



Forensic Anna:thropology

Forensic Anthropology rocks my world...

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ABOUT ME

Dr Anna Williams



I have had a bit of a nomadic life, living in Tanzania and Swaziland during my childhood and adolescence. I went to Oxford University to study Archaeology and Anthropology, and since have specialised in Forensic Anthropology through a MSc and PhD and lots of casework. I am currently a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Science at Huddersfield University, and I live on the outskirts of the Peak District with my husband and our dog.

[View my complete profile](#)



I'm watching you!

FOLLOW ME...

I am also on [Academia.edu](#) and [ResearchGate](#)

My YouTube channel is [here](#).

You can find out more about Forensic Science at Huddersfield [here](#) and on Facebook, [here](#).

THURSDAY, 28 AUGUST 2014

The microbiome of death

Sadly, my [Media Fellowship](#) placement at [New Scientist](#) has come to an end. But, I rather feel like I have 'gone out with a bang', as my latest article for them is a double-page spread! (Not the same as a centre-fold, to my husband's disappointment!)

You can read it [here](#).

I was very pleased to be able to write about something (a) I know quite a bit about, (b) I'm really interested in and (c) I'm passionate about. A lot of the time, I gather, journalists don't get to choose what they write about, so I was very lucky.

The microbes that colonise cadavers is just up my street, and it was great to interview [Professor Peter Noble](#) about his research – although I did have to disturb him during his Caribbean holiday [alright for some!]. He and his team looked at how microbes spread out from the gut and colonised different internal organs of several cadavers, as a function of time. They found that the microbe populations differed more between individuals than between organs, suggesting that colonising microbes may be used to identify people. Then talking to [Sibyl Bucheli](#) was really fascinating too, especially as some her research is very closely aligned with mine, and that of the [Burial Research Consortium](#). She voiced certain caveats to the research that I was thinking but couldn't put in without an external reference, so it was very helpful to talk to her. I hope that we may be able to work together on similar projects in the future. And of course, it was wonderful to get some choice comments from BRC's very own [Professor John Cassella](#), an expert in this field.

I really enjoyed seeing all the processes that go into transforming a spark of an idea into a full-blown article, and watch it being tweaked and polished by editors, sub-editors and back to editors again. It was great to see how pictures were chosen, or rejected as the case may be, and how my writing turned into a 'proper' article for [New Scientist](#). I'm absolutely delighted!

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 15:26 No comments:

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Labels: [Media Fellowship](#)

FRIDAY, 15 AUGUST 2014

From the trading room floor

Well, I am now into my penultimate week at [New Scientist](#). The time has zipped past, in a blur of commuting on the tube, interviewing scientists on the phone, meeting deadlines and lots of writing and rewriting. I have begun to get the hang of

WELCOME!

Like most forensic anthropologists, I am pretty passionate about my work – it is more of a calling than a job. I hope that, through this blog, I can share with you some of the reasons why I find forensic anthropology so fascinating, rewarding and cool. This blog is about me, and my job, and the things that make me tick. It is for professionals, students and interested lay people. I hope there will be something for everyone!

FORENSIC LINKS

[Burial Research Consortium](#)

[Forensic Science at Huddersfield University](#)

[Forensic Science Education book](#)

[Forensic Science Society](#)

[American Academy of Forensic Sciences](#)

[Kenyon International Emergency Services](#)

[The Real 'Body Farm' University of Tennessee](#)

[Top Forensic Science Blogs](#)

[Top Criminal Justice Degrees](#)

[The Crime Writers Association](#)

[Kathy Reichs](#)

[We Are Forensic](#)

[Zygoma](#)

[Bones Don't Lie](#)

MEDIA I'VE ADVISED

[Blink Films](#)

[Ultimate Tutankhamun \(NatGeo\)](#)

[Alien Investigations \(C4\)](#)

[Secrets of Everything \(BBC3\)](#)

[Tony Robinson's Gods and Monsters \(C4\)](#)

[Silent Witness \(BBC1\)](#)

[Nelson's Hospital: Time Team Special \(C4\)](#)



My dog, Lucky, when he was a puppy. Sadly, he's not really bright enough to be trained as a cadaver dog!

things a little, and, if nothing else, learned how everybody likes their tea! So far, I have had eight pieces published, and hopefully have more to come. These have varied from short 'reaction' pieces to bizarre photos, to slightly longer, news-fuelled articles. I have also had a chance to get my teeth into one longer story so far, that is more forensic based than the others.

Here they are:

[Origin of Egyptian mummification pushed back 2,000 years](#)
[Otherwordly view of a giant Californian wildfire](#)
[Pacific dead zone has been shrinking for a century](#)
[Cold potatoes could counter health effects of red meat](#)
[Terracotta Army's vibrant make-up was made of ox glue](#)
[How to stop toxic blooms clogging up Lake Erie](#)
[Winning photos reveal fairy-tale worlds on Earth](#)
[Rainbow slinky offers way into Schrodinger's box](#)

Actually, I have already learned more than I ever expected to. I now have insight into the dynamic between reporters, sub-editors and editors, and seen how stories get chosen or pitched to be articles for the magazine or online platforms. I am beginning to see the world through a journalist's eye – examining 'ordinary' events for extraordinary angles, or trying to think of something that no-one else has thought of. It has made me appreciate how science gets published, blogged about and retweeted – it doesn't seem to be so much about the quality of the science – although that has to be sound – but it is more about whether the ordinary person can relate to it, and whether people want to chat about it down the pub. I have gathered that there is a clear correlation between the catchiness of a journal paper title and the chances of it being picked up by popular science journalism. So, if you want a journalist to do a feature on your research, you need to make it clear, easy to understand and emphasise how it affects real people. Basically, meeting the science writer half way will make the whole process much easier for both sides.

Facts are different beasts these days too. I have learned that they are a commodity to be traded, but the exchange rate is very steep. Scientists, or the fact 'makers', cherish the few true facts that they might be lucky enough to generate over the course of their careers. I, personally, have spent my academic career being careful not to accidentally make incorrect 'facts', by avoiding making sweeping statements or jumping to conclusions, by being sceptical and reluctant to exclaim causal links between phenomena. Journalists are fact-hungry. They will procure several precious facts from a handful of different scientists before breakfast. Facts are – quite rightly – the bones of the article on which to hang the meat.

So, at first, my impression was that it felt a little unfair – that the fruit of the scientists' labour is snapped up and guzzled very quickly. But actually, on closer inspection, it seems to be a more reasonable trade, as scientists relish the recognition of their work, and try hard to produce the sort of facts that people, and journalists, want to consume. Scientists just need to learn to take advantage of this, and start working more closely with journalists. And that, my friends, is just what the [Media Fellowship](#) is all about.

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 17:42 [No comments:](#)

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Labels: [Media Fellowship](#)

WEDNESDAY, 30 JULY 2014

[It's Day 3 in the New Scientist office...](#)

[Ann Cleeves](#)

[Timothy Williams](#)

LINKS I LOVE

[I'm A Scientist, Get Me Out of Here!](#)

[The Body Farm \(BBC 1\)](#)

[Helpful Genealogy](#)

[my Physics](#)

[The View From The Lab](#)

[Nigella](#)

[Cream Tea Crazy](#)

[Cath Kidston](#)

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▶ [2013](#) (15)

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▶ [2011](#) (31)

SEARCH THIS BLOG

Wow! I'm now three days into my placement and I've only just found some breathing space to write a post. *New Scientist* goes to print on a Tuesday, so when I arrived on Monday afternoon (not morning – don't ask – nightmare journey), everyone had their heads down, furiously tapping away on their keyboards. The big open plan office was buzzing with typing and brains whirring. I was introduced to everyone, who all seemed very friendly but busy; given a desk and computer, and set to work finding a winning news story related to (luckily) forensic science. I won't spoil the surprise, in case it makes it to the magazine or *New Scientist* online.

I was surprised at how difficult I found it to choose a piece of research that was (a) not too niche and esoteric only of interest to a small handful of academics, or (b) hadn't already been plastered all over the headlines. This is really a skill that I need to acquire! I thought that a bit of insider knowledge would help, but it may even have hindered me slightly, as I was acutely conscious of what colleagues would say if I wrote anything remotely inaccurate.

The next day was particularly frantic, and really nothing like I'm used to in (relatively) slow-paced academia. Keyboards were smoking until at least lunchtime, but as I didn't have a piece in the magazine that day and wasn't under the same pressure, I researched a couple of other forensic stories, completed my Health and Safety induction and familiarised myself with the tea and coffee-making facilities. I was shown around the whole London office, which I was amazed to discover only contains about 60 people, who between them manage the 'Upfront' and bite-size '60 seconds' news stories, editorial features, technological advances, careers, opinion and letters sections, as well as designing artwork, layout, online content and marketing. Talk about talented! And they do it every week!

By late Tuesday afternoon, there was a collective sigh of relief as "final copy" made it to the publishers, and a well-deserved pint was in order.

Only three days in, although I feel a little out of my comfort zone, I am really enjoying the difference between science journalism and academic research. Whereas the latter needs sound results and robust methodology, the former is more focused on finding an intriguing angle for each story, and although scientific accuracy is paramount, the human perspective is necessary too. I am loving the challenge, and hoping that I can learn to master the art of science writing.

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 22:41 [No comments:](#)

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WEDNESDAY, 9 JULY 2014

Hitting the headlines

It must be a slow news day in Huddersfield, because I've made it into the [Huddersfield Examiner](#) for the second time in as many months! They've picked up the story of my recent award of a [British Science Association Media Fellowship](#), and the fact that I will be doing a stint at *New Scientist* this summer. Here's the [article](#).

The previous [article](#) was about me joining the Forensic Science team at the University of Huddersfield and bringing the 'sexy' (their words, not mine) subject of Forensic Anthropology to the syllabus. I must say, I would have liked the opportunity to have another photo taken! However, I am delighted to say that there is a new [MSc in Forensic Anthropology](#) starting in September 2014. There are still places available, so get your [application](#) in!

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 17:31 [No comments:](#)

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FRIDAY, 6 JUNE 2014

Science Scoops

I am thrilled to have been awarded a [British Science Association Media Fellowship](#), and I am particularly excited to be joining the team at *New Scientist* this summer.

The [British Science Association](#) is a national organisation dedicated to the advancement of science engagement. Their vision is of a world where science is seen as a core part of our culture and society. Every year, the BSA holds lots of science engagement events, including the [British Science Festival](#). This year it will be in Birmingham, from the 6th to 11th of September.

Every year, for the past 27 years, the BSA has awarded ten Media Fellowships to scientists interested in science communication and engagement to a wider audience, offering working placements in several prestigious publications or media outlets. This year's outlets include Nature News; BBC Countryfile, The Times, The Scotsman; BBC radio/online, the Guardian and *New Scientist*. The scheme is designed to allow scientists to learn first-hand how science journalism works, how journalists, researchers and reporters get a science story from idea to page or screen, and how to navigate media attention in scientific work.

Yesterday was the first time we all got to meet each other, as we attended the Briefing Day in London. What an interesting, diverse bunch! The Fellows hail from a wide range of specialisms, including earth science, neurology, botany, astronomy, medicine and (muggins) anthropology. There's everyone from PhD students and postdocs to lecturers and even a Professor. Name badges in place, it was like freshers' week all over again, except instead of 'which A' levels did you do?', the questions were 'what's your research?' and 'which media outlet are you going to?'

As scientists with either limited or no experience of the world of journalism and broadcasting, we were treated to glimpses of how science journalists find a news-worthy story and pitch it to editors, how they craft headlines and interview experts in a whole range of fields. Over the summer, we will all have to take on the personas of story-hungry reporters and go trawling for science scoops.

We were pushed in at the deep end and asked to write a press release about our work, and then we interviewed one of our peers about theirs. Immediately I was struck by how journalists have to be reasonably knowledgeable in a wide range of subjects - "up to undergraduate level", which is quite a daunting prospect for someone who dropped Physics after O' Level!

After that, we fired questions at the organisers, and then got to meet some of the previous Media Fellows, all of whom had found the experience extremely worthwhile and rewarding. I must admit that, by lunchtime, I'd been a bit daunted by the prospect of working as a science journalist for a month in the summer; but by the end of the day, I was really looking forward to it! I was very glad that the others seemed to be having similar thoughts. I'm nervous about cold-calling scientists for sound bites, but am excited about potentially (hopefully) contributing positively to the public's awareness and comprehension of important science stories. I'm also looking forward to working not only with new colleagues at *New Scientist*, but with the nine other stimulating, thought-provoking and cool Media Fellows.

Follow the British Science Association and Media Fellowships on Twitter: @BritSciAssociat and @MediaFellows.

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 12:24 [No comments:](#)

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Labels: [Media Fellowship](#)

MONDAY, 19 MAY 2014

The Skeleton Crew

Have you ever, like me, stared out of a moving train or car at the waste ground by the side of the track or road and wondered if there's a dead body lying there? Every now and again, something incongruous like a crumpled piece of coloured fabric

or a lumpy bin bag catches your eye and you think 'could that be a body?'; but by the time the thought is fully formed, you're further down the track and it's too late?

The Skeleton Crew tells the story of people who are constantly on the lookout, and who follow the stories of unclaimed bodies found by the side of the road or railway track. It describes a forgotten backwater of investigation – away from the relative 'glamour' of police work and forensic science – the vast hoards of private individuals working hard to solve cold cases. This is the story of those dedicated – sometimes obsessed – people who sacrifice time, money and even relationships or sanity to put names to the bodies metaphorically and often literally 'left by the wayside'. Halber tells of the 'web-sleuths' who spend hours at clunky computers scrolling through thousands upon thousands of descriptions of missing people, waiting for that tiny, elusive, spark of recognition. We are introduced to the 'Facebook for the Dead' databases such as [NamUs](#) and the [DoeNetwork](#), where eerie facial composites or reconstructions sit atop biological profiles, like a morbid dating site. She tells of how their suggestions of potential matches are often overlooked or ignored by the police, and how the world of the cyber detectives has its own culture, customs, language and politics. But for them, the chance of a 'hit' – a successful match or positive identification, based on fingerprints, DNA or dental records – is the ultimate prize, keeping them searching even when the odds appear stacked against them.

Through a series of intriguing, interlocking episodes, Halber weaves the stories of the grieving families with those of the unnamed remains languishing in mortuary fridges. She flits between narratives, describing unknown bodies with romantic names like the Lady in the Dunes or Tent Girl. The reader is not allowed to get too comfortable, echoing the desperation of the hunt; and Halber doesn't shy away from gore, recounting autopsies and identifications in forensic detail. This book was shocking and cheering in almost equal measure. The volume of unidentified remains and missing people is very scary, but it is uplifting and moving to think that, behind the scenes of the white suits and the police investigations, there is an army of ordinary philanthropists on the case.

Deborah Halbers' *The Skeleton Crew* is available for pre-order [here](#).

Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 12:48 No comments:

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SUNDAY, 20 APRIL 2014

Written In Blood

Just realised that I forgot to post something about this review that I did for [BBC Focus Magazine](#) last month. It's not on the website, so I have scanned it in and posted it up here – sorry the letters are a bit indistinct. I read and wrote a review of Mike Silverman's autobiographical book *Written In Blood*, that tells of his career in forensic serology and blood spatter analysis in the UK before, during and after the Forensic Science Service. Hope you can read my review, and that you like it, and that you are tempted to read his book as a result.

To Do List

READ
THE LATEST SCIENCE BOOKS REVIEWED

🔍 **READ**
THE LATEST SCIENCE BOOKS REVIEWED

🔍 **READ**
THE LATEST SCIENCE BOOKS REVIEWED

Written In Blood
The Remarkable Casebook Of One Of Britain's Top Forensic Scientists

Mike Silverman
Bantam Press, £16.99

THIS BOOK IS not for the faint-hearted. Don't expect to tiptoe into the gory details. From the first page, Silverman gives you a sharp shove between the shoulder blades and sends you face-first into the pool.

With the metallic scent of blood rising from the pages, Silverman recounts a personal journey through 35 years of game-changing advances in serology (the study of blood serum), fingerprinting and DNA analysis. Giddy with the implications of catching criminals using ever-tinier samples, the police initially thought their problems were solved. Almost overnight, cold cases were cracked and swathes of suspects eliminated from enquiries. But it wasn't all plain sailing. Rapists changed their pleas from 'never met the woman' to 'she consented', and courts expected TV fiction-inspired results.

Silverman describes his work with the scientific detachment of many a forensic scientist. There's a faint amusement at the fright and disgust of 'lay people' - his girlfriend for example, when he brings home a jar of decomposing flesh and maggots from a crime scene - and much of the book's appeal lies in its shock factor. Each case is almost joyously described, sparring no intimate or gratuitous detail.

However, more alarming than the bloodshed, is the story of the inevitable

"More alarming than the bloodshed is the inevitable commercialisation of forensic science"

commercialisation of forensic science and the resulting monetisation of justice. As fast as labs could perfect DNA amplification techniques, they became commodities, subject to patents, copyright infringement and market competition. Suddenly, the Forensic Science Service was under pressure like never before to produce accurate and speedy results every time, and turn a profit to boot.

The impact of having to pay for every single test meant police sent fewer samples to the labs and relied more heavily on evidence they thought would be a 'sure thing', undoubtedly compromising investigations. In turn, labs often threw unnecessarily advanced techniques at samples in order to secure competitive results and generate income, or risk being undercut or outbid. And eventually, that's exactly what happened.

Silverman makes a convincing case that prioritising profit over 'locking up bad guys' was doomed from the start. His prognosis for forensic science in the UK is bleak, and ultimately he asks what price we have to pay for justice. But whatever you do, please don't have nightmares.

DR ANNA WILLIAMS is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Science at the University of Huddersfield

MEET THE AUTHOR

Mike Silverman

What are your particular areas of expertise in forensic science?
I joined the Scotland Yard Forensic Science Laboratory full-time in 1979 and ended up specialising in sexual assaults and murders - or more specifically in bloodstain distribution analysis. This involved looking at blood splashes at crime scenes and identifying the sequence of events that led to them.

What's the general procedure when you're called to a crime scene?
First, you have to make sure the scene is properly secured so that there's no contamination. Then, as a Scenes of Crime Officer, you start looking for everything from fingerprints to suicide notes to blood, hairs and fibres. If I go as a forensic scientist, though, I'll have been called in after that stage to look at the blood splashes. I'd mark them up, test them, draw them and then do calculations to identify the point of origin. If it's a battering-type attack, there'll be a single point where the splashes have come from. You can also identify how many blows were made with the weapon, and whether any arteries were cut.

What scientific breakthrough has had the biggest impact on forensics?
I think nobody would dispute that it was DNA (profiling). This meant you could find blood, semen, saliva or just the touch of a fingerprint at a crime scene, analyse the DNA, run it through the DNA database and come up with a name. Now, thanks to advances like the 'polymerase chain reaction' (an amplifying technique) we can get DNA from samples that are invisible to the naked eye.

MORE ON THE PODCAST
Listen to the full interview with Mike Silverman at sciencefocus.com/podcasts

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Posted by [Dr Anna Williams](#) at 19:15 1 comment:

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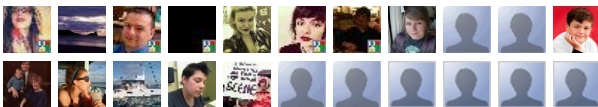
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