



Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils

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An irresistible journey of discovery, science, history, and myth making, told through the lives and afterlives of seven famous human ancestors

Over the last century, the search for human ancestors has spanned four continents and resulted in the discovery of hundreds of fossils. While most of these discoveries live quietly in museum collections, there are a few that have become world-renowned celebrity personas—ambassadors of science that speak to public audiences. In *Seven Skeletons*, historian of science Lydia Pyne explores how seven such famous fossils of our ancestors have the social cachet they enjoy today.

Drawing from archives, museums, and interviews, Pyne builds a cultural history for each celebrity fossil—from its discovery to its afterlife in museum exhibits to its legacy in popular culture. These seven include the three-foot tall “hobbit” from Flores, the Neanderthal of La Chapelle, the Taung Child, the Piltdown Man hoax, Peking Man, *Australopithecus sediba*, and Lucy—each embraced and celebrated by generations, and vivid examples of how discoveries of how our ancestors have been received, remembered, and immortalized.

With wit and insight, Pyne brings to life each fossil, and how it is described, put on display, and shared among scientific communities and the broader public. This fascinating, endlessly entertaining book puts the impact of paleoanthropology into new context, a reminder of how our past as a species continues to affect, in astounding ways, our present culture and imagination.

Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils Details

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From Reader Review Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils for online ebook

Wanda says

An interesting exploration of the reasons that certain paleo-human fossils achieve the status of icons in popular culture. What makes a fossil catch the interest of everyday people? Firsts are always attention grabbing, as are remains which include skulls or very complete skeletons. A good nickname or discovery story helps too (see Lucy, *Australopithecus afarensis*). And you can't beat good old-fashioned controversy either!

When controversy is one of the requirements, it becomes obvious why the author chose Piltdown Man, the English fake, as one of her iconic fossils! Talk about controversial—and people continue to speculate today about who all was in on the hoax and who got fooled. Humans are attracted to good stories, especially mysteries, so I guess Piltdown deserves this position.

Also interesting was the choice of Peking Man, where the actual fossils were lost in the swirling turmoil of WW2 in China. Only casts of the major fossils remain, but once again there is a very noir mystery surrounding the fate of the real McCoy. The mystery is like catnip to puzzle-solving people and the search for the original fossils continues.

I was most interested in the final two chapters, concerning the Flores Island “Hobbit” and *Australopithecus sediba*. The first I was only familiar with through the original news announcements and the second was unknown to me. I'm not sure that we could label either of them “iconic” just yet, but there is certainly potential.

Interestingly absent were any of the Leakey family's discoveries, as was any discussion of the personal rivalries between Richard Leakey and Donald Johanson (Lucy's discoverer). Hearteningly present was the open attitude of the paleoanthropologists who are sharing their data on *Australopithecus sediba*—instead of hoarding the fossil and the data, they are opening the doors to any researcher with an interest and showing a new, inclusive way of doing paleoanthropological research which gives me great hope for the future.

Carmen Tracey says

Fascinating subject matter and interesting interpretations and ideas put forth by the author, but the writing was often clunky, the sentences convoluted and the language overly academic. Almost sounded like it was written by a lit crit major. Pacing was, perhaps by necessity, slow. Overall a thought-provoking and enjoyable read, laying out these famous fossils in particular and paleoanthropology in general for the educated layperson, but not gripping or deeply affecting in the way the best history or science writing is. Really more of a sociology or cultural anthro read than a popular science book.

Jamie says

3.5 rating. Fascinating look into 6 fossil studies and the history/science behind them. It also covers the

controversy surrounding the discovery of Sediba.

Love this subject matter and it was informative - and I really enjoyed the chapter on the Peking man-just at times, I felt it was a little dull.

Zivile says

I received this book through "First to Read" program.

I woke up this morning and learned about new Pokemon Go app game and rushed out of the bed, where I, usually, spend at least 30 mins trying to get up, in order to play that new exciting game. But as soon as I left my bed I dropped on my couch to finish "Seven Skeletons". Because this book is so interesting!

When I was in the 6th grade, that was the first thorough encounter with the oldest human ancestors. I memorized Lucy, neanderthals and a female fossil somewhere from Siberia. Recently, in the news I learned about the hobbit-like huminids... So, I wasn't too well acquainted with our possible ancestors. And if you're in the same category - this book will give you plenty of knowledge about most famous seven prehistoric human fossils.

I've been following news on evolution science like every educated person is expected to. And in just a short time I've noticed how, for example, view on neanderthals have changed. They were introduced to me as inferior species who failed and therefore are extinct; now we face a question - what if they were as good as homo sapiens or even better and we simply killed them all? If in the past we were trying to draw a very straight line of how we evolved from one to another huminid, today we start asking ourselves - what if we were unique but not connected species, and homo sapiens triggered the extinction of them all (while migrating)? We are, after all, very destructive species, no one can't deny it. And sometimes political correctness is more acceptable than harsh truth.

This book is very well written and even if it's from a scientific category, anyone not involved in paleoanthropology will be able to enjoy this book. It doesn't bother us with long history and hypothesis of what those fossils could have been like in their times, but it gives us an anthropological point of view how these fossils have lived their afterlives: some became icons, some were faked, some were lost, some were forgotten... What you can clearly see throughout this short paleoanthropology's history through fossils is that people from early days had the agenda to draw a clear line between these fossils in order to make "sense" out of them. Which was even heightened by famous Piltdown forgery (but British were always anglo-centered, alas!). And every time they thought they made a perfect summary, a new fossil would pop out, which would destroy all that perfect alignment (haha!); and puts everybody at another search for "missing link".

I met quite a few intelligent and scientific people who dropped belief in evolution just because of that constant failure in finding a "missing link". If we stopped looking for "missing link", perhaps we would be able to see something new; not to be afraid to break the rules and perhaps even rewrite the whole human evolution...

Nikki says

Received to review via Netgalley

Seven Skeletons is a very readable survey of some of the most famous hominid skeletons ever discovered. The choice of skeletons to discuss is interesting: it includes the known hoax, Piltdown Man, because like or not, that alleged find had a massive effect on the field for far too long. It's not solely a discussion of each skeleton's merits as part of the hominid ancestry, but also of their part in our culture and history. Indeed, the most important aspect is that it places each skeleton in context, viewing them as a part of a larger picture as well.

If you're very familiar with the stories of hominid finds around the world, you may not find much new here. What I enjoyed was the contextualising, even to the extent of discussing speculative fiction based on the finds. That context is far too often ignored, considering speculative fiction is often right on the cutting edge. For a detailed analysis of each skeleton's importance on an anatomical level, I'd look elsewhere, and it'd be a heavier read. This is more cultural and thus, for me, easier (though not necessarily more fun!).

Some of the formatting was awkward, but I put that down to reading an advance copy on my Kindle. I imagine those issues will be smoothed out for the published version, especially the print edition.

Originally posted [here](#).

David says

From Kindle location 1964 of my free uncorrected advance electronic copy of this book:

Some of these reconstructions and visual images become culturally coded into the intellectual and public milieu and serve as important signifiers for cultural space.

I believe that your reaction to this quote will predict your enjoyment of this book. There is a lot of writing like it. If you can read it as you might any other sentence, without strong reaction, then you might enjoy this book. If not, not.

I must admit that sentences like this irritate me. I tell myself, with all seriousness, "Perhaps they shouldn't bother me". But they do.

Rather than just carping, I'm going to try to write a version which, in my opinion, is an improvement, but still doesn't alter the author's message.

Museum dioramas and other visuals used in popular exhibitions sometimes become strong symbols in the public imagination. These symbols take on a life of their own long after the exhibitions close down.

This book is well-researched and about an interesting topic, but sentences like the above did not make reading it more pleasurable.

Although it seems unlikely that the above quote will change, I hope that the final copy of the book will correct several other distracting mistakes in my galley copy. Many of them were noted in an earlier review here at Goodreads. In addition, I'd like to report that "outraged" is misspelled at location 855. Finally, nearly immediately after the misspelling (location 858), a scientist is said to have immortalized the Piltdown Man

story in “campy prose”. Immediately afterward follows a long quotation in written in rhyming couplets. This, I think, meets the definition of poetry, not prose.

More generally, I think that this book is OK, but it really missed a great opportunity to be a better book. It just can't seem to decide who its audience is. It seems like it might be aimed at a mass audience, but the author backs away from obvious opportunities to make the book more accessible to the general reader. (Maybe she felt that doing so would “dumb down” the book.) Sometimes technical terms appear without warning or explanation, but other times technical terms are explained. Topics that might be compelling to the non-expert reader (e.g., competing opinions about the identity of the Piltdown hoaxer) are given a cursory once-over, something I found especially strange in a book that purported to be about “fossil as celebrity”. I just think the author didn't have a clear idea what the non-expert reader knew or found interesting.

BTW, hashtag “the rest of the story”, here are two bits of recent news about the fossils mentioned in this book, specifically, Piltdown Man and Lucy. The latter article is especially interesting as it casts serious doubt on the headline-grabbing “Lucy died falling from a tree” narrative of only a few days previous.

Thanks to Penguin Random House and Netgalley for an uncorrected advance electronic copy of this book.

Holly says

I enjoyed this! I remember handling casts of these skulls in my undergraduate anthropology classes, memorizing the morphology of each to pass an exam. Pyne brought them back to life for me as she presents, in approximate order of discovery, The Old Man, Peking Man, Piltdown man, the Taung Child, "Lucy," the "Hobbit" (*Homo floresiensis*), and "Sediba" (*Australopithecus sediba*) - the last two, and *Ardipithecus* as well, had not even been discovered in 1992 when I was taking those classes!

Pyne describes being challenged by a colleague to defend why she's writing about seven fossils that are *already* well-known rather than the important ones that get little public attention. But she focuses on these because her book is about WHY they are famous, and by explaining how each fossil came to have a popular identity she can explore what scientific paradigms and paleoanthropological knowledge were like at the time of their discovery. Her subject is the cross-relationships between science, history, and popular culture. So each chapter describes the discovery and the historical context, then moves on to how it was received by the public and why it's known today. Each chapter expands to a slightly different emphasis, as the culture changes. (I'm making it sound formulaic but it's not.) Piltdown is included because it shows the Euro-centric biases of the scientific establishment in the early 20th century and because the hoax still fascinates today. ~ This book would make great supplementary reading for a paleoanthropology course or a class on science & culture.

Laura says

Seven Skeletons takes a look at what makes a fossil famous, what helps connect it to the public's consciousness. Pyne looks at seven archaeological finds - including one hoax - and how they came to life once again upon their discovery.

I wish that the author spent more time on the revitalization of the fossils as they became part of the

conversation, and less on some of the specifics, like the taxonomy of each name. I knew that I was in for some science with this book, of course. But I was hoping for more of the cultural impact. It's in there, but to varying degrees for each skeleton.

The chapter on Lucy was my favorite, for it captured the best of both sides of the story. I went to see Lucy when she was exhibited at the Pacific Science Center, and the way the author describes the event was spot-on: there was a reverence to seeing her, an awe in standing before this human ancestor six million years later. The author uses the popularity of Lucy's tour to argue for more access to fossils for all of us.

There is a lot to learn here, so if you're interested, it's worth your time to pick this up. If this isn't your usual fare, it probably won't turn you into a fan. Try something else first, and then come back to this.

My thanks to the publisher for an ARC of this book through the First to Read program.

Sarah says

Way behind on my reviews, gotta catch up before school starts! Prepare for short and choppy...

Okay, this one was a mixed bag. The content completely carried the book, so it's a good thing this was nonfiction instead of fiction. I've been fascinated by early homonids since my biological anthropology class back in freshman year of college (my ideal major would have been English-History-Anthropology-Psychology with minors in Creative Writing and Women's studies, but alas, there is only so much time in the day). I'd actually learned about all but the last of the described skeletons before, though of course not in the detail that Pyne goes into here. If anything, I may have wanted more detail: How could scientists know from just a few bones of a single example of a different species that homonid was male or female? How can they tell that they're different species with only partial skeletons? How do scientists decide what makes a new species (except in the obvious case of *homo floresiensis*)? How did they preserve the spongy, not-actually-fossilized *homo floresiensis* bones? I would have liked to know more about the frequently-mentioned Java Man, but that would have ruined the title's alliteration and the book's symmetry.

What's fascinating about this book, though, is that these questions aren't neglected by negligence but by choice. It's remarkable that this book isn't just about human evolution but, in fact, about how modern *homo sapiens* react to these skeletons: it's not just the scientific story, but the story of the media, the cultural impact. This actually would have made the book more appealing to me up front, since I'm very interested in how humans relate to each other and to the world around them. I would have made this much more obvious up front by slipping another word into the subtitle: "The Cultural Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils." But that might be the scholarly side of my publishing experience coming through--I can't exactly say that I know better than a trade editor about what titles catch attention. Probably that subtitle sounds too academic and stuffy for the educated, non-specialist reader.

I can definitely tell the writer has potential, but there should have been a lot more editing in this. Granted, I was reading an ARC, so I have no idea how far ahead of the pub date this particular review copy was printed--it's quite possible it did get a lot more editorial help after this point. Some points:

- > In the space of three pages, three paragraphs begin, "Today, the Old Man..."
- > Three paragraphs are exactly repeated--I seriously hope this is something that was caught before the book went to print!

> I could never figure out why some words were defined but not others. We're told that a scapula is "part of the shoulder" but we don't get a definition of paleoanthropology. I would guess that readers, even if they know what the separate parts mean, might want to know before diving into the text how, exactly, we can extrapolate about human species from fossilized bones. Dinosaurs are guesses enough, and it seems like we have far more of them than we have homonids. (Hey, that would have been a useful factoid to include! But I'm not docking points for that).

> Puns, oh my heck. Here and there they're fun, but for some reason they were almost exclusively concentrated in a single chapter and involved repeated use of the phrase, "no bones about it." Ha flipping ha. You can't use that more than about twice without it becoming a groaner.

Okay, this is picky, but Pyne hinted at a potentially fascinating point in the chapter on *homo floresiensis* before dropping it like a hot potato: the contemporary local legends of the ebu gogo, small human-like creatures that live in the forest (205). This is a ready-made opening for an interesting sentence or two here about the possibility of overlap between two species of homonid and the length of cultural memory, but Pyne doesn't follow it up. To be clear, the only reason I'm complaining about this is because I did a paper on it in college and because I'm fascinated by the ways some fairy tales are shaped by reality.

Okay, on to quotes--not as many as usual, for which you're probably thankful.

Quote Roundup

74) *I just love that the British Museum is saving satire, poetry, and cartoons about Piltdown Man along with the bones. This is exactly the kind of archival work I fantasize about.*

97) *I must admit, I found it interesting how little Pyne mentioned religious opponents of human evolution. Here's one page where it is addressed. This was also the page where I really understood that this wasn't just a story about the skeletons, but public investment in their discovery and interpretation.*

220) *Here's where there was an opportunity to discuss how scientists determine sexual dimorphism versus individual variation.*

222) *I felt a little warm inside knowing that as far back as the 1920s/30s, a male archaeologist tried to nickname a fossil "Nelly" to combat what he saw as explicit sexism by referring to particular hominin discoveries as "man."*

Wow, almost none of my quotes were actually quotes. Don't think that's ever happened before...

Overall, I recommend the book for its fascinating content, but not for structural or stylistic execution. But this recommendation is made with the caveat that I have no idea how close to final this ARC draft was when it was printed. And I'm a grumpy fan of continuous narrative who unfairly doesn't cut nonfiction writers a little slack.

Anna Nesterovich says

I won a copy of this book through the Goodreads Giveaways and was so looking forward to read it! Since I got it before the publication day, I made sure to clear enough days in reading "schedule" so I could post my review the day the book was officially out. Turned out I didn't set aside enough time, this reading took me

more than a month instead of a usual week for 200-300 pages.

I was anticipating eagerly. Science and scientists desperately need that popularization element. We all need books that explain current research, make it a part of the paradigm the society lives in, inspire people to ask questions and seek answers. Unfortunately, lame attempts at all these things hurt the science more than no attempts at all.

My disenchantment started with a feeling that I'm reading a scientific paper - as if I don't read enough of them - and not a good paper at that. The same style, the same jumping thoughts and sloppy writing characteristic of bad papers that nobody wants to read, but everyone in the field has to, because (ten different reasons here). After page 25, where "the stereoscope expanded [research possibilities] in the same way that telescopes and microscopes expanded the visual possibilities for other sciences centuries before", my reading slowed down significantly. Because no, it didn't. The CT scan expanded possibilities for paleoanthropology the same way microscopes did, not stereoscopes. Could the author really not see the difference? How? Why? Should I read it?

By the end of chapter One, I resorted to highlighting, which I never do with books, only with papers. The last three pages of this chapter in my advanced copy was a jumble of several sentences repeated over and over again (at least 4 times) in different order. Very surprised, I decided to wait for the release date and continued reading the hard cover. At least this mess at the end of the Old Man chapter was fixed, which is a huge relief.

The part I liked best was a heroic saga "Australopithecus" by Dr. Walet Rose on the page 104. It is simply the best part of the book. Can you imagine my disappointment, when the reference given at the end turned out to be "Raymond Dart Archive", which basically means that there is no way I can read the whole saga?

I have lots of remarks about the content of this book, thanks to "scientific paper mode" of reading - I kept notes, highlighted, and wrote on margins, but each one of them is small and insignificant, until you see them all together. The overall conclusion is depressing. What was it? A dissertation published as a book? It's written in worst possible way for the genre. The author gives bits and pieces. The moment writing turns into a story and becomes interesting, she changes the topic and keeps jumping the whole book. She doesn't give any conclusions, just piles up little facts in a way that suggests she waits for the reader to make the "right" conclusion, the one she has in mind. But the piled facts are too small to be interesting and the whole pile is not comprehensive enough to draw any conclusions. They are just hanging there, a messy pile of facts.

I'm very upset after reading this book, but give it three stars nevertheless, for the effort of popularizing paleoanthropology.

Baal Of says

This book is not so much about the science of evolution, and more about the culture meaning of the various fossils. I thought it was a good choice to cover the Piltdown hoax, as this gives a good idea of how science is self-correcting, when scientists are allowed to freely pursue their interests.

Bonnye Reed says

GNAB I received a free electronic copy of this fine book from Netgalley, Penguin Group Viking, and Lydia Pyne in exchange for an honest review. Thank you, folks, for sharing your work with me.

And this is an exciting and encouraging look at the field of paleoanthropology and access to these marvelous discoveries by both professional and amateur alike. As this field has grown over the last hundred years, the knowledge accrued has escalated in both quantity and speed of revelation to the point where new finds are shared rapidly with the scientific community and the public very quickly. Lydia Pyne does a detailed history of the seven most well-known fossil finds - Lucy, The Old Man of La Chapelle, Piltdown, the Taung Child, Peking Man, Flo and the newest finds, Sediba. She explains in layman's terms why these fossil finds are the seven best known out of thousands of important finds, and what it takes to generate a famous fossil. An important work for all of us interested in archaeology and the evolution of humanity.

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Penguin Group, Viking

Beth Lee says

Factual content but a pretty boring read. I had hoped for a "storylike" quality but, to me, this read like a text book. It's not bad (except for the excessive use of the word "plethora") just not for me.

Tony says

SEVEN SKELETONS. (2016). Lydia Pyne. ***1/2.

The author, who has degrees in history and archaeology, with a PhD in history and the philosophy of science, has done a fine job in relaying to the average reader the importance of the studies being done in paleoanthropology. To facilitate this, she has selected seven different discoveries of humanoids over the years that have become touchstones in the field. Actually, there are only five sets of bones that she can really talk about: the Piltdown Man turned out to be a fake, and Peking Man's bones went missing as a result of an accident at sea. When you look at what these science specialists do, it seems nothing more boring can be worked at. It is only after findings have been made that some excitement can creep in as they are analyzed to see how they fit into our family tree. The objective here is to fit in new findings into our family tree, i.e., are we in direct line with them or do they represent new branches of life. All of this is fascinating work – much like a spot-on mystery novel. The author also takes the time to help us understand why some findings become superstars – like Lucy – while others just seem to become fillers within existing data sets. All in all, this is a good read told by a talented writer.

Annie says

Marvelous. Most of us have heard of these skeletons before, if we frequent museums or took an anthro course in college, but this book is the perfect amount of in-depth without getting tedious. (Also, a very soothing and fun audiobook to fall asleep to).

Snap to the author for comparing the Piltdown Man hoax to Milli Vanilli. Didn't see that coming.

