

BOOK REVIEWS

Missing & Murdered. A Personal Adventure in Forensic Anthropology.

By Alan G Morris. Pp. vii + 240. Zebra Press. Cape Town. 2011. ISBN 978-1-77022-361-5.

The eminent Dutch palaeopathologist, P A Janssens, in his 1970 book on the disease and injuries of prehistoric humans, described burr holes in the skulls of early humans (a process now known as trephination). Presumably, this was to treat conditions such as headaches, epilepsy, mental illness, migraine, and head wounds and injuries. The latter would have included relief of subdural and extradural haemorrhage; if so, it required considerable diagnostic and clinical skill. Trephination was common practice and the osteological evidence is that survival was high and the rate of infection low. All this would have contributed to the idea that early human hunter gatherers were a gentle, harmless people with considerable intellectual, language and artistic skills.

Alan Morris, in his recent book, public lectures and op-ed pieces, presents a more realistic picture of human life in those times. Besides the undoubted achievements, he describes a murder rate that is high, a violent end to life that was common, and he postulates group ethnicity and xenophobia. Accidental end and mass graves were frequent, much like present times. Ritual cannibalism was common. Competition for food and of culture was rife. Systematic South African data are, however, not available, although some information has been gleaned from excavations in the Kalahari desert, Modder River, Western Cape and elsewhere.

The book describes and explains the investigative tools available to the modern forensic anthropologist, and their limitations. These tools include dating of skeletal remains using the radioactive isotope lead 210, determination of sex (with 80% accuracy), estimating age at the time of death, microscopic bone structure, the LO mitochondrial gene as an indicator of 'broad ancestral groups', sequence determination of base pairs in strands of DNA, DNA 'fingerprinting', facial reconstruction, and estimating the nature of marine diet by detection of 15-nitrogen.

A dedicated and experienced teacher and supervisor of postgraduate students, Alan Morris has done well to explain his discipline in straightforward terms for the interested reader. He argues that South Africa is a suitable and an important, and a neglected, place to conduct research into forensic anthropology, starting with an African database that would build up a picture of health and disease in early humans.

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Handling Truth: Navigating the Riptides of Rhetoric, Religion, Reason, and Research.

By William Melvin Gardner. Pp. 192. \$12.95 (paperback), \$9.95 (ebook for Kindle and Nook). Logica Books. 2012. ISBN 978-0-9761875-1-6 and 978-0-9761875-2-3, respectively. Information and contact available at: handlingtruth.com

Do not tell a patient that they have cancer – they cannot handle this and behave inappropriately. This was the gist of the teaching of my mentor, Professor Jannie Louw, when I was a medical student. This book does not deal with such, now outdated, patient-related specifics, but with the four main domains of truth. These concepts are most helpful when we, as medical scientists, find ourselves perplexed by people (and our patients) latching onto other beliefs rather than taking our advice. Gardner's descriptions of the domains of truth: rhetorica, mystica, logica and empirica, are an easy read and help us to make sense of why and how people differ in their views of the world.

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