

One of my reading secrets is juvenile nonfiction. It's replete with illuminating explorations. It supplies rich detail to things I wouldn't normally consider. Reading juvenile nonfiction is like flipping through back issues of National Geographic: lots of captivating adventure in unexpected places. It allows me to revert to a time when I was oblivious to peer pressure and when I didn't find the topics obscure, irrelevant or gross, just really cool. I've enjoyed books on epidemics, witchcraft, earthworms and most recently, bog bodies.

"Bodies from the Bog," is written by James M. Deem in 1998. Deem's other books have titles like "How to Make a Mummy Talk", "How to Read Your Mother's Mind", "How to Hunt for Buried Treasure", "How to Catch a Flying Saucer", and "How to Find a Ghost." Super titles for the precocious child. Deem is fastidious. He visited every museum where bog bodies are exhibited and consulted with people who have built academic careers studying bog bodies.

I have encountered references to discoveries of the remains of those who died thousands of years ago, but I never pursued the topic until now. I wouldn't have tolerated a long, scholarly work, although after this thumbnail sketch, I may seek more. Deem systematically led me through the formation of peat bogs. These are watery places where Iron Age people believed that they could communicate with the supernatural world. They deposited weapons, tools and jewellery in the wetlands to please their gods. Sometimes, they placed sacrificed bodies, the bodies of murderers or murdered bodies in the wetlands. Sphagnum peat forms sphagnum which blocks the decomposition of a body and tans bodies the way hide is tanned into leather. For a body to be preserved in a peat bog, a number of conditions must be met. Chances of preserving a body for over 2,000 years are as remote as are the chances of finding it intact today.

Bog bodies have been discovered in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Ireland where peat was cut manually, then dried and burned as a fuel. Finding bog bodies today is rare because the use of peat fuel has declined and manually cut peat has been replaced by mechanically cut peat. Now, peat is harvested by machines that shred bogs and all that they contain.

Grauballe Man was discovered near Grauballe, Denmark in 1952. Radiocarbon dating showed that the body had been placed in the bog in 55 BC. The teeth revealed that the body belonged to a man who died in his late thirties. His hands showed little sign of manual labour. He had a fractured skull, a cut throat and a broken leg. His intestines revealed that his last meal was winter vegetables and fungus-contaminated grain. The fungus may have acted like a drug causing hallucinations or a coma prior to death. Scientists have concluded that he was sacrificed. His hands suggest that he was an important member of his society. His last supper may have been fed to induce drowsiness. Given the season of his sacrifice, he may have been an offering to the goddess of spring and the blood from his throat may have been used ritually.

In Schleswig, Germany a man's strangled body was found pegged to the ground by eight stakes beside the body of a blindfolded girl. Near Osterby, Germany, only the head of a man with his hair tied in a style worn by Swabian tribesmen 2,000 years ago was unearthed. These are gruesome stories, but they are not fabricated and they offer insight to our past. Remember juvenile nonfiction when it's time to escape to reality.