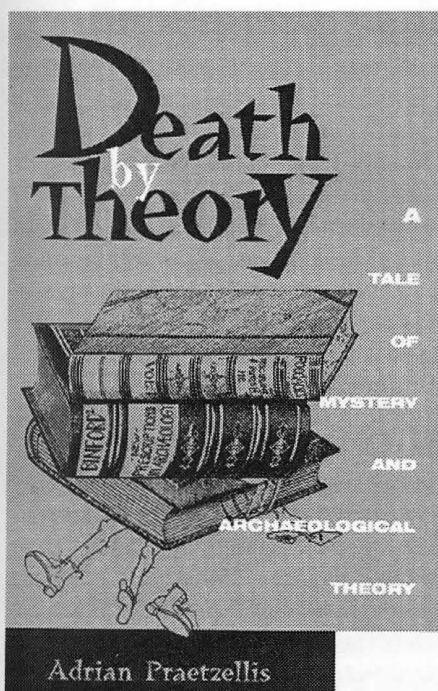


BOOK REVIEWS

Death By Theory. A Tale of Mystery and Archaeological Theory.

by Adrian Praetzellis. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 2000. Vii + 174 pp., illus., index.



Adrian Praetzellis (1998) has previously urged archaeologists to adopt the role of storyteller. To use their imaginations to create more engaging stories for the sites they excavate, still based on the data, but in a less rigid format than a site report. In the present volume, *Death by Theory*, he reverses the roles slightly and weaves the history of archaeological theory within the structure of a mystery novel. Unlike

other novels that use archaeology as context or setting, such as those by Elizabeth Peters or Lyn Hamilton, the mystery in *Death by Theory* is entirely concerned with an archaeological site and its interpretation.

Without giving too much away, the story follows Dr. Hannah Green and her nephew Sean, a recent graduate and now shovelbum, as they are drawn into an excavation directed by one of Green's colleagues. At the heart of the mystery lies an unusual burial site on an island in the Pacific Northwest that promises to cause a sensation. Along the way they encounter a variety of archaeologists and students with varying and conflicting theoretical perspectives, a seemingly militant cult, and overly enthusiastic representatives of the media. Archaeologists reading this story will no doubt recognize situations familiar to their own experiences throughout the narrative.

As the story progresses readers are introduced to prominent theoretical perspectives by means of conversations between different characters. For the most part these discussions flow with the story, without a great stretch being made to include the topics. Points and concepts are illustrated with well known sites and debates in archaeology. The author uses the dialogue between characters to present a rounded discussion that includes different perspectives. Praetzellis presents clear and easily understood introductions to different theories in each chapter.

The story opens at a meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, where Hannah and Sean discuss

whether or not archaeology is a science, and the nephew receives a remedial lesson on scientific method. In Chapter Two, Sean meets a man who is convinced his bag of rocks are important artifacts, but he has been unable to convince any experts that the lines he sees were made by people. This leads to a discussion of how theory influences what we see. Chapter Three introduces the New Archaeology, and four continues with processualism, ethnoarchaeology, determinism and cultural ecology. Their first visit to the site leads to a discussion of diffusion and social structure. Materialism forms the basis of the theoretical discussions in Chapter 6 and gender is addressed in Chapter 7. Marxism is discussed in Chapter 8, complete with an illustration of "The Contents of Karl Marx's Brain (abridged version)" (p.122). The final chapter deals with post-modernism, bringing the mystery to its solution.

Although *Death by Theory* is aimed at those just starting out in archaeology, the volume will also be of interest to a general audience. It will be a welcome addition to the reading lists of introductory courses as it provides approachable introductions to complex theoretical issues. Praetzellis has included a list of additional readings, and a series of "Talking Points" for each chapter. These questions encourage readers to move beyond material presented in the text, and provide a good starting point for more involved discussions of archaeological theory. The glossary will also be a useful feature for readers

unfamiliar with terms used in archaeological theory (or that Hendrix recorded Purple Haze in 1967).

Praetzellis has succeeded in producing an entertaining story, and at the same time providing an accessible introduction to archaeological theory from the basis of scientific method through postmodernism. His writing is clear, and along with his illustrations has considerable wit, making the book an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon.

Mike Brand

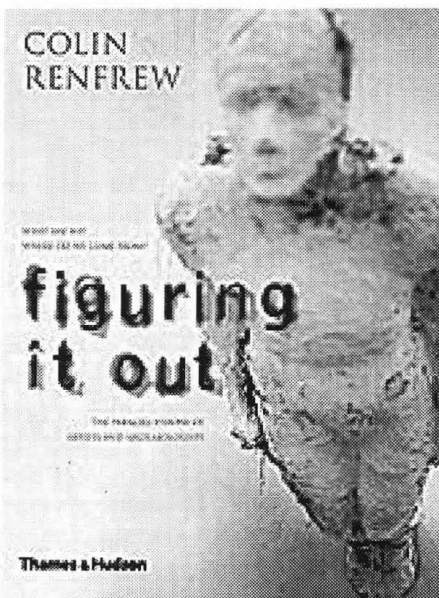
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Should Tell Stories Once in a While.
Historical Archaeology 32(1):1-3.

Mike Brand acquired his doctorate in archaeology from Simon Fraser University in 2003.

Figuring it Out: The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists.

By Colin Renfrew. Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London, 2003. 224 p., illus., index



“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” Those famous questions posed by the post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin articulate the point of departure for Renfrew’s latest book, *Figuring it Out*. An exploration of the idea that art can be viewed as archaeology and archaeology as art, the book illuminates the generous overlap between both disciplines: their approach towards material culture, interpretive meaning and, above all else, process.

Renfrew compares the art gallery viewer – the individual confronting a conceptual visual work – with the archaeologist who discovers a poorly understood object from the past. How is a relationship established between beholder and that which is beheld? What is the process whereby an individual determines the meaning or significance of a thing? What does an archaeologist do with an ancient symbol inscribed on clay? How about an inscrutable Marcel Duchamp ‘readymade’ or a Richard Long photograph of footprints left in tall grass? Renfrew considers how both disciplines “make sense” of material culture and human experience. In the process, he blurs disciplinary boundaries in an eye-opening and evocative way.

Don’t buy the book, however, to learn much about archaeology. Attempts to summarize human evolution and cognitive archaeology are rather weak, even rushed.

What does make the book worthwhile is Renfrew’s infectious enthusiasm, woven throughout the book, for contemporary artists and their work. Describing how “the visual arts have transformed themselves into what might be described as a vast, uncoordinated yet somehow enormously effective research program that looks critically at what we are and how we know what we are...,” Renfrew introduces his audience to a range of contemporary artists who experiment with notions of display, exhibition, collection and

classification. The works of Richard Long, Mark Dion, Barry Flanagan, Antony Gormely, Edwards Paolozzi and David Mach are illustrated and discussed, and yet, just as the book finds its greatest success within this very compilation of talent and ideas, it also finds – in my opinion – its most poignant flaw. For it is not the “human condition” that Renfrew is mulling over; rather, it might better be called the ‘white, Anglo male condition.’ His book is devoid of real inclusion of either female or minority artists and thus, his claims to addressing the human condition (if there is *one*), feels inflated and overdrawn.

Aside from that one scruple, however, any archaeologist will be enriched by exposure to so many vibrant and modern artists wrestling with issues familiar to them. Who knew that the Tate Gallery in London commissioned an artist to excavate the Thames River bank site and create innovative display cases to house the recovered artifacts? Or that certain artists devote their lives to exploring formation processes, the very crux of experimental archaeology? Indeed, the book feels like a breath of fresh air as it permits a detour into new disciplinary terrain and expands the relevance of archaeology in public life. Perhaps the most vital aspect of the book is Renfrew’s survey of artwork that employs found objects as their primary medium. For what are framed collections of pottery sherds; sculptures of frosted glass; free-standing hat racks; figures made of discarded blenders and plates, or life-size sheep made of plastic if not the indisputable ‘archaeology of now’ made explicit?

Amanda Adams

Amanda Adams conducted her graduate research on the petroglyphs of Gabriola Island, receiving her M.A. from the University of British Columbia. She currently lives in Minneapolis, where she works full-time as both an archaeologist and ethnographer.
