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Review of *Forensic Anthropology: A Comprehensive Introduction*

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Nebraska Anthropologist Book Review

Forensic Anthropology: A Comprehensive Introduction.

Editors: Natalie R. Langley and Maria Teresa A. Tersigni-Tarrant. 2017, 2nd Edition.

CRC Press, Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton, Florida, USA.

ISBN: 13: 978-1-4987-3612-1 (Hardback).

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This book looks to contribute to the proper training of all post-secondary students in theory, methods and best practices of forensic anthropology. The book fits a niche in a post-2009 National Academy of Sciences call for standards development and validation of research and methods in general forensic sciences. Historically, the US Departments of Justice and Defense took the lead in best practice development with the now-defunct Scientific Working Group for Anthropology (SWGANTH). As conceived by Langley and Tersigni-Tarrant (the editors), this textbook is to serve as an introductory resource, intended to focus on training a new generation of forensic anthropologist who will maintain the best professional standards and live up to medico-legal expectations.

The thrust of this review is to evaluate the book, check the extent to which the intended objectives have been achieved, identify the strengths, and suggest how any observed deficits can be addressed in a subsequent edition. The authors of this review are aware that a Third Edition is under development at this time.

While there are two editors (Langley and Tersigni-Tarrant), there are 25 authors spread amongst 18 chapters and two appendices. Each author is a bonified expert in their field, be it forensic anthropology, forensic odontology, forensic archaeology, taphonomy and the post-mortem interval, as well as various aspects of the biological profile.

A close assessment of the biographies of the editors and contributing authors reveal a diverse group of experts in their respective niches, with many years of experience. Almost all hold doctoral degrees in addition to being Diplomates of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology, Inc. While few are retired, the authors generally span the spectrum of service forensic anthropologists/archaeologist/biological anthropologists, consultants to the Office of Medical Examiners, Federal and State Agencies (like the Laboratories of the US Department of Defense's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, DPAA), the Smithsonian Museum, and some international bodies like the International Committee of Red Cross. Many are in academia conducting research and are well published. It is noteworthy that most of the authors hold combinations of these positions, and those retired either work as Emeritus Professors or are engaged in private consultancy.

GENERAL OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book consists of 18 Chapters arranged into 4 Sections, and 2 Appendices. It is pertinent at this stage to list this arrangement for ease of subsequent reference. Section I is comprised of chapters on the history of forensic anthropology in the US, treating skeletal remains as evidence, concepts of forensic archaeology, and forensic taphonomy. Section II focuses on a review of hard tissues (human osteology, human odontology, and the examination of skeletal materials and their documentation). Section III details up-to-date methodologies on the biological profile (sex, ancestry, age, and stature estimation as well as pathological conditions and skeletal trauma). Also in Section III, is a general overview of using the current version of FORDISC (3) and other statistics in understanding human variation. The final section deals with a variety of concepts that are important – the most detailed is understanding the postmortem interval. Also included in Section IV are various methods of personal identification, the forensic investigation of mass fatalities, and advanced topics such as fire and commingled remains. Appendix A focuses on more detailed understanding of forensic odontology while Appendix B examines theoretical and practical elements of age estimation.

The chapters are well researched and written by authors with expertise in their respective areas. Case studies and some research details are provided where necessary in many “Blue Boxes” within the book. There are also copious photographs, cited data and tables. The book has a good layout that allows for easy reading and flow. There is a display of the learning objectives at the beginning of each chapter, copious illustrations, a summary at the end of each chapter, and a set of revision questions for the student to use for self-evaluation. Thus, each chapter is structured with learning objectives and a review of what will follow: *Contents*, followed by the *Learning Objectives*, and ends with the *Summary*. Additionally, a list of review questions, a glossary of terms, and suggested readings for the student to delve deeply into the topic. We have found that while the textbook can be used as a standalone for an undergraduate course, the list of suggested readings can enhance its use as a part of a graduate student course of study.

This brings to the fore, what might have been the degree of contributions of each individual to the chapters. There is also the risk that some subtle discordance of views might be apparent. The author of Appendix B could have adequately contributed Chapter 10 alone, thus replacing the existing three contributors of that chapter. Appendix B extensively covers the subject of age estimation and could have easily replaced the entire contents of Chapter 10. While it is obvious from the above that the contributors are qualified to have been involved in writing the book, perhaps there are too many contributors for 18 Chapters and two Appendices. These can create some inconsistencies in practice and information as well as a lack of consistency in the voice of the entire volume. This was a complaint from users of the First Edition and the problem of a limited voice has not been completely rectified.

One curious redundancy is that at the end of the entire book is a list of Glossary for each of the 18 Chapters, followed by the Index. This repetition of the list of Glossary can be considered a waste as the specific components are already listed individually at the end of each chapter.

However, slight re-arrangement of the chapters may have been preferable. Moving the chapters around and placing them into different Sections would perhaps allow for a better and more logical flow of the information. It is our opinion that the above suggested re-arrangement will allow for an easier flow of the reading process for the new student.

SECTION I introduces the student to the subject of forensic anthropology and Chapter I rightly gives the definition and touches on the historical perspective. However, the historical aspect is primarily focused on the development of forensic anthropology in the United States. One aspect of this history that will hopefully be rectified in the Third Edition is the understanding of contributions of marginalized scientists. However, this general introductory section could have been followed up with the contents of Chapter 5 (Human Osteology) and Chapter 6 (Human Odontology and Dentition in Forensic Anthropology). This Section should have probably ended with Chapter 15, which deals with the basic and uncomplicated changes after death. Thus, Section I could have served as a short review of normal human osteology, dental pattern, and taphonomy/decomposition after death, before plunging the student into forensic anthropology which is often meant to address the abnormal or unknown situations related to identification.

In SECTION II, the student is to be introduced to the different settings in which skeletal remains might be encountered, and how to proceed with the handling of such situations. This Section could accommodate the contents of Chapters 2 (Skeletal Remains as Evidence), 3 (Forensic Archeology), 4 (Forensic Taphonomy) and 7 (Skeletal Examination and Documentation). Forensic Taphonomy could be expanded a bit to add some additional information about the different forms of disposal often encountered (human agency as a taphonomic process), impact of geographical and soil type, and other abiotic factors that could modify the bone changes after death, etc. This is particularly for the consumption of the graduate students and general practitioners, who of course would be required to possess additional specialized texts.

Thus, Chapter 7 would act as a transition to Section III.

SECTION III deals largely with laboratory analysis. It will naturally comprise Chapters 8 – 14. As previously suggested, Appendix B could adequately replace Chapter 10 or at least be placed immediately after the current chapter on aging techniques.

SECTION IV is focused on some contemporary issues and special situations. Consequently, it is appropriate to have the current Chapters 16 – 18 in this Section.

Overall, this text fits very well into the body of literature in forensic anthropology and has largely addressed the purpose for undergraduate and graduate courses. It is not overly technical, and it is good for undergraduate teaching and practical work. The reviewers would also recommend it to graduate students, and as a good resource text for practicing forensic anthropologists. It is hoped that the suggested changes will be reflected in the subsequent edition. Additionally, we believe that this text can also function as a compact field guide to be used while conducting case work and having numerous techniques and processes available at

one's fingertips. This second edition is easy to read and it is intended to meet a one-semester requirement. It is a textbook that can be used for advance undergraduate or graduate student curriculum. Furthermore, the chapter on Forensic Taphonomy can be expanded a bit to add some more information about the different forms of disposal often encountered, impact of geographical and soil type, and other abiotic factors that could modify the bone changes after death. This is particularly for the consumption of the graduate students and general practitioners, who of course would be required to possess additional specialized texts.