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The Not-So-Silent Past: An Archaeology Collection

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Undergraduate

The Not-So-Silent Past: an Archaeology Collection

“The archaeologist is digging up, not things, but people” – Sir Mortimer Wheeler, 1954

It is a common misconception that archaeologists are merely in search of objects from long ago. Archaeology is, after all, the study of the material remains of the past. But in looking at these items from tombs or campsites or palaces, the archaeologist is really concerned with those everyday people who lived, struggled and achieved in the past. The collection of books that adorn my shelves is about these ancient peoples, and the modern ones who seek to give them a voice once again. Archaeologists study the past so that the lessons and accomplishments of long ago are not lost to silence. Over the years, I have gathered a strange little assembly of books that let me listen to and understand the many people who came before.

My collection is a motley assortment of literature. Some of the books are shiny and crisp, bursting with the very latest finds and theories of the field. Others look as though they may have been excavated from a dusty tomb themselves, with dog-eared pages and crumbling covers testifying to their age and heavy use. But I treat them all with equal reverence, for each one tells me different stories about the past that teach, inspire or just plain entertain me.

Many of my books come from garage sales or thrift store expeditions, my favorite summer pastimes. These finds are often rather recreational. My guilty pleasure is Indiana Jones-style tales of mummy’s curses or modern-day Neanderthals. Michael

Crichton's Timeline, the story of some time-traveling archaeologists who wind up stuck in medieval France, is an enduring favorite of mine. I often have to laugh at the ridiculousness of the plotlines but when the subject is archaeology, I can be content with a little "suspension of disbelief".

Some of my books are treasured friends from my childhood that first stirred up a curiosity about the past. I owe an unending debt of gratitude to the *Eyewitness Books* series for their glossy photos of ancient treasure and trash that have never ceased to delight. I loved flipping through the pages and imagining the discovery of broken eggshells from Pompeii or the soggy remains of a massive Viking longboat. And there was many a night when I scared myself silly reading Mummies and Their Mysteries under the covers with a flashlight. It was not so much the grotesque mummies as the thought of coming face to face with such a vivid incarnation of the past that always sent shivers down my back.

The most valuable books in my collection were passed on from another, more eclectic collector, my late great uncle. For as long as I can remember, our basement has been full of his rare and very old books; ranging from Japanese art, to Civil War histories, to famous archaeological discoveries. To my everlasting excitement, I was allowed to add his fascinating sets of books on Tutankhamen and the Roman Empire to my collection. I love thumbing through these books because I often find old newspaper clippings about the pyramids or Roman aqueducts carefully tucked between the pages. It is almost as though they are waiting to be discovered amongst the pages like the wondrous finds they describe. I never met my great uncle, but I like to think he would be

glad to know that his extraordinary books and meticulous newspaper records are important to someone else as well.

One book in particular holds unparalleled meaning for me. Five years ago, my father passed away from brain cancer. Last summer, my grandmother gave me an unassuming little book creatively entitled Archaeology. I casually flipped open the cover and my heart skipped a beat when I saw, printed in my father's unmistakable hand, "Glenn Hosek, Kennedy Jr.-Sr. High School." I had had no idea that my dad shared my interest in archaeology when he was young! I had always known he liked history, but to me he was an architect who loved to golf and play softball. I wonder if he ever considered the path I am now on, and how he would be sharing this journey with me today. At least I have this little book, full of the thoughts and theories of archaeologists and the stories their own journeys to remind me that so many of us feel a desire to touch the past. Now, when I read it, I feel like my dad is there with me, delighting in the discoveries, cringing at the mistakes and marveling at the wonders created by ancient peoples.

Beneath the excavations, the science, and the publications, archaeology is about connections. It reestablishes our bonds to the past and helps us understand the human experience. These books about archaeology link me to the people of previous times, from their triumphs and tragedies, to their simple everyday lives. I find the years between us melting away when I read about their realities and find similarities to my own. In my collection, I find a priceless connection to my own past as well: my father, and the passion for archaeology that we unknowingly shared.

I look forward to adding to this motley bunch of books that lets me listen to the people of the past. As my collection grows, so too will my understanding ancient times and I will be able to hear those voices a little clearer. They whisper from the pages, telling me their stories and I find myself yearning to join the ranks of the archaeologists who can unearth this knowledge from the silence and reconnect us once again with those long gone.

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