

Anthropodermic Bibliopeggy Part 1

00:21

Emily

Welcome to the Hybrid Pub Scout podcast, where we're mapping the publishing frontier with stories of publishing past conversations with publishing professionals of today and peeks into publishing future. I'm Emily Einolander, and today's guest host, author and librarian extraordinaire Chris Curran joins us once more to discuss some very light subject matter. Hi, Chris.

Chris

Hi, Emily.

Emily

What, what are we talking about today?

Chris

Oh, we are talking about anthropodermic bibliopeggy. So many syllables, so o many Greek words coming together to talk or to describe the practice of binding books with human skin. Which was actually a thing.

Emily

In this two part episode, we will talk about how researchers determine which books are made from human skin, who bound the books whose skin was used, and the stated and subtextual justifications for the practice.

Chris

So as with our Malleus Maleficarum episode, we soon discovered that this topic was more than just a historical curiosity. We wanted to approach the subject with sensitivity to the power dynamics and our own historical heritage of colonizers.

Emily

Yep, so let me just throw out some content warnings before we get started. Corpse violation obviously, medical ethics violations, abuse of power, objectifying the human body, obviously, colonialism, racism, misogyny, and we're going to say some swears also.

Chris

but if we're going to swear, it's gonna be it's gonna be about something like this. If anything ever justified some superlative expletives. It's going to be this.

Emily

It's gonna be the most What the fuck thing in books. What are our main sources today, Chris?

Chris

So our main source for this episode is going to be the book *Dark Archives* by Meghan Rosenbloom. As well as a few related interviews and features, including an episode of the podcast *Ologies* with Allie Ward, where Rosenbloom and analytical chemist and fellow researcher, Dr. Daniel Kirby go into more detail about their work. Speaking for Emily and myself, neither of us have real scientific backgrounds and it's going to get a little chemical all up in here.

Emily

We're gonna front load with that. So we're gonna get all that stuff out of the way before we get more into the ethical things that we probably also shouldn't be talking about, but are going to. Le codicology more Foucault.

Emily

So Chris, what is the first thing you think of when I say books made with human skin?

Chris

The first thing that pops into my head is no, you know, that's not a thing. That's sensational nonsense from the 19th century. That's some Penny Dreadful Sweeney Todd type shit. And then, you know, you delve, like, you spend two seconds on Google. And you discover Nope, this was a thing. And well, well, now my curiosity is piqued

Emily

A thing for fancy people.

Chris

Yeah, exactly.

Emily

A thing for fancy lads with disposable incomes and large libraries

Chris

And some serious detachment from human life. How about you?

Emily

Oh, I mean, like, this is an aside but I do some writing for a Jack the Ripper website. I don't know if we've ever talked about this, but I've been doing it for years.

Chris

Yes.

Emily

But I always, you know, with the research, you know, obviously amateur research that I've done. I was always kind of like, Why do these people think that it was a doctor? It obviously wasn't a doctor. And reading about this subject that we're discussing today has made me realize, Oh, no wonder everyone thought he was a doctor, like doctors are ridiculous,

Chris
especially in this time period.

Emily

Yes, absolutely. And this is even a little bit later in the time period. Like the what they're discussing here began in the 1700s. Almost or just to start with, but you know, more so in the 1800s. But yeah, I immediately I'm just like Leatherface, Ed Gein, like in Nazi exploitation comic books, but for the record, they don't have any books in the collection that were owned by Nazis or made by Nazis. That was something that they are very quick to point out at the very beginning of the book, or any resources that you look at is like none of these are from Nazis. So far, we have not discovered any of those, which, cold comfort but okay.

06:01

The second thing I think about is the Necronomicon in *Evil Dead* in the *Evil Dead* trilogy. But specifically, as I was thinking that and reading the introduction, Rosenbloom calls out the Necronomicon from *Evil Dead* and says most anthropogenic books don't announce themselves with a ghoulish appearance. Although I was researching this on Atlas Obscura, and they had a picture of the book in question, one of the books that we will discuss today, and it looks pretty fucking ghoulish to me, I don't know, it looks like, it looks like a person's skin. Like, I don't know that, at least to me, it looks like a dead person's skin.

Chris
That that particular book stands out, it definitely does, from all of these other confirmed books. One stands out as looking kind of like what you would kind of like what you would expect. Um, the other ones just kind of look like antiquarian books. Yeah. Which, again, yeah, if you're, if you're expecting or if you hear about human skin books, you expect us a certain number of pentagrams and, and other such things, and devil faces and whatever on the cover, but no, no, they look like books,

Emily

I mean, banality of evil and whatnot, not to take it back to the Nazis. So anthropogenic biocodicology is the study of biological information stored in manuscripts. That field of study looks to expand the field of codocology to include biomolecular techniques of proteomics and genomics. Codicology is the study of books and parchments, easy code, Codex books, proteomics is the study and analysis of proteins. Also easy, right? And genomics is the study of genes. So, so far, so good. When you look at word origins in terms of scientific fields of study, I always feel smart. And that's, that's usually where it ends. So the leading scientist involved in this research is Dr. Daniel Kirby, who I think we mentioned earlier. He'd worked with some drug companies, and he worked at IBM. And then he took a bike tour of the worlds because he got bored of his job. And then he started volunteering at the Harvard Art Museum. And at

that point, people who were working in archaeology had already started doing protein analysis with bones and other artifacts. And he was like, we should just do it with books. So he started applying some of those same techniques to books at Harvard who the librarians wanted to test and it sounds like it kind of just evolved organically into this, "Hey, why don't you test this book that everybody's been saying is human skin?" And you can get a sample smaller than, I think, your finger like the very tip of your fingernail or your hair or something.

Chris

Well, the so the anthropic dharmic book project, for whom the author, Rosenbloom works, has a picture of a sample and they put it up next to a penny. And if you if you look at the reverse side of the penny that has the the Lincoln monument on it, the size of the sample, is roughly the same size as Lincoln's head in the monument, not not the front facing coin side of the coin, but this miniscule

Emily

Yeah, the teeny guy.

Chris

Yeah, exactly miniscule piece of material. So yeah, it is infinitesimally small,

Emily

which is, is good if you're talking to Special Collections librarians because the heart attacks. Exactly. That's why I fixated on the size on the sample size, just because it's so tiny.

10:22

Emily

It's a minimally invasive procedure. So the method that they use is called PMF, which stands for peptide mass fingerprinting. Leather maintain some of that collagen, even after it's treated. So the proteins are made up of amino acid strings. So these strings have different types of proteins. So they cut up the protein and they use spectromic analysis to see how big the different masses that make up the string are. And that's how they tell the difference. They just compare them to other reference samples that they have. So by using the special tools to look at these cut up proteins that can compare them to collagen from different types of mammals, to see if a book is made of the skin of a 19th century lamb or a destitute human victim of yellow fever.

Chris

It's it's interesting to see (total aside), but it's interesting to see that some pathologies are preserved in the skin samples you mentioned yellow fever. I just think that it's interesting house you know, certain pathologies can be preserved and and preserved not only through the skinning process, but also the also the tanning process, which is such an invasive thing.

Emily

We'll get into a little bit more. But don't shut off the podcast yet.

Chris

Guys, we're just getting into this.

Emily

So there were so many so many claims, there are so many bizarre claims from that period of time of books being made with human skin. But what did what means did they use to assert and, or quote unquote, prove that before this type of analysis was available.

Chris

So originally, it involved microscopes, specifically putting the book under a microscope and looking looking specifically at the hair follicles on the I'm going to call it letter. So it's, it's, it's thought that human hair follicles have a distinct pattern from other animals or even other primates, this can be problematic as over the years the collagen in the skin can change. And that can change these patterns. The pattern that most people seem to be looking for is kind of like a diamond shaped pattern versus like a triangular shaped pattern in the, in the skin. The diamond pattern is supposed to indicate, according to some people, human skin, or more generally primate skin, which... In doing this and doing this research, I had never heard I hadn't come across a book being bound in like gorilla skin or anything or monkey skin or anything like that. Somebody prove me wrong. Not that I'm advocating this, I just thought that was interesting. Um, but as the collagen in the skin can change over time, there's also the consideration like I was saying earlier about the tanning process itself can also alter these diamond patterns making, you know, what some might think is a diamond pattern, make it look more like a triangle. And this can ultimately lead to the test being inconclusive or or being subjected specifically to false positives. As a result, this follicle test has been deemed less than reliable.

Emily

Inadequate,

Chris

Yes. Fortunately, things have changed.

Emily

I suppose. So. So why did people believe that certain books were made and bound from human skin?

Chris

Oftentimes, the claim that a given book was bound in human skin was often made by the owners of the specific books or by eventual owners of a specific book. And oftentimes, they would write in the margins or or in the frontispiece of the book itself, they would write these handwritten notes that would say, hey, this has been bound in human skin. It's interesting to think, though, what, what this tradition of writing in the books and claiming that these are Human skin can say about a given culture at the time or something. So realizing that this is, um that this is a written claim, but, and and that the study of history is the study of the written record, one could say that this is a historical source that these marginalia

15:22

are written sources and as such are viable, but digging a little bit closer, I would be more tempted to consider it as oral tradition, the question of, of historical fact, and solid evidence versus oral tradition, you know, is an important distinction to be made. I was once speaking to a colleague about this. And they asked, you know, well, "When you're examining history, shouldn't you take oral tradition and tradition just in general into account? How can you discard, you know, tradition when you're trying to understand the past? And, you know, I said, fair enough. But the study of history with a capital H is like science, based on evidence. And, yes, an oral tradition can be evidence. But let's take an absurd example. So if you have census records, claiming one thing that should you know, be taken as higher quality evidence than, say, a rumor shared by a nosy neighbor, somebody living in a specific neighborhood, and this nosy neighbor will say in an interview, well, so and so my next door neighbor used to have, you know, an illegitimate child or something. That's kind of an oral tradition, isn't it? This also brings us into the topic of bias, which is a four letter word among historians. So when you're thinking about these things, who are you going to listen to? Are you going to necessarily speak about, say, a nosy, or rely on the nosy neighbor with, you know, a potential axe to grind? Or are you going to listen to a disinterested third party such as a census taker? So you take all of this evidence into account and you see kind of what comes out in your historical analysis. So no, oral tradition should not be ignored, but it should be balanced with the record. So, back to the handwritten note, these notes found in margins, found in these purported human skin books. So who wrote these? We nowadays can't ignore the salacious, even titillating allure of the transgressive when examining these reports. "This book is bound in human skin" is a transgressive, and I hesitate to use the word interesting, but an interesting allegation. It's a it's a good there I go in quotes, again, it's a "good," albeit gross story, which explains why the allegations kind of endure, doesn't it, despite any, any actual evidence to the contrary. Also, these allegedly bound books could illustrate the time and place the allegation was made. You know, like I was saying earlier, so at the time, and alleged human skin book could fetch a higher price, says, says Rosenbloom, right in in the Dark Archives book right. financial gain is definitely an excellent motivation. But why would these books fetch a higher price in the first place? A couple of things come to mind. So in Georgian and Victorian England, it was not uncommon for rich people returning from a quote unquote grand tour of exotic places, specifically like Egypt, to to have these people come back to England and host parties and share stories and display trinkets from their travels. And then in even more exclusive circles some of these travelers would return with an actual mummy from Egypt, a full human corpse with them and then these rich people would create a spectacle by unwrapping a corpse in their private home.

Emily
Ew.

Chris

...to two, well, let's say the the delight of their guests. This was you know, so far removed. Granted, these people were removed by these mummies by a couple of 1000 years. Um, so maybe there's a certain amount of distance involved, but also there's this kind of salacious idea, right? So oftentimes, and this is where it gets even grosser, the wrappings and even the human tissue from these mummies would be ground and made into oil paints. So the pre raphaelites all of all of those, you know, Rembrandt paintings, those dark browns—that's human tissue.

19:56

Emily

Oh my god.

Chris

That is human tissue. This This paint is called Mummy Brown. Interesting. Interesting side note. So I recently read something on by the Smithsonian Magazine. And then I just double checked this, just to make sure I got my date, right. But this practice of grinding up human mummies from Egypt didn't end until 1964.

Emily

Yeah. Oh my god.

Chris

And why did it end? Because someone because someone said That's fucked up. No, no, that's what you would expect. But apparently, the one remaining paint company that continued to make these ran out.

Emily

They ran out of mummy.

Chris

They ran out of the raw material.

Emily

Mummies just got too expensive.

Chris

And yeah, it's exactly. Um, and then we start getting into like, archaeological malfeasance and everything. But But yeah, it was even interesting reading this article, how a representative from this pen company said, you know, you know, we might still have like an arm or a leg kind of stashed away. But do we still have like a full body? No, because we've run out.

Emily

How did I not know this?

Chris

So that's mummy Brown. Right? But the Victorian and the Georgian obsessions, obsession with mummies didn't end there.

Emily

Well didn't, didn't didn't all of the you know the rich boy magic societies in England like used mummies as part of their like potions and their rituals and stuff like that as well? I mean, it's not the...

Chris

Yes. Yes.

Emily

So that's like, ingesting them, right?

Chris

Yep. Yeah. Doctors are or not, not pharmacist apothecaries. apothecaries would prescribe pills made from made from human beings in general, but specifically made from made from mummies made from ground up human tissue. There's a there's a book and again, in researching all of this, I ran across this book that I really want to read *Mummies, Cannibals, and Vampires: the History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* by a Durham University lecturer named Richard Sugg. S-U-G-G.

22:37

Emily

Maybe you should go to your local library and find it.

Chris

Hmm. I wonder, wait, do libraries still exist? No. They should.

Emily

They should have a Netflix for those.

Chris

Yeah, exactly. Join the 21st century already. Honestly, let me wrap this up before I lose completely lose my train of thought. So here's So with all of this. Here's a question. Here are several questions, really. So what does the existence of these books bound in human skin say about Western civilization at this time? And what was so important about the human corpse that made it the target of consumption and violation? Why would 19th century Western people want to ingest this? Or make it into a book? There are a lot of answers to those specific questions. What about like changes in domestic culture at the time? What about the mechanization of war seen in the 19th century?

Emily

The thing that's kind of hovering in my mind when we're talking about ingesting human corpses is that maybe we're doing something where we can tell ourselves that they're not human?

Chris

Exactly. Granted, you and I are going to talk about this a lot more. Now.

Emily
a lot more.

Chris

There's there's so much to unpack with this. But also, what can be said about the the implied existence of these books, these books that are written in human skin made by these handwritten notes that we find in the marginalia. So even if a person did not actually violate a human corpse to make a book, Why would one want to lie?

Emily

Right? Yeah, why? Why would you brag about that?

Chris

Exactly. So this suggests to me a certain prestige was added to these books, right? Um, so again, that's that's when we start talking about the owning and objectifying human beings. Yeah. I have another thought, though. As I was going to going on my little diatribe there, a thought occurred. Western civilization kind of looks at the corpse and looks like corpse handling from from the Judeo Christian worldview and belief system. Right. So with that said, there are other cultures in the world that practice, and I think even some that continue to practice funerary cannibalism as just part of dealing as part of their grief and part of their funerary practices, eating small pieces of the recently deceased as a means of prolonging their life so to speak. I'm hardly an expert. That's an anthropological discussion, that I'm hardly qualified, but it is worth saying that, from a cultural relativistic standpoint, people have practiced funerary cannibalism.

Emily

I mean, spoiler alert, Cheryl Strayed did it.

Chris

Right.

Emily

It seems like there must be some kind of natural human impulse there when you're grieving, but that's grief that's different than that's different from like, Let's go dig up a dead body and then grind it into powder for paint. Right? That's different, right?

Chris

What goes on, I am a paint manufacturer, living in 1750. And my brain goes, Whoa, look at this human corpse over here, I'm gonna grind it up and make brown paint.

Emily

If it's in the ground, it's gonna be ground. And that's the paint maker's philosophy. So, currently, the Anthropodermic book project count, as they slowly and methodically and respectfully

26:46

test these books that have the claims of being bound in human skin, alleged anthropogenic books identified 50 That's that's what they got in the pipe their books tested or in process 31 books confirmed as human 18 and books proven not to be human 13. Let's also lay the groundwork by looking at a case of a person whose body was used for this purpose. Additional content warning as we continue—this gets much more biological. While they can't track every single person who has had this done to them, marginalia ends up being a clue to make those discoveries and to follow those threads that you were referring to. That adds credence and proof, evidence to the oral traditions if I can overgeneralize. So we're going to talk about a single instance of someone who could be tracked and who was able to be tracked because of the marginalia that their... Gosh, what should we call it? Should we call it their attacker, aggressor, violator? The doctor.

Chris

All of these words! Let's go with doctor.

Emily

Yes, let's be a little more dispassionate in the telling of the story. So, this doctor wrote in the margins of a collection of books they had bound in human skin, Mary L—. So through some study, the it was determined that it was referencing a woman named Mary Lynch. So she was a 28 year old Irish tuberculosis patient in the 1860s. She lived at Philadelphia General Hospital, which was a hospital where orphans and poor people and mentally ill people were all basically dumped together to be kept treated. Yeah, I mean, supposedly treated but I don't know. So as she's there being extremely ill her family would visit and would bring her ham sandwiches. And those were contaminated with trichinosis. Which is so sad because imagine, your life sucks so bad and then the ham sandwich betrays you. And, and so on.

Chris

It's a ham sandwich that does you when of all you're surrounded by all this suffering, but it's it's the act of kindness that does you in.

Emily

Kindness and comfort, right?

Chris

Yes, yes.

29:51

Chris

It's your comfort object. Oh, God. Ridiculous. This poor woman.

Emily

Seriously? The poor family

Chris

Yeah, I mean, maybe they did no, no.

Emily

Maybe they didn't find out.

30:06

Chris

Oh, I see what you're saying. Oh, God, I would hope not.

Emily

From what I read, it was after the autopsy where it was discovered. Oh, and clearly, the doctor in question was not in very good communication with this woman's family. So chances are they didn't know. Um, so John Stockton Hough was responsible for the autopsy. He did not know her in real life. This was the first time he was seeing her, her body. And he discovered as he was dissecting her, sorry, guys, worms, just lots and lots of worms all throughout her body. And he was very excited about it. And yeah, I know, oh, my God, I'm gonna make myself throw up. Okay. So he was so excited that he took the skin from her thighs and took them home with him. So this, this is just, this is a human being. Oh my god. So. So meanwhile, he took these home with him all, you know, skipping, skipping about with his new findings, and Mary was left to be dumped in a pauper's grave. So yeah, but we never would have found out what her story was if he hadn't written her name in the marginalia of the in the margin of the book. So let's talk about how they actually bound the books. So the actual work was done at tanneries, but before that point, these doctors would be responsible for preserving the skins and drying them out and treating them before they brought it to the tannery. Sometimes this would last for years. So in Doctor Hough's case, they used lime to remove the hair and skin particles, and then used ammonia to pickle the skin, and he did this by storing Mary's skin in a chamber pot underneath his bed, and pissing on it.

Chris

Because what's a great source of ammonia?

Emily

I mean, it worked. But imagine taking...how did he not go to...How was he not a serial killer?

Chris

Exactly. There's, there's so many points of failure. In this whole progression,

Emily

you just like put, put her skin in the toilet for years, and then bring it to another person. And you bring it to another person and say, Here you go, put this on a book. I know, I know. God, I am a lot more tired than I thought I would be. I think talking we can wrap up. Chris, if you would like to talk a little bit about the first book to be confirmed by the anthropogenic book project is bound in human skin. Because I

believe it acts as a good bridge from talking about these disgusting processes, to the ethical human debates around how to deal with these discoveries and the research.

Chris

Oh, let's get into this one.

Emily

I don't know, man, I'm ready to get out of the other parts.

Chris

So seriously. So it was back in 2014. Um, when when the news broke the doctor Kirby, who we were talking about earlier, had verified that Harvard University had an anthropomorphic book. It was from the 1880s called, *Des Destinees de L'ame*, French, for on, on the destinies of the soul. And surprise, it was bound in a French woman skin, they discovered so the book itself was written. The text itself the book was written by our Zenmuse AE in the wake of his in the wake of his wife's death as a as a sort of poetic exploration of life and death and the soul. All that good stuff.

Emily

Oh, that French stuff.

Chris

Yes. So French. So he got the skin from his doctor friend and he was elated, for lack of a better word. To be able to use a woman's skin to bind this book. I think it's interesting to to read the inscription the written inscription in the book. In full I found it online.

35:01

So the inscription reads, "This book is bound in human skin parchment on which no ornament has been stamped to preserve its elegance. By looking carefully, you easily distinguish the pores of the skin. A book about the human soul deserved to have a human covering. I have kept this piece of human skin taken from the back of a woman. It is interesting to see the different aspects that change the skin according to the method of preparation to which it is subjected. Compare for example, with a small volume I have in my library sever *Pinaeus de Virginitatis Notis* which is also bound in human skin but tanned with sumac."

Emily

Ah, fetishization of objects!

Chris

And objectification of people in general but but in this case, in and so many cases, women, you are yes, your art is so important that a woman must be sacrificed for it. Also, just you know, there's also the I don't know..."My wife is dead. I am sad. Therefore, I will get another woman's skin to cover a book I wrote about her." Like, what? Right And anyway, let's talk about the fallout a little bit of this discovery being made and how it was presented.

36:33

Chris

Yes, moving right along. The ability. So the ability to prove that this book was indeed bound in human skin was a it was a pretty big, big breakthrough. And then another example of losing Well, losing the plot a little bit. The headline that announced, um, the, the findings of the test was...can we call it glib? One of them said and here comes another quote. *Caveat Lector* spelled like, like Hannibal Lecter? Doctor.

Emily

Oh my god, you're right. That wasn't on purpose. That couldn't have been on purpose. Maybe it was okay. Keep going. Sorry.

Chris

Right. So *Caveat Lector*: Good News for fans of Anthropodermic Bibliopeggy, Bibliomaniacs and Cannibals alike.

Emily

Fans of anthropodermic bibliopeggy.

Chris

Good news?

Emily

Fans! Fans?

Chris

so this announcement brought the whole ethical debate into focus. Princeton librarian Dr. Paul Needham interesting guy. He's gonna show up more. But Dr. Paul Needham, in particular was adamant that the book cover should be entered to respect the unnamed woman who was who was, according to him, according to Dr. Needham, mutilated to fulfill this man's psychosexual desires to fulfill Houssaye's psychosexual desires. Um, so, that's, that's where we come to the next part of this whole this whole subject, right. What is the right thing to do? When these books are are confirmed to be bound in human skin? Who decides what is done with human remains and and what plays into those decisions? There are some very interesting points made on both sides of this debate. I feel.

Emily

So Chris. Closing thoughts.

Chris

I'm wiped, I'm wiped out.

Emily

My go drink.

Chris

Yeah, exactly. I I think I need to go on a long, anxious walk to cleanse myself of all of this.

Emily

Okay, well, you can find us at hybrid pub scout.com on Facebook and Twitter @Hybridpubscout on Instagram at @hybridpubscoutpod. Thanks for hanging in there with us.