interesting photograph from the book)



Dr. Charney examines the skull, and makes out it belongs to an Asian woman. He calculates the height of that woman from one of the bones. It comes to about 5 feet. He is also able to give an idea about the weight of the woman. She is not very heavy. An examination of blue jeans recovered along with the bones also seems to corroborate this finding. The girth of the jeans gives the investigators some idea about the weight of the woman, while the length of jeans seems to corroborate the height deduced by Dr. Charney.

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Dr. Charney delivers the final blow with a very ingenious method. And this ultimately leads to the discovery of the identity of the woman. Her husband Richard Nyhuis is caught for her murder and is prosecuted. The jury relies on the information supplied by the bones. So the book strengthens our belief in the fact that "Dead do tell tales".

The book describes not just one but several such cases. Some of the other cases finding mention in this book are Lucy's legacy, the case of the iceman, the case of General Custer and the case of Jesse James. It is full of color photographs which persons of younger generation would find very useful.

And it tells not just about bones but about other things also. For instance, we learn during the course of reading this book that Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) is a high-speed computer system that stores fingerprint images and would immediately match any suspect fingerprint within a matter of seconds. In fact, in one case, AFIS helped catch a criminal thirty years after he committed a crime.

This book can be recommended heartily for younger generation trying to learn about the exciting world of forensic osteology or forensic anthropology. Even experts would enjoy leafing through the pages, and going through the lovely photographs.

Purchase the book by clicking here

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