ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 6, NO. 2
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_006_no_002/others/interview/1/quigley.html

Interview with Christine Quigley

Christine Quigley



Christine Quigley has been studying death since 1986, when she graduated from the University of Connecticut with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic design. She spent the next sixteen years working for Georgetown University Press in various capacities, including marketing manager, office manager, and business manager. During that time, she

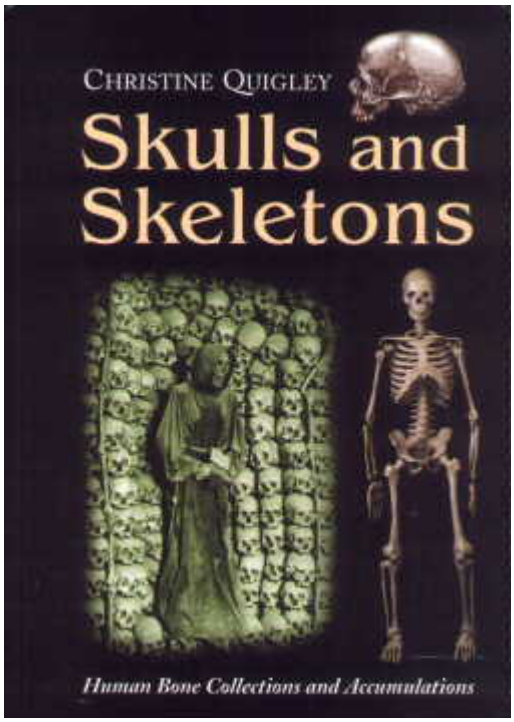
researched and wrote several books, all published by McFarland & Co.: *Death Dictionary: Over 5,500 Clinical, Legal, Literary and Vernacular Terms* (1994), *The Corpse: A History* (1996), *Modern Mummies: The Preservation of the Human Body in the Twentieth Century* (1998), and *Skulls and Skeletons: Collections and Accumulations of Human Skeletal Remains* (2001).

After the "bones" book, Chris decided to focus on the living, albeit those with body anomalies. *Conjoined Twins: An Historical, Biological and Ethical Issues Encyclopedia* was published in 2003. The research was conducted in part at the Mütter Museum thanks to a Francis Clark Wood Institute Fellowship from the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. The study incorporates biography, medicine, sociology, psychology, law, ethics, theater, and literature, and put her back in touch with medical writers, carnival sideshow afficionados, and museum curators whose acquaintances she had made relative to corpses, mummies, and bones. All of Chris's books have focused on the human body, its dissolution and anomalies. Despite the fact that she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1991, she has no desire to write about her own or others' disease process. Chris finds it much more compelling and satisfying to write about the dead.

In 2003, she transferred to a position in Georgetown University 's Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, where she awards graduate degrees, orders diplomas, and accepts master's theses and doctoral dissertations. The move freed her up to pursue her own graduate degree, a Master of Arts in Georgetown 's Communication, Culture & Technology program (http://cct.georgetown.edu/). Her recent research is a visual analysis of the full-body plastinates in Gunther von Hagens' BodyWorlds exhibitions. She also reviews books on the website she established in 2003 (www.booksaboutbodies.com) and for *Morbid Curiosity* (www.charnel.com/automatism/morbid.html)and *Fortean Times* (www.forteantimes.com). And she is a longstanding member of the Association for Gravestone Studies (www.gravestonestudies.org) and the Paleopathology Society (www.paleopathology.org/).

We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" approached her for an online interview and she graciously agreed. The interview was conducted by the editor-in-chief Dr. Anil Aggrawal for well over two months. Some excerpts....)

Skulls and Skeletons, the best selling book by Quigley. Click cover to read its review



Q. How were you attracted to skeletons? This is not a common hobby, especially with females.

A. It was Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* that sparked my morbid interest. A bestseller in the 1970s, the book is best known for bringing to light a number of financial practices common in the funeral industry, a revelation that led to changes mandated by the F.T.C. But it wasn't the economic issues that drew my attention. It was the chapter about what takes place behind the closed door of the embalming room. The usual course of posthumous events involves trocars, eyecaps, and other tools and products it never dawned on me to imagine. I read with incredulity and sought out other books about funeral directing, bereavement, famous funerals. Having long held an interest in ancient Egyptian mummies, I filled in the gaps between past and present by reading about the Greek way of death, death and the Victorians, and the history of American funeral directing. From there, I branched out into other death-related topics like cannibalism, human sacrifice, reincarnation, vampires, cemeteries, execution, suicide, war, survival stories, forensic anthropology, assassination, and autopsy.

I cannot honestly remember whether it was my obsessive-compulsive personality or whether I had a purpose in mind when I began collecting all the words I came across in my readings. Jotting down the subtle differences between grief, bereavement, and mourning. Listing all the slang synonyms for murder. Realizing that I was not a necrophile, but a thanatophile. Averaging a book every other day, in a couple of years I had compiled more than 1,000 sources. The resulting *Death Dictionary,* a slim black volume containing 5,500 words defined and cross-referenced-was published by McFarland & Co. in 1994.

...I had determined from my reading that I liked the "juicier" subjects like preservation and decay over the tame topics like death education and grief counseling or abstract issues like capital punishment and euthanasia. I organized the second book into six parts, each with an appropriate photograph, and covered everything from cryonic suspension to necrophilia...

Two years later, another book: *The Corpse: A History.* I had determined from my reading that I liked the "juicier" subjects like preservation and decay over the tame topics like death education and

grief counseling or abstract issues like capital punishment and euthanasia. I organized the second book into six parts, each with an appropriate photograph, and covered everything from cryonic suspension to necrophilia. The research confirmed that to exhumed bodies, murder victims, organ donors, and cremated remains, I prefer mummies. Embalmed pharaohs, bog bodies, incorruptible saints-but there has been much written about each. By limiting my third book to the preservation of the human body in the twentieth century, I found a niche that still included contemporary interpretations of ancient Egyptian embalming, a miraculously preserved saint or two, and other novelties like freeze-drying. Not to mention the frozen bodies of climbers rolling out from under glaciers decades after taking those missteps. Thus *Modern Mummies* was born and published in 1998, complete with more than fifty photographs.

Then I took a wrong turn. Thinking I wanted to write about the living, I took up the subject of amputees. Lots of inspiring stories, but lots of twisted tales, too. A subculture of "devotees." The occasional self-amputee. And where to draw the line? Loss of an entire limb, a hand, a finger? Too much blood. Instead I returned to the dead and wrote about their bones. Lots of them. In heaps and piles and mass graves and museum collections and mosaics and reliquaries. Dry, clattering bones-less juicy even than mummies, but rich with potential for research, crime-solving, decorating. I used words like "ossuary" and "charnel house" that I had defined in *Death Dictionary.* The results was *Skulls and Skeletons,* published in 2001.

File photo of Christine Quigley in her earlier days (from our archives)



Q. Tell us something about your early life, and education.

A. I am often asked where my interest in death stemmed from. Sometimes I remember back to the highlights of my adolescence: visits to Dickson Mounds Indian burial ground, the Koster archaeological dig, the King Tut exhibit. But were these destinations the cause or already the effect? Was the sight of a weeping family next to the bloody body of their just-struck dog a formative experience for me? Did a childhood trek through Mark Twain's cave in Hannibal, Missouri, translate to an interest in crypts? Can a scene from the first horror movie I ever saw, in which a hand reaches up through the ground, have led to curiosity about premature burial? I can remember the moment I became aware of my own mortality: I was afraid to zip up my sleeping bag because that might prevent me from escaping in a fire. Then there's Halloween, which has always been my favorite holiday (and not just for the chocolate). When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I consistently answered, "A writer." The follow-up "About what?" came later. And "Why death?" may never be answered to everyone's satisfaction, but this is the best I can do.

Q. Which is the most astounding collection you have seen? What did you like about it exactly?

A. I found the Hamann-Todd Osteological Collection housed at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (http://www.cmnh.org/collections/hamann-todd.html) to be most extraordinary. Over the last several decades, the collection has been completely inventoried and relabeled and is now stored in a safe, environmentally-controlled facility. Radiographs have been microfilmed and records have been computerized, with the originals transferred to acid-free files. The bones, with the exception of half the ribs, were recently degreased. It is one of the largest collections (more than 3,000 human skeletons) and includes a remarkable amount of documentation.

...I made a number of "field trips" during research for Skulls and Skeletons. My visit to the San Diego Museum of Man, which curates the Stanford-Meyer Osteopathology Collection, coincided with an exhibit of mummies, which also interested me, and allowed me to see painted skulls from Hallstatt in person...

Q. How many collections around the world have you seen? Tell us something about them.

A. I made a number of "field trips" during research for *Skulls and Skeletons.* My visit to the San Diego Museum of Man (http://www.museumofman.org/), which curates the Stanford-Meyer Osteopathology Collection, coincided with an exhibit of mummies, which also interested me, and allowed me to see painted skulls from Hallstatt in person. It was remembering an earlier visit to the National Museum of Health and Medicine (http://nmhm.washingtondc.museum/), when I was shown a drawer full of the skeletal hands of Civil War soldiers, that sparked the bones book. At the National Museum of Natural History, I was shown the Robert J. Terry Anatomical Skeletal Collection (http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/cm/terry.htm), which contains some 1,700 documented human remains and has been the source of many studies. Visiting the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory at the University of Florida (http://web.anthro.ufl.edu/c.a.poundlab/poundlab.htm) gave me the forensic perspective of bones as evidence.

Q. What would you suggest to a young forensic pathologist/anthropologist who wanted to start a new collection?

A. I'm not sure I'm qualified to give advice in this regard and would only suggest that in today's politically correct world, a budding anthropologist would do best to get institutional backing for a new collection rather than attempt to amass a collection as an individual subject to legal restrictions and public misunderstanding. I don't own any human remains myself, although I was once offered curatorship of a carnival mummy!

Q. Which big and interesting collections around the world you have not seen, but would like to see?

...Don't miss the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, which was established in the 1850s and curates the Hyrtl Skull Collection and countless other prize medical specimens. I would also recommend the incomparable walk through the catacombs in Paris...

A. To my great regret, I am afraid that I am not ambulatory enough to tour two great stops on the "morbid map": One is the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo, Sicily, which contain galleries of mummified monks and townspeople, including the extraordinarily preserved body of little Rosalia Lombardo. The other is the Sedlec ossuary near Kutna Hora in the Czech Republic (http://www.kostnice.cz/), which is a church decorated with human bones, including a chandelier that contains every bone in the human body.

Q. If a person had the time and money to see just three collections, which ones would you suggest and why?

A. Don't miss the Mütter Museum (http://www.collphyphil.org/muttpg1.shtml) in Philadelphia, which was established in the 1850s and curates the Hyrtl Skull Collection and countless other prize medical specimens. I would also recommend the incomparable walk through the catacombs in Paris, in which the skulls and longbones of six million people are stacked along passages in a former gypsum quarry. And although I have yet to visit myself, I would suggest the museums of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, which include the Hunterian Museum and the Wellcome Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, and are of course rich with anatomical history and associations with anatomist John Hunter.

Chris Quigley can be approached via E-mail at quigley@georgetown.edu.

Interviews : Collective Index Interviews in our sister publication : Collective Index

IMPORTANT NOTE: ALL MATERIAL APPEARING IN THIS ONLINE JOURNAL ARE COPYRIGHTED BY "ANIL AGGRAWAL'S INTERNET JOURNAL OF FORENSIC MEDICINE AND TOXICOLOGY" AND MAY NOT BE REPOSTED, REPRINTED OR OTHERWISE USED IN ANY MANNER WITHOUT THE WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE WEBMASTER