



BOOK REVIEW

REVIEWED BY GIL SAPIR

A Voice For The Dead: A Forensic Investigator's Pursuit Of The Truth In The Grave

By James E. Starrs
with Katherine Ramsland
G.P. Putnam's Sons, NY © 2005
284 pages
(hardcover) \$24.95
Reviewed by Gil Sapir

James E. Starrs reminds the reader of what Mark Twain said, "Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please." Starrs prides himself in being an attorney, forensic scientist, pedagogue, and risk taker. He is dedicated to instilling integrity and ethics in scientific evidence.

Starrs' synergistic experiences are derived, in part, from: being in the U.S. Army's intelligence unit during the Korean War; a Distinguished Fellow of the American Academy of Forensic Science; the editor of *Scientific Sleuthing Review*; Professor of Forensic Sciences and Law at George Washington University Law School;

1960s civil rights attorney in Mississippi; and prolific author. This protagonist meticulously unearths skeletons regarding people's history, credibility and professed expertise. His controversial notoriety is reluctantly authenticated by celebrities, pundits, editors, and even Supreme Court Justice Rehnquist.

Jacob Bronowski espoused, "The essence of science is to ask impertinent questions, and you are on your way to a pertinent answer." *A Voice For The Dead* epitomizes this premise. Starrs undertook a series of high-profile exhumations of historical figures and notable legends, such as: determining Jesse James' true descendants; Alfred G. Packard and cannibalism in Lake City, Colorado to debunk folklore; the deft, deliberate and diabolical homicide of Dr. Frank R. Olson by the Central Intelligence Agency; Louisiana Senator Huey Long being shot and killed by his bodyguards, not by Dr. Carl A. Weiss; vindication of "Boston Strangler" Albert DeSalvo through Mary Sullivan; the investigative demise of famed American explorer, Meriwether Lewis; infamous "hatcheteer" Lizzie Borden; and the mysteries underlying FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's death — assassination or cover-up.

A Voice For The Dead possesses extensive historical and background scientific research. It provides a conceptual understanding of the design, issues, ethics, complexities, exhilaration and painful lessons of each exhumation. Starrs' indomitable perseverance presents a brutally penetrating and appalling assessment of the trend to keep real facts hidden. He sees through governmental obstreperousness, bureaucratic obstructionism and distorted notions of innocence or guilt. Professor Starrs' intention is to correct the imbalance of history and precious truths.

A Voice For The Dead appeals to an audience of attorneys, forensic scientists, history buffs, armchair sleuths, and forensic science wannabees. The book is well written and uses a erudite narrative presentation that makes it easy to understand.

Starrs explains the purpose of

each exhumation. The significance of each investigation, its forensic analysis and reasoning are set forth in an informative and concise manner, to provide a holistic understanding supported by fundamental details. Starrs then adeptly takes the reader through tantalizing and frustrating accounts of achieving that objective. The author's linguistic abilities, insolent wit, and use of modern day investigative forensic techniques will entice readers to read as much as possible in one sitting.

Starrs personally financed the exhumations to avoid allegations of improprieties and conflicts of interest. *A Voice For the Dead* reveals continuing personal recognition and respect for the dead, their family's privacy and burial sites.

Exhumations rely on collaboration and extensive planning. They utilize sophisticated multi-disciplinary teams of seasoned scientists and highly-skilled personnel employing traditional and state of art technology. All who facilitated these exhaustive endeavors are generously acknowledged by Starrs. Absent is the surrealism of fictionalized television programs (CSI), Hollywood glaze, glitzy gimmickry and scientific buffoonery.

Any negative comments about the book should be directed at the publisher. The book suffers from small type, and just too few photographs and those that are published are of poor quality.

Misinformation is worse than no information at all. Death does not silence the dead, nor should it. The dead cannot speak for themselves, but science and surrogates such as James Starrs, with his multi-discipline team of experts, can give the departed a voice. ■

About the Reviewer

Gil Sapir JD, MSc is a forensic science consultant and attorney. He has lectured, testified, and written extensively on scientific evidence and drunken driving.

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