

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *A Voice for the Dead*

REFERENCE: Starrs EE, Ramslandk A. *A voice for the dead: a forensic investigator's pursuit of the truth in the grave*, G. P. Putman & Sons, New York, NY, 2005, 277 pp.

For those readers of this Journal who are familiar with Professor Starrs through his writings, lectures, breakfast presentations and television appearances, expectations will be met. For those few previously unexposed, a treat is in store, for this book is vintage Starrs.

The introduction to *A Voice for the Dead* is an instructive exposition on exhumation and its somewhat blurry distinction from excavation. Jim Starrs' preconditions for a justifiable exhumation are both rigid and reassuring to those who would look askance at the delayed disturbance of a decedent. The author's interest in this process apparently came as something of an epiphany in the middle years of a distinguished career as a law school luminary. He felt a calling to orchestrate and conduct the application of modern forensic sciences in resolution of certain historical uncertainties and ambiguities of which he had become keenly aware. Widely accepted explanations of the demise of several historical figures are without scientific proof or credibility. Starrs determined to become the prolocutor of these heroes or villains, perpetrators or victims. The lawyer in him insisted they deserved their day in court, and that he could provide a voice for the dead through exhumation and scientific investigation. This book is a memoir of several of those almost quixotic quests.

Of the many exhumation which he has directed, Professor Starrs selects five for chapter-long dissertations: 1) Alfred G. Packer, the "Colorado cannibal"; 2) Carl W. Weiss, the mild-mannered ENT specialist accused of assassinating Huey Long; 3) Frank Olson, the CIA scientist whose mysterious and fatal defenestration from

a 13th story hotel room in Manhattan raised suspicion of a high-level cover up; 4) Jesse James, the notorious outlaw never arrested or convicted of a crime, famously murdered from behind by "that dirty little coward," yet alive in legend for decades thereafter; and 5) Mary Sullivan, supposedly the victim of Albert de Salvo, who supposedly was the infamous Boston Strangler.

Each of those chapters is richly furnished with fascinating background material in the appropriate historical setting. The preparation and performance of the actual exhumation are exemplars of persistence, determination and scientific teamwork. The denouements usually come with just the little twist expected of a good Irish storyteller.

Jim Starrs is an accomplished wordsmith who crafts sometimes intricate sentences of precisely selected words from a prodigious vocabulary. Many of us are dismayed by the merciless pruning of individual literary style from contemporary scientific "literature" by overzealous copy editors who worship only the simple declarative sentence. Starrs' scholarly style, often spiced with contemporary references and impish wit, is a rare delight.

Katherine Ramsland deserves probably the highest compliment due to a writer whose contribution is acknowledged on a book's jacket as "with" or "as told to." Her input is not discernable and does not cramp Starrs' style.

The final chapter of this book is a lament for several failed or thwarted exhumation projects—George Washington's brother Samuel, Meriwether Lewis, Lizzie Borden. But this does not imply that they have been abandoned. Given Professor Starrs' dogged tenacity, unflinching enthusiasm, continued vigorous health, and that bit of a leprechaun hiding behind the beard, one suspects that some of these temporary set-backs may become the core of a sequel to the present volume.

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