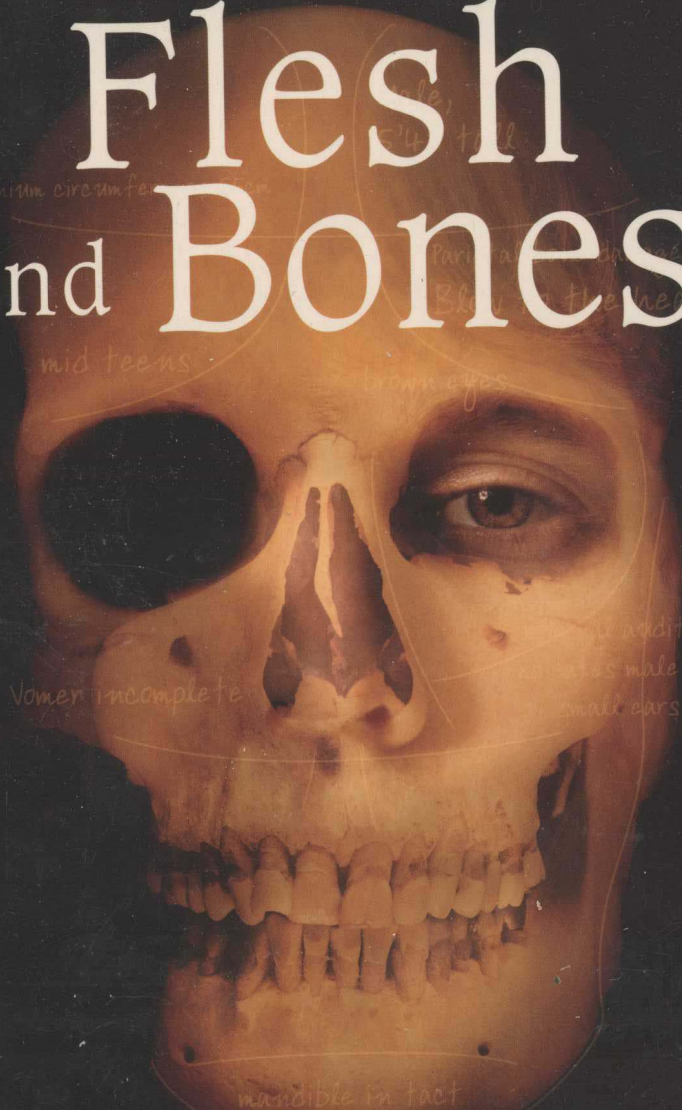


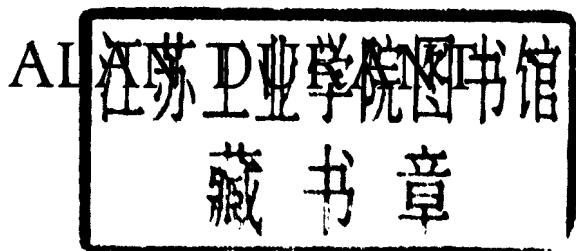
*Foul deeds. Murder. The Black Art . . .*

# Flesh and Bones



ALAN DURANT

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DEFINITIONS  
in association with The Bodley Head

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*Alan Durant*

***The Times*, 13 June 1999**

## **MEDIEVAL MYSTERY OF SKULL AND 'SCRATCHCARD'**

A yellowing piece of parchment found beneath the altar of a ruined monastic church could be the world's earliest known scratchcard, archaeological experts believe.

The 10in by 8in document, whose authenticity is currently being researched with the help of the British Library, is considered to date from the late fifteenth century. It was discovered during excavations at Maundle Abbey near York.

The parchment, known as an incunabula, features three illuminated characters side by side, with a text promising the winner a spiritual reward. It is thought to be an indulgence sold by the Church to guilty Christians seeking forgiveness for their

sins. Dr Malcolm Wagstaff, who is heading the excavation, says that the parchment may well be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds.

The dig also uncovered a skull, which it is believed may be the last remains of the monastery's founder, St Geronimus. If confirmed, this would be a very significant find for the Church. Dr Wagstaff said that while it was too soon to make any such claims, initial tests and research revealed that the skull dated back several centuries.

Dr Wagstaff told reporters that there was no evidence that the incunabula and the skull were connected, although, he added, this could not be ruled out. Tests continue.



# PART ONE







## CHAPTER 1

The skull made me feel sad, deeply sad. Staring into those cavities where eyes had once been, imagining the flesh that once covered the bare white bone . . . it brought a lump to my throat. Quite apart from anything else, a skull was a death's head, and death made me think of Mum; this skull more than any other, 'cause it had been dug up from its five-hundred-year-old rest a year to the day after Mum died. A whole year had gone by and I was still a mess. But then how could you ever get over something as terrible as that? Could there *be* anything as terrible as that? It seemed to me that even if I was five hundred years old like that skull, I could never come to terms with Mum's death.

I picked up the sheet of paper on which Dad had noted the main findings from the physical anthropologist's report. It was headed 'Brother Boniface'. How they must

have laughed when someone had come up with that name. I could see why it had seemed appropriate: Boniface was a saint's name, and what was a skull but a bony face? But I hated it. It wasn't his name, was it? Nobody knew what his name had been. The one thing they knew for certain was that he wasn't St Geronimus the Venerable. Dr Wagstaff's enthusiasm for this theory had been misplaced – so Dad said. He didn't have much time for Dr Wagstaff. The two of them had worked together before on another dig and they hadn't exactly hit it off. Dad dismissed Wagstaff as a 'sensationalist', always trying to bend the facts to fit his theories.

So who was the person whose skull I was now staring into? A novice monk apparently. According to the report, he'd been in his mid-teens when he'd died: 'Boniface was a male Caucasian of European ancestry and stood about 5' 4" tall.' The same height as me, which would have made him below average now, though in those days I reckoned it would probably have been quite tall. No one would have called him 'short arse' the way some of the kids at school did me. Not that I cared any more. What were a few taunts next to what I'd been through?

I stared once more into the hollow sightless eyes and again had that overwhelming feeling of sadness. I'd lost my mother, and so had he, I thought – well, actually, no, she'd abandoned him. We'd done a project on monastic life in RS

and I knew that in medieval times parents put their sons into monasteries the way some parents these days pack their offspring off to boarding school. Only going into a monastery was for life; there was no going home for the holidays. It was final – final as death. How could any mother do that?

My eyes moved to the bigger cavity in the crown of the skull where the fatal blow had been struck before the head had been severed from the body. As yet, no one knew why. Had the boy suffered? Had he had time to know what was happening, to register the identity of his killer – or had death been instantaneous? Dad said that the experts inclined towards the latter theory. They'd finished all their tests, carbon dating and all the rest – they knew when he lived, how tall he'd been, how he'd died; now they'd passed the skull on to Dad to try to discover what he'd really looked like. That was Dad's job: putting flesh on the bones – well, clay anyway.

Once again I gazed into the eyes. The eyes! I started, blinked, frowned. The skull was eyeless. *But brown eyes had gazed back.* It wasn't possible, but it shook me all the same – not just the eyes, but for a second I'd heard a sound too, oddly muffled like someone talking to you when your head was under water. I turned to see if anyone had come into the room. I was alone.

\* \* \*

That evening me and Dad and Dad's brother, Uncle Jack, sitting having supper. Jack on his favourite subject: *what I'd do if I won the lottery*. Tonight he was going to buy himself a yacht – 'A great gin palace,' he said – and cruise around the world, visiting exotic places.

'You've as much chance of that happening as Wagstaff has of making a sensible diagnosis,' said Dad.

Jack raised his hands in a stop-right-there gesture; pursed his lips. 'You may scoff,' he said. 'But I have faith. One day it's going to happen, you'll see. And then you'll laugh on the other side of your face.'

'Not me.' Dad again. 'I'd wish you luck, Jack, because that's when you'd need it. You may need incredibly good fortune to win the thing; but not to let it ruin your life when you do – now that's when you'd need all the luck in the world. Riches – and especially unearned riches – never brought anyone happiness. Winning the lottery has ruined more lives than it's benefited, I'm certain of that.'

'Ah, you scientists,' Jack tutted. 'You have no imagination – no soul.' He turned to me. 'Isn't that right, Liam?'

I shrugged. 'I reckon there are better things to put your faith in than the lottery.'

'Oh yes, and what might they be?'

'Well' – a hesitation – 'God.'

‘God? Now you *are* clutching at straws. Tell him, Will.’

Dad sighed. ‘I can’t say I find either helpful.’

‘I suppose you believe in science,’ Jack irked.

‘It seems as good a thing as any to put your faith in. At least it doesn’t promise what it can’t deliver.’ Dad pushed at a dollop of mash with his fork. ‘Take that skull I’m working on. What good did believing in God do him, poor beggar?’

I wasn’t having that. ‘You don’t know that. Maybe he was better off dying. Maybe he went to heaven and he’s looking down on us right now, shaking his head at what a mess we’ve made of things putting all our faith in science or the lottery.’

‘Hey, don’t knock the lottery,’ Jack sparked. ‘Anyway, didn’t I hear they found some kind of scratchcard in with that monk of yours?’

‘It was an incunabula, offering absolution from sins,’ said Dad. ‘And I think the reward it offered was to be collected *after* death.’

‘After death?’ Jack was aghast. ‘What’s the use in that?’

‘If you believed in hell and damnation, which most people did in those days, then getting rid of your sins was essential: you didn’t want to live for ever in the burning fires of hell. So you did everything you could to be absolved from your sins – go on a pilgrimage, buy an indulgence, give money to a church or monastery – so that

when you died, you'd be rewarded with a place in heaven. And knowing this, the Church cashed in any way they could. Selling incunabula, or spiritual scratchcards, was just one wheeze they came up with.'

My hackles were up and I couldn't let it pass. 'You think science has got so much to be proud of? What's it ever done for us except help create nuclear missiles and mutant tomatoes?'

Dad smiled wearily. 'That's ridiculously simplistic, Liam, and you know it. I'm going back to work.'

In bed that night I picked at the conversation – science, the lottery, the skull, God . . . I hadn't always believed in God. It was only since Mum died that I'd gone down that route – and it had brought me some comfort where nothing else had been able to. I'd talked to friends, doctors, bereavement counsellors, listened to countless words of advice, sympathy and consolation, but nothing could break through the crust of despair that had grown over me. Certainly not Dad. Not that he'd really tried.

I'd gone into a church to annoy Dad as much as anything. I couldn't bear the way he seemed so matter-of-fact about our tragedy. He just carried on working with his old bones as if nothing had changed. When I told him that one of the counsellors had suggested talking to a priest, Dad

had dismissed it out of hand. 'Pie in the sky,' he'd called it. 'A waste of time.' So I, who hadn't been thinking of following up the suggestion, did so the very next day.

The priest, Father Christopher, was very approachable. He invited me to a service. And I liked it. I liked being part of a . . . well, yes, a family. It made me feel wanted, supported. I found praying a release. I could say what I felt without having anyone opposite, pitying or judging or analysing. There was comfort too in the idea of an afterlife – that monk in heaven looking down . . .

*The bones are false.*

The words came out of the air. Or were they in my head? Had they insinuated themselves in one of those nano-seconds of unconsciousness when my eyes had closed and almost at once opened again. I sat up, knew myself to be wide awake, my room just as it always was, the sky outside dark, starless, a fuzzy glimmer at the window from the streetlights.

*Foul deeds. Murder. The Black Art.*

The same voice again, and this time a figure too, superimposed on my vision like one of those overhead projector overlays they were so fond of at school: a boy, about my own age, earnest brown eyes staring out from under the cowl of a black serge habit. A monk's habit.

Brother Boniface.



## CHAPTER 2

The visions and the voices became more and more frequent. I heard whispers of bones and murder, saw shadowy hooded figures – and the eyes, always the eyes, staring out at me, imploring me in. I was drawn to the skull compulsively. It no longer made me feel sad. Now it evoked in me a range of new feelings – fascination, elation, terror.

I watched Dad in his workshop with his ultrasound equipment, attempting to gauge the depth of the tissue there would have been on the living face of the skull. As Dad had explained a number of times, the results were only approximate – they gave you ‘average’ information and you couldn’t be sure your subject had been average. Some people had small heads, some – Neanderthals, for example – had large ones. But you got some basic guidelines – ‘Good enough for someone like Wagstaff, but not for a



proper scientist.’ Dad preferred the anatomical method. This is where his real expertise came to the fore. He drew on his deep knowledge of the muscles, glands and fat pads that most affect the way people look to give life to the skull.

It wasn’t the first time I had watched Dad carry out this operation, but I’d never before been affected like this. I could barely watch as he painstakingly sculpted the defining anatomical structures onto the skull. I winced as if these structures were being applied to my own head: the zygomaticus muscle between the eyes, the parotid gland above the left eye, the orbicularis oris at the bridge of the nose . . . There were seven structures in all, and with each one, my hand went involuntarily to the corresponding area on my own face. I felt giddy, like I’d been given an anaesthetic and was in that mid state between consciousness and unconsciousness when light intensifies and sound muffles.

*Brother Martin will be your keeper. He will make sure that you are well looked after and that you carry out the vows and duties you are bounden to.*

Two figures in tunics whispering in the darkness.

*You know too much, and knowledge is a dangerous, dangerous thing.*

*Murder. The Black Art.*