Dead Men Do Tell Tale Essay, Research Paper

Dead Men Do Tell Tales

In the book, Dead Men Do Tell Tales, by William R. Maples, Ph.D. and Michael Browning, a story is told in how the dead, no matter how dead, still “talk” to us. The book is appropriately titled because, according to Dr. Maples, truth is discoverable, truth wants to be discovered (2). Dr. Maples tells us of what it is like to be a Forensic Anthropologist. Dr. Maples does not hold anything back in any of his descriptions, from the smell of corpses to the explanations of maggots.

Dead Men Do Tell Tales is a complete engrossing journey into the world of Forensic Anthropology and the science of bones. The book is well organized and easy to follow. The story is not from some published medical work containing lengthy medical terminology. The book is best described as the story of Dr. Maples career and interesting encounters it entailed. The book is a total of 292 pages. The book is organized into 16 chapters, each appropriately titled for the subject and stories that it contains. One could only wish that all story tellers could be as good as Dr. Maples.

The first chapter, “Every Day Is Halloween”, gives a preview of the book and talks about the nightmares that he seldom has. “They are usually flitting images of the everyday things I see on the job: crushed and perforated skulls, lopped-off limbs and severed heads, roasted and dissolving corpses, hanks of human hair and heaps of white bones – all in a day’s work at my office” (1). In this part of the book, we learn of Dr. Maples’ life and how it came to include the fascinating world of anthropology. It is in this chapter that Dr. Maples proves his credibility that he knows what he is talking about. He tells of his upbringing with strict moral values, taught by his father, the death of his father, and how he ended up taking an anthropology class in college, only because the other classes were full already. As Dr. Maples puts it, “It was a combination of good luck and bad character.” (6)

It is in this beginning chapter that we get to know William Maples, the small boy who did not grow up wanting to become a Forensic Anthropologist, initially majoring in English, but realized that it was his passion. It is in this chapter were we first hear of the notorious teacher, Tom McKern. “It was McKern who, more than any other man save only my father, shaped and directed my life” (6). We find out about his “odd” jobs that he undertook while attending the University of Texas, from working at a morgue to being an ambulance driver. In the end, he ends up spending time in Africa to study baboons. I feel the admiration that he has for his newfound love of Anthropology when he makes reference to Newton. “ ‘I have seen further, Newton said, it is because I have stood upon the shoulders of giants’. In my case, it has been the shoulders of baboons, but I am nonetheless grateful” (19). We should all be so fortunate to find are true passion as Dr. Maples did.

I appreciated the humor in the next chapter, “Talkative Skulls”, when Dr. Maples immediately disassociates himself from the television show character, Quincy. I immediately compared Quincy to Bill Nye the science guy of my generation. In this chapter, he starts putting together how anthropology and crime investigation starts going hand in hand. In many of the cases that he describes, the skulls that he studies “talk” to him. I laughed when I thought about how a Forensic Anthropologist was actually using the techniques that I had studied and learned in class. Teachers are always trying to prove to there students that what they are learning is actual used in the real world and not just there to torture us. Having paid attention in class, cranial sutures, sloping foreheads, orbits, and dental observation made complete sense and I found myself with the feeling that I was in the laboratory and making suggestions to Dr. Maples on how to “sex the skeleton”. He even gives an example of how one of the skulls even talked to him to inform him as to what kind of hammer was used to kill her.

In the chapter “Bolts of Bones” is where we get a detailed description of what happens to the body upon death, from being overcome by bacteria to the fact that we could emit a blue flame due to the gas buildup in our bodies, and who could forget the smell! Who better to give a true picture of death than a Forensic Anthropologist! The most important lesson I took from this was the two processes involved in decomposition, autolysis, and putrefaction. Autolysis occurs after death when digestive juices, which when you are alive only digest food, begin to digest the intestinal tract. Within hours, your stomach and esophagus is “eaten”. Putrefaction occurs as a result of bacterial activity throughout the body and goes through the lifeless body like a “silent fire”. He also describes his laboratory at the C. A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory of the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida in great detail. I envisioned a cold place surrounded by silence. Although this part was a little slow, I respected his admiration of his work place and compared it to how a man looks at his workshop, making sure no one touches his things as a father would not allow the use of his tools by his young son. He offers his sarcasm with his story of his run-in with the Piltdown Man. In my opinion, this chapter shows how professional Dr. Maples really is.

“The Enfolding Earth” is a descriptive chapter about Dr. Maples’ participation in exhumations. One learns from the activities of maggots to the importance of the burial container. Of course, one cannot forget the general rule of decomposition: one week in the open air equals two weeks in the water, equals eight weeks underground (48). If I don’t remember anything else from this class, I’m sure this will stay with me at least until grade time.

Once again Maples’ shows his sarcasm with the quote from The Wizard of Oz, to open the chapter dealing with dismemberment, “Flotsam and Jetsam”. Here, Dr. Maples takes on a different tone. It is still sarcastic, but there seems to be resentment in his voice. I can imagine this would be like taking test in school and never finding out your grade. “It is quite one thing to do murder. It is quite another to destroy the murder victim’s identity” (61). As Mr. Maples points out, he puts himself in the mind of the murderer to “piece” together the clues to give the victim its rightful identity.

The title of the next chapter, “When Sickness Is Your Soul”, shows the passionate side of Dr. Maples. The title expresses the feeling that Maples truly sees suicide as a sickness within oneself. I myself find it hard to imagine that life could be so bad that the only answer is to end your own life. He refers to it as the shadowy realm “from which no traveler returns”. He knows, he’s seen, and has had to deal with the aftermath. I felt as if this was the hardest part of his job, and he knew it. Up to now, his tone was “it is my job”, to the point of almost losing faith in humankind. “Suicide has the power to unsettle us all, to make even the dullest brain philosophize for a few minutes about the meaning of life” (76).

In the following chapter, “Outpacing the Fiend”, Dr. Maples tries to illustrate how the profession of Forensic Anthropology came of age. He uses many names with important titles and various associations to illustrate the profession’s background. This chapter is appropriately titled because Dr. Maples informs us that the profession is very young compared to the profession of homicide. “From the beginning, our science has walked almost abreast of homicide, trying to outpace the ‘frightful fiend’ who commits it. Sometimes we are scarcely half a step ahead; sometimes we are several steps behind. In all such cases our instructors are assassins” (90). It is sad to think that a number a people have careers because of others dark side.

“Unnatural Nature” is a lesson into the skeletal system. I was actually impressed with the fact that I knew what Dr. Maples was talking about. Good gob professor Barbolla. I knew what he was talking about when he was mentioning the differences between the male and female skeletons. He titled it “Unnatural Nature” because of how the skeleton is an ever -growing process. Our bones let us know how old we are getting. They inform the observer about what we eat, what we do, our illnesses, culture, and many other things. He sums it up best when he states, “To read all of these things – that is the art of Forensic Anthropology” (105). The most important lesson I got from this chapter was how to distinct between a rock and a bone.

Another passionate side is shown by Dr. Maples in the chapter “A Sunless Place”. He has a soft spot in his heart for children, as I think everyone that reads this chapter gets. He also claims that while he may be able to solve crime riddles, he may never be able to figure out the mind of a killer. Dr. Maples goes on to state that he does not believe in capital punishment, but he also believes that America is not yet ready to be without it. He goes into great detail to describe the gas chamber, hanging, the guillotine, electrocution, and lethal injection. I also found it very interesting to know that he performed the autopsy on Ted Bundy after Ted’s electrocution. To bad he will never get to do my autopsy…just kidding.

I found it amazing the case he encloses in the next chapter, “Flames and Urns”. One would think that fire would destroy all evidence used to identify a person, but “Dr. Maples the great” does it again. It seems as though that extreme patience and an extremely investigative mind would be needed to carry out such an complex solution to the puzzle involving remains. I know that I do not have the patience, but I guess that is why I’m a business major and not Anthropology major, no offense.

As with any profession, it is very hard to disassociate distractions from your main goal. Police cannot help but feel their “heart strings” being pulled when they are called to a rape, or the Fireman not being able to save someone inside a burning building. In “Death in 10,000 Fragments”, Dr. Maples describes his frustrations with one particular case, the Meek-Jennings case. I believe that Dr. Maples put this part in to show his great accomplishment, and what a pain it was, that took over a year to solve. It was his curiosity and his doubtfulness of the suicide note that led him to practice his extensive studies to good use and determine the proper identifications of the bodies.

“The question of American soldiers missing in action in Vietnam is an open, bleeding wound in American politics even today” (187). In “Lost Legions”, Dr. Maples takes great pride in letting us know that he helps out extensively to help identify fallen Vietnam veterans at CILHI in Hawaii. I believe that he takes great pride in helping out our country this way because it is a change of pace from the murderous world that he constantly deals with. His pride is reflected in the fact that he did not charge a family to help identify a lost serviceman. He also helps illustrates how a dentist and an anthropologist must work together in the extensive identification process.

The next few chapters offer a change of pace from the norm. I wish that history classes taken at school were as interesting as these. We first get a brief and exciting history lesson on Francisco Pizarro, how he lived and died by the sword. It was very interesting to find out that for so many years, people have been worshiping and kneeling before an impostor, until Dr. Maples helped to identify the true Francisco Pizarro by establishing the wounds on the skeleton. Former President Zachary Taylor was thought to have been assassinated by means of arsenic poisoning. Once again, Dr. Maples shows his patriotic badge in describing the former President. Dr. Maples helped to put to rest that President Taylor was not poisoned, but rather that he died from natural causes by verifying that no high doses of arsenic were present on the exhumed skeletal remains. On the subject of exhumation, I agreed with what Dr. Maples told Clare Rising on the subject of exhuming Zachary Taylor’s remains. “Human remains are not the property of cemeteries. They don’t belong to the nation, no matter who they were in life. Nor do they belong to the courts. They belong to the relatives who survive them” (226). The last historical lesson deals with the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Once again, we are given a great history lesson that lead to an anthropological resolution. Dr. Maples introduces dental records and mitochondrial DNA, which we just talk about in class (I was paying attention), to help resolve the identification of the family members.

In the last chapter, Dr. Maples states that the Rolling case “amply demonstrated the sheer power possessed by human bones: the power to bear witness to the truth beyond death; the power to avenge the innocent; the power to terrify the guilty” (275). He illustrates one last time the fact that he has been repeating in all the previous chapters, if you listen the bones will talk.

There could not have been a better storyteller than Dr. William Maples. To get me to read and like it is quite a feat. This man has evaluated, witnessed, identified with certainty, remains from all over the world. He speaks from experience and I appreciated how he laid out the story. He did not hide anything. I think that the book is so fasinating cause he doesn’t try to put a rated “R” subject into a “PG-13” book, after all we live in a rated “R” world, whether we like it or not. He helps to illustrate his world in all different varieties, I believe that is why the chapters were broken down the way there were.

Dr. Maples includes so many fascinating experiences and resolutions to his investigations that even I was able to stay interested to the last page. The class helped out a lot in reading this book because I was able to easily follow his explanations of the skeleton, from differences between male and female skeletons, the different bones that were being talked about, the dental records, and a lot about the skull, like skull features, cranial sutures, and orbital features. I only wish all school books assigned could be as interesting as this one.