



No Bone Unturned: The Adventures of a Top Smithsonian Forensic Scientist and the Legal Battle for America's Oldest Skeletons

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When he's not at a notorious disaster, Doug Owsley is entering tombs and crypts, unwrapping mummies, or climbing into caves to unlock the secrets of bones.

In *No Bone Unturned*, investigative journalist Jeff Benedict not only unveils a compelling portrait of the man behind America's most notorious cases but also gives us a fascinating look inside the world of forensic science as seen through the eyes of a leading specialist.

Doug Owsley's extraordinary talent has put his phone number on speed dial for federal agencies, from the FBI to the CIA and the State Department. When the Branch Davidian compound in Waco caught fire, when a terrorist-flown plane crashed into the Pentagon, and when mass graves were uncovered in Croatia, the authorities called Owsley. Through cutting-edge science, instinctive artistry, and dogged tenacity, Owsley painstakingly rebuilds the skeleton, and helps identify it and determine the cause of death.

A curator for the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, Doug Owsley has handled over ten thousand human skeletons, more than anyone else in America. He has worked with America's historic skeletons, from, colonial Jamestown burials to Plains Indians to Civil War soldiers to skeletons tens of thousands of years old.

That includes the Kennewick Man, a 9,600-year-old human skeleton found in shallow water along the banks of Washington State's Columbia River. It was a skeleton that would turn Owsley's life upside down.

Days before Owsley was scheduled to begin studying the skeleton, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers seized it and announced they would repatriate Kennewick Man, burying his bones on the land of the Native American tribes who claimed him. Along with seven of America's leading scientists, Owsley sued the U.S. government over custody. At stake was a wide body of knowledge about our past and our history that would be lost forever if the bones were reburied. For six years, Owsley fought a legal and political battle that put everything at risk, jeopardizing his career and his reputation.

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Zee Schaefer says

Insanely intriguing book. Owsley is a true hero here. I had no idea about the legal battle behind the Kennewick Man skeleton, and I'm flabbergasted to have read what transpired. I'm both pissed off and in awe. Amazing book.

Mare Kinley says

Fascinating information about possibly the most renowned forensic archaeologist (or is it anthropologist) in the history of this country or not the world.

Doug Owsley worked on identifying bodies in Waco, Texas, the aftermath of the 9/11 Pentagon attack, and countless others. He also specialized in the ancient remains of Native Americans which led to the central story of this text. When bones from a 9,000 year old skeleton are discovered on government land, Owsley is called in and determines that these remains are not, in fact, "culturally related" to any current Native American groups and wages a legal battle to stop them from being repatriated to these tribes thereby precluding any information that could be gathered from in-depth study.

All these stories are skillfully woven into a very readable narrative that is fascinating, and somehow, actually suspenseful.

Good job.

Sophiene says

Very interesting read. I would absolutely recommend this.

Gretchen says

I LOVED this book. I remember when the Kennewick man was first found and I remember my frustration when I heard how the government was kicking the scientists around with regards to studying him. A 9,800 year old nearly complete skeleton was, in my mind, far too rare and valuable NOT to study! while the author was clearly working with Doug Owsley (the real life Smithsonian forensic anthropologist that it seems Temperance 'Bones' Brennan was based on in both the Kathy Reiches novels and the TV show) he laid out their case so clearly and used so many scholarly works to write the book that bias cannot be held against him.

99 times out of 100 I am on the side of any Native American tribe in its dealings with the US government.

This is the rare case that is the exception. The Tribes were 100% wrong, in my opinion. Thank goodness that the judge agreed and our understanding of ancient humans in North America and the migration patterns they followed.

Bruce McNair says

Doug Owsley was a curator for the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. He had studied thousands of human skeletons, including those at the Branch Davidian compound at Waco Texas, many ancient skeletons found around the US, and many of the victims of the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. However, a 9,000 year old mummified skeleton found in Washington state threatened his career and his scientific field. The book is dominated by the long-running court case that ensued, which pitted a group of scientists, including Owsley, against the US Government, during which the scientists fought for their right to study ancient human remains. The court case embodies the tension between science and politics, which science often loses due to a lack of assertiveness from scientists. This is something that is reflected in modern politics, where the rise of conservatism and “fake news” has sought to subvert the role of science.

For a non-fiction book, I found this riveting reading. I gave it 4 stars out of 5.

Ellee says

I enjoy both books and shows about forensics. I love that small details mean something specific and using multiple details can winnow out potential scenarios into fewer more probable ones. Disproven theories discarded - but potentially reviewed if new evidence points to them again. :) This particular book is more about the cultural issues around forensic anthropology and the Kennewick Man case in particular rather than the methods. I suspected this would be the case since the book was shelved with others about Washington state rather than true crime or medical examinations. The book is excellent. It was very fast-paced and I read it in one sitting (about 3 hours start to finish).

The book also covers Doug Owsley's (the main forensic anthropologist featured) examination and identification of the bodies removed from the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, TX and other cases he was involved with. I know that it isn't work that I could do day to day. The same way that I'm pretty sure I couldn't be an ER nurse or an EMT. However, the author, Jeff Benedict, portrays Owsley's dogged determination to go on, to do everything possible - as scientifically as possible - with humanity. It's not that he's unaffected by the remains he's called to identify - it's that he's helping people: victims' families, law enforcement officials, ambassadors, and post-Communist peace in Europe. He's helping people with the skills he's got and pulling through the difficult times is part of that. I also like that the author acknowledges Owsley's assistants by name. They probably do a LOT of work to keep up with Owsley & to keep him up with requests, and other duties that he's got at the Smithsonian.

Anyway, I highly recommend this book to readers with interests in forensic anthropology and/or Native American rights in modern-day United States (not saying that this necessarily portrays all sides of that particular issue, but I think it's a valuable POV to hear about).

Robin says

This book is about a topic that is controversial in so many aspects. Kennewick Man.

If you don't know who Kennewick Man is, here's some basic background information that you could probably find just by googling him:

Kennewick Man turned up on the banks of the Columbia River on July 28, 1996. The police gave him to the county coroner, Floyd Johnson, who promptly had James Chatters, a specialist in human remains. James Chatters took one look at the skeleton and noted that it had a distinctly european look to it. However, dating was indeterminable, so he had a bit of the skeleton sent off for radio-carbon dating. The information that came back read that the skeleton was 9,800 years old.

This alone, and the fact that it was found on ancestral land for the tribe, caused the Umatilla and a few other local area tribes to claim that the skeleton was theirs and that it should be repatriated immediately. The battle between scientists who believe that the skeleton is too old to be claimed by an individual tribe, and who would like to study it more closely in order to figure out where the indigenous people of the americas came from and between the native american tribes who believe their belief system is being challenged, has lead Kennewick Man to be one of the most famous and ancient findings in the history of the United States.

As far as this specific text goes, it follows one physical anthropologist, Doug Owsley through his life right before, and during the trial period. It also gives some background and childhood history on Owsley. While this makes the book incredibly fascinating, it also makes it so that when you hear about what the indian tribes are trying to do, and what the Army Corps of Engineers does in response to the entire thing, highly irritating. It is well written, and that makes you feel it so much more.

I highly recommend it. I also highly recommend this book to people who have never studied any anthropology before and want to learn about it with real world case studies.

Maureen says

Even though I m intrigued with forensics, I wondered if my unscientific mind could follow this book. What a pleasant surprise. Well written, held my attention, interesting facts made for a great read. One downside was too much info about trial. I just skipped over that but was still able to follow everything. Great job on research and writing !!!!

Lindsay says

Well, I wrote a review and then it didn't go through and got deleted.

Anyway, I loved this book. I got extremely wrapped up in the tension of the case, I don't know how the people that lived it could function. It was extremely hard to stop reading at any given point. And honestly, I wish it was longer... I could have even read the mundane day to day stuff for Doug's job at the Smithsonian and have been happy with that too.

No matter what's happened between this book being written and now, so much of this reminded me how much I dislike religion. Don't care which one or whose it is.

Sandy D. says

The subtitle of this book is a bit misleading...it is partially a biography of a Smithsonian archaeologist and human bone specialist, Doug Owsley, with short chapters on some of his work at Waco and in Guatemala, and partially an account of the lawsuit he & several other anthropologists were involved in over the right to study Kennewick Man, a 9600 y.o. skeleton found eroding out of the Columbia River in Washington state.

In 1990, a law called NAGPRA (Native American Grave Protection & Repatriation Act) was passed, allowing Indian tribes in the US to claim human remains & other sacred objects that are related to their tribe for religious ceremonies, reburial, etc. The problem with Kennewick Man is that it is so old that it cannot be directly linked to any living tribes - especially without studying it, which a coalition of tribes from that part of WA did not want to allow.

The press has framed this mainly as a battle between Indian traditionalists and scientists, but the book shows some interesting insights into different govt. departments and political reasons for the battle. My only complaint is that Owsley is portrayed in such a fawning manner...the author just went a little overboard in the hero worship department. Not that Owsley doesn't deserve it, from everything I've heard, but it detracted from the book.

Although Owsley did win the case in 2002, and they got to study the skeleton, the whole question of "who owns the past" is still being debated.

Scott Umphrey says

Very good book. Written like a thriller with lots of science sprinkled in.

Webster A Chilton says

Two books in one. Very well researched and superbly written.

Maria says

MY God, this was bad.

I bought the book believing that, following the subtitle " ... the legal battle for America's Oldest Skeletons", it was to tell me something about the Kennewick Man case, without having to read hundreds of scientific articles about it.

In some sense, this was true, but the main story of the book is unfortunately a eulogy for Doug Owsley, forensic at the Smithsonian Institute and one of the participants in the Kennewick trial. After reading the book, I am familiar with Doug's family history, his medical history, and his personal attitudes towards gardening and mowing. I know about his courting his future wife and her attitude towards Doug's excessive work load at the laboratory. I know that the participants of the trial who were in favor of Doug, are good,

sensible people, while the other party consisted of biased arrogant people. This is in no way a neutral description of the process but a biased description which rather resembles an explanation of why these good american citizens defended the liberty of science.

I think I never read such a book before and I will certainly NOT read anything like this again.

Erth says

Ok

Beverly Rakowski says

This book is really good. It had my biting my fingernails. You forget that it is a non-fiction book. The author brings out this man's passion for what he does and his skill at doing it so very well. I highly recommend it. Dr. Owlsley worked on so many important investigations into very public tragedies because of his skill. Enjoy!
