

# **Dead Men Do Tell Tales Study Guide**

**Dead Men Do Tell Tales by William R. Maples**

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# Plot Summary

William Maples is one of the United States' most important forensic anthropologists in the second half of the twentieth century. *Dead Men Do Tell Tales: The Strange and Fascinating Cases of a Forensic Anthropologist* is a mixture of Maples's most famous cases and the story of his career, beginning with his interests in forensics as a young man extending all the way to cases in the mid-1990s before his death in 1997. Maples's specialty is the human skeleton. His expertise is so widely known that he has the opportunity to study a number of famous skeletons, including those of Francisco Pizzaro, Tsar Nicholas II, Joseph Merrick also known as "The Elephant Man," and Ted Bundy.

*Dead Men Do Tell Tales* is for the reader with a strong stomach. The details of rotting skeletons, how the human body burns when cremated, the explanations of how murder weapons can be identified by the markings they make in human bones and the reconstructed murder cases are gruesome. However, they are an integral part of a tale about a man intimately connected to the human body and its core structure, the skeleton. Maples claims that he is not a religious man, but philosophical observations on the nature of evil pervade the book. While Maples never claims to understand the origin of evil, he is mystified by the evil he finds etched into the bones of victims and lying somewhere within the long-since decayed bodies of the bones of murderers that come into his lab. Maples is deeply existential about his skeletons, sometimes feeling deeply connected to them.

One of Maples's most important aims in writing the book is not to mystify the reader but to defend the science of forensic anthropology for its usefulness in solving historical mysteries and gruesome crimes. Maples sees his field as under attack by budget cuts and a lack of awareness of the usefulness of his craft. He claims that forensic anthropologists can more than pay for themselves in reduced court costs and that every state in the United States should have at least one on staff. More broadly, Maples sees his book as defending the use of science to understand human nature.

The book is composed in largely chronological order, with sixteen chapters. Chapter 1, *Every Day Is Halloween*, and Chapter 2, *Talkative Skulls*, introduce Maples, the main themes of the book and explain how he came to be interested in forensic anthropology. The remaining fourteen chapters tell particular tales, examining the forensic details of famous murders or particularly challenging crimes. Perhaps the most perplexing and lengthy chapter is Chapter 11, *Death in Ten Thousand Fragments*, which explains how Maples and his team reconstruct ten thousand bone fragments to help pin down the culprit of a murder-suicide. The chapters on famous studies are also interesting, such as Chapter 14, *Arsenic and "Old Rough and Ready"*, where Maples shows to a high degree of certainty that American President Zachary Taylor was not poisoned by arsenic as he was thought to have been.



# Chapters 1-2, Every Day Is Halloween, Talkative Skulls

## Chapters 1-2, Every Day Is Halloween, Talkative Skulls Summary and Analysis

Author William Maples has seen death countless times in many manifestations but always sees it through a scientific lens. He teaches physical anthropology to graduate students at the University of Florida, though he is often asked to investigate wrongful death cases. With a scientist's perspective, then, Maples believes that the truths about such deaths wish to be discovered and can be through the science of forensic anthropology. The human skeleton, unnamed and "unfleshed," fills Maples with wonder and provides him a mystery to unravel with the tools of science alone. He also wants to see life as it really is, no matter how bad. When Maples sees his first autopsy photos—of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow—he is enthralled. However, Maples recognizes that what he does also serves a public, not just a personal, purpose.

Maples asks readers looking for a spiritual perspective on death to read another book. He is raised without faith and is not overwhelmed by evil. Instead, he is raised with a simple, clear morality of honesty and integrity, which leads to anthropology only through a series of unlikely events and his teacher, Thomas McKern. When Maples is a student, he sees his first dead body outside of a coffin, a woman who dies on the way to an emergency room. In his job as an attendant for a funeral ambulance, he sees many deaths at a relatively early age and he has to face it head-on, with a reality that precedes the relatively cleaned up bodily realities presented to emergency room workers.

Maples sees his first autopsy at eighteen, in his hometown of Austin, Texas, and then quickly starts to see rotten bodies and serious mangled. In that day, Maples is an English literature undergraduate but at night he faces terrible, horrifying deaths and their human remains. In 1959, Maples graduates and marries his wife Margaret. He quickly goes on to get his PhD in anthropology, though he quickly flunks out due to taking courses while holding down two jobs. Instead, after Margaret gets her education degree, Maples goes to Dallas to become a Hartford Insurance Company investigator. He hates the job but it prepares him to be a forensic anthropologist. He meets so many evil people that his respect for humanity significantly decreases.

After some time at the job, Maples decides he wants to go back to graduate school and quickly earns his MA, leading him to Kenya. Maples becomes an anthropologist at twenty-four, studying primates. It is a memorable experience in his life, which he owes to McKern and he sees many baboons and monkeys in person. However, one day he is attacked by a baboon, leaving him with a horrible shoulder wound infected with *E. coli* bacteria, which his arm barely survives. However, the experience still proves the worth of Kenya to him.



In Chapter Two, Maples begins discussing the first time he is asked for his considered judgment about a skull. He is in graduate school and it is a pivotal moment in his life, as his advisor, McKern, treats him like a professional. He judges the skull, with jawbone removed, to be a mongoloid Japanese person, which McKern agrees with but then points out what Maples missed.

Maples notes that he has no medical degree, like forensic pathologists, but he has a PhD, having studied anthropology at the graduate level. His specialty is the human skeleton; he feels that he can always add information to a skeletal examination. He receives his first criminal case in 1972 but in 1973 many bodies crop up. By 1978, Maples has twelve cases. The first case is a skeleton of a toothless elderly man with a lot of bone fusion and who had been deaf in one ear due to a middle ear infection, which causes bone loss in the skull. With this information, the identification is clear. Maples is similarly successful with a 1974 case where he surmises that a female skeleton is of a woman who has been hit twice by a hammerlike object. The murderer is Raymond Stone, a man Maples helps to put away. The conviction is a victory for forensic anthropology in Florida.



# Chapters 3-4, Bolts of Bones, The Enfolding Earth

## Chapters 3-4, Bolts of Bones, The Enfolding Earth Summary and Analysis

Maples's laboratory is full of dry bones but the bones can still tell stories to him and his students. Bones are often burned, boiled, desiccated, are bones of martyrs, murderers, and so on. Skeletons of all kinds are housed there. The lab is built according to Maples's design in 1991. The security is as tight as it can be, given the legal importance of the skeletons. It has a safety shower, three "odor hoods" and many ventilated enclosures. Sometimes the odors are terrible.

Full skeletonization can be very rapid, as quickly as nine days depending on the environment. Maples's friend, Bill Bass, helps uncover a decay rate facility to study just this problem. In Maples's morgue, they process thirty to forty bodies a year, all of which are documented in detail. You must get used to the smell of reeking corpses but Maples has seen many policemen, lawyers and others become ill and run away when they see the bodies.

Yet there is nothing intrinsically horrible about decomposition. It consists in two well-understood processes: autolysis and putrefaction. The first occurs when digestive juices eat away the gastrointestinal tract. Putrefaction occurs from bacterial activity in the body and is the major component of decomposition. Many other processes occur, but hair and fingernails do not continue to grow after death; instead, skin simply retracts around them. These are simply carbon-based processes that obey natural laws.

Maples's lab also has a workbench he uses to study human remains, often with design frames and supports. He is familiar with tools that often give him the ability to come to clear conclusions. Machine grinders are often used to grind down bones for samples and use of photographic equipment is common. Maples often uses x-rays and his students need inoculations to work in the lab due to unusual diseases.

Maples is afraid that anatomical expertise is declining among medical doctors due to a modern medical curriculum and a skeleton shortage, as a lot of skeleton export is now prohibited. A bone course is offered in medical school but it only scratches the surface. Nature can often fool us, as can very smart human beings interested in creating hoaxes like Piltdown Man.

In Chapter 4, Maples notes that he has assisted the process of exhuming bodies many times. People do ridiculous things to dispose of dead bodies, even when cremated. Surprisingly, Maples can learn quite a lot from "cremains." The burial container is often very important. Full bodies often last longer underground. Maggots also leave important information. Killers prefer burials. And interestingly, buried bodies are rarely found



unless someone confesses the location. The more present at the burial, the more likely it will be found. Maples has encountered exceptions, which he discusses at some length. One of the more interesting exceptions occurs when a recently buried body is discovered at an Indian burial mound found by scavengers looking for ancient pots. Maples also notes that he was involved in the forensic analysis for the La Belle drug murders.



# Chapters 5-6, Flotsam and Jetsam, When the Sickness Is Your Soul

## Chapters 5-6, Flotsam and Jetsam, When the Sickness Is Your Soul Summary and Analysis

Maples encounters four or five dismemberment cases each year that are both challenging and frustrating. These cases identify brutal, cold murderers who take apart fresh human bodies. It takes quite an effort to do so; dismemberment is bloody, messy and dangerous. However, dismemberment is very effective at hiding an identity. In dismemberment cases, the victim is already dead, so Maples must put himself in the mind of a murderer, cutting his victim into pieces. Most dismemberment is done in bathtubs. The initial crimes often occur along the interstate. At one time, hacksaws are most often used to dismember bodies and, while effective, they are easy to identify in the lab. However, now chainsaws are used to save time, though they are loud and messy. For the investigator, clues come up as chainsaws have individualized cuts.

In 1981, Maples encounters an extraordinary case where a dog has eaten part of a human body; the lower portion of a right leg is found a hundred miles from the body. The rest of the body never surfaces. Most dismemberment is drug-related and tied to organized crime. Such people know how to kill and cover their tracks and Maples has experienced such cases in detail. Bodies quickly become part of the food chain, which often makes identification difficult. Dismemberment plus placing the parts in the ocean is particularly effective. In some cases, body parts can be matched and Maples recounts a few cases. He shows how frustrating the cases can be, as he must reassemble and attach body parts with long odds. The real victory in such cases is scientific, as they often get lots of attention. In one case, Maples is able to so thoroughly reconstruct a murder during a trial that the murderer changes his plea to guilty to stop from forcing himself to relive the murder. This is satisfying for Maples.

Chapter 6 concerns suicides. In Maples's experience with suicides, the cases are far less moving and noble than suicide is often portrayed. Cases are often rotten, ridiculous or sad and primarily concern young people. The act is often hasty, wasteful and stupid, though Maples is not speaking of suicides of the terminally ill. Policemen often joke about youth suicides, but often one cannot too quickly disagree with their reasons for laughing.

Most suicides are better thought out than pregnancies. Persistence is often tied to self-inflicted deaths, as the will to die can be quite strong. Some suicides are quick and painful and others are fastidious, with the person wanting to look beautiful or clean in death. Women often die in nice nightgowns and wearing make-up. Maples discusses a few of these "please-don't-fuss-over-me" suicides.





Sometimes people kill themselves without meaning to; the cases are then confused for suicides. Though sometimes these deaths are not mere accidents, but result from being reckless, such as from autoerotic asphyxiation. Sometimes murders are set up as autoerotic asphyxiations, however. These deaths are not unusual, with one a month in Florida. One man even electrocuted himself to death as he was in the habit of shocking his penis.

Suicides are often very frustrating as many methods of suicide do not leave evidence on the skeleton. Many such suicide skeletons are found in faraway places. Sometimes deaths occur from poison or drug overdoses. In other cases, when guns are involved, guns often disappear and it is unclear whether someone has committed suicide or been murdered. Most suicides that Maples sees typically involve lashing out, such as inflicting pain on loved ones or family. Florida contains a high number of suicides, particularly among the elderly.



# Chapter 7-8, Outpacing the Fiend, Unnatural Nature

## Chapter 7-8, Outpacing the Fiend, Unnatural Nature Summary and Analysis

Murderers help forensic anthropologists advance their science and the worse the crime, the more helpful the contribution. Forensic anthropology is a very new science, developing only in smart spurts starting two hundred and fifty years ago. The field has its professional inception in 1878 with Thomas Dwight, who is influenced at age seven to study anatomy by a highly publicized murder. His pupil is George Dorsey with interests in the human skeleton and who is inspired by a notorious murder in 1897. Dorsey uses brilliant and in that day unknown forensic reasoning to achieve a guilty verdict in the case. Another step forward occurs in 1937 when Dr. John Glaister publishes *Medico-Legal Aspects of the Ruxton Case* which examines one of the most famous double murders of the twentieth century, a case that is still the most studied in forensic textbooks.

Dr. Buck Ruxton is found guilty of murder and hanged on May 21st, 1936. Maples is born the next year. In his life, Maples knows many of the great pioneers of his field. The field is so new that even in the 1930s the FBI does not have its own forensics department. One of Maples colleagues, Dr. Ellis R. Kerley, spreads the discipline far and wide among other forensic scientists. All the forensic anthropologists of Maples's day follow on his coattails. Ellis helps identify the remains of those who die in the Challenger explosion, an incredibly difficult task.

In 1947, the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI) is created and Charles E. Snow is the first anthropologist to serve there. Mildred Trotter is another. McKern works there as well. All work on identifying war dead during World War II. In 1973, forensic anthropology comes of age as a discipline as it is established as a section within the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. It has fourteen members and starts its own journal, the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. Maples has not missed an academy convention since 1974; he loves the meetings. They regularly inspire him to do something new and they often certify new forensic anthropologists through exams.

In Chapter 8, Maples emphasizes that bones are not merely solid and unchanging. Bones are not rocks but constantly reshape themselves. Our bones change constantly when we are alive and they keep records of all our bodily histories. After death, bones retain many of these records, even when they are cremated. As many clues are held in the organic portions of the bone in the material called collagen, as are held in the inorganic component of bone which remains after a fire. Maples notes that there is no precise scientific answer to how many bones are in the human body as the number changes over time.



Maples argues that the female skeleton is more beautiful than the male skeleton. The bones are less bumpy and are smoother. Women's skulls are more evenly surfaced. These details alone often allow the sexing of skeletons though sometimes even Maples is fooled. He then discusses the early 19th century forensic debate over whether an uncovered skeleton is that of King Robert the Bruce, who is a major figure in the Scottish Wars of Independence in the 14th century. In 1968 a Danish Doctor is able to show that indeed the skull is King Robert's, given identifying information from historical texts.

The most eloquent skeleton Maples ever examines is that of Joseph Merrick, the "Elephant Man." His life deeply moves Maples. To a large extent, Maples discovers, the deformities of Merrick are due to his skin. Maples helps study the skeleton at the time when Michael Jackson is attempting to purchase the bones and Merrick's family is trying to reclaim the skeleton to "protect" it (likely to financially benefit from it). Maples makes records in case the skeleton is lost. During examination, Maples feels Merrick's hairs, a few of which are cased in plaster when Merrick's skeleton is preserved. One day the hairs may confirm Merrick's genetic infirmity.



# Chapters 9-10, A Sunless Place ..., Flames and Urns

## Chapters 9-10, A Sunless Place ..., Flames and Urns Summary and Analysis

Maples does not know where evil comes from but he has encountered it both in victims and in executed evildoers. He has seen the bodies of the wicked on full display; their brains fascinate him. The instruments of murder are vast; Maples has seen hammers, wrenches, tree limbs, building blocks and artificial legs used to kill. Murderers rarely use heavy objects. To see the depths of human depravity, one need only look to the *Medico-legal Investigation of Death*, a 623-page tome that sears the eyes of the unfamiliar. The worst is Chapter Eighteen which deals with wrongful childhood deaths.

The cases of young children that Maples faces remain the most vivid in his memory, such as the remains of a five-year-old girl found in a cloth bag thrown into a pond. She is murdered, very likely by her mother and her mother's boyfriend. She was horribly abused by the boyfriend, Don MacDougall.

Maples's first case of childhood dismemberment is stuck in his mind; the case is of the murder of a thirteen year old girl in 1978. Her skull is found inside a paint can a few weeks after she disappears. A knife is used to remove her head and blunt trauma was used to beat or kill her. A terrible picture arises from Maples's analysis. As the chapter is being written in 1994, a suspect is arrested. Often murder cases are solved when the murderer confesses after encountering forensic analysis.

Maples's feelings on capital punishment are mixed. Sometimes he thinks abolishing the death penalty is a matter of being civilized though he wonders if sometimes it is not needed for some murderers. Some methods of capital punishment are needlessly cruel, such as hanging or the guillotine. These methods do not lead to instant death, as many believe. The gas chamber is not any more humane. Electrocution is one of the least cruel methods, save using electric shock routed directly through the brain with a small jolt. Maples prefers that capital punishment be carried out by lethal injection. It is very quick, though finding a vein is often hard.

Maples has the opportunity to autopsy Ted Bundy, who is electrocuted on January 24th, 1989 for killing thirty-six women. He is a larger man that Maples realized. He is tan and took good care of his body. He has aged a great deal from the trial. His brain is later examined but brains are not useful for understanding the problem of good and evil. Ted Bundy's brain looks like all the others.

In Chapter 10, Maples points out that watching a cremation is solemn and quite colorful. Watching the body reduced to ash is eerie. Yellows, oranges, blues, greens and purples arise from different compounds and chemicals. Maples has been inside the ovens or



"retorts." He sometimes has the job of examining skeletal remains after they have been burned. Crematories are typically sterile and factory-like though cremation varies in procedures used. Few are cremated in caskets any longer. Natural gas is used to burn the body at 1700 degrees Fahrenheit. Cheap cremations are bought for a few thousand dollars, though some are far more extensive. The process usually takes several hours. First, everything organic is burned.

Surprisingly, a trained osteologist can stand a few feet away from a calcined (fully burned) set of remains and tell employees the race, sex and approximate age of the deceased. Fire does not destroy the identifying traits. When remains are moved from the retort, a hoe or rake is used to sweep ashes into a groove in the floor and into a waiting container. The remains are then placed in a "processor" or a grinder to make the remains a small particle size. Now the body is ash and small particles. Some crematories cremate jewelry, others do not. The same is true of dental work, save silver and gold, which will not melt. Standard procedure bars more than one person from being cremated at a time.

It is hard to perfectly clean out retorts from previous cremations. When particles are known to have mixed, lawsuits are raised and sometimes Maples is called into investigate. The task is daunting but Maples has done it. Chemical tests are often helpful as are dental devices. Sometimes staples from cremation containers are found. Examining "cremains" often requires great patience; everything must be carefully documented. Maples is usually paid by attorneys. He ends the chapter with the description of one such legal case he was involved in. He notes that he receives great esteem from the legal community and is paid handsomely.



# Chapters 11, Death in 10,000 Fragments

## Chapters 11, Death in 10,000 Fragments Summary and Analysis

The Meek-Jennings case is the most perplexing in Maples's career, occurring only twenty miles from his door. It starts with a terrible fire and takes up to a year and a half of Maples' and his students' time. They discover that they are dealing with four deaths, occurring in two pairs, both in fires. Two suicide notes look fake, and Maples seeks to prove that hunch. He is initially overwhelmed by all the contents of the vinyl examiner's bags. Ten thousand bone fragments are mingled and crushed inside. The two murders that Maples is responsible for in Gainesville are tied to a similar double murder in New Hampshire that occurs only a few days before. There is now great political, legal and media pressure on them.

The mind of the murderer seems to taunt the lab. Passion and premeditation are mixed. No one spots the burnt cabin for ten days and everything is cold when the sheriff's deputies arrive. The fire was incredibly hot. The bodies were lain side by side and a burned car is found several hundred feet away. A long and oddly worded suicide letter is found in the car. The two victims are D. Mike Daniels and Page Jennings Daniels. It refers to other murders in New Hampshire, when Page Jennings's parents, Malcolm and Elizabeth B., are found dead from stab wounds.

To recompose the details of the remains, Maples has to familiarize himself with the personalities involved in the case. He focuses in particular on the personality of Glyde Earl Meek, or "D. Mike Daniels." He is quite athletic and has a criminal record. Arrested for burglary, he spends several years in prison. He returns briefly after his second marriage falls apart. He then flees to Tucson, Arizona and assumes the name Daniel Mikel Daniels. While there, he uses a chiropractor that Maples is able to visit to learn about his skeletal structure through x-ray records, the only antemortem pictures of his skeleton.

In 1983, Daniels moves to Alaska and meets young Page Jennings—a beautiful, smart girl with wealthy parents. Life is good to her until she performs poorly in college and starts working as a cook at a resort in June 1983. It is there she meets Meek, who is working as a caretaker at the time. They quickly fall in love and Meek's third wife discovers that he is obsessed with her. Page enjoys his attention. In the fall they leave Alaska together, going to Jackson, New Hampshire to visit Page's parents. Meek frightens Jennings's parents.

Meek and Page head south at the end of 1983, to Texas. Page starts working as a sportswriter. In spring 1984, Jennings quits and the relationship begins to crumble. They cross the country again and break up in Seattle, with Page ending up in New England. She visits a psychiatrist and follows her brother to Gainesville, where he has a job with the Gainesville Sun and she has a job as a waitress.



On December 4th, 1984, Meek shows up and convinces Page to let him move in with her and her brother. Chris Jennings is furious. Meek will not let go of Page. He seems to have control over her in a way that disturbs everyone who knows them. On January 5th, 1985, Page, Chris and Meek have a fight and Meek leaves the apartment. Page goes to live with him in a motel. Meek then goes north alone, spotted in North Carolina and Connecticut. On January 16th, in New Hampshire, Malcolm and Betty Jennings are found killed in their burning hotel. Chris is immediately notified and leaves for New Hampshire, which saves his life. The murders are mentioned in the suicide note. On January 28th, the burned skeletons are found in Gainesville.

The bones delivered to Maples are ground up with only a few extras. The task is daunting, but Maples focuses on his problem while others pursue the oddness of the notes. Some wonder whether the skeletons are from Meek and Jennings. The discovery of a tooth in Meek's former girlfriend's car allows it to be tied to his dental records. A second tooth is found in the fire, and is thought to have been pulled by Meek—but the tooth should have had a gold filling, according to Meek's dental records. However, the gold, which would not have melted, cannot be found. There is also a problem with the female skeleton, whose palate is fifteen percent smaller than average; the bones are also absent of scars that Page's medical history indicates should be on her body. The story starts to take a life of its own in the media.

For a year, whenever Maples has a spare moment, he returns to the skeletons. They have only two humans, Maples is able to show. He uses Duco cement or model airplane glue to reassemble the bone fragments. For a year and a half Maples and his students look for fragments from particular bones and slowly reassemble the skeletons but they do not have fully articulated skeletons at the end. The riddles start to dissolve; for instance, the palate has simply been shrunk by the fire. The palate is Jennings's. The male skeleton is Meek's, as Maples shows from the x-rays he receives in Tucson. The case is finally closed, though Maples uses a number of archaeologists to find Meek's gold filling; it is finally located by a graduate student, Heidi Sydow.

It takes a great deal of work to prove what was always been the most likely version of the story. However, the suicide note really is interesting. Maples believes that Meek murdered Page on January 11th and Meek made up the details. He intended to kill Chris but failed and probably wanted to substitute Chris's body for his own. Meek then killed himself when it was clear he could not cover up the murder.



# Chapters 12-14, Lost Legions, The Misplaced Conquistador, Arsenic and Old Rough and Ready

## Chapters 12-14, Lost Legions, The Misplaced Conquistador, Arsenic and Old Rough and Ready Summary and Analysis

Maples has often been charged with the task of identifying remains of United States soldiers who died in Vietnam and whose remains are recovered. He assures the reader that the remains are treated with great care and examined carefully. The remains are clearly separated into distinct individual groups. There is no conspiracy in the Hawaii lab, CILHI. They have some of the best help in the world.

Maples then describes the bones and the processes used to separate out the bones. Each case has an anthropologist; if there are teeth, a forensic dentist is added. Painstaking records are composed and the files are reviewed in detail, all before the family is notified. The remains are then carefully moved. Not all the remains can be identified; some may never be. Maples tells a story of a difficult identification he pursues in 1985 and how he and colleagues push for an overhaul of CILHI, as the result of a controversy that starts many doubts about the facility. As time progresses, Maples suspects that DNA testing will help to completely transform the identification process.

Chapter 13 focuses on the assassination of Francisco Pizarro, a famous Spanish Conquistador killed in 1541. Maples holds the man's skull in his hands. The tale of his bones fall neatly in place with what history knows of his travels. Pizarro's bones are the first famous bones Maples ever truly handled. With the help of several colleagues, Maples helps unmask an imposter mummy and authenticate a set of remains that beyond a doubt match those of the man who conquers Peru for the Spanish Empire. The next section of the chapter tells the history of Pizarro's conquests and how he is killed by conspirators. The first bodily identification occurs in 1661, after Pizarro's remains have been moved many times. In 1891, another identification occurs which results in a false identification. In the 1980s, Maples and his colleague are able to do a correct identification.

In Chapter 14, Maples recounts the tale of how he proves that President Zachary Taylor was killed by poison. President Taylor is a hero of the Mexican War in 1850, when he dies from what appeared to be gastroenteritis and acute diarrhea. "Old Rough and Ready" dies on July 9th, 1850 but his death is abrupt. Taylor is a hot-tempered man but the Southerner may have been able to quiet the political tensions over slavery. His successor, Millard Fillmore, cannot do the job.





Assassination is suspected since, while Taylor is sixty-six, he is in good health. In 1991, Maples is drawn into the story by the work of Florida alum Clare Rising, who is working on Taylor's case. Rising interviews him about possible causes of death and then asks him to do an examination as she returns to him over the months. Maples gets permission to do an exhumation after some soul-searching. He puts together a team and gets to work. The results of their examination are clear: arsenic is found in all the samples of Taylor's bones they have taken, but at minuscule levels. They cannot have produced death or sickness. The only poison that could have produced his symptoms was arsenic.

Taylor seems to have died of natural causes, perhaps unintentionally killed by his doctors. Cathartics and laxatives are proscribed for diarrhea in Taylor's day, and the use of fluids prohibited. This is the opposite of what should be done. Taylor probably had a routine intestinal infection and E. coli germs. Rising cannot let go of her poisoning theory and never publishes her manuscript, despite past literary success.



# Chapters 15-16, The Tsar of All the Russias, These Rough Notes and Our Dead Bodies

## Chapters 15-16, The Tsar of All the Russias, These Rough Notes and Our Dead Bodies Summary and Analysis

On the night of July 16th-17th, 1918, the last of the Romanovs, Tsar Nicholas II, is executed by a Bolshevik death squad, along with his family. While Nicholas's death is reported, no mention is made of his family. The bodies are secretly disposed of. However, in the early 1990s a bog reveals nine basically complete skeletons in the same area. Maples and his colleagues are invited by the Russians to investigate, following up on reports of the bodies' disposal, which Maples retells from testimony. It is not clear whether the witness, Ermakov, is reliable, however, as he says both sulfuric acid and gasoline are used to destroy the corpses, which seems redundant. However, details are removed from the Soviet media and history books.

When the Soviet Union falls and Boris Yeltsin becomes President of Russia, rumors of the brutal murders surface and horrify the world, embarrassing the Soviet regime. To this very day, people claim that some of the Romanovs survived, particularly Anastasia. A Soviet playwright, Edvard Radzinsky, has been researching the death of the Tsar for a quarter century in the late 1980s and gives a different account of the death in his 1992 book, *The Last Tsar*. This tale is much more bloody, deceitful and incompetent. All the killers and soldiers involved in the deaths are drunk at the time, as are those who dispose of the bodies. Again, Maples recounts the tale.

Maples and his colleagues hear that the bodies have been discovered in 1992 and the Russians ask the U.S. Secretary of State if the United States can provide technical assistance in their identification. The mystery has fascinated Maples for four decades, so he quickly puts together an extremely impressive team, including not only medical examiners and forensic anthropologists but diplomats and translators and a Soviet geophysicist. Quickly the team identify the age and sex of the skeletons; the Russians immediately give them their respect. Five skeletons are female, four male and three are young women. All faces are badly fractured and all the female skeletons have dental work. Many have gunshot wounds to the head. Maples then explains the details of each of the bodies and how each one of them was killed.

It appears that bodies 3, 5 and 6 belong to Olga, Marie and Tatiana. Body 1 probably belongs to the Tsarina's maid, Anna Demidova and body 2 probably belongs to Alexei's physician, Dr. Sergei Botkin. Anastasia's body seems to be missing. Body 8 is probably the skeleton of the cook, Ivan Mihailovich Kharitonov and body 9 is likely that of the



footman, Alexei Igorevich Trupp, part of the Tsar's entourage. Body 7 is perhaps the most important and has rich dental work; it is probably the skeleton of Tsarina Alexandra. Body 4 is likely the skeleton of Tsar Nicholas II.

The only skeletons missing are those of Tsarevich Alexei and Anastasia. There is no serious alternative explanation that allows the skeletons to be reconstructed so as to match them. Nonetheless, Maples very much doubts that Anastasia escaped and died as "Anna Anderson" in 1984. Yurovsky reports burning two other bodies and they are buried elsewhere.

In 1993 DNA tests are used to check the Russian skeletons, identifying them with a 98.5% chance of certainty. It is easy to track the DNA, especially the mitochondrial DNA, to relatives (Alexandra was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria). "Anna Anderson" is cremated so her remains cannot be checked. Legal difficulties have prevented a few remaining tissue samples from being tested.

In Chapter 16, Maples discusses five young students, four from the University of Florida and one from nearby Santa Fe Community College, who are tortured and murdered in August 1990. Their deaths cause thousands of students to leave Gainesville temporarily. The murderer, Danny Harold Rolling, confesses and is in custody when Maples is put on the case. The jury recommends the death penalty for him. However, for years after arrest, Rolling admits no details that can convict him. So Maples is asked to be part of the autopsies under Dr. William Hamilton. Maples focuses on the murder weapon which he examines with Dana Austin-Smith, one of his best students.

The murder weapon is a large knife, which Maples matches to bone markings. The actual murder weapon is not found but reports indicate that the weapon is a Ka-Bar knife, so an identification of the weapon mentioned in the testimony can be made. This information is allowed into evidence. When the forensic evidence is used in court, the murderer's resolve crumbles as the bones of his victims rise up against him. He suddenly pleads guilty. Again the science of forensic anthropology has a victory, saving the taxpayer millions in full-blow trial costs and terrible grief for the families in a public courtroom.

Maples tells the story of these murders last because they strike close to home. There is a moral to the tale because the lamp of science can reveal the heart of darkness. However, a vast amount of work in the field must still be done. Many cases cannot be solved and there are simply not enough forensic anthropologists to meet the demand. There is a great need for people in Maples's profession yet the numbers do not increase. He then explains how the great departments of forensic anthropology are shrinking. The point of Maples's memoirs is to demonstrate the great need for such individuals. He wants at least one forensic anthropologist in each crime lab; larger states should have more. There is not enough money to support students. Maples cannot be everywhere.



# Characters

## William Maples

William Maples is born in Dallas, Texas and spends much of his young adult life in Austin. He is born in 1937 and dies sixty years later, only a few years after *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* is published. For most of his life, Maples serves as a highly respected forensic anthropologist at the University of Florida, located in Gainesville. His work in human identification is renowned, particularly with respect to skeletons and also trauma analysis. Maples earns both an MA and PhD from the University of Texas in 1962 and 1967 respectively.

A year after receiving his PhD, Maples is appointed an assistant professor of anthropology at Florida and rises to become a full professor there, along with the curator of the Florida Museum of Natural History. He serves numerous forensic sciences units in the United States, along with working with the U.S. Army to identify the remains of soldiers lost in action. His C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory is created in 1986 and the subject of great respect, ranking among the best forensic labs in the United States. Maples participates in identifying human remains in over one thousand cases including the high-profile cases of Tsar Nicholas II, Francisco Pizzaro and The Elephant Man.

Maples is the main character of *Dead Man Do Tell Tales* and the book is written from his perspective. Maples has a high degree of respect for science and is a passionate defender of the field of forensic anthropology. While declining to engage in religious speculation about death and evil, he expresses a deep sense of mystery and morality regarding his cases.

## Forensic Anthropologists

Maples is a world-renowned forensic anthropologist and much of *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* explains the history of his field and defends its value not only for science but for crime solving. In Maples's view, forensic anthropology is in decline as there is too little funding to provide lines for graduate student funding. As a result, fewer forensic anthropologists are available for the hard work of discovery and detective work.

Specifically, forensic anthropology is an applied science which mixes physical anthropology and the study of the human skeleton—human osteology—to the law, typically in cases where the remains of a victim have degraded to a large degree. Forensic anthropologists help identify these deceased individuals regardless of whether their remains have been burned, mutilated, shattered or are in any way beyond recognition. The techniques of the forensic anthropologist can be used to recover remains and to determine age, sex, height, build and ancestry. They can also detect genetic and even bacterial and viral disease. They help determine causes of death and



testify with the authority of an expert witness. Only one hundred anthropologists are certified forensic anthropologists in the United States and Canada.

Maples discusses several important first and second-generation forensic anthropologists, such as Thomas Dwight, Aleš Hrdlička, Thomas McKern, T. Dale Stewart, among others. He also mentions several of his students. In high profile cases, Maples assembles entire teams of forensic anthropologists.

## **Thomas McKern**

A forensic anthropologist before the field officially exists, he serves as Maples's mentor, helping him at several points to find a career in forensic anthropology.

## **Charles E. Snow**

The creator of Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii and the first anthropologist to serve there.

## **President Zachary Taylor**

The twelfth president of the United States who is said to have been poisoned. However, Maples's examination largely puts this myth to rest.

## **Tsar Nicholas II and His Family**

The last Tsar of Russia, murdered during the Bolshevik Revolution, Nicholas's family is killed along with him. Their bodies are disposed of and hidden from history until the fall of the Soviet Union. Maples is asked to assemble a team of forensic experts to examine the remains which they determine are in fact the bodies of the Romanov family.

## **Francisco Pizarro**

A 15th century Spanish Conquistador who conquers the Incas and founds Lima, Peru. His skeletal remains are identified by Maples.

## **Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man**

Once an English "freak show" player, the so-called "Elephant Man" has several physical deformities due to an unknown genetic disorder. Maples is called in to examine his bones and make records.



## **Glyde Earl Meek**

A murderer whose method of disposing of his victims produces the most perplexing and frustrating case of Maples's career.

## **Page Jennings**

Meek's on-again-off-again girlfriend; Meek murders Page and her parents, with her brother only narrowly escaping.

## **Vietnam Veterans**

The American who fought in the Vietnam War, many of whom return dead to the United States unidentified. Maples often does identification work.

## **Danny Harold Rollings**

A drifter who kills five students in Gainesville, Florida, in 1990 and whom Maples helps to put away due to his excellent forensic work. When it is repeated in the courtroom, it so neatly matches Rollings's crime that Rollings confesses to stop being forced to relive the murders.

## **Murder Victims**

Murder victims fill the pages of Dead Men Do Tell Tales as they are the primary source of skeletal remains in Maples's career.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Gainesville, Florida**

The city where the University of Florida is based and where Maples spends his career.

### **Austin, Texas**

Where Maples attends college at the University of Texas.

### **The Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CILHI)**

The American military lab in Hawaii responsible for identifying the remains of war dead; Maples works there from time to time.

### **Maples's Laboratory**

Maples's lab in Gainesville is one of the most sophisticated and respected in the country. Many of the stories in the book take place there.

### **Maples's Tools**

Maples refers to a wide range of laboratory tools throughout the book.

### **A Retort**

A cremation oven. Retorts are discussed in one of the chapters of the book and "cremains" are often a subject of analysis.

### **Bones**

Maples's expertise is in the human skeleton, so bones are a staple of the book.

### **MIA Identification**

MIAs or soldiers missing in action often are removed from the MIA list when remains are identified as theirs. Maples assists in these identifications.



## **Fire**

Fire often burns bones severely and this occurs several times in the book. However, Maples is usually able to derive something from the bones anyway.

## **The Death Penalty**

Maples is ultimately against the death penalty but the wickedness of some cases motivates him to hold that the use of execution is sometimes just. He has strong opinions on methods of execution; he considers only lethal injection and direct brain electrocution are humane methods of death.

## **Evil**

Maples often thinks about evil. He thinks its causes are primarily environmental rather than spiritual or genetic but he makes no strong claims about its origins, considering such claims beyond his professional ability.





# Themes

## The Macabre and Evil

Early in the book, Maples makes clear that many of the cases he will focus on in the book will demonstrate the profound wickedness that human beings are capable of. He mentions that he was not raised in a religious home and has no expertise in the matter of evil's origin. While Maples claims that he does not accept a theological or biological explanation of evil, he notes that something seems absolutely authentic and awful about it despite its environmental origins. Thus, the stories of evil are stories where he holds individuals responsible and rejoices at using forensic anthropology not only to imprison them but to force them to relive their crimes.

However, "evil" is not a specific enough category. Many of Maples's cases dip into the macabre. For instance, he discusses the methods by which individuals dispose of bodies. Hacking up limbs is hard work, Maples says and he discusses how murderers have moved from the relatively clean but time-consuming use of hacksaws to the relatively quick but quite messy use of chainsaws. When he discusses the Meek-Jennings case, the burning of human flesh plays a prominent role in the story, and in the Gainesville case, the macabre is a deep feature of the explanations of the state of the bodies Maples examines.

Interestingly, Maples is able to use his training to identify murders, and thus great evils, far back into the past. For instance, he is able to reconstruct how the Romanov family was murdered and how, because the Romanov women had their clothes packed with diamonds, the bullets that hit them did not always penetrate them, prolonging the time it took them to die.

## The Vindication and Defense of Forensic Anthropology

Maples is one of the first forensic anthropologists to bear the name. While he works as a forensic anthropologist for some time, the Academy of Forensic Anthropology and its certification board is created when he is already practicing. While he has forerunners, the systematic science of forensic anthropology arises almost simultaneously with his early education. Clearly, as one of the second-generation of his field, Maples is interested in preserving it and in defending its merits. In one way, *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* might be seen as an attempt to vindicate his view.

The main line of argument for the value of forensic psychology is made in three ways. First, forensic anthropology is crucial to solving important historical mysteries. Second, it is central to solving murders and unsolved crimes generally. Third, it is good for its own sake, for the sake of scientific discovery. In support of the first argument, the reader will



encounter the power of forensic anthropology in identifying the remains of the Romanovs or showing that President Zachary Taylor was not poisoned by arsenic.

In support of the second point, which is by far the most well-supported argument, Maples details case after case where the unique tools of forensic anthropology are used to solve otherwise unsolvable crimes. For instance, the Meek-Jennings case could only be solved by someone with Maples's skill set. Finally, in support of the third point, Maples shows how discoveries in his lab add to the scientific knowledge of how bones decay or how congenital defects occur. His ability to collect samples and analyze the skeleton of The Elephant Man is a case in point.

## Mystery

One of the central but perhaps more minor themes of *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* is the role of mystery. Many skeletons, upon reaching Maples's lab, carry with them exciting tales that have yet to be understood. Whenever Maples is brought in on a murder case, for instance, he often knows few details of the case and is charged with reconstructing other details that may prove vital in achieving a conviction and getting justice for the victims and their families. Thus the pressure to solve the case comes not only from lawyers, politicians and the media but from the internal pressure of Maples's professional standards and his natural interest in solving the mysteries in question.

Consequently, many chapters tell a tale of mystery that is ultimately solved by forensic psychology. Many cases are high profile and are tied to social and intellectual pressures. Many of these cases are frustrating and often run into dead ends. The stories have twists and turns and even have dramatic climaxes where, say, a vicious murderer will confess to a crime after hearing his murder reconstructed in perfect detail by Maples. The murderer, unable to bear the reality of his deed, will confess in order to stop the report.

Other mysteries arise as well, however. Maples is selected to examine several historical mysteries, such as whether a skeleton belongs to Francisco Pizzaro or whether an unearthed group of Russian skeletons belong to the Romanov family.



# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* is wholly that of its author, William Maples. Maples lives from 1937 to 1997 and spends most of his life as a widely respected forensic anthropologist who is called to lead a number of very important skeletal identifications and to do a wide range of identifications of remains in murder cases along with autopsies and skeletal examinations that help lead to convictions. His perspective combines a "man of science" attitude towards death and forensics with a wistful curiosity about the nature of evil, an ardent sense of justice and a deep fascination with the dead.

The man of science attitude is strongest in the beginning of the book, where Maples describes how he has no theological perspective on his work and instead eschews questions about ultimate meaning. It also comes through in his passionate defense of forensic anthropological science as both an essential part of the scientific enterprise and a core part of successful criminal investigations. He is also often very matter-of-fact about his cases though he is sensitive to the sensibilities of his audience.

However, a wistful fascination with theological questions still penetrates his work. He often writes asides about the nature of evil, his theories about its origins and his general lack of certainty. His sense of justice comes out in his delight at causing murderers to recall their crimes and in his meditations on the death penalty. Finally, his fascination with the dead pervades the book, often through the lengthy descriptions of macabre circumstances and cases and his explicit claim of fascination (even from an early age) with death and dying.

## Tone

The tone of *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* has four primary strands: the scientific, the macabre, the suspenseful and the moral. The scientific aspect of the tone is most prominent in chapters and parts of the book where Maples proceeds carefully through the details of his forensic analysis, often found in descriptions of skeletal remains and his steady reasoning process that leads systematically to a conclusion. The scientific tone also comes through clearly when Maples discusses the history of forensic anthropology.

The macabre strand in the tone is perhaps the most obvious and is sometimes overwhelming. When the reader encounters Maples's tales of murders, the death stories that he derives from skeletal examinations will illustrate the sometimes gruesome element in the tone. The description of cremation is particularly shocking, as is the entire Gainesville incident in the final chapter.



The suspenseful element in the tone is most clear during the build-up to the climax of Maples's more exciting cases, such as when Maples solved the Meek-Jennings murder or when he solves a murder generally. Other elements of suspense arise when Maples is trying to solve a mystery, such as whether the Princess Anastasia was killed in the Romanov massacre.

The moral tones in the book come out whenever Maples is making a normative argument, say, for the validity and power of his profession, for the power of science or discussing his various concerns and thoughts on the death penalty. The moral elements in the tone are also prominent when Maples discusses getting justice for victims.

## Structure

*Dead Men Do Tell Tales* has a relatively straightforward superstructure. It contains sixteen chapters, each of which focuses on a specific topic. The chapters are largely arranged in chronological order. Chapter 1, "Every Day Is Halloween", introduces Maples, his profession and the beginnings of his fascination with forensics. Chapter 2, "Talkative Skulls", shows how he entered his profession. Chapter 3, "Bolts of Bones", describes Maples's lab and the practices in his lab. Chapter 4, "The Enfolding Earth", explains some of how Maples identifies bodies and Chapter 5, "Flotsam and Jetsam", covers dismemberment cases. Chapter 6, "When the Sickness Is Your Soul", explains how people kill themselves and how suicides work generally.

Chapter 7, "Outpacing the Fiend" discusses famous murders that inspired a few men to establish the field of forensic anthropology. Chapter 8, "Unnatural Nature", covers Maples's examination of the bones of Joseph Merrick, The Elephant Man. Chapter 9, "A Sunless Place ..." discusses the deaths of children and the death penalty. Chapter 10, "Flames and Urns", explains how cremation works and how much can be learned from "cremains" despite the apparent lack of detail. Chapter 11, "Death in 10,000 fragments" discusses the Meek-Jennings case, the most challenging of Maples's career. Chapter 12, "Lost Legions", elaborates on the cases of identifying the remains of Vietnam Veterans that Maples is involved with.

Chapter 13, "The Mislplaced Conquistador", examines Maples's attempt to identify the skeleton of Francisco Pizzaro. Chapter 14, "Arsenic and 'Old Rough and Ready'", explains how Maples uses forensic anthropology to show that President Zachary Taylor was not poisoned by arsenic. Chapter 15, "The Tsar of All the Russias", covers Maples's identification of the skeletal remains of the Romanov family. Chapter 16, "These Rough Notes and Our Dead Bodies ..." explains the Gainesville murders that Maples helps to solve.

As far as the structure of the chapters, they vary somewhat. They are interspersed with scientific details, brief stories, extended mysteries, personal anecdotes and careful argumentation.



## Quotes

"Truth is discoverable. Truth wants to be discovered." (Chapter 1, p. 2)

"I have often wondered whether I have a character flaw, to be so drawn to deadly things." (Chapter 1, p. 3)

"It was a watershed moment for me, because for the first time McKern was treating me—I will not say as an equal, but very nearly as a colleague whose independent opinion he valued." (Chapter 2, p. 21)

"My laboratory room ... is a fleshless village of the dead, dry and silent save for the soft whirr of a dehumidifier under a table." (Chapter 3, p. 33)

"It is my belief that every set of remains deserves a certain minimum of respect. We owe them that." (Chapter 3, p. 45)

"When we consider that scarcely an active cemetery on the planet is more than a few hundred years old, we realize how short our undisturbed subterranean sleep can be." (Chapter 4, p. 46)

"I mean murder victims who have been coldly, deliberately cut to pieces, whose fragmented bodies show the work of human malevolence—and hard work at that." (Chapter 5, p. 62)

"Interstate highways are the veins and arteries by which crime circulates in America. Serial killers seem to float through them like blood cells, sometimes fast, sometimes slow." (Chapter 5, p. 63)

"Suicide has the power to unsettle us all, to make even the dullest brain philosophize for a few minutes about the meaning of life." (Chapter 6, p. 76)

"We forensic anthropologists owe a dark debt to murderers." (Chapter 7, p. 90)

"If there is one thing I have sought to impress on my students, it is that they must not think of bones as solid and unchanging." (Chapter 8, p. 104)

"Patient and silent while we live, our skeletons shout to heaven and posterity after we die." (Chapter 8, p. 116)

"I am a scientist, not a clergyman. I do not know whence evil arises; but I have seen where it falls to earth, extinguishing life and disfiguring limb." (Chapter 9, p. 117)

"When it finally was removed and examined, Ted Bundy's brain looked like anyone else's." (Chapter 9, p. 133)



"This is the ultimate bonfire of the vanities, in which all that we wore in life is brightly, briskly swept away like dross, leaving only the durable, solid bones beneath." (Chapter 10, p. 134)

"Today when anyone asks me which was the most difficult, the most fascinating and perplexing case I have ever encountered, I answer without an instant's hesitation: the Meek-Jennings case." (Chapter 11, p. 150)

"Like the assassins who murdered Julius Caesar centuries before, the victorious conspirators all dipped their swords in Pizarro's blood, to share in the honor of the deed." (Chapter 13, pp. 212-213)

"Zachary Taylor can take his proper place in history, as a military commander who fought hard for his country and as a President who did not shrink from his duty." (Chapter 14, p. 236)

"It therefore seems likely that, when the last Tsar is finally entombed in St. Petersburg, he will be served in death, as he was in life, by the arms of his faithful footman." (Chapter 15, p. 268)

"... the lamp of science, properly grasped and directed, can shine its rays into the very heart of darkness. ... It cannot raise the dead, but it can make them speak, accuse and identify the agent of death." (Chapter 16, p. 275)

"[Skeletons] have tales to tell us, even though they are dead. It is up to me, the forensic anthropologist, to catch their mute cries and whispers, and to interpret them for the living, as long as I am able." (Chapter 16, p. 280)



## Topics for Discussion

What is forensic anthropology? How is it distinct from related fields like forensic pathology?

Why does Maples think that forensic anthropology is an important science? Why does he think the practice of forensic anthropology is in decline? What are his arguments that the decline should be reversed?

How does Maples become interested in forensic anthropology? How does he become a forensic anthropologist?

What is Maples's most difficult and frustrating case? Please recount the case in as much detail as you can and explain why Maples finds the case so difficult.

Please name two of the famous individuals whose bones Maples examines. How does he come to examine them? What does he discover about them?

Maples claims not to theologize about evil, but it still fascinates him. In what sense is Maples fascinated by evil? How has he most often encountered it?

In your opinion, is Maples's case for forensic anthropology successful? Do you find his arguments compelling? Explain why or why not.