

Unbridled Books



READING GROUP GUIDE
for
CRANIOKLEPTY: GRAVEROBBING AND THE SEARCH FOR GENIUS
By Colin Dickey

ABOUT THE BOOK

So you've always admired a certain musician. Perhaps you're a life-long fan of a particular writer. Perhaps there is a scientist you'd love to meet.

Would you also want their skull?

Sound preposterous?

Not too long ago, some people did want the skulls of people they deeply admired.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, due in large part to the popular work of Dr. Franz Joseph Gall, the skull had begun to assume a new meaning and significance. Gall's discovery, called "cranioscopy" and later rechristened "phrenology" was predicated on the theory that, all things being equal, size determines propensity. The bigger the brain, the higher capacity for intelligence. His elegant assertion that the brain's workings might be made visible by the impressions it made on the skull is the motivation that drives phrenology.

From the 1790's to the mid-nineteenth century, interest in phrenology sparked an intense fascination in particular with the skulls of great men. Just as phrenologists looked to the heads of criminals for proof of pathological deficiencies, they also sought out – by whatever means necessary – the heads of artists and philosophers for proof of genius.

Beginning with the dramatic opening of Haydn's grave in October 1820, *CRANIOKLEPTY* by Colin Dickey takes us through the extraordinary history of a peculiar kind of obsession: the at times overpowering desire to possess the skulls of the famous – for study, for sale, for public and very private display.

The after-death stories of Haydn, Beethoven, Sir Thomas Browne and others have never before been told in such wretched detail and lightning vividness. Fully researched, indexed, and illustrated with some surprising images, *CRANIOKLEPTY* is a fascinating and authoritative history of ideas carried along on the guilty pleasures of an anthology of real afterlife gothic tales.

FROM THE AUTHOR

I had known about Sir Thomas Browne's skull for quite some time, how the man who famously wrote that to be "gnawed out of our graves" was a "tragical abomination" had his own skull stolen out of his crypt 150 years after his death, and how it subsequently ended up in a museum for another eighty years as religious authorities tried repeatedly to get it returned to the ground. It was just one of those curious ironies of history, a macabre anecdote.

And so it wasn't until a few years after I first learned of that story that I happened across an anecdote of the exhumation of the painter Francisco Goya's grave in France, some eighty years after his own death, and the tantalizing telegram that the Spanish consul sent back to his government: "Goya skeleton without a head. Please instruct me."

Wait, I thought, you mean this happened to somebody else?

I soon learned that it wasn't just Goya and Browne, but at least half a dozen famous men who had their heads stolen from their graves and kept as phrenological trophies, scientific curiosities, and bizarre fetishes (Viennese composers—Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart—seemed in particular to be singled out). The human skull is one of those symbols that has meant so many different things to people of different time periods, and these skulls in particular—the final remains of great geniuses—happened to be above ground through such an amazing series of scientific, religious, and cultural upheavals. It seemed to me that one could follow these evolutions of scientific thought and religious beliefs just by tracing the strange odysseys of these skulls over the course of two hundred years. That's what I set out to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Dickey is the co-editor of *Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices* (2008). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Cabinet*, *TriQuarterly*, and *The Santa Monica Review*. A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, he now lives in Los Angeles.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

1. Not that Unbridled Books endorses this, but if you could, whose skull would you dig and why?
2. Phrenology was considered a real science for many years before being debunked. What science do you now think may have the same fate?
3. Before hitting on his key concept of "cranioscopy" (later known as phrenology), Franz Joseph Gall developed a core system known as "organology" which had four main principles: 1) moral and intellectual faculties are innate and determined from birth; 2) the manifestation of these qualities depends on their organization; 3) the brain is the exclusive seat of the mind; 4) and each faculty of the mind corresponds to a different, independent section of the brain. While these may seem a bit dubious and arbitrary, modern day neuroscience supports many of these same principles albeit in modified

form. What do you think of Gall's original concepts? Discuss these in light of what you know of modern day thinking.

4. Do you think it is possible to “document” genius, to discover what makes one a genius or not? Should we?

5. How does this book illuminate the history of medicine? Does it make you look at modern medicine differently?

6. There are some pretty "interesting" photos and illustrations in *Cranioklepty*. Did you have a favorite?

7. By the time phrenology had moved from dubious science to worldwide phenomenon, Johann Spurzheim, Gall's star pupil, had begun to focus not just on identifying the various mental functions of the brain but on the possibility of actual self-improvement through the use of phrenology. This angered Gall who accused Spurzheim of distorting the original project of organology. To Spurzheim's way of thinking, moving beyond science and into the popular culture was the only hope phrenology had for survival. Who would you side with in this argument? Gall or Spurzheim? And why.

8. Colin Dickey has written that he considers phrenology to be the forefather of the modern self-help movement. What parallels can you see between phrenology and our current world of weight-loss books, talk-show psychologists and lifestyle magazines?

9. *Cranioklepty* is one very extreme, and early, manifestation of fan culture, where people will go the extreme lengths to own a piece of their idol. What are the more unsavory aspects of today's fan culture? Do you think things have become worse (more invasive) or better in the 200 years since Haydn's skull was stolen?

10. Most book groups serve refreshments when they discuss a book. Did you? So...what was on the menu?

SUGGESTED READING

Beethoven's Hair by Russell Martin

Driving Mr. Albert by Michael Paterniti

Postcards from the Brain Museum by Brian Burrell

Descartes' Bones by Russell Short

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More to Come