

13 Questions with Dame Sue Black

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digital:**

What drew you to the career of forensic anthropologist?

Sue Black: I fell into the discipline by accident. I studied human anatomy for my undergraduate degree and to progress into a PhD I wanted to study something that interested me and I knew that it was neither in the clinical world nor that it would involve animal models. So I started to examine how you can determine identity (in the days before DNA) from human skeletal remains. This led to my first case, which was a local non-suspicious death, and I simply progressed from there—utterly hooked.

hd: **Where did the idea come from to write this book? How did you settle on this approach and concept? Why the chapter structure of head to toe?**

SB: One of my areas of expertise is in human dismemberment and what we can tell from the process itself (i.e., was the body lying face down or on its back; which was the first part of the body the perpetrator worked on; what sort of an implement was used—was it mechanical or hand driven, was it a saw or a knife, was it a cutting, sawing, or hacking approach?). Because every case is unique, we have no control over what parts of the body will be presented to us to examine and so we have to be able to draw out every piece of information that the remains can tell us. So taking an anatomical approach, I decided to look at all the different sections of the body, which mimic the number of parts in a dismemberment, and establish what that region of the body alone can tell us about the person. I then sought to give examples of cases where such a region was particularly important in the resolution of the forensic problem.

hd: **We know you hate feet. What is your favorite bone and why? Does it vary based on age or sex?**

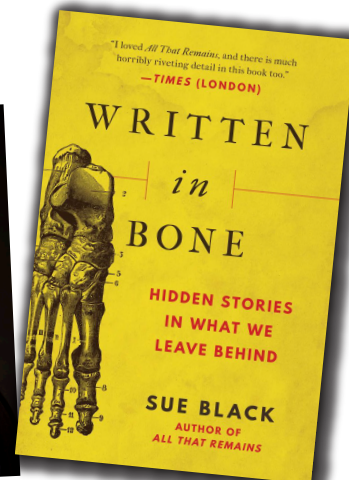
SB: I really like the clavicle or collar bone. It is the first bone in the body to start to form when you are a very small fetus inside your mum. It then grows at a remarkably regular rate until you are born. It is very durable and survives fire, explosion, and decomposition really well because of its unique construction. It then keeps maturing all the way through our childhood, teenage, and early adult years, not reaching its full maturity until we are well into our third decade. It is also the bone most likely to be fractured and that one that we really don't need and can have surgically removed. It is such a rebel and so different to any other bone—I respect it. It also has a wonderful shape which is derived from its Latin name 'clavicula,' which is the word for a Roman key.

hd: **Does your work make you very aware of the fragility of the human body or its resilience?**

SB: Both—perhaps the fragility of life but the resilience of the physical human. We see for example how despite extensive burning, crushing, and even explosion, fragments of the human can remain and be sufficient for us to be able to confirm who they were in life. It is very difficult to dispose of a body in its entirety, despite what some of our more ambitious fictional portrayals might try to convey.

hd: **How do you maintain a balance between viewing victims as just flesh and bone and viewing them as the real people they were, beyond the remains?**

SB: I can only talk for myself but I have never viewed any of the victims with whom I have worked as just flesh and bone. They are always somebody's mother, father, son, daughter, or friend. They are always real people but my job is not to become personally involved with them, only professionally. A seasoned police detective gave



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me the best piece of advice. He told me not to own the guilt: I didn't cause the incident, I couldn't have stopped it, it was not my fault. My job was not to investigate the crime or find someone guilty and seek justice, my job was to find the evidence, log it, retrieve it, analyze, it and report on it. Nothing more and nothing less. He was very wise.

hd: Throughout your career, you've witnessed the results of some truly heinous crimes and human suffering, and your findings have not always resulted in cases being solved or in offenders being brought to justice. How do you compartmentalize? Does it affect you—your sleep, dreams, sense of safety, levels of anxiety, mood?

SB: I refer to my answer above as I view my job professionally, and while it makes good TV for the scientist to become personally involved, it does not assist the investigation and it does not help us with our own coping mechanisms and well-being. I can honestly say that I have never had affected sleep, I don't dream about my cases, and I can be a moody so-and-so, so nobody would ever notice anyway. Sense of safety is a different matter as depending where you are in the world there can be significant security implications. All we can do is to trust to our security teams to keep us safe—and so far, I have been very lucky.

hd: You also bravely write about your personal experience with sexual assault. Can you share what it was like to include that, and why you decided to?

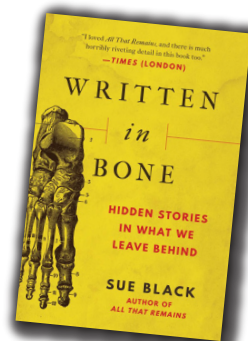
SB: It wasn't a conscious decision during writing to do that but as the story progressed it seemed an appropriate thing to do. Of course it was hard and it was necessary for me to have that discussion with my family so that they were not blindsided. The response has been tremendously positive. I also wanted to make the point that my history has not in any way directed my career pathway, as I did not start my research into identification of those accused of child abuse until I was well into my 40s, and the case came to me rather than me looking for it. I am also a very staunch supporter of innocence until proven guilty, and forensic scientists must be impartial in their opinions; our job is not to find guilt or innocence but to help the jury come to their decision with confidence in the scientific evidence. I have successfully appeared in such cases both for the prosecution and for the defense and that is the test of unbiased science.

hd: Does the advancement in DNA tracing/forensic technology mean that forensic anthropology might not be as necessary for identification? How are advancements in other forensic fields changing or influencing the forensic anthropology profession?

SB: Although DNA has been transformational in forensic investigations, it cannot resolve every case. It is true that many of the cases in which we might have become involved in the past are now resolved by DNA; it does mean that our load is now heavily weighted to the 'more tricky' cases where other sciences have not been able to solve. We have developed from generalists into specialists by and large. So I don't think our discipline is going to disappear anytime soon but the nature of our involvement has certainly changed and I expect will continue to do so.

hd: I hear you don't read crime fiction. Why? Also, what are your thoughts on the massive interest in the true-crime genre (books, podcasts, scripted TV, docs)?

SB: For me, reading crime would be a bit of busman's holiday, and so it is not a genre that I naturally gravitate towards. I have been mightily impressed by the determination of some of our best crime writers to get as close to the truth as possible and their research is impressive. That shows to me a healthy respect of the reader by the writer and I am always willing to help when they have a query over what they are writing and its authenticity. Forensic science has been a tremendous success in the media



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and while this is to be applauded it has two immediate concerns for me. The first is the impact on our young scholars who think this is to be their future and they go to university to study a generic course in the subject. It is highly unlikely they will ever end up employed in that area and so I always advise that they choose a strong core science for their undergraduate degree. If at the end of that they are still drawn to the forensic world, then consider a postgraduate specialization in a particular area. Many will need to go on to secure a PhD so this is not a quick process and can take anywhere between six and nine years just to get the qualifications, let alone the experience.

hd: You get asked by police and governments to consult on cases all the time. Do you ever get asked to consult on television programs or documentaries? What about fiction programs, films, or books? And would you ever try your hand at writing fiction, like your friend Kathy Reichs?

SB: I do get asked and I turn most of them down because they don't need a forensic anthropologist, they need a pathologist or a scientist with laboratory experience. I am more likely to assist authors and script writers and it is all very interesting but it is very much an aside to what I do in the day job. I am not at all interested in writing crime fiction. Firstly I don't think I would be a very good storyteller; there is such an art to it. I am also a little uncomfortable that my real stories would bleed into any fictional story and I would feel very uncomfortable in what that might do to family and friends of the deceased. So I remain very happy to help other authors, but it is not my future.

hd: You recorded your own audio for this book. Why did you decide to do that, and what was the experience like?

SB: A very simple answer—I was asked to. I recorded the audio for both books, *All That Remains* and *Written in Bone*. I had never done anything like this before and one of the downsides was that, as I read it, I found things that I wanted to change, so I got very frustrated with myself. It was actually hard work and each book was recorded within three days. Talking for three days is actually quite draining and by the end of it, I felt as if my tongue was like a carpet and I was wearing somebody else's teeth in my mouth.

hd: What question would you pose to the hoopla Book Club?

SB: I am slightly going to combine this question with the next. Perhaps the club could think about their own identity or that of one of their family. Go and download the Interpol DVI identification forms and see how difficult it is to fill those forms out when it is about yourself or someone that you think you know really well. Then I would simply ask—just how well do we know each other? It is not until you lose someone that you start to think about how you might describe them.

hd: What do you hope hoopla readers take away from reading *Written in Bone*?

SB: I hope the readers may take away a renewed sense of awe about the human body and just how much of our life story gets written there. Then perhaps they may think about the nine years of study required by a forensic anthropologist for them to be able to extract that information from their bones to such a level of confidence that we are prepared to release your remains back to your family. Some people have called forensic scientists the modern day 'sin eaters'—I wonder if the group might agree.

Ready to discuss *Written in Bone* with your book club? Find hoopla's exclusive discussion guide and meeting planner at theclub.hoopladigital.com. Then, let us know what you think on social using @hoopladigital and #hooplabookclub!

