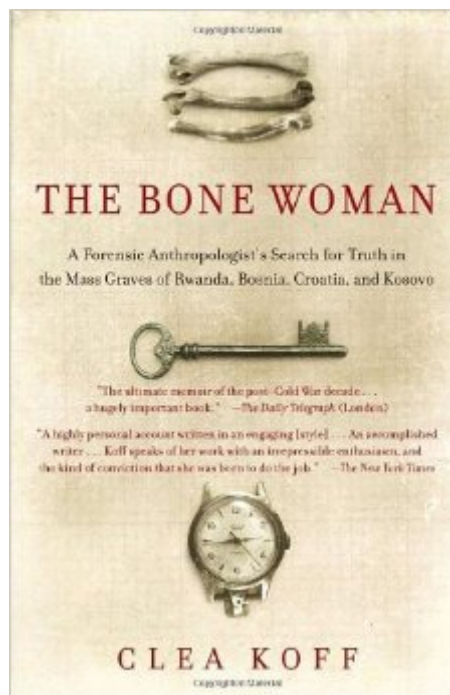


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# The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search For Truth In The Mass Graves Of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, And Kosovo



## Synopsis

In 1994, Rwanda was the scene of the first acts since World War II to be legally defined as genocide. Two years later, Clea Koff, a twenty-three-year-old forensic anthropologist, left the safe confines of a lab in Berkeley, California, to serve as one of sixteen scientists chosen by the United Nations to unearth the physical evidence of the Rwandan genocide. Over the next four years, Koff's grueling investigations took her across geography synonymous with some of the worst crimes of the twentieth century. *The Bone Woman* is Koff's unflinching, riveting account of her seven UN missions to Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Rwanda, as she shares what she saw, how it affected her, who was prosecuted based on evidence she found, and what she learned about the world. Yet even as she recounts the hellish nature of her work and the heartbreak of the survivors, she imbues her story with purpose, humanity, and a sense of justice. A tale of science in service of human rights, *The Bone Woman* is, even more profoundly, a story of hope and enduring moral principles.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The book seems to read as a journal that was written up into a book. The majority of the book follows the author's thoughts and observations over a few significant years in her life, in pretty much chronological order. To a reader who's not paying attention, the whole thing might seem like an "I was there" account. However, one gets insight into how the author approaches her work, with careful observation, dispassionate analysis, and contemplation of the pieces to solve a larger puzzle. She also convincingly communicates an underlying enthusiasm and idealism that drew her

into the work and maintained interest throughout. The narrative contains many anecdotes about kinds of information that bones can reveal, and does a good job of communicating nightmarish conditions in a mass grave and speculation about the atrocities that created them, but concentrating on the interesting problems to be solved rather than going into gratuitous "gross-out" descriptions of the conditions or the violence. (They seem to have left her with a few nightmares, but whether she was having nightmares was never the point of the narrative.) The writing style is good throughout the book, but the last chapter, which I expected to be some editorial "wrap-up" of the book, turned out to be a real thought-provoker. It's extremely bad form for a reviewer to discuss the ending of a book, and my overpromoting it may lead to disappointment in some. However, she describes some bigger picture issues and generalities, conclusions about the world that comes from the commonalities of the various cases she worked on.

I was surprised to read such negative reviews for a book that I dearly love and have bought twice (after one copy was loaned and not returned). Maybe it's just an anthropology thing. As an anthro grad student who wants to work in the same types of situation that Ms. Koff describes, her book gives insight into her experiences. This is not a technical book, in fact it reads more like a memoir. So don't expect detailed excavation information, that's not what this book is. And Ms. Koff is young when she goes on these digs (she is just out of her bachelors when she travels to Rwanda). For those who may not know anything about anthropology, this is a big deal. People without a masters degree or with little field experience aren't usually part of these recovery efforts. Ms. Koff was lucky and competent enough to have worked with good professors who had connections and helped her to get on the UN mission. This is not to say she isn't a good scientist, she is, but as many in the field (and in life) know, half the battle is knowing the right person. Some people seemed to want to see some strong emotional responses by Ms. Koff, and I can understand for most people excavating a mass grave in Rwanda would be horribly traumatic. But this is why some people do this work and others don't. You wouldn't expect a doctor or a firefighter or a soldier to be so wrapped up in the emotion of the moment that they can't focus and get the job done. She is affected, she discusses what she is seeing, imagines what would she do if something as awful as genocide happened to her, how would she save her mother who suffers from some physical limitations making a quick escape impossible. These are the reactions of a forensic anthropologist who has worked on two long and difficult mass recovery missions.

Though this was published in 2004, this memoir looks back at Koff's work as a budding forensic

anthropologist going out on her first major assignments in the mid to late 90s (the last bit of the book ends around 2000) and how these first jobs affected and molded her not only professionally, but as a person. I personally found this memoir fascinating. Not only is the work she does grim but interesting, but Koff herself comes from a unique background -- born in England, Koff comes from an American father with Polish-Russian heritage and an English-raised Tanzanian mother (with 1/2 her family being from Uganda). As Koff puts it, "instead of national identity, we had strong family identity." This background influences Koff some emotionally when she takes her first job working for the UN to investigate mass graves of victims of the genocide in Rwanda. She quickly learns that many of the victims came from multiple backgrounds within one family tree and were often killed for it during the months of the genocide. Koff first visits the mass graves in Rwanda in 1994, and again in 1996. Through her investigations and information that became available in the months and years after the genocide, it's learned that in less than four months, 800,000 people were murdered, most by blunt force trauma. In Kibuye (just one county in Rwanda) alone, 250,000 were killed in just three months, and over 100,000 children were left orphaned. IN MONTHS. One thing that Koff says she quickly picks up on and something she is really moved by is the clearly indomitable spirit of the people of Rwanda. Despite these horrors these families had to survive, she still found a community full of warm and friendly people who (maybe not always, but oftentimes) welcomed her into their homes and their lives.

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