



# Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930

*John Harley Warner , James M. Edmonson*

Download now

Read Online ➞

# Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930

John Harley Warner , James M. Edmonson

**Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930** John Harley Warner , James M. Edmonson

**"Cadavers, camera, action!"** (*The New York Times Book Review*). From the advent of photography in the 19th and into the 20th century, medical students, often in secrecy, took photographs of themselves with the cadavers that they dissected: their first patients. Featuring 138 of these historic photographs and illuminating essays by two experts on the subject, *Dissection* reveals a startling piece of American history. Sherwin Nuland, MD, said this is "a truly unique and important book [that] documents a period in medical education in a way that is matched by no other existing contribution." And **Mary Roach said Dissection "is the most extraordinary book I have ever seen--the perfect coffee table book for all the households where I'd most like to be invited for coffee."**

## Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930 Details

Date : Published May 19th 2009 by Blast Books (first published May 1st 2009)

ISBN : 9780922233342

Author : John Harley Warner , James M. Edmonson

Format : Hardcover 208 pages

Genre : Art, Photography, Nonfiction, History, Health, Medicine, Science, Death

 [Download Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in America ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in Ameri ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930** John Harley Warner , James M. Edmonson

---

# **From Reader Review Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine 1880-1930 for online ebook**

## **Rob Dhillon says**

...from the grand tradition...

---

## **Suzanna says**

Very interesting. I had read about much of the history of cadavers/dissection in "Body of Work" and to a lesser extent in the more journalistic/popular work "Stiff: Lives of Human Cadavers," but the photographs in this book are powerful and speak volumes while inviting questions and thoughtful commentary. The introductory essay and notes accompanying the images are both thought-provoking and paradoxically imbued with respect in juxtaposition with the photographs, many of which were unsettling to me despite my personal experience in morgues and embalming rooms.

---

## **Rebecca says**

Excellent book illuminating the pictorial documentation of the American dissection in medical and other schools. I was depressed (but not surprised) to see that in the early schools African American cadavers (as a result of grave-procuring and poor houses) were the dominant cadavers. It was shocking (but not surprising) to find that the photographers who documented these scenes were often the same photographers who photographed lynching scenes. It is a reminder for the continued need for solemn and appreciative regard that I had for the individual who donated his body as my medical school cadaver and taught us anatomy--especially when you see how little the individuals were treated in death by these early medical and allopathic students.

---

## **Deana says**

Really fascinating photos, and a little disturbing. An interesting look at a part of medical history.

---

## **Cyndi says**

Great images. I wish there had been more of the written word.

---

## **Wendy says**

WANT!!

---

**dejah\_thoris says**

Macabre yet beautiful in a way. Born from an exhibition of dissection photos, this book shows the reader the wide range of subject matter in a short lived tradition from 1900-1950 of documenting the dissection laboratory. The text does a great job of explaining why these images should be seen more as "right of passage" documents than as students merely showcasing their black humor. It also adds a few nuances of race and gender to consider too. Definitely worth reading.

---

**Lisa says**

Very macabre. Not a great lunchtime read, but fascinating. Highly recommend.

---

**Karrie Stewart says**

An amazing part of forgotten medical history is found in this book. I had no idea resurrectionists were still around into the 1900's. A must read for anyone in the medical field and not for people who get totally grossed out.

---

**P. says**

The most interesting part about this was the saddest part, which is the criminalization of obtaining bodies for medical colleges, making many poor people of color whose bodies were unclaimed become the unwitting donations for medical students, who then were often racists, despite evidence at their fingertips that they were dissecting a human being. as a collection of photographs, the curator/author can't go very far into this story, although he definitely is aware of it and writes about it, but it is the story that lingers behind these social records and deserves its own book. The photographs themselves, being so similar, become monotonous after a while.

---

**dianne says**

*"The only subjects procured for dissection are the productions of Africa, and if those characters are the only subjects of dissection, surely no person can object."*

(page 16) said by a late 18th C or early 19th C New Yorker.

This is an important collection of American medical school photography. Important, i think, because it says so much, long before and after the words, about the brief and bought off story of this profession in this country's short life. This would be a perfect accompaniment to the second part of "Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers" by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. But...that's another book.

The pomposity on many of these (almost all) white boy faces as they are photographed flaying the mostly African American bodies is impossible to miss. The camaraderie in their homogeneity and frequent racism was beyond discomfiting, even 'for the time' it was nauseating. The odd occasional inclusion of an uncomfortable looking Black staff member (janitors, etc.) who, if named at all, were never recognized as having a surname - as all the students did (of course).

Is the cadaver + **us** a communal rite of passage? Is this why there are so many of these photos from the 19th and early 20th C?

This florid, borderline (and sometimes outright) illegal activity (especially in the early years of resurrectionists) seems all the more disgusting knowing that these "medical men" had nothing to offer. It was more dangerous to be "treated" by a doctor in 1890 than staying home with a washcloth and a cold bath. And maybe some snake-oil?

Perhaps, because 19th and early 20th century doctors could not do much but describe disease, it would be important for them to know anatomy?

They arrive with their bag - trephine? Check. bleeding equipment? Check. Ether? Check...(?can anyone think of anything else?) If you were real lucky, maybe a willingness to listen, or to hold your hand. Still, mom is better at that.

Oh yeah! They also needed anatomy to properly define their "therapeutic" interventions:  
"Then i placed 3 large, healthy leeches on her left sternocleidomastoid. Don't know why. Just did."

I started med school when there were still few women in medicine. In my class of 120 there were 19 women. An older woman gynecologist told me that on her first day of gross anatomy (dissection), she had put her designated coat on, put her hand in the pocket and realized there was something flesh in there. Without removing it (knowing she was being watched as one of 2 women in her class) she figured out that it was a set of male genitalia. Thinking fast, she climbed onto the nearest chair, and then an open table; reached into her pocket, pulled out the fresh set, held them up as high as she could and yelled "someone here must have lost these?!"

Needless to say, she won that hand - but those years were full of #METOOs for all of us. That was funny in retrospect, only because she thought so quickly, but most situations were terrifying; there was always a male fellow student, resident, attending, faculty - poised to make your already almost impossible life hell.

And i think that is what grates most about these photos - these smirking frauds, ready to charge \$ for their uselessness. Grrrr. Perhaps i project a wee bit too much, you might say? Perhaps....Nah.

There are women students photographed from the women's med school in Philadelphia. They are dressed, usually for Sunday School - it's noted that they strived to prove that they could maintain their femininity despite undergoing "this" (what? unladylike?) training.

The men, often in bowlers and bowties, vests and healthy mustaches - leaning jauntily against the table that holds the half-dissected human, the same leaning pose i assume they'll take at the bar in a few hours after they finish with the photographer. No dearth of self aggrandizement. But we know. We know none of them knew anything more than they learned from this body they've (perhaps) stolen, and are now (perhaps) mocking. This was a time when doctors were offended at Ignaz Semmelweis' suggestion that they wash their hands between patients in the maternity ward, after he noted that 3 times as many new mothers died in the care of doctors than midwives. Their disgusting, gloveless, *streptococcus pyogenes* covered hands were not a problem! (They put him in an asylum instead. Guards beat him up and he died at 47 - but that's a different

book).

Many of these photos seem a bit like hazing - with both the cadaver and the group of med students as new recruits to a silly society that they're, nonetheless proud of. But the few photos in which the face is undissected, the person that was - is totally recognizable - seem unforgivable. Not only is this dissing the gift of the body, but dissing the identity of the soul who once resided there. Cadaver malpractice. Oh yeah - but the bodies were primarily stolen then, and African American.

Recourse unavailable.

*"The only subjects procured for dissection are the productions of Africa, and if those characters are the only subjects of dissection, surely no person can object."*

---

### **Martin Perez says**

The collection of photographs gathered here by Warner are truly spectacular. For an aspiring doctor, this book shows insight into the world of human body dissection, the true rite of passage for any doctor. The sections included in the book are both intriguing and surprising. I particularly enjoyed the "Dark Humor" section of the book, which includes humorous pictures of the cadavers "doing things", which is also a thought-creator in regards to the evolution of Medical Ethics and the respect given to the corpses.

---

### **ANIOTUS Marcus Longmuir says**

A matter-of-fact collection of images reveals much about the early use of photography as well as race, gender, and age issues as related to medical practice in the USA. The writing is concise and observant and hints at psychological and social influences on the creation of these images.

The inclusion of numerous janitorial staff in the images accentuates the social questions raised by the fact that the majority of cadavers were of African descent, and mostly stolen, especially when it is known that some of these support staff were past-slaves.

The images also have the intrigue of being entirely staged but at the same time attempting to suggest how the students do their work. The choice to write comments on the actual dissection table in chalk, or for the socks to be emblazoned with the states from which the students came originally, or other identifying comments shows that these were to be personal memories. Snapshots of the early work. The introductions to the understanding of the human body and the interior workings of those bodies are given extended life after death by revealing all to the viewer of the image as well as to the students.

---

### **Maria Skyllas says**

Amazing collection of photographs of medical students posing with the cadavers that they dissected. Very instructive and entertaining essays on the topic. It was interesting to learn how the medical schools provided themselves with cadavers to dissect, how racism affected this industry, and how legislation on the matter

changed throughout history.

---

## **Trina says**

(I actually feel guilty putting this towards my book challenge because it was mostly pictures. Ah, well...)

So this is an interesting book to have for fans of the macabre. As the title makes pretty clear, it is pictures of late 19th and early 20th century dissections, which was actually quite the controversial practice, given the habit of the anatomists of stealing bodies at will. While it is not a full history of the practice, it is a lovely companion book and also a great way to make everyone think you're kinda weird.

So a double win, in my books.

---