

Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils

Lydia Pyne

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SEVEN SKELETONS

Fig 01 THE OLD MAN

Fig 02 PILTDOWN

Fig 03 TRUNG CHILD

Fig 04 PEKING MAN

Fig 05 LUCY

Fig 06 FLD

Fig 07 SEDIRA



THE EVOLUTION OF THE
WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS HUMAN FOSSILS

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Lydia Pyne : Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent Blend of Science Education and Popular Interest
By Dr HFantastic and unique book for the science lover and the student of popular culture. Well and engagingly written with a mix of well-researched historical and cultural context and attention to a popular reader's needs. This is great science education for us non-scientists.
1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating journey
By redwindThis was a fascinating journey through time and space; a series of stories about the discovery of, and meaning of, seven ancient hominid skeletons. Somehow Lydia Pyne manages to weave together a narrative of discovery and meaning that explains both our origins, or the best theories of our origins at the present time, and how our perceptions and views rooted in our culture bring us to conclusions about those origins.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Us reviewed.
By CustomerThat's book in careful and sometimes tedious style describes the seven iconic skeletons with Jim brass a majority of human history. A reader with an interest in human anthropology will learn a great deal about The hominem s And the man who discovered them. It is fascinating reading and a great deal of new information is provided.

An irresistible journey of discovery, science, history, and myth making, told through the lives and afterlives of seven famous human ancestors
Over the last century, the search for human ancestors has spanned four continents and resulted in the discovery of hundreds of fossils. While most of these discoveries live quietly in museum collections, there are a few that have become world-renowned celebrity personasambassadors of science that speak to public audiences. In *Seven Skeletons*, historian of science Lydia Pyne explores how seven such famous fossils of our ancestors have the social cachet they enjoy today.
Drawing from archives, museums, and interviews, Pyne builds a cultural history for each celebrity fossilfrom its discovery to its afterlife in museum exhibits to its legacy in popular culture. These seven include the three-foot tall hobbit from Flores, the Neanderthal of La Chapelle, the Taung Child, the Piltdown Man hoax, Peking Man, *Australopithecus sediba*, and Lucyeach embraced and celebrated by generations, and vivid examples of how discoveries of how our ancestors have been received, remembered, and immortalized. With wit and insight, Pyne brings to life each fossil, and how it is described, put on display, and shared among scientific communities and the broader public. This fascinating, endlessly entertaining book puts the impact of paleoanthropology into new context, a reminder of how our past as a species continues to affect, in astounding ways, our present culture and imagination.

"*Seven Skeletons* is not simply a mixtape of paleoanthropology's greatest hits. Instead, Ms. Pyne uses each celebrity fossil as a springboard to ask why these particular fossils have captured our attention.... [A]n important reminder that we are a self-obsessed species that loves a good hero story."
Brian Switek, *The Wall Street Journal*"[Pyne's] selections highlight the different ways a fossil can achieve celebrity status. Catchy nicknames, media attention, unusual circumstances surrounding a discovery and even scandals can help....The book provides plenty of interesting backstory for each fossil.... [A] peek at how the field of paleoanthropology itself has evolved over the last century."
Science NewsDescribing human evolution through accounts of fossils that became media events might seem a publicity ploy, but science journalist Pyne pulls it off. [Pyne] casts her net... widely, adding captivating accounts of how each discovery fascinated the mass media and entered literature and popular culture.
Kirkus s (starred) "Highly readable and an excellent title for armchair explorers with dreams of their own history-making discoveries."
Booklist"Impressively blends the humanities and science to greatly enrich both."
Publishers Weekly Ever wondered how we got here, and how we think we know? Lydia Pyne takes us on a grand romp through some high (and low) points of the scientific discovery and cultural interpretation of the human fossil record, and along the way shows just how intimately the two are intertwined.
Ian Tattersall, author of *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution* How and why do some important fossils become famous and others do not? *Seven Skeletons* is a story about science, but also its impact in popular culture remind[ing] us that context matters in shaping how we think about science and the past.
Samuel J. Redman, author of *Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism to Human Prehistory in Museums* As lively and readable as it is informative and instructive. By framing her account around the intimate history of seven individual hominid fossils, Pyne shows that paleoanthropology is about far more than dead and dry bones.
Lukas Rieppel, Assistant Professor of History, Brown University A skilled historian and a lively, colorful writer, Lydia Pyne takes us beyond the headlines and into the archives, revealing intimate details of scientific investigation, discovery, marketing, and myth-making in the stories of seven of the best-known human fossils. *Seven Skeletons* is a sprightly, informative page-turner with a deeper message: the strange careers of human remains have much to tell us about how we use science to understand what it means to be human.
Nathaniel Comfort, Professor of the History of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University
About the Author Lydia Pynehas degrees in history and anthropology and a PhD inhistory and philosophy of science from Arizona State University. She hasparticipated in field and archival work in South Africa, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, Iran, and the American Southwest. She has published articlesand essays in*The Atlantic*,*Nautilus*, and*Public Domain* . She lives in Austin, Texas, where she isan avid rock climber andmountain biker.
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Dad, I found a fossil!
On August 15, 2008, nine-year-old

Matthew Berger tagged along with his father, paleoanthropologist Dr. Lee Berger, on a field project in Malapa Nature Reserve in northern South Africa. The project was part of efforts to explore and map out known fossil sites and caves in the reserve, about forty kilometers north of Johannesburg. While puttering around the reserve with his dog, Tau, Matthew discovered what he knew to be some kind of fossil sticking out of a dark brown chunk of breccia rock. At first glance, the senior Berger thought that the fossil was simply a piece of a very, very old antelopea common fossil in the area. He picked up the block of rock containing the fossil and looked more closely, and realized that what he was looking at was a claviclea collarbone of a hominin. He flipped the block over and saw a lower jaw encased in the same piece of breccia. I couldn't believe it, Dr. Berger giddily recalled in a New York Times interview. I took the rock, and I turned it [and] sticking out of the back of the rock was a mandible with a tooth, a canine, sticking out. And I almost died. What are the odds?-----In April 2010, the fossils Matthew and his dad's team discovered in excavations from Malapa were published in Science as a new fossil hominin species called Australopithecus sediba. Although the paleoanthropological community was basically in agreement that the fossils were truly spectacular specimens, the scientific name proved to be a somewhat controversial taxonomic assignment because the fossils showed primitive apelike traits as well as derived, or Homo-like, characteristics. (Many researchers thus argued that the anatomy of Sediba would be better ascribed to the genus Homo, not to Australopithecus.) The publication of the fossils was accompanied by numerous opinion pieces arguing about the best taxonomic status for the fossil from Science to Nature to National Geographic to the New York Times. Regardless of its taxonomy, to date, the Malapa site was undeniably a significant fossil locale, having yielded over 220 bone fragments that, when put together, can boast a total of six skeletons: a juvenile male, an adult female, and three infants that all lived around 1.9 million to 2 million years ago. When the fossil species was described in 2010, it was and still is tremendously exciting not only because Sediba lived during a time when both australopithecine species and early Homo roamed the greater African landscapes together, but also because the fossils were from multiple individuals with incredible archaeological provenience. These fossils represented an interesting time in our evolutionary history and constituted a sample of the species that was greater than just one individual which, in turn, helps paleoanthropologists understand variation within fossil species. Over the twentieth century, little did more to shape paleoanthropology's emerging identity as its own scientific discipline than the fossil hominin discoveries from Europe, Africa, and Asia. Every new discovery inherently carried a certain prestige because the fossil discoveries offered the basis for creating hypotheses and explanations about what could be observed in the fossil record new fossils could make or break definitions of species and every new discovery had the potential to rewrite the family tree. New fossils were imbued with social prestige in their original context either accepted as ancestrally significant, like Peking Man, or dismissed, like the Taung Child. As more and more fossil discoveries have entered the scientific record over the course of the last century, fossil collections are simply not as sparse as they were in earlier decades. (There are, for example, over four hundred Neanderthal individuals represented in the fossil record so far, compared with the very few specimens of the nineteenth century.) So, where does this leave twenty-first-century fossil discoveries? What would a famous fossil look like today? Flo and Homo floresiensis gave us one type of modern celebrity contentious little hobbit that she is. The discovery of Sediba raised other questions: What historical patterns could or would other fossil discoveries follow? What historical patterns would they follow? What cultural expectations and what scientific questions would twenty-first century fossils now need be required to answer to? The dolomitic cave deposits of South Africa have yielded arguably the richest record of both hominin and mammalian evolution in Africa. Fossils were first recognized in these deposits in the early 20th century, but it was the discovery of the Taung child skull from the Buxton Limestones in 1924 that led to the recognition of the importance of these cave sites, Berger explained in a guide to the fossils and history of the Malapa region. Part of the reason that the Malapa specimens could catapult so quickly into the paleo limelight was due to the incredible paleoanthropological history associated with the Malapa Sedibas success is contingent, in no small part, upon the fossils South African legacy. But Sediba's renown is also a product of the fossil being in the right place at the right time and with a person to champion it, all the while pushing for a change in the paradigm of how paleoanthropology collects data and generates hypotheses. If the historical parallels are any indication, the life and afterlife of a fossil are made and remade by its contexts; its lasting celebrity is created over decades. While Sediba's initial life history certainly sets it up to be The Next Big Thing, it's not a foregone conclusion that a century from now it will still carry the same distinction it has today.