



The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo

Clea Koff

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In 1994, Rwanda was the scene of the first acts since World War II to be legally defined as genocide. Two years later, Clea Koff, a twenty-three-year-old forensic anthropologist, left the safe confines of a lab in Berkeley, California, to serve as one of sixteen scientists chosen by the United Nations to unearth the physical evidence of the Rwandan genocide. Over the next four years, Koff's grueling investigations took her across geography synonymous with some of the worst crimes of the twentieth century.

The Bone Woman is Koff's unflinching, riveting account of her seven UN missions to Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Rwanda, as she shares what she saw, how it affected her, who was prosecuted based on evidence she found, and what she learned about the world. Yet even as she recounts the hellish nature of her work and the heartbreak of the survivors, she imbues her story with purpose, humanity, and a sense of justice. A tale of science in service of human rights, *The Bone Woman* is, even more profoundly, a story of hope and enduring moral principles.

The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo Details

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Namrirru says

Extremely graphic account of a forensic anthropologist's life and hardships while digging mass graves in recent sites of genocide. The humanity of the writer starkly contrasts with the inhumanity of her work. It's a good book, but not for the squeamish.

Sofi says

I had to read this book for a class, but I'm really glad that I had to. It's about the author's work as a forensic anthropologist. She digs up graves in other countries to bring justice to the people who were targeted in genocides and other crimes against humanity. I really like her way of writing, it's really informative while still having a feeling as if she is speaking one on one with the reader. Reading some parts actually made me feel nauseous. She is completely honest and really descriptive. If you have an interest in history or forensics, I would definitely recommend this wonderful book.

Minji says

This woman, Clea Koff, is a hero. I was continuously amazed at her persistence, optimism, discipline, and most of all, her strong stomach. At times her positivity seemed to border on naivete, but perhaps because of her naivete she was able to rise above even the most harrowing circumstances. She's dug through knee deep mud, surrounded by walls of rotting bodies. She's worked in rooms splattered with the blood of the victims she was exhuming. But with just her conviction to uncover truths to massive crimes, she's gone back over and over again to the same tragic, desperate work. How can she deliberately throw herself into various forms of hell, and still continue to smile about it?

Just knowing that this kind of person actually exists gives me a lot of insight into my own nature. I am too cynical to believe noble virtues such as justice and truths could ever prevent government entities from oppressing and massacring civilians. As forensics advance, methods of deception and control would also advance. But if everyone thought like me I can see that the world would be worse off. *The Bone Woman* is an amazing memoir. I've learned much about the evils in the world, of greed, hatred and cruelty befitting fiction. But I also saw that destruction through the eyes of a resolute optimist, who would so readily suffer for the sake of the dead. It was a poetic dichotomy.

Anna says

the topic itself is interesting and makes the book– basically Koff's unique job, the history, & the discoveries. however the writing style was a bummer. the author is self-centered; it seemed like a book about herself

more than the cause.

Kevin Keith says

The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo is a harrowing, fascinating report of the author's personal experiences as a forensic anthropologist on UN-sponsored teams investigating war crimes in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Clea Koff was only 23 years old, still a student in her Master's Degree program in anthropology, when she was first picked to join the forensic team unearthing victims of an infamous massacre in Rwanda and providing evidence for the international tribunal - the first since Nuremberg - seeking to bring their killers to trial. Over more than a decade she earned the respect and loyalty of her peers in the small world of war-crimes forensics, rising to head teams of her own and become a known expert in identifying the remains of victims of genocide and war crimes, and documenting their murders. Her story is jaw-dropping, saddening, and ultimately moving as she explains her own feelings of duty to the dead, and satisfaction in bringing them home to their families, and doing them justice.

Koff's story is an astounding one, beginning with her interest in the field, her thirst for involvement in its demanding practice, and what she saw and learned over the years of grueling stress and physical exhaustion. Koff developed a precocious interest in anthropology as a teenager, from seeing TV specials and reading a book by one of the pioneers of the field - a man she would later speak to on a personal tour of her own dig site at a later war. She majored in anthropology at Stanford, then chose a graduate anthropology program with a connection to a forensics lab, and gained a great deal of experience in identifying, "aging" (determining age from developmental signs on a subject's bones), and reconstructing skeletons from actual cases of crimes and natural deaths. She soon accompanied her mentor into the field on her first UN expedition. One mission led to another, and by the time she returned to grad school to finish her degree, she already had years of practical experience with the information and techniques her fellow students were just hearing about for the first time. Soon after that, she was directing operations at field sites in war zones as her flighty high-profile boss jetted around to other missions, the tribunal courts, or the UN - all this before she was 30.

The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo tells this story in detail, but tells it through the very personal perspective of its author and her experiences, and reactions to them, in the field. (Koff, the daughter of renowned political documentary filmmakers David Koff and Msindo Mwinyipembe, apparently inherited the storyteller's gene.) Koff explains that she did not feel repulsed by the bodies she examined, or the sadness of what they had suffered, but rather was interested as an anthropologist in what they could tell about the victims and their deaths. Gradually, though, she begins to connect the bodies not only to the lives of those who inhabited them, but also to the relatives and communities they left behind. She talks about the families of the dead she examined, and their reactions to the process of exhuming and identifying them, and how it made her feel to work, sometimes, under their eyes. She evocatively documents the internal dynamics of the "non-governmental organizations" that do this work, the sometimes maddening UN bureaucracy they work under, and the constant stress - over seemingly small things like bad food and marginal accommodations, and larger ones like death threats from still-lurking war criminals who don't want their crimes revealed. She has

insightful things to say about how the administrative structure of organizations, and the personalities of those in authority, can build teams or tear them apart. And she finally documents how worn and haunted she herself became under this grinding, penetrating stress, overwork, and emotional burden.

Koff provides a fascinating look at how forensic field teams operate; her inside-baseball description of the process of exhuming graves and documenting crimes is a master class in the subject without ever resembling an academic text. The teams are composed of multiple specialties, with support staff to do some of the heavy labor (when they show up, and have not been run off by death threats from warlords). The anthropologists uncover buried bodies, document their position, and prepare them for evidentiary photographs. (Pro tip: brush the corpses' clothes clean in the grave so they will stand out visibly against the dirt.) Then the bodies are carefully removed from the grave, with all accompanying clothing, artifacts, or body parts carefully noted, and taken to an autopsy site - either a modern lab with full facilities, or a wooden table in an open field. The medical pathologists examine the bodies' organs, if any are left, probe the bodies with the help of X-rays to identify any bullets or other projectiles (sometimes 30 or more) in the tissue and remove them, and create a forensic autopsy report. The anthropologists then examine the teeth and remove samples of particular bones to check for specific signs of developmental age, to further help in identifying the victim. (Pro tip: the bone saw will not cut flesh, but it will spray decomposed liquid matter in a wide arc, so it's still best to be careful.) Clothing is removed and documented. Koff provides an intriguing insight into both forensic science and the nature of disruptive war: many civilians and family members will make an identification of a body on the basis of its clothing or possessions, but the forensic teams do not, because refugees may acquire other persons' clothing in emergency conditions. The teams try to provide public viewings for family members, both to aid identification of bodies and to provide closure for the families, but this is not always successful: those who recognize a relative may be traumatized by the sight, and those who do not may be traumatized by their ongoing uncertainty. (Pro tip: photograph the deceased person's teeth close-up; many family members can identify their relatives by their distinctive smiles, but will be upset to see the entire naked skull.) The clinical detail is fascinating, but Koff interleaves it with her observations on the personalities of her team members, and how small issues of organization and support could make or break the team's operations, as well as their morale.

Koff is at her best in her reflections on the human dimension of the work. She speaks of her own exhaustion, and how the saddening implications of the work they were doing could take a toll on her, sometimes unexpectedly. She writes beautifully of the dignity, heartbreak, and suffering of the family members whose relatives were in the graves she exhumed, and who were often called on to provide information, testimony, and even blood samples to aid the work of the tribunals. Some of her observations are surprising: in Rwanda, families were desperate for information about their loved ones, but in Kosovo the mothers of war crimes victims agitated to prevent the forensic investigation, apparently because they did not want to be confronted with the finality of knowing their sons were dead. She notes the differing nature of conflicts: in Rwanda, a planned cultural genocide, most of the victims were women and children; in Kosovo, a territorial war, virtually all were young men of military age. She has an eye for telling, sometimes heartbreak detail: the artificial leg that identified one victim; the hospital clogs on the feet of other victims in Kosovo that proved the truth of the charge that the Serbian army had rounded up and killed the staff and patients. And in her occasional asides on the question of why and how - issues she, surprisingly, does not dwell on - she is keen and incisive in identifying the personal interests - money, land, class status, inheritance, political power - that provide a motivation for murder, and give the lie to the airy tales of ancient territorial or tribal disputes that the murders bandied as justifications.

The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo is written in a spare and descriptive style. Its power is in the facts it conveys, and the human cost glimpsable through them. Clea Koff is a good but not an indulgent writer, and that seems correct for this story. The book is recommended for those with an interest in forensic anthropology, the history of the genocides in Rwanda and Kosovo, or in general the process of serving the dead with unsparing, unsentimental, but not inhuman, skill and knowledge. The author is due a full measure of admiration and thanks for her vital but draining work on these terrible crimes, and equal respect for documenting it so clearly, personally, and rewardingly.

MaryG2E says

The stories told by Cleo Koff about the terrible genocides in places like Bosnia were informative and sobering. I was particularly touched by her analysis of the Rwandan massacre that she worked on, where innocent people were struck down brutally, and those who sheltered in a church compound were targeted. My main reservation about this book is that, while Ms Koff may be a brilliant scientist, she is not a good writer. The stories were let down by her lack of literary style, which diminished my enthusiasm to keep reading. Despite this nit-picking on my part, this is a worthwhile book to read.

Zrinka says

The experiences of a forensic anthropologist working for ICTY and ICTR described in a very personal manner. I felt strangely relieved seeing that we had both asked ourselves the same question: what if I had been in the middle of all that killing and destruction? (Still wondering about the answer though.) Everyone could benefit by reading this book.

Bryonny says

Might have been stronger focusing just on Rwanda, which is the real punch of this book, but super fascinating and heartbreaking in discussing Kosovo and Bosnia too. I keep thinking about how many bodies were dressed in multiple pairs of pants, socks, etc., as a way of carrying as many of their things with them as they could, and how that was true in both Rwanda and Kosovo.

Maysze says

I bought this book back after my trip in Rwanda about 7 years ago. Rwanda has caught my heart every since. Hence, when I saw the subtitle of the book 'among the dead in Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo', I knew back then it is the book I want to read. Koff did not disappoint me at all. I'm very grateful for her honest encounter in all those unfortunate places. Certainly, her heartbreakng stories touch my heart the most. I can echo what she saw and experienced emotionally. I think we all agree that forensic anthropology has its power in the international count, but Koff didn't just displayed its power. But she displayed her heart

and belief in forensic anthropology, which is the true starting point of her work, her life, her passion and this book. All the stories that she shared are from her heart and belief. I appreciate that.

This book doesn't go all details in forensic anthropology. But there are information for you and I to understand how it works and subsequently how difficult to gather the evidence in those places. I'm thankful to Koff for her heart and the honesty she shared in this book.

Chrisiant says

Koff occasionally gets a little too much of her own personal journey in the pages for my taste, but at other points I find her personal reflections particularly relevant. Mostly when she overshares and gets off on personal meditations, I'm willing to forgive her because the rest of it is so interesting.

The inside view into both the fieldwork and the morgue at a handful of ICT sites in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia is fascinating. Koff shares the realities of her chosen work, warts and all: the lack of appropriate and functional equipment and timely training on UN and ICT missions, the involved process of unearthing bodies that are jumbled together in mass graves and don't always fit into neat archaeological levels, the numerous methods of physically identifying bodies, the strange pressures of living amongst the relatives of the bodies being unearthed, and the tough physical and emotional demands and the interpersonal effects of sharing tight quarters with co-workers experiencing the same pressures.

I think I most appreciated towards the end when Koff becomes part of the team in charge of a mission, and is able to see some of the effects of her work come full circle: bodies she helped to take out of the ground when she was in the field are returned to their families for reburial. A sense of the general flow of the bodies being exhumed - gender and age breakdowns, couples and families buried together. It's also interesting when she's able to make cross-connections between sites in Rwanda and Bosnia - worth considering the implications of similarities between what might be understood as vastly different events. Do the graves tell similar stories?

I flirted really hard with the idea of pursuing forensic anthropology when I was an anthro and poli sci undergrad. Not sure I should've gone that way, but reading this really makes me itch to be in a plastic suit in a mass grave, bringing out those murdered and helping justice finally be served.

Mr. Roboto says

A little bit of mud-slinging and trash-talking, but certainly interesting enough to make me want to go out and do fieldwork.

Chris says

Some interesting passages, but mechanically written. The distance that Koff needed to maintain between her job (exhuming mass graves) and her interior self has been preserved in her writing.

Mike says

I enjoyed this book, the concept and the facts were very interesting, it seemed like the author just did a lot of complaining about her situation. She spent so much time talking about her lack of equipment/feuds with co-workers that the original stated purpose of hers, bringing awareness to genocides and helping skeletons speak, at times got lost in the background. I wish she would have focused more on the back stories of the genocides, like she did on the first section of the book. It seems like she didn't have as much interest in her numerous cases in Europe as she did in her African case. The book tailed off towards the end after a very promising beginning in Rwanda. The beginning of the book seemed like it was written with a purpose, the ending sounded like she was satisfying an editor's needs by copying parts out of her journal.

Ed says

An excellent book by an extraordinary young woman who has worked in the remains of the human abattoirs around the world. Rwanda, Kosovo, Croatia, all needed the services of a team of forensic scientists to figure out the identities of the bodies--all decayed, many reduced to piles of bones--and to ascertain if those people died as a result of crimes against humanity. Koff and her associates had to show how these people had died and to make sure they weren't causalities of civil war or revolutionary uprisings.

Even though they lived in primitive conditions--no running water in Rwanda, cold water for in the taps for two hours per day in Bosnia for example--were subject to the strictures of the infamous United Nations bureaucracy and were often in the middle of a hostile population that didn't want them to succeed, Koff and her associates came up with the evidence to try and in most cases convict those who gave the order for mass murder.

Each chapter is a new deployment to areas containing mass graves. Koff begins with a short and even-handed account of the massacres and the events just before them and then gets down to the work itself, uncovering human remains--work that is both exhausting and painstaking. They are scientists digging in the dirt with picks and shovels then brushing away what sticks to the bones with the finest tiny brushes.

Koff herself has quite a background. Her father is English, her mother Tanzanian. They are documentary filmmakers who packed up the family (Clea and her brother) and took them to Africa, the Middle East and South America while they were filming. With an undergrad degree from Stanford and graduate study at Arizona, she was asked to take part in the first forensic mission to Rwanda when she was 23 years old.

She describes how she loses her scientific detachment when she gets what she calls "double vision", seeing beyond the skeleton in front of her to the person that it might once have been--for example a preteen boy who has been shot in the head. One of the most gruesome discoveries in Rwanda happened when they began finding ankle bones with machete slashes. When the killers simply had too much work to do--too many people to kill--they would sever a victim's Achilles tendons so they couldn't run away and would be there for killing hours or even days later. One mass grave in Croatia was full of the staff and patients from a hospital, some of the patients with plaster casts on limbs or with IV needles still in their arms.

Highly recommended.

Cher says

This is the second time I have read this book - a book I found enjoyable both times I read it. Many of the reviews have complained it was not professional - however this is exactly the thing I enjoyed about it. The distancing that can occur to produce self preservation is balanced here by Ms. Koff's candor about when those distances are reduced and emotional breakdown occurs.

I would like to have heard more detail about the places they stayed and other members of the crew. Learning more about the local groups would also have been an improvement - but all in all, I enjoyed the book. I don't know that I would read it a third time, but will use it as a teaching tool if the need arises.

Bel says

When you have completed a case and turned in your paperwork, you may still be thinking about it. But before that thinking takes you to a place where you realize that this case was just like the one you had before and maybe just like one from Kigali, before you notice that the case file says that your last case was the husband of the old woman being analyzed at the next table, and before you think about that or feel the sadness, you are assigned your next case and the pathologist is in a hurry and wants to get it done before lunch. Snap! You are saved from thinking and feeling until later, maybe much later, after you have left the mission and you find yourself crying into your pillow twelve thousand kilometers away, a world away, with your hands that touched and your mind that remembers and that elderly husband and wife are still dead, and you know the finality of that and you are left thinking and feeling indefinitely.

I loved this one! It's so refreshing as a female to read about another woman's experience on the field, especially when it comes to things like feelings, hygiene (*gasp* periods), harassment, and above all dealing with the grief (and sometimes straight up denial) of family members whose loved ones have been brutally massacred. I'm not saying it's the norm, but male anthropologists tend to not give those more "human" aspects the relevance they deserve.

Amanda says

I was expecting to invalidate a lot of the complaints about Clea Koff's book, but I was more and more disappointed as the book progressed. Gone was the wisdom of her experience, missing was the self-discovery and introspection, only barely existent was her experience of the people around her who had survived the horrors, and the writing that replaced what had begun to glimmer in the first few chapters was that of a hardened, unhappy woman who seemed stressed out and angry at her coworkers.

This does not mean that the book was completely worthless to me, and for that reason I give it three stars. I think it is an extremely important book, one that examines one step of the process by which someone guilty of genocide comes to justice, and one that pays ample tribute to the remains of the people who cry out for justice.

I hope Clea has found more peace, both with her coworkers and with herself, in the four years since the last part of the book. I did feel as though I was there, experiencing every part of it with her, and she did an ample job of keeping the jargon of her profession to a manageable level -- which was something that had worried me prior to reading the book. She really is a wonderful writer on the face of it, but just needed to focus a bit less on the problems that happened within each mission.

Sarah says

Clea Koff shares her personal journey as a forensic anthropologist in her powerful memoir *The Bone Woman*. Koff became interested in forensic anthropology as a tool for human rights investigations as a graduate student. Her inspiration for such work was born out of reading *Witnesses from the Grave: The Stories Bones Tell* (7, 259). She spends a great deal of time describing the picturesque surroundings of her mission sites and the essence of beauty that shell-shocked burnt out homes and hotels still possess. The beauty of the countryside and the fantasy of what those old buildings must have been like are sharply contrasted with the macabre descriptions of her work in the field and the technical descriptions of her work in the makeshift morgues. Koff may be trying to draw the readers' attention to her assertion that these crimes against humanity can and at some level do happen anywhere in the world (264). The buildings also become stand ins for the missing, they bear the same marks as the dead and are left behind as a reminder that the unimaginable happened against the backdrop of beauty. Koff also reminds us through her descriptions of survivors' everyday lives that people go on living....

Mandy says

The Bone Woman is an incredibly well-written and poignant book written by the forensic anthropologist Clea Koff. The author talks about her work on mass graves in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo as part of UN International Criminal Tribunal investigations.

It is hard to describe this book - I feel like I have undertaken a very long and exhausting journey. Ms Koff described her surroundings so well I feel as if I actually visited hot, leafy forests in Rwanda and cold, grey landscapes in the Balkans. There were times when I had to put this book down and simply process the information that I was reading.

There is something about the human condition whereby we find it hard to imagine mass murder; we find it hard to comprehend the mechanics of taking the life of hundreds of people in one event; we find it hard to imagine that these were once people, to put a human face to the atrocity. In her book, Clea Koff does this for us - she paints a picture whereby the reader is finally able to comprehend and understand.

Renice says

Great source of information from a forensic anthropologist but a bit of a bore to read. Experiences are not always exciting... Maybe it's just from the way it's written?
