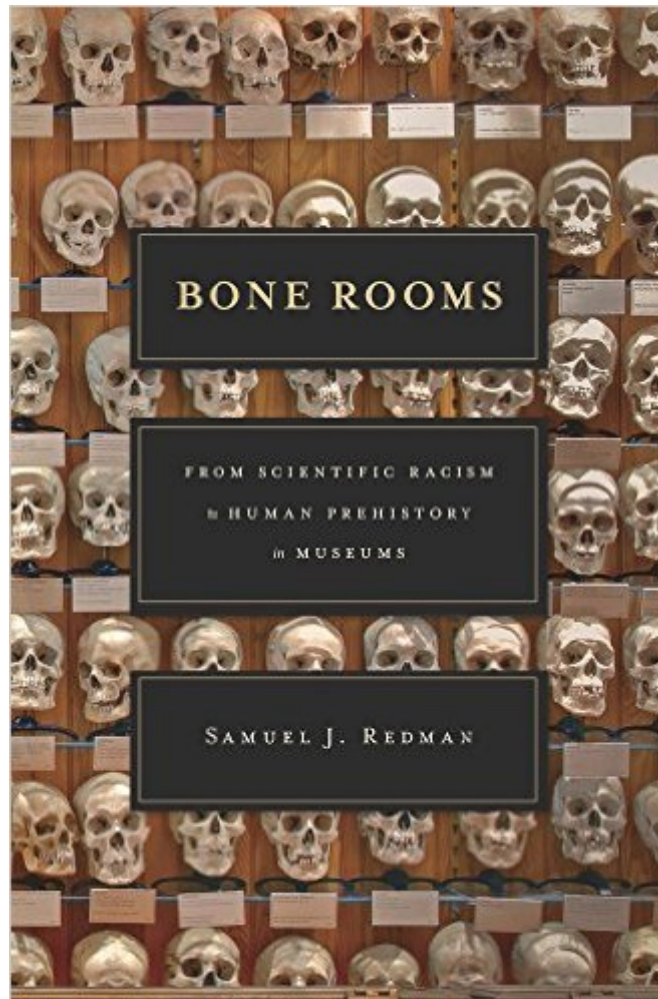


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# Bone Rooms: From Scientific Racism To Human Prehistory In Museums



## Synopsis

In 1864 a U.S. army doctor dug up the remains of a Dakota man who had been killed in Minnesota. Carefully recording his observations, he sent the skeleton to a museum in Washington, DC, that was collecting human remains for research. In the "bone rooms" of this museum and others like it, a scientific revolution was unfolding that would change our understanding of the human body, race, and prehistory. In *Bone Rooms* Samuel Redman unearths the story of how human remains became highly sought-after artifacts for both scientific research and public display. Seeking evidence to support new theories of human evolution and racial classification, collectors embarked on a global competition to recover the best specimens of skeletons, mummies, and fossils. The Smithsonian Institution built the largest collection of human remains in the United States, edging out stiff competition from natural history and medical museums springing up in cities and on university campuses across America. When the San Diego Museum of Man opened in 1915, it mounted the largest exhibition of human skeletons ever presented to the public. The study of human remains yielded discoveries that increasingly discredited racial theory; as a consequence, interest in human origins and evolution ignited by ideas emerging in the budding field of anthropology displaced race as the main motive for building bone rooms. Today, debates about the ethics of these collections continue, but the terms of engagement were largely set by the surge of collecting that was already waning by World War II.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I cannot recommend Redman's *Bone Rooms* enough. The topic alone -- museums and the

collection of human remains -- is fascinating enough on its own, but Redman has uncovered a treasure trove of anecdotes that help to unpack a meaty subject. From an arms race (no pun intended, though the author does tell a story of a civil war veteran finding his own amputated arm in a museum,) to collect the greatest number of human remains and no small amount of looting, to the discrediting of scientific hierarchies of race, to the foundations of the collections of some of the U.S.'s most important museums, this book packs a lot in. Redman also considers how this history of collection shapes current debates, especially over the need to guard the sacredness of bones and artifacts of native Americans versus the willingness of museums to display them. Great read overall.

I am not a scientist â “ not a scholar of any kind; but, yet I found Dr. Redmanâ™s book completely captivating. His writing style made his subject matter engaging and thought-provoking on a subject â “ bone rooms - I never thought I would have any interest. So, do I recommend this book for the everyday reader? Absolutely! You have to try it â “ I think you will be entertained albeit a non-fiction book.

Redman tackles a little known but important subject in American History in this wonderfully, difficult to put down book. Using his skill as an historian and as a story teller, Redman brings this period to life in a way that few academics would be able to achieve. I would recommend this book to anyone who is fascinated by history, museums, anthropology, or simply good writing. If nothing else, Bone Rooms will change the way you think about museums, and lead you ponder what lies behind the exhibits. I have no doubt this is one of those books I will be rereading!

An excellent synthesis of physical and cultural anthropology demonstrating how the noble quest for knowledge was corrupted by the ignoble quest for academic fame, all written in an approachable style that makes for a great read rather than a pedantic exercise. Professor Redman writes for both the inquiring reader and the scholar. This is not the first book on the subject but it's intent is obvious: to make the study of physical anthropology understandable to all and provide a fresh perspective to the already knowledgeable. Sam Redman (and Harvard Press) deserve great credit for publishing a book so rich in fact and story telling but devoid of the dry and dusty language that so often coats academic writing like bone dust.

Interesting look into a not-so-distant past. This book illustrates how science and culture shape societies and how that perspective is every changing. Highly recommend for academics and

general interest.

An excellent read from an excellent scholar. Professor Redman's book has added an important brush stroke to the canvas of our understanding of the 19th and early 20th centuries. From Ford's Theatre being used to house the Army Medical Museum, to the race to collect mummies in North America, *Bone Rooms* is sure to please from start to finish.

The exquisite detail, trenchant analysis, and wealth of sources artfully explicates the history of scientific racism, biological anthropology, and the socially constructed mission of museums. Redman's monograph is a pleasure to read and appropriate for freshman seminars, popular audiences, or fellow members of the academe. Highly recommended.

Redman offers new insights on scientists and anthropologists like Ales Hrdlicka, Franz Boas, and W. Montague Cobb. Amazing to read that Redman discovered archival evidence that even the ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore collected human bones for the Smithsonian! The book includes two case study chapters, one on the history of the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia (a medical museum) and the second on the San Diego Museum of Man. A great piece of scholarship and an entertaining read -- you won't be disappointed.

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