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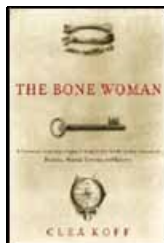
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Book Review

The Bone Woman

A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, & Kosovo

by [Clea Koff](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer

Posted: October 22, 2005

Some books make us envy the experiences of the author. "If only I could kayak in the South Pacific like Paul Theroux," we might think, "or travel through Madagascar with a horse, like Dervla Murphy."

Other books — like Robert Sullivan's [Rats](#), which describes the author's nights in a ratty alleyway in downtown Manhattan — satisfy our curiosity about things that may fascinate us but that we don't really want to do ourselves. For most of us, *The Bone Woman* falls in this category.

Clea Koff is the daughter of a Jewish man and a Tanzanian woman, each of them a filmmaker specializing in human rights. Her childhood was spent in England, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, and the US. *The Bone Woman* is a memoir of her work as a forensic anthropologist, examining the bodies of those killed in massacres in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

Forensic anthropologists, it seems, are not like the rest of us. "Nine hours of clearing earth from on top of bodies and disengaging their limbs from one another for transfer to body bags was uniquely mellowing and fulfilling for me," Clea Koff writes. After a few years of burial, human bodies may be mummified, skeletoned, or still "fleshed." Or they may be "saponified," a condition in which the decaying flesh comes "foaming" out of any break in the skin.

Under normal conditions none of this fazes the author, not even the smells that accompany the various types of decay. In Rwanda, for instance, it is not the bodies she examines that bother her but the bloody handprints on the walls of the church where she and her UN team are working. The savagery indicated by the splashes of blood on the *ceiling* haunts her as well, and she is shaken to find that Rwanda remains a deadly place: security forces shoot two men to death before her eyes, in the water of the lake near her hotel.

The author's scientific detachment breaks down in the course of a mission to Bosnia, one of several missions she undertook on behalf of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. For the first time she also finds herself examining the same bodies in a lab that she helped unearth from a hillside not long before. She examines a thigh bone with a bullet embedded in it, then the unfused hipbone of a young man, and for a few minutes she experiences what she describes as "double vision":

"I 'saw' this young guy, there at Cerska, on the hillside where we had just been digging, and I 'felt' the pain of the bullet entering his thigh just above the knee; I could sense his youth and the tragedy of it all and I thought of his family and what they were missing ... and I lost an element of self-control. I felt so awful, so full of hurt and emotion, and mixed in with that was a knee-buckling sense of privilege that I was touching the bones of someone whose family was out there and wanted more than anything to have him back..."

She pulls herself together a few minutes later, and continues her work: work that has proved the existence of massacres that some denied ever happened, and has given friends and families of the missing an answer to what happened to their loved ones.

About the Reviewer

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.

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