

The Bone Woman – Among the Dead in Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo
by Clea Koff. Atlantic Books 2004

This is a most unusual story told by a quite extraordinary young woman. Clea Koff, daughter of a white Jewish American father and a black African mother, decided at a relatively young age that she wished to work with human remains. Following university studies in human osteology and forensic pathology, Clea found herself assigned in 1996, at the age of 23, to the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, where she joined a team of sixteen uncovering victims of the massacres of the Rwandan genocide.

Clea Koff spares no detail of the work she did, or the circumstances in which she did it, and a strong stomach is needed for some of her passages; but as well as the forensic detail she talks honestly and openly of the emotional and psychological impact of her work and few readers will fail to be moved by what she expresses, or the aftermath of the horror into which she stepped.

From Rwanda Clea Koff moved to the Balkans, where she performed similar forensic work on the victims of massacres and atrocities in the Balkan wars. As well as providing the victims of such crimes against humanity with the opportunity of varying levels of identification, and a dignified disposal of their remains, Ms Koff satisfyingly concludes her narrative with a summary of prosecutions carried through by the UN Tribunals on the basis of the work done by the teams of which she was a part.

This is not necessarily the type of book that many of us would pull off the shelves, and it is certainly not an 'easy read', but it is inspiring, touching and full of hope and decency.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh