

Book reviews

by Michael Legge

All that remains by Sue Black.
Doubleday; 2018
ISBN:97817842162818

This is an interesting book where the author takes the reader on a personal journey of death. The author Professor Dame Sue Black is Professor of Anatomy and Forensic Anthropology and one of the world's leading experts in Forensic Anthropology. All 13 chapters takes the reader into the authors life and experiences with the dead in their many forms. The chapters exploring what occurs following death are well written and carefully tempered providing no "shock horror" events, rather the progressive development of what occurs after death to the body. The personal journey starts as a teenager with an after school job in the butchers shop and warming her cold hands after handling cold meat in the freshly delivered (and still warm) livers from the abattoir. Due to her life-long fear of rodents the decision was made to take human anatomy and dissect humans instead of working with rodents. Here her journey starts with the death of a very close relative and being asked by her father to go and check if her uncle was OK. Having checked the vital signs of the body in the coffin she could declare he was dead and OK. Progressively integrated in the books chapters is the appreciation and willingness for people to donate their bodies for teaching and research after death. The text moves into the forensic work and the role of the forensic anthropologist. The identity of human remains pre and post-DNA is carefully constructed with bodies from cold-cases and reconstruction of bodies from historic and current crime scenes. The chapter on body mutilation is carefully written, again with cases experienced in the authors life. Her journey with death arrives at Kosovo, when the author leads a team identifying bodies from mass graves and mutilations including bodies booby-trapped with explosives. Again, there is sufficient detail illustrate the horrors of what had happened without the gory details. This leads into a chapter on the creation of a Disaster Intervention Identification system with the author leading development of the system and training with the police and other related experts to establish expert teams to identify victims in disasters, with examples from the 1966 Aberfan School disaster in Wales through to the London bombings in 2005. The final chapters deal with issues relating to acceptance of new and novel techniques in court and the forensic problems of identifying children's remains. Exploration and implementation of a new techniques for body preservation for teaching is interesting. The authors muses on what might happen to her body when she dies, the book will have to be read to find out. This was a very well written and easily read book relating an interesting journey with a person concerned with death.

Plagues upon the Earth: Disease and the course of human history by Kyle Harper.
Princeton University Press; 2021
ISBN: 9780691192123

The author is a Professor of Classics at the University of Oklahoma and has written previous books relating to historical changes in antiquity influencing early human cultures. In the current book he explores the relationships between diseases that have impacted on human survival. He traces the evolution of a number of significant diseases that have occurred as plagues throughout human history. Unfortunately the first two chapters left the reader thinking "why am I reading this book"? There was a lot of repetition, however having laboured through these chapters the reader is rewarded with well written text and an interesting approach to understanding the origins of human plague diseases. Looking back to the origin of humans he uses current ancient DNA evidence linked with phylogenetic trees to trace when microorganisms might have 'jumped' species and when they might have achieved plague proportions. The book covers the origins and arrival of new diseases in human populations and there linkages with slavery, social conditions, farming, population increases, human movements etc. There are many plague diseases covered in this book and the well-known such as syphilis, malaria, typhus, black death, smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, influenza etc are traced over possible origins, time and human activities. Using published research he has used information from both microorganism genomics but also when a disease may have appeared with evidence of infections appearing in the Neolithic period that were presenting up to modern times. The inking of early human civilisations with significant plagues is well done, providing a historical account of how people lived and their beliefs of how diseases originated. Quoting from Samuel Pepys's diaries first-hand accounts of how human waste was discarded leaves much to be desired. Overall, the book provides a fascinating insight into historical living conditions, beliefs in disease transmission and the modern use of genomics to trace the origins of diseases resulting in human plagues. It is well notated and referenced and with 509 pages a substantial read.

