

# Metropolitan Tombology with Dr. Erin-Marie Legacey

## Ologies Podcast

### October 20, 2022

Oh hey, it's your coworker who sounds like she gargles lighter fluid but it's just a cold, Alie Ward. We're back, we're going deep under the streets of Paris, France and we're getting very creepy. So, I knew I was going to France with Jarrett's family for a quick trip, and you can see last week's minisode, Field Trip: I Go France, for all the weird France stuff that I learned. But I knew in advance of that, and I thought, "We need a Spooktober on all the skellies in the Catacombs," because if you did not know, there are tunnels under Paris, lined with millions of human bones and you can visit them. I was thrilled to find and chat with quite possibly the world's finest ologist for this, a Texas-based expert who wrote the actual book on catacombs.

And before we descend into it, a quick thanks to all the patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://Patreon.com/Ologies) who support the show and who sent in such great questions for this one. Thank you to everyone who rates, and subscribes, and keeps us up in the science charts, and to everyone who leaves reviews, I read all of them and I prove it by reading a just-left one, like this one from Zacks Mom 08088, who wrote that she wishes I were part of the family. And Zacks Mom, I'm happy to be your internet dad forever. Also, Shampoozgambali left a mad review about how the French minisode had too many ads in the beginning and Shampoozgambali said that they wish us:

*... the beat of lick but I will unfollow the show.*

Two things: Shampoozgambali, huge apologies. That was our bad; we accidentally programmed the ad break at 15 seconds in, instead of at the 15-minute mark. Big goof on our part and it's fixed now, thank you, sorry everyone. Two, I think you meant the best of luck, but henceforth I'm going to wish people the beat of lick, because I just like it.

Okay, so Metropolitan Tombology, the study of where to put the dead in growing cities. We got an expert; we got *the* expert. She's an associate professor at Texas Tech University, specializing in the history of modern France, the French Revolution, and even death tourism in Europe. She's the one! She's the one to talk to. She did her PhD on the Catacombs, she authored the wonderful book, *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830*, and I'll link where to buy that right in the show notes and on my website because you're going to want this book.

I absolutely loved this conversation and this topic so fire up your headlamps and let's explore subterranean Paris and cemetery history, sinkholes, midnight wagon rides, smells, skulls, how we view our bodies post-life, the architects of the macabre, old-timey reactions to the Catacombs, my own experience of them and hers, plus tips on visiting, with metropolitan tombologist, Dr. Erin-Marie Legacey.

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**Aside:** Okay, the interview hadn't started but we were already getting hot tips straight out of the gate.

**Alie:** I'm going to Paris in a week or two.

**Erin:** Oh, lucky you.

**Alie:** I know, right? Never seen the Catacombs, never smelled the Catacombs, [*Erin laughs*] so I figured it would be good to interview you ahead of time.

**Erin:** Sure. Well, do you have tickets yet?

**Alie:** No, not at all. See I'm already learning. *[both laugh]*

**Erin:** It's very tricky. I don't want to waste your time, but I went with my family, I have two daughters, brought my little girls to Paris for the first time ever this summer, which was very exciting for me, and I was like, "I'm taking them to the Catacombs, I wrote a book about this, no problem!" And like, I could not get tickets. *[laughs]* So, we did not go.

**Alie:** That is really good to know.

**Erin:** So, get on it.

**Alie:** I better get on it.

**Erin:** I don't know if it's useful for the interview, but they release the tickets 10 days ahead of time, so you've got to get on the internet and get them. You can't get them well in advance, you just have to do it within 10 days. Just go to their website and you can get them.

**Aside:** So, go to the official Paris Museum site, and I'll link it on my webpage for this episode. And just keep checking, even a few days before. So, I tried, I missed the window, which really bummed me out, and then I reached out to the museum PR department asking for media passes for the Catacombs, but I was ghosted on that front, no dice, and I was desperate and embarrassed. So, I asked on social media if anyone had contacts, and Twitterer @AmelieLouise replied, "I see plenty of times available on the days you want to go on the Catacombs' website. Did the transaction not go through?" So, I don't know, there were suddenly tickets available, they released more a few days before. My point is, just keep looking on their site.

But why would you even want to go? What are they? Why are they? Let's get to this interview.

**Erin:** Erin Legacey, she/her pronouns.

**Alie:** Awesome. I wasn't sure it was if it was *[phonetic]* 'Le-gay-cey' or 'legacy' but it's straight-up 'legacy'.

**Erin:** Just the way you want it to be, it's just Legacey.

**Alie:** And for someone who works in history, that's I guess convenient, right?

**Erin:** There you go, yeah. People say that a lot. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** I'm so sorry, you must get that all the time. So, what drove you toward history? What was it about the past that you gravitated toward?

**Erin.** I love storytelling. I love writing stories, reading stories, and unpacking narratives. When I was in college, couldn't decide whether I wanted to be an English major or a history major, but to tell you the honest truth, I couldn't deal with Shakespeare and so English major was out. *[Alie laughs]* And so, I decided to be a history major and now I get to tell stories for a living, writing or in the classroom, and teach students how to do the same thing. So, that's really what sucks me in is, I mean, yes, history, very interesting. But it's historians telling stories is what really gets me excited.

**Alie:** I understand that your family owned a bookstore when you were growing up?

**Erin:** Yes, yes. My dad ran a bookstore from the time I was about 3 until I was 12. And so, I have these very nostalgic, romantic, probably highly inaccurate, memories of just quietly sitting

in the back of the bookstore reading books all day, every day. I'm sure it wasn't quite as calm and peaceful as it sounds, but that's how I remember my childhood very fondly.

**Alie:** When it comes to gearing your life toward history and deciding, you love narratives, you love understanding what happened in the past, how do you figure out what era and what part of the world?

**Erin:** That's a good question. So, I would say... These are, like, the questions I get all the time and I never have really... I need, like, just good, two-second answers. [*Alie laughs*] So, I grew up in Canada, where I went to a French Immersion school, so I learned to speak French from the time I was 5 years old, which is great. And so, I knew how to speak and read French in college which meant French history had a lot more opportunities for me than what I initially was interested in, which was Russian history. So, I went to Russia for a semester in 2000, the winter of 2000, and tried to learn Russian; it's very hard. [*"I can't read it, there's no words on it!"*] That kind of sealed the deal for me and I came back and recommitted myself to French history.

I was interested in revolution as a college student, and any kind of violent disruption, major change, was where I focused all of my attention. So, it was free floating around Europe, and I just landed in France because I already had the language skills and, like so many people say, I had a great teacher. I loved all of his classes, he told great stories, and he made me care about French history, which I knew nothing about before going to college, and that just kind of set me on my path.

**Alie:** Does that fluency help when it comes to searching archives for things, or finding letters, or poring through old accounts?

**Erin:** Absolutely. I mean, I have students who don't have French language skills and I'm not going to discourage them from studying French history, there's a lot of things that are translated, especially in the period I work on, which is the 19th century. But I mean, it's just a fraction of what's out there. So, if you can read and understand French, there's just so much more you can find. I mean, you can't do a PhD in French history without understanding French. That's the case for, kind of, any geographic discipline that's in a language other than English. But yeah, absolutely.

My favorite document in my book about the Catacombs is this... I don't remember how many pages it is; I'd have to look it up, but it's a couple hundred pages of handwritten comments that people made. It was a guestbook. You know when you go to a museum or you visit any site, there's often a guestbook there when you leave or when you come in. So, when I did my research as a PhD candidate, I was looking for this document, I knew it existed, and I couldn't find it. Eventually I did, and the whole thing, it's thousands of comments people left in their handwriting, and I mean, that would have been indecipherable to me if I didn't understand French.

**Alie:** Yeah, what year was that from?

**Erin:** 1809 to 1812.

**Alie:** Wow!

**Erin:** Yeah, it's amazing. And I will tell anyone where to find it, I had a hard time finding it. So, I'll tell anyone who wants to know. It's at the Historic Library of the City of Paris, it's a public library, you can go in and it is manuscript number 11. [*Alie exclaims, Erin laughs*]

**Aside:** So, if you go to Paris, pop in and pore over pages of the Catacombs' earliest visitors. In her 2017 paper, "The Paris Catacombs: Remains and Reunion beneath the Postrevolutionary City," Erin describes these early adopters of the Catacombs' opening years. She writes:

*Although most individuals who filled the book with extended comments were relatively educated men, Catacombs visitors represented a wide range of the population from Paris, France and Europe. On a typical day in the Catacombs, August 8th, 1811, 38 individuals signed the guestbook. Of these people, two made strong references to the existence of an immortal soul, eight wrote Latin expressions, two urged the living to take advantage of their time on Earth, one made a joke about the skulls on display, one made reference to the happily honored dead, and another noted that he had come to the Catacombs, "...driven by curiosity and the desire to see a spectacle that will be entirely new for me."*

And then a few dozen others just signed their names, maybe they were in a hurry to make the most of their remaining breaths on Earth, above ground. So, reactions from early visitors were all over the map, maybe because our reactions to death are just so individual. So, what is Dr. Legacey's story? What's her frickin' deal?

**Alie:** You have written a book about the Catacombs, which is how I found you. I was looking for an expert in this and it led me to Lubbock, Texas, where you are. *[both laugh]* What was it about the Catacombs specifically, how did you become an expert in this?

**Erin:** I do have a story about that. This is a not-very-scholarly story of how I became interested in the Catacombs. I was a second-year PhD student and casting around looking for something I wanted to research. Because when you do a PhD, you have to pick a topic, and I was in my second year, and I still didn't really know what I wanted to work on. I knew I wanted to work on France, I knew I loved Paris, I was oddly fascinated with history of the dead. I'd written a research paper about political suicides the year before, but it was very heavy and I wanted to move away from that because it's something you're going to spend the next, you know, 10, 15 years of your life on, 20 in some cases.

Anyway, I had a Halloween party at my house, it was actually the party where I met my husband, *[Alie gasps]* isn't that funny? Anyway, so I had a Halloween party at my house and the next morning I was recovering from our party on the sofa and was, like, watching whatever was on TV and I flicked to a show that I've never seen since, but I think it existed for a while, called like, *The Scariest Places on Earth*. I want to say it was on the Family Channel or something, I don't even know. Anyway, they had an episode about the Paris Catacombs, and I had never heard of this before. *[Eerie music plays, child's voice narrates, "Below the city lies a labyrinth of ancient tunnels and mass graves known as The Catacombs."]* And I was just totally struck by how weird it was. So, it's a series of underground tunnels beneath the city of Paris that's just lined with human bones. It doesn't look real. *[laughs]*

And so, I did what all history students, or maybe all people do when they're interested in something, and I got out my computer and typed "Paris Catacombs" into Wikipedia and learned that they dated not from, like, the medieval period like I initially and very mistakenly thought, but from the exact time period in history that I was interested in, which is the early 19th century. So then I did the historian thing, and I went to journal databases and looked to see what historians had published journal articles about the Paris Catacombs... Nothing. I looked to see what books had been published and there's really

beautiful photography books, there are some literary scholars who have worked on the Catacombs but that's from a different perspective, looking at how it appears in fiction and things like that. I love that, that's all amazing work, but it's not what I do.

Anyway, so that's second-year PhD student, looking for a research topic, finds this thing that they can't put their finger on why it's fascinating, but I'm like, "This is so cool and so weird!" And nobody has explored it from a serious academic perspective. And that's always my angle, to find something that everyone knows about, that's intrinsically attractive, but for some reason it hasn't been taken seriously. So, then I tried to take it seriously and spent the next 10 years doing that.

My whole book isn't about the Catacombs, it's called *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830*. So, one chapter, my favorite chapter, is about the Catacombs, but I also write about cemeteries and ideas about what to do with the dead in the late 18th century, which is really fascinating, and if we have time I'd love to tell you about how you can turn bones into glass.

**Alie:** Yes! [Erin laughs] Yes, wait. Have bones been turned into glass?

**Erin:** You can turn- Yeah, yeah!

**Alie:** Whose bones? Any bones?

**Erin:** Sure. If you like... I can point you toward the 18th-century essay that tells you how to do this.

**Aside:** Of course, *of course* there's going to be more on this later. We can't not know that, but back to the Catacombs.

**Erin:** I'm getting way off topic here. But, started with the Catacombs and spread out from there. I realized I couldn't write a whole book about the Catacombs because I couldn't find enough research materials, but I could write a chapter and it's, again, my favorite chapter, by far.

**Alie:** And okay, this is one thing that blows my mind about it. Essentially, early 1800s, not the 1300s, not the 1600s... the 1800s. That's like, yesterday in terms of history.

**Erin:** Right! And that's what got me too. I remember, yeah, saying this seems old and it's pretty new, this is pretty much a modern construction.

**Aside:** So, this whole thing absolutely boggled my skull, what a buster of flimflam, right here.

**Erin:** Similarly, you would think the Catacombs were created maybe over time, and they kind of organically took this shape, and people took their time putting this together. But this is something like, there were a whole bunch of bones dumped into these underground tunnels because they needed to put them somewhere, they kept them there for 10, 15, 20 years and then were like, "Oh gosh, we should do something with that. Let's make walls out of them and open it up to the public." [*"That's a great idea."*]

It's not like it was this sacred space that evolved into a tourist attraction, it was designed to be a public space from the very beginning, and it happened in a manner of months. And so, that's very modern to me and that's one of the things that makes it so appealing, something that hooks you because it doesn't make sense, initially. And so, as a historian, what you do when something doesn't make sense is figure out, "Why doesn't that make sense to me?" And dive in further.

**Alie:** Walk me back a little bit about where the bones came from. What was going on in terms of having to make space for that dead? Whose bones are they? Where had they been before? And who was the person that was like, “Y’all, I have an idea”? [both laugh] Who was the Walt Disney of the Catacombs?

**Erin:** So, I’m going to try to give you the world’s shortest history of this.

**Alie:** [laughs] No, bring it on.

**Erin:** Basically, Paris’ burial culture up to the end of the 1700s, so the 18th century, they had this one really big cemetery in the middle of the city. If you go to Paris, it’s right where the big shopping center called Les Halles is right now. [AI voice, phonetic pronunciation, “Les Hall-ees”] and you can still see the fountain that was from this big cemetery. It had been there for almost a thousand years and it contained, just... I mean, you can imagine, a thousand years’ worth of bones from the city of Paris, so this is a huge cemetery. I mean, the bones aren’t continuously buried in the ground. They’re dug up and they’re put in these charnel houses that line the cemetery.

**Aside:** I’m sorry, what is a charnel house? I did not know this term until today. It’s straight-up just a building, usually near a graveyard, where they store all of the human bones they dig up from the cemetery to make room for new people. And you can also see last year’s Taphology episode with Robyn S. Lacy, wherein we learn that in places that are not the US, which is a giant expanse of newly colonized land, other parts of the world’s gravesites are much less permanent. In some countries, you can even lease them for a few decades and then they’ll dig up what’s left, they’ll be like, “You want this? No?” If not, they cremate it and then they open up some real estate for the next generation.

But back to what is now the 1st Arrondissement in Paris. So, starting in the 1100s it was the Holy Innocents’ Cemetery. And paintings from the 1500s and the 1700s of this cemetery depict scenes of loiterers and picnickers, skulls just strewn about the grounds like empty coconuts after a music festival. There are wild animals chewing on human bones. Erin recounts in her book, a story of a woman who had to fight a wild pig for the cadaver of her child. And in one painting I looked at, I stared way too long into it, there’s a stray dog defecating onto a human skull. I mean, the Holy Innocents’ Cemetery... iconic.

**Erin:** It’s been around forever, and people had been complaining about it forever because it’s right in the middle of the city. It wasn’t initially in the middle of the city, but the city grew over a thousand years, as cities have a tendency to do. And every now and then, throughout the early modern period in the 17th and 18th century, there’s a bit of an uproar. “This cemetery is gross, it smells, and we need to come up with a better solution.” But nobody ever really does anything until the very end of the 18th century at the very tail end of the era that we call the Enlightenment.

There’s basically, like, a public panic about this cemetery because people become convinced it’s making them sick and maybe it’s even killing them. This idea that the dead are contagious, they’re spreading death. [laughs] And I mean, I could talk forever about this really interesting transition where dead bodies go from being accepted as a part of the community to being this thing that is making us sick and we really don’t want to see every day, we don’t want them in the middle of the city. Because the way people were buried in the 18th century are just in these open pits.

**Alie:** Oh wait, what?!

**Erin:** We're talking about ordinary people, not fancy, wealthy, influential people. But ordinary people are just buried in these big mass graves.

**Alie:** [*gasps*] Like the garbage dump?

**Erin:** I mean, like a sacred garbage dump. The point is, the body doesn't matter, it's the soul that matters. So, the bodies are buried in these large pits that are left open for weeks, sometimes months at a time, and then when they're full, they're covered up. And then they're left for, like, 5 years so the bodies will decompose, and then they're opened back up, the bones are taken out and they're put into storage. And this is just the way it's done, especially in a big city like Paris.

So, your reaction was like, "Ahh, that's disrespectful," you called it a garbage dump. That's a very modern reaction and that's the reaction people started to have to that space in this era of the Enlightenment. They're like, "This is not a good way." They weren't necessarily concerned with "this isn't a good way to treat the dead," they were more like, "This is not a good way to treat something that's decomposing, we think it's dangerous." This is back when they thought that smells spread illness, but illness and diseases spread by bad smells called miasmas, and what smells worse than a rotting body? [*"Not much."*]

**Aside:** Just a little FYI, the Enlightenment started at the end 1600s and it ran through the early 1800s and it's known as, "The age of reason." People were really into science, and they did their best. Scholars were like, "Hey, we figured out what causes diseases and... it's haunted air. We did it, we figured it out." They also thought that night air was more dangerous than daytime air. They weren't quite at the level of understanding germs but they're like, "Something is up with the air."

But in the audio tour of the Catacombs, the part that gave me just the biggest willies, was hearing that if you lived near a Parisian cemetery at that time, again, just open pits, rotting humans just raw-dogged in dirt, [*"No coffin please, just wet, wet mud."*] your milk would sour overnight, and your soup would spoil, and your wine would turn. So, imagine you were about to dive into a perfect deli sandwich, and a ghost farts on it, but every day. Parisians were pissed.

**Erin:** So, there's a lot of outcry about this, especially from these early men of science, and medical authorities, and people concerned with public health and hygiene. But the tipping point comes, and this is a good story, when allegedly, somebody whose house is on the border of the cemetery, so they have a house right on the edge of that cemetery in the middle of the city, and their basement wall kind of collapses in. And what do you think runs into their basement wall?

**Alie:** Oh god, oh no.

**Erin:** Right, so decomposing human remains.

**Alie:** Oh no!

**Erin:** So, then the story, and I think this is relatively accurate, goes that the terrible smell fills the house and then they see people start dying from the gasses that are coming out of these decomposing bodies. So, that's the final straw. And then in 1780, the cemetery that's been around for a thousand years is condemned. So, people are like, "Yay, we're done with the cemetery!" There's definitely some outcry, especially from the Catholic Church who runs the cemetery, but it's a done deal. And so, then they have an immediate problem which is

“What do you do with a thousand years’ worth of bones and human remains?” That’s a logistic problem.

**Alie:** That’s so many bones.

**Erin:** So many bones. And so, it just so happens that at the same time that all of this was happening in, like, the 1780s, late 1770s, Paris is having a problem with sinkholes appearing randomly in streets. Like, just a hole will open up and swallow people and things into it, like 80 feet below ground.

**Alie:** Oh no! Ahhh!

**Erin:** *[laughs]* Right? You also have to remember this is at a time of massive political instability. We’re on the eve of the French Revolution here, and so the French monarchy and the French state is collapsing on all fronts, including, like, in the streets. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Including cemetery walls collapsing, sinkholes.

**Erin:** Collapsing, the streets are... I mean, it doesn’t happen every day, but it happens often enough that people are alarmed. And so, they’re like, “Oh gosh, remember when we built Paris like a thousand years ago and we dug up all of this limestone and gypsum from under the city and we built all of our buildings? Those tunnels aren’t super stable.” *[laughs]*

And so, there’s this sort of honeycomb of tunnels under the city of Paris. And so the city corps of engineers goes down and kind of maps it and reinforces it. So, you had these new, cleaned up, safer tunnels and you have all these bones. And so, it’s like the perfect solution, right? *["You got peanut butter on my chocolate." "Well, you got chocolate in my peanut butter!"]* “We’re going to take those bones and just put them underground,” and someone was like, “Yeah, we’ll have our own catacombs just like Rome.” And they’re like, “Yeah, just like Rome.” So, that’s what they do. And so, starting in 1786 they start moving cartfulls of human bones across the city from the Cemetery of the Innocence, that’s the name of that big cemetery, over to this entry point to these quarries.

**Aside:** I looked this up; I had to know. And the cart march from the cemetery in the 1st Arrondissement to La Tombe-Issoire was 4 kilometers, or 2.5 miles, over the Seine River, past the Jardin Du Luxembourg, into what’s now the 14th. The carts would be loaded up and the transportation would take place only at night, all the way to these former limestone quarries in an area called Montrouge.

AndAnd also, this is the very area that suffered some *major* sinkholes previously. There was one in the Rue d’Enfer which was 30 meters, or 90 feet, wide and deep and it swallowed buildings, carriages, horses, I’m guessing some hooman beings. And this chasm was described as “The Mouth of Hell,” for obvious reasons, and also because Rue D’Enfer coincidentally means, “The street of hell.” Branding was on point for that. And this area also housed the offices of the city tax collectors and then the Catacombs. So, death and taxes, together again.

**Alie:** I’ve got to ask, what was Rome’s catacombs like?

**Erin:** I’m not an expert on the Roman Catacombs, but the Roman Catacombs are this famous Christian space where Christian martyrs are secretly burying people under the city of Rome. So, it’s this sacred, historic space.

**Aside:** Y’all, Rome has a lot of catacombs. As many as 40 different networks of them. One cave system, the Catacombs of Domitilla, spans 17 kilometers, or 11 miles. What’s up with



these European quarries, you ask? Why all these creepy caves under cities, filled with bodies? Well, the limestone used to build these cities came from oceanic sediment that was deposited from little, dead, shelly creatures around 45 million years ago when parts of Europe, news to me, was underneath a tropical sea, full of mollusks making limestone, slowly over millions of years. And in Paris, because of this high demand for limestone and gypsum to make stuff, about 20% of the city was left susceptible to gaping, hellish sinkholes because of the quarry tunnels that are just quietly empty under the streets.

**Erin:** But the Paris Catacombs are just like a solution to a problem, very much so. And this is in 1786, and if you remember your European history at all, you know the French Revolution is just around the corner, 1789. So, they start this process of, like, taking cartfulls of bones across the city, and I've read descriptions of this from people and they're like, "Ahh, they're dropping bones in my yard." *[laughs]*

**Alie:** *[quivering voice]* Oh no. Were they just, like, wheelbarrows?

**Erin:** I mean, they're carts drawn by horses, I'm assuming. The bones are blessed and there's a priest present at the procession, so it's a little bit sacred; they know that they're doing something serious. But it's also, I mean, you have to get a lot of bones from one place to another. So, they dump them all in these tunnels. I mean, dump is kind of a maybe more aggressive term than it should be, but that's what it looks like. There are just these heaps of bones, these piles of undifferentiated bones. So, they start with one cemetery, and they move onto another and another cemetery across Paris, so the bones are kept according to which cemetery they came from. But they're just in piles underground, from 1786 until 1809.

And sometimes in the French Revolution when there was a massacre, they'd be like, "Oh gosh, we've got to get rid of all these bodies. *[“I have an idea.”]* Let's put them underground." So, they'd bring them down to the Catacombs and put them underground.

**Aside:** So, in 1788, royal guards shot, killed a bunch of Parisians, whose bodies were deposited directly into the Catacombs. And then 4 years later, during something called the September Prison Massacres of 1792, as many as a thousand bodies were dumped into the Catacombs, many of whom were prisoners killed by guardsmen or ordered slaughtered by these neighborhood militias. Erin writes in her 2017 paper:

*The Catacombs served as a useful space where potentially controversial bodies could be quickly stashed away in anonymity and forgotten since the Catacombs were not yet an accessible city space.*

**Alie:** And were those treated differently because they were fresh?

**Erin:** Yeah, they were treated with lime.

**Alie:** Oh! And that helps break it down.

**Erin:** That helps decompose, yeah.

**Alie:** And whose idea was it? Instead of being like, "This is a storage locker or a space under the stairs that we're just going to put a bunch of Tupperware with a bunch of bones in here," to like, "Let's make art."?

**Erin:** Let's make art. Oh! I've never thought of it as art, that's a really good idea. So, I don't know exactly whose idea it was but there's this young engineer, he's got a very French name, his name is Louis Etienne Héricart de Thury. *[laughs]*

**Aside:** Louis Etienne François Hericart-Ferran de Thury, I'm saying that wrong, but it's a name so long it would make an Icelandic volcano fume with envy. This is post-revolution in 1809.

**Erin:** And he is put in charge of this new Department of Mines and Quarries, and he's put in charge under the Napoleonic regime. But Héricart de Thury is put in charge of the Department of Mines and Quarries and one of the first things he's tasked with is, "Clean up those catacombs and open them up and do something with them." And he does it in four months.

**Alie.** What?!

**Erin:** And so, him and his staff do this work. The engineers and city workers do this work of piling up all the bones. They take the bones from the heaps that they're in, they take the longest bones, the tibias, they stack those up; they take the skulls, they stack those up; all the little bones, the bones that don't fit, are just in piles behind that front façade. So, it's only one bone— If you look at an image of the Catacombs it looks like maybe it's just this massively organized structure, but it's really just one layer deep and then it's just a pile behind it, which is a great metaphor for the Napoleonic state. [*"Ouch."*]

Yeah, so it takes four months, and then they open it to the public, and people start going down for tours in the summer of 1809, which is right in the middle, again, of the Napoleonic empire, when France was at war with all of Europe. That's pretty fascinating that they create this weird new space. And it's visited by hundreds and then thousands of people between then and when it's closed down in 1830.

**Alie:** Now, in the meantime, do they charge, like, a franc to come look at it? Or is it a service of the city?

**Erin:** Yeah, that's a good question. You have to write and request; you have to write and ask for a ticket, and they'll give you a ticket. It's only opened a couple days a week. And you go and you meet with a guide who will take you. He gives everyone a candle and he says, "Do not deviate from the group and I'm going to take you on a tour through the Catacombs that you've requested." I think there's a black line on the ceiling that shows the route of the tour. And they're like, "If you happen to get lost, follow that black line. But don't leave the group, because if you leave the group, you will die." [*laughs*] Which is probably not true, but still, this is why people are going, right? They want to have this dangerous, not-dangerous experience. You want to go down so far below ground and surround yourself with death.

**Aside:** So, I decided to go surround myself with death, which is odd timing, given the recent passing of my dad. I'm kind of like, "I'm good on death for now, thank you so much." But I thought, maybe this will be healing? I mean anything can be healing if you want it badly enough, right? Sure.

So, I went to Paris last week with Jarrett and his sister, his mom and his nephew too. And Jarrett and I took an afternoon to go queue up in this long line of mostly other Americans, waiting our ticketed turn to descend the 130 steep spiral stairs, around and around, and around, 65 feet down, 5 or 6 stories below the street, until we reached this network of former quarries. It's musty, it's a little damp, frankly I was glad to be wearing an N95, but we crossed through a stone threshold inscribed with the Latin, *Memoriae Majorum*, in memory of the ancestors.

*Alie narrates as she walks through the Catacombs:*

*We're walking in gravel right now, through a lot of tunnels. And there's inscriptions on the walls, people have carved in hearts and initials."*

Past visitors who must have felt compelled to immortalize their love, in this, a glaring reminder of our own impermanence.

So, I walked along, I spotted the black line above our heads that led the way of early visitors. And just inches away are skulls; some are cracked, others are patinated with moss or missing teeth, there's rows and rows of orderly femurs and tibia, it's just as neat as a supermarket shelf of soup. But behind them, behind that first façade, were just these chaotic haystacks of skeletal remains. It's a real gut punch, I'm not going to lie. You're kind of reverently walking along, just trying to process each individual who comprised this collection, and they all had birthdays and secrets, and hopes, and sorrows.

*Jarrett: This is surreal... So many fucking people. It's weird to see the ones that have, like, injuries.*

*Alie: I know, I always wonder if that happened before or after?*

*Jarrett: I think probably a combination but... You just think of how many people die from accidents, from wars... Very strange.*

And then there's the sad shift where you go from wondering about each bone's owner to just the fate of all of humanity, and how we relate to each other. Jarrett and I continued on, I thought I would narrate as I went, but I was listening to the tape later and I'm mostly just listening to the audio history and kind of stunned into silence. So, I suppose I was processing more than I realized at the time, didn't feel super chatty down there.

**Erin:** So, only a tiny portion of those tunnels under Paris are actually the Catacombs proper, the rest are just this network of tunnels that make up the old quarries. It's just a little, tiny portion that are filled with bones that we call the Catacombs, but the Catacombs becomes shorthand for the whole thing. If you were to look at 20, 21st century cataphiles, those guys who go down and explore, they don't go to that tourist site that you would go to. They go to all the other parts that are not available for public viewing.

**Aside:** So yes, there are hundreds of kilometers of tunnels under Paris, but only around 11,000 square meters are said to be bone zones, housing an estimated 6 million peoples' remains. And of that, only about 800 meters of these tunnels are arranged into sculpture and open for looky-loos like us. So, I got a ticket for, like, a 40-minute walkthrough, narrated via this audio device, and informational posters along the wall along the way giving historical context in a bunch of different languages, but not everyone does that. I found a video of YouTuber, FunForLouis, who just wriggled like a ferret into some of the zones that are less tourist friendly.

*[clip from YouTube video, "PARIS CATACOMBS"]*

*Speaker 1: This just doesn't compute in my head.*

*Speaker 2: Louis, this is just a skyscraper of bones.*

*Speaker 3: What?!*

*Speaker 2: A skyscraper of human remains! It's just bones stacked on bones; you would only see this in a movie.*

I'm a woman of simple needs, I don't need to do that. But let's back up.

**Alie:** What happened in 1830?

**Erin:** There's a revolution again in 1830, and there's a new government that's brought in. And one of the things they do early on is they close down the Catacombs. They say it's unsafe, they say people can get lost, there are collapses, people could get killed, could get trapped, but they also think it's in poor taste. They think this is a holdover from the Napoleonic regime, they think it's a holdover from the restored monarchy, who come back in 1815, and they want to be different. They think it's disrespectful, and so it's closed down in 1830. It's going to open up again later in the 19th century.

**Aside:** So, they were closed in the 1830s because the church was like, "People, can we not? It's bones, it's people's bones. We, as the church, feel that this is not cool." But after 17 years, France was like, [*whiny voice*] "Please, please?" and it reopened in 1850. And because we now all scroll through each other's vacation photos while we're on the toilet, demand has only risen in the digital age.

**Erin:** And then they just took off in popularity in the 21st century, like in the last 10 years.

**Alie:** What about you, when did you get to see them for the first time?

**Erin:** My first trip to Paris. So, my first trip to Paris, I went with a group of art historians, and we were all giving presentations on Parisian spaces. I was already interested in the Catacombs, so I took my group down into the Catacombs and gave them my tour and my presentation. And I see the professor who had led that group – she was an art historian named Hollis Clayson – every now and then at conferences, and she always remembers that she was the one who took me to the Catacombs, [*Alie laughs*] although she was too claustrophobic to go down with me. She brought me to the entry point and so she, sort of, claims that it's because she took me there that I was able to write my book, like 10 years later. [*laughs*]

**Aside:** So, they're not for everyone, clearly. You claustrophobic? It's a big nope. You got a fear of human remains? You might not like this. And in a way that really surprised me, it's just not accessible to many disabled people. Elevator? Nah. Ramp? Negative. Which saddened me as much, if not more, than the death and the bones. So, if for whatever reason you can't make it down there alive, I hope this episode is a good proxy for going. Either way, you cannot touch the skulls.

**Alie:** What was it like when you saw it in person?

**Erin:** Okay, good question. To me, it was weirdly underwhelming. I thought it would be kind of moving and emotional, but it just was like, "Yup. Those are bones." [*both laugh*] And like, it's funny, maybe because I'd already read about it, I'd seen pictures, I knew what to expect, there's some artificial lighting down there now. It's eerie and weird, but it was like weirdly... I didn't feel moved. Which is something I actually saw in the first tourists of the Catacombs too. They say, "I came down here and didn't know what to expect and I got bored after a couple of minutes." Some people say that, not everybody.

**Alie:** Yeah. They're like, "Okay, bones. Got it."

**Erin:** Yeah. I mean, it's very interesting. It's fascinating to see how it's staged. In addition to all the bones, there's a bunch of sculptures made out of bones and there are these quotations from all sorts of things, literature, poetry, the Bible, things from antiquity, things from the 19th century. Little passages are put on these plaques throughout the Catacombs that are supposed to make you ruminate on death, your own death, and things like that. Those are from the early 19th century and a lot of them were actually pulled from the Catacombs

guestbook that I mentioned earlier that I used as a major source for my research. They're things people wrote in the guestbook and then that engineer was like... He basically did the 19th-century equivalent of highlighting; he took a red pencil and put a little mark next to it, and then it shows up on a plaque in the Catacombs a couple months later.

**Alie:** Oh wow!

**Erin:** Yeah. So, be careful what you write in guestbooks. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Seriously! I love that it was almost like a book blurb or Amazon review like, "Five stars. Thought about my own death."

**Erin:** Thought about my own death, yeah. It's interesting to see all the different reactions people had to the Catacombs in the early 19th century because they feel very familiar. Right, a lot of them, they could have been made now. And as a historian, I don't love that, I want things to be different. But it's still really fascinating.

**Alie:** Can I ask you some questions that listeners wrote in?

**Erin:** Please do! Yes.

**Alie:** Oh, they have so many good ones, so many good ones.

**Erin:** Okay, I hope I have answers.

**Aside:** And before we get to your listener questions via [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies), we're going to give some money to a cause of the ologist's choosing. I asked the Lubbock-based Dr. Legacey at the end of the chat and without a second's hesitation she requested Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas, whose homepage says, "We are still here with you. While abortion services are not available at Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas, our health centers are open and scheduling appointments for essential reproductive health care. Planned Parenthood is here for you with information, resources, and services." So, a donation will be going to them in Dr. Legacey's honor. Let's take a quick break.

*[Ad Break]*

Okay patrons, let's get to your questions. If you want to submit a question for future episodes, you can sign up for as little as \$0.25 an episode at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies), which is linked in the show notes. But okay, let's unearth your inquiries.

**Alie:** Aly V, Lily Bee, Kelsy Simpson, Hillary Talbott-Williams, first-time question-asker, Meghan Matthews-Adair, Aubrey Lunt, Sonya Wiseman, Ashlee Dent, everyone, wanted to know: As someone who has never been in one, what does it smell like in there?

**Erin:** *[laughs]* It doesn't smell like anything.

**Alie:** Oh, that's good!

**Erin:** I don't think so, yeah. It's been so long since I was there. But no, I gave you that long history of the Catacombs earlier, these are bones, in some cases, that are a thousand years old, you know? They don't smell.

Although, I was reading an article written by an anthropologist, I think, earlier today and he actually describes going into the Catacombs with a group of urban explorers and he describes the smell very differently. Maybe if you're going on the official Catacombs tour, it's a little bit different than if you're literally slinking your body through tunnels of bones, which is what he describes.

**Alie:** Do you remember how he described it?

**Erin:** Yeah, he's got a whole section on it.

**Aside:** So, this was a 2020 paper by Dr. Kevin Bingham of Barnsley College titled, "Rethinking Utopia," and in it, Kevin describes spelunking in the lesser-traveled passages, which are just littered haphazardly with skeletal remains. And Erin highlighted a section for me which reads:

*Inside the bone crawl, it seemed to be the strangely pleasant aroma of the limestone coated bones and a damper, earthy scent of petrichor, which was mild at first but quickly became intoxicatingly captivating. There was something incredibly evocative about the smell and it had the power to provoke all our other senses in unison. In doing so, it transported us into an ephemeral space of excitement and pleasure that can only be experienced in somewhere like the subterranean.*

Well done, Kevin. I would have been like, "Kinda musty." But he nailed it.

**Alie:** Celeste Finet-Chau and others want to know: Are there catacombs still operating today and taking in bones? Like, can I request in a will that after X number of years, my bones get moved to a catacomb?

**Erin:** Oh man, wouldn't that be amazing? I don't know. The catacombs in Paris had their last transfer of bones from Père Lachaise Cemetery in 1930 or 1933, thereabouts. I don't know if there are catacombs still accepting bodies now. That's an interesting question. It's also like... I love this idea of requesting your body could go somewhere specific. That feels very 21st century, but then I was mentioning earlier in our conversation, people in the 18th century did the same thing. There was this one guy who asked that his bones be turned into glass! *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Yeah, how does that work?

**Erin:** Gosh, I don't want to take up too much of your time here.

**Alie:** No, bring it on.

**Erin:** So, in that weird period between closing down that big cemetery and opening up new cemeteries – which, Père Lachaise Cemetery where like Jim Morrison and Oscar Wilde are buried, is what ended up being built – in that gap between the old and the new there's, like, "What are we going to do? Let's try and come up with as many ideas as possible." And people in the late 18th century are wildly creative, right? Because this is a period of revolution where no ideas are bad ideas. This is where they invent the guillotine. *["It's about innovation."]*

And this one guy has this amazing idea, it's so wild and he says, "Well, the issue is space and so, what we need to do is take all the bodies and we'll cremate them," which is 100% illegal at this time, it's not going to be legal for another hundred years. But he's like, "We'll cremate them and then with what's left, with the bones," they're not going to turn the bones to ash, they're just going to get rid of the flesh and the fat, and all that tissue and stuff. "We'll take the bones, and we'll subject them to some high heat and pressure, and we'll transform them into glass." This is called the vitrification of bones, and it's possible, "And then we'll take that glass, and the families who want to pay for it can have that glass made into a sculpture of the person's face," like a bust. *[Alie gasps]* "And then we'll put the ashes that are remaining in a little drawer under the bust, like how perfect, and then they

can just take it home. Or, for the poor,” of which there are many in Paris in the late 18th century, “If nobody comes to claim their bodies, we’ll just turn them into bricks and we’ll just use it for building.” Isn’t that wild?

**Alie:** Whuuut?

**Erin:** Right. So, this is not adopted.

**Aside:** Erin writes about Pierre Giraud in her book, which led me down my own, morbid rabbit holes of Google to find a translation of Pierre’s 1801 book, *The Tombs: Essay on the Graves*, which includes a detailed lab recipe, so many lab recipes, with measurements and everything. He writes:

*A furnace will be built, and above it, four boilers capable of containing 1, 2, 3, and 4 corpses, immersed in a caustic lye which, as we know, has the property of completely separating bones from flesh and fat.*

Do we know that, Pierre? Do we?? Now we do. He writes that treated bones tossed in special ovens, vitrify or glassify into a substance that he describes as looking:

*Quite pleasant and somewhat resembling the Chinese porcelain with a blueish appearance and half transparency. But perhaps by raising the temperature as much as possible, we would obtain a product strong enough to be used in the form of bricks or plates for whatever uses you would think. One could form some in molds, of which one would then make such work as one wishes.*

DIY dying, I love it. He said that the turnaround time is just a few hours and that vitrifying bones into glass is, “Proof of what divine omnipotence will do on the day of our brilliant resurrection.” Enlightenment era folks, I’m telling you, they loved science. And if you’re not all-in already like *Shark Tank* CEOs fighting over a deal, Pierre concludes his pitch with an emotional imagining of a glass memorial piece. He writes:

*Wouldn’t that be better than rotting my bones in the putrid public spaces exposed to the passerby? There, my gnawed skull, accompanied by a few vestiges of teeth will present hideous cavities in place of eyes. This show will frighten passersby, especially children, and pregnant women, far from familiarizing himself with the idea of death, he will only make it more horrible and more appalling.*

Well, Pierre Giraud, a visionary who lived far before his time. Take my money *and* my bones!

**Erin:** So, in this essay, he writes this recommendation. He has a little footnote that says, “When I die, I want to be made into glass. I know it’s not legal, but when it’s legal, make me into glass.” [*laughs*]

**Alie:** Do you think he was?

**Erin:** I don’t think he was. No, I don’t think he was. But he was a real... ambitious... cemetery reformer.

**Alie:** I want to help him out. I mean, I hope...

**Erin:** Go find his body, go find his bones.

**Alie:** One day. I mean now, if he knew that you could get ashes or carbon turned into a diamond, you know?

**Erin:** Same thing, same thing.

**Alie:** Right?

**Erin:** Exactly, yeah.

**Alie:** Turn him into a giant diamond. What a... Wheuf! What a ride.

**Aside:** Is now a good time to pop in and tell you that the Paris cemeteries were so overcrowded, and the soil was so depleted that there was a lack of oxygen that meant that the bodies didn't fully decompose, and instead, some just left behind mounds of fatty wax? Scientists who studied the Paris exhumations at the time coined this stuff, *adipocere*, which means 'fat wax' in Latin. An article was published in *Scientific America* on October 30, 1852... 1852! That says there were corpses 20 meters deep, turned to wax and the article reads:

*The substance of the skin, cellular tissue, and tendons, all the soft parts, and even the bones had completely disappeared, leaving only the fat, which resisting the influence of decay for lack of oxygen, remained in the form of margaric acid.*

Which yes, is where we get the word margarine, y'all. Fuck.

Okay, so what did they do with all of that wax that people left behind? Maybe like, did they throw it in the river? Did they feed it to the hogs? No, they didn't. They gave it to soap boilers and Parisian candle makers. They made soap and candles with it! And this 1852 article continues:

*The French are a people of fine sentiment, and they certainly carried the quality to a charming point of reflection in receiving light from candles made out of the bodies of their fathers.*

Augh! So, if you feel like you can't hold a candle to your forefathers, well, this is one way to get out of their shadow.

Let's lighten things up by talking about peril. People had caving curiosities like first-time question-asker Shannon O'Grady, or about getting lost, which was asked by Samantha, Stephanie Leské, Sara Ayala, Kathleen Sachs, Chase Penix, Hope, and Miren Carredano.

**Alie:** Let's see, Grace Markley and many other people wanted to know if people ever have caving accidents. Are there any events down there where people get hurt exploring the catacombs? Another person who is a caver, Kyriaki Karalis, asked the same question: Are there safety measures down there, in place?

**Erin:** So, there are police. There's a special group of police who patrol the Catacombs because it's such a popular space for urban exploration. I'm sure part of the reason the police are there is to keep people safe but it's also to prevent destruction and vandalism in the Catacombs. I don't personally know of any episodes of people recently getting hurt or lost or anything down there. I'm sure it happens but I could not speak to that.

But I can tell you that it definitely happened in the 19th century [*laughs*] when the Catacombs first opened. Yes, every now and then someone would get lost or there would be a cave-in when a city worker was working on the Catacombs. And those stories are one of the things that I think brought people to them, this idea that you might not make it out. You probably will, you almost certainly will, but maybe you won't. That's a real draw.

**Aside:** And history has stories of lives lost to these quarry tunnels, like a hospital guard named Philibert Aspairet in 1793, who decided to explore a tunnel after work, got lost in the dark, and then went missing for 11 years until his body was found, just feet away from an



exit. He was later buried right back in the same spot, which is off-limits from the usual tourist route. In 2017, three teenage boys also decided to dip down into the quarries and they went missing and were found three days later, thanks to some search dogs who sniffed them out. They were alive, but they were cold, and they were scared, as I would be. But if all the death down there doesn't freak you out, there's also the threat of getting a ticket from so-called, catacops, on patrol.

But if you decide to do the legal, ticketed route, they space these self-guided tours out so there aren't too many people down there and there are docents and guards stationed all along the way. But some skulls I saw certainly look like they've been smashed or damaged, and I can only imagine the thousands of bones and fragments that people have taken with them. Just, hard no on that. No, for me. I won't pick up a penny that's tails up because I don't want bad vibes so I'm not going to pocket a medieval finger; fuck off with that. No, don't do that. All due respect to the dead, no.

But many of you wanted to know about illegal stuff such as patrons Earl of Greymalkin, first-time-askers, Sutton Moore and Jacob Hollingsworth, and Slayer, who asked: Are some of them sussy sus chambers where they did sus things?

**Alie:** Well, considering that there's law enforcement down there, a bunch of people wanted to know, Emmett Wald asked: How much illegal stuff happens down in the Catacombs? Ashley Oki said: Have you seen the post about taking a skull from the Catacombs and sneaking it into the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland? *[Erin laughs]* Apparently that happens. Skella Borealis wants to know: Are things stolen? Does that tend to happen?

**Erin:** Probably? Apparently? I didn't know about that. I've heard about vandalism in the Catacombs, they had to be closed down. I can imagine people could, I mean in the... publicly-accessible part of Catacombs, there's no police watching you, but there's, like I said, a lot that is technically not accessible to the public that people sneak into. And sure, I think that in itself is illegal activity but it's wildly common.

**Aside:** Again, I'm good. But anyone who wants to do this, I wish you the beat of lick. Now, what about party time down there? Patrons Jade Podtetenieff, Bee Wilson, Ursula Wood, and Ada Smith wanted to know: Who is putting the raves in graves?

**Alie:** A bunch of people including Bee Wilson mentioned something that I did not know about at all. Bee asked: What is up with the raves and the movie screenings that happen in the Catacombs? Have you heard of this, that there's some exclusive raves?

**Erin:** Sure, I think that's been going on for a long time. It's been going on since the 18th century. I'm sorry I keep dragging it back to the 18th and 19th century, but there were musical performances in the old regime. Before the catacombs were the Catacombs and it was just piles of bones, there were musical performances down there. People have always wanted to have weird macabre celebrations surrounded by bones.

So, we can speculate on why they want to do that. I think it adds a certain macabre appeal. There's this weird illusion of danger, makes everything more sacred, makes everything more intimate, the acoustics are probably very interesting. It's always been a space people are kind of invited to, and want to visit, and are drawn to because they seem sort of dangerous, and they seem sort of fun, and they seem very different than the above-ground space. Yeah, I don't know, why do you think people want to party in the Catacombs?

**Alie:** I mean, definite vibes. The vibes. *[Erin laughs]* Irreplaceable vibes. Not to mention for the Gram. The Gram and the vibes.

**Erin:** And millions, millions of people hanging out with you. I mean, skeletons hanging out with you.

**Alie:** That's true. You could always be like, "My last concert, millions of people attended. Most of them were dead."

**Erin:** They were just silent in awe. *[both laugh]*

**Aside:** So, in the 1870s, there was a secret concert featuring a 50-piece orchestra playing some musical reflections on mortality. I like that they stuck with the theme. They played the Danse Macabre, which was actually a piece of music inspired by a poem about the Catacombs, and the music was written with the thoughts of dancing, clacking skeletons in mind. But now, there are whole-ass rooms down there that cataphiles know about. Like one called The Plage, or The Beach, because it has a wave mural, and there's a disco ball-lined salon de mirrors, and an electro room. But how would you even find all this stuff?

**Alie:** Bunch of folks, Amber McIntyre, Audra Purita, Kathleen Sachs, Dantooine, Ayshia Yaeger want to know: Have we explored every inch of the Catacombs? In Ayshia's words: Is there a GPS? Do we know every bit of it, or do you think that there might be unexplored sections?

**Erin:** I think that there's such a robust community of cataphiles that I would be totally surprised if there was anything that hadn't been explored. I think they're always running into each other down there as well. But hey, maybe not, maybe you could go and find something new, *[laughs]* find a little extra little corner.

**Alie:** I thought this was a great question. Claudia Dana wants to know: When does it start becoming archaeology and stop being something like graverobbing? At what point does the removal of bones into one area... Is it completely dependent on what the culture at that time is? The culture at that time says: these are leftovers, your soul is elsewhere, these are not the sacred part of you. How does one, as an academic tiptoe around the changing values of a body?

**Erin:** Yeah, that's a really wonderful question and that's one of the things that makes the creation of the Catacombs so fascinating. I mean, people were complaining about the cemetery being overfull for... forever, right? Every couple generations. But it's not until the end of the 18th century that they decide to create the Catacombs, and I think that's because there's a changing attitude or a changing understanding of the relationship between the dead and the living and what's sacred and what isn't.

We've seen that fluctuate so much over the last 200 years. So, even in the timeline of the Catacombs, what's acceptable in 1809, going down and tapping on the skulls, becomes in poor taste by the time you get to 1830. And so, it's always dependent on exactly when in history you're looking, and I think there are so many things that remain constant over the last 200-plus years that the Catacombs have been open, but there's these certain things that change. It's those moments of change that I think are most interesting, that we should focus our attention on.

**Alie:** Did people tap on skulls as good luck, or...?

**Erin:** Oh no, just because there's a skull in front of them.

**Alie:** They want to touch it.

**Erin:** There's a row of skulls and they want to touch it, yeah.

**Alie:** That makes sense. I wasn't sure if it was three taps...

**Erin:** No, people wrote about that like, “I tapped on the skulls.” You know, “It was sacred when I first went down and after about half an hour, I got curious and tapped on the skulls.”

**Aside:** Just an FYI, there are signs that say in emoji essentially, “No touchy bones.” Now, what about underground on screen? Patrons Megan Duffy, Sydney Toups, Chelsea-Victoria Turner, Dorian Gray, Aven, Sara Meaden, James Nance, and Reiley Allison all want to know...

**Alie:** What about movies that get it right or wrong?

**Erin:** There’s definitely a horror movie about the Catacombs that I think was filmed down there, called, *As Above, So Below*, something like that. I actually haven’t seen it because I’m a little bit afraid of horror movies, but my students have told me it’s great. *[laughs]* It came out maybe like 15 years ago, something like that.

*[clip from trailer for As Above, So Below:]*

*AI voice: My name is Scarlett Marlowe and I’m a student in urban archaeology.  
[dramatic music plays]*

*Speaker 1: 370 feet beneath this point is a hidden chamber that might contain a critical missing piece of our history.*

*Speaker 2: Well, how are we supposed to get down there?*

*Speaker 1: The Catacombs.*

Apparently the 2014 thriller, *As Above, So Below*, was actually filmed on location, in the Catacombs. One actor, Ben Feldman, apparently kept having to take breaks to cope with the claustrophobia. Can you imagine booking that gig? Like, “Hey, you got the part! Also, it’s a living nightmare.” Anyway, I have not watched the movie, but I looked up the trailer and I braced myself for it to be pretty cheesy, but it legit freaked me out! And the most upvoted comment on YouTube for the trailer was, “10 years of watching horror movies and this is easily on my top 5 list.” Okay.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* I love that you’re like, “I have it on authority that it’s good.”

**Erin:** It’s an acceptable film. *[both laugh]* Yeah. It’s a horror movie.

**Aside:** So, as the bone walls will start to lurch in one direction and fall apart, different sections of the Catacombs will be closed off for a temporary restacking. But this next question was asked by first-time question-askers Sydney S, also Kata Zarándy, Jenn ‘Squirrel’ Alvarez, Elektra, Kristen Egelhoff, Kaylyn Rathkey [ph.], Adam Foote, Kristen Rosenblum, Jeffrey Nix, Amelia Frank, Kelsy Simpson, Shelby Reardon, Lindsay Mixer, and essentially...

**Alie:** A ton of people had questions about structural soundness but in Adam Foote’s words: I’ve been wondering if any of the bone pillars in the Catacombs are weight-bearing? Like, is there a fromagerie in Paris that’s only supported by a carefully arranged pile of femurs?

**Erin:** Yikes. I don’t know. I doubt it. That doesn’t sound like a very 19th-century way to build a space. I’m going to guess that the bones are... I don’t know this for certain though, but the bones are kind of a façade around a pillar. But who knows? No, there’s no way they’re weight-bearing, right? Because the Catacombs and the tunnels under Paris are always being maintained and renovated.

I actually randomly had an email exchange with someone a couple of weeks ago whose husband is an engineer and recently worked on the shoring up, the maintenance, of the Catacombs and making sure they're safe and sound, very recently. So, they are doing this all the time. No, I don't think there's any weight... I'm not going to be able to stop thinking about that, a fromagerie collapsing into the Catacombs.

**Alie:** "A carefully arranged pillar of femurs." That's going to be my DJ name, we're going to play the Catacombs. [*Erin laughs*]

**Aside:** But who would be in attendance? Is the big question asked by patrons Courtney Peterson, AP, Felix Wolfe, The Lucky Honey, Montana Flynn, Sonjabird, Sleepy John, Laura Lemon, Dawn and Eric Easton, Cate Muenker, Lindsey James, Aliya Myers, Sarah Meaden, Dana B, Mykenzie King, and Benjamin.

**Alie:** A bunch of people wanted to know about the identities of the people. Sleepy John asked: Is there any way to identify the dead? Would DNA testing tell us anything about the Parisian population? Is anyone going in there to do bioarcheology on it? To check for diseases? Does it continue to be a research area?

**Erin:** That's fascinating, I wonder. People are obsessed with the identity. And that's one of the things that makes them so interesting, all the bones look basically the same, you have no way of knowing anything about the person whose skull you're looking at, and that really freaked people out in the 19th century. Like, I don't know if I'm looking at a criminal or a young girl. That was, of course, before DNA testing and so presumably you could now.

But there's lots of famous people in the Catacombs. Everybody who died in the French Revolution basically, other than the royal family, are down there.

**Alie:** Really?

**Erin:** Yeah. Almost everybody who died in Paris are in the Catacombs, for centuries, it's really fascinating. Most people you read about are down there, you just don't know where. [*laughs*] That's part of the appeal. That's frustrating but also really cool, there's so much possibility in the bones.

**Aside:** So, what is the best way to pay your respects? Asked patrons Jade Walker, Naomi Jane, Lee O'Reilly, Leila Laco, and Kelsy Simpson.

**Alie:** And last listener question, Celeste Rousseau, and a bunch of other folks wanted to know: How can you go to Catacombs and be as respectful as possible to the deceased? Is there any particular way to approach a visit to it?

**Erin:** I would say don't steal stuff.

**Alie:** That's a good idea.

**Erin:** That's a good start. Definitely don't take souvenirs. And I guess, just remember that they were people, right? Like I said, I went down to the Catacombs the first time and I was relatively unmoved and sometimes it's hard to recognize something that appears to be an object, to what it once was. So, remember these were people walking around in Paris in the 18th, 17th, 16th, 15th century, whatever, living their lives, and had no idea they would be put on display two, three hundred years later, which is kind of wild.

**Alie:** Do you think there's anything distinctly French or Parisian about maybe wanting to have that, the... pardon the pun, but the legacy of wanting to be viewed by the future? Do you

think there's anything in French philosophy that would want to be a reminder for others to live life in the moment?

**Erin:** Oh, that's so interesting. I don't know if there's anything distinctively French or Parisian about it, but I think, especially as the Catacombs were created, there was this idea that the Catacombs were going to be this bridge between the past, the present, and the future; that they would unite Parisians from centuries past to Parisians walking through at that time, to Parisians or visitors who would pass through in the future. There's this idea that you might end up down here if you're a Parisian in the 19th century. So, it becomes this collective embodiment, only without the bodies, just the bones, of the city of Paris.

I'm coming back to a question that one of your listeners asked about the— I can't stop thinking about the pillar of bones that might be supporting the city. But that's the kind of thing that people thought in the 19th century as well; it's the bones of the people who lived here in the past who are supporting the city. So, it's this really tangible, physical way to think about the relationship between the past and the present. It's a great metaphor, even if they're not technically supporting the city, it looks like they are, right? And aren't we all supported by the past and what came before us in some way?

**Alie:** Oh, that's so beautiful.

Last questions I always ask, something's got to suck about studying catacombs, about the work, about being someone who knows so much about this field. Does anything suck about your job?

**Erin:** *[laughs]* There's so many ways I can answer that. But what I'm going to say is the first time I went to Paris with my group of art historians, and we had a behind-the-scenes tour of a very famous museum, and this guy, a high-up figure in this very famous museum asked us all what our research was on. And I told him, "I'm studying the Paris Catacombs" and he said, *[fake French accent]* "Oh, how trendy." *[laughs]*

**Alie:** *[gasps]* Well.

**Erin:** So, there's certainly... It doesn't suck not being taken "seriously" but I would say that might fall more into that category, but I welcome it. *[both laugh]* My next project is about female daredevils and parachutists in the early 19th century, and so I'm sure that will meet with the same kind of critique, of not being very serious. Very trendy, not very serious.

**Alie:** *[fake French accent]* How trendy.

**Erin:** *[fake French accent]* How trendy. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** That's so French.

**Erin:** It's very belittling, but whatever.

**Alie:** What about your favorite thing about studying this or about what you do?

**Erin:** Oh, I'm never bored. *[Alie laughs]* So, when you asked me to do this interview, and thank you so much for that invitation, it kind of pushed me to look and see what else has been written about the Catacombs since I published my book, and I found some new articles! And I've been spending the last couple of days looking through those and I love it. I will never get tired of this topic, I am never bored, I am always in awe, and I always want to say, "This is so wild!" And like, I feel like you don't have that maybe in every topic. So, I am never bored with what I research.

**Alie:** I'm sure cocktail parties start to gather around you after a few minutes. [laughs] "What does Erin do?" [both laugh] Thank you so, so much for doing this. I'm really excited to try to hit refresh and see if I can smell some tunnels.

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So, for more on all of this, get a copy of Dr. Erin-Marie Legacey's book, *Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris*. It's so wonderfully written and it's so fascinating. I'll link it in the show notes and on my website alongside so much of the stuff that we talked about.

You can also follow us @Ologies on Twitter and on Instagram, I'm @AlieWard on both. Thank you to everyone at Patreon.com/Ologies for always supporting this show, we couldn't do this without you. Thank you to everyone telling friends about us. If you have little ones, we have a ton of all-ages and classroom-safe episodes called *Smologies* available right in this feed or all collected at AlieWard.com/Smologies, those are linked in the show notes. Also in the show notes is a link to T-shirts, and bucket hats, and sweatshirts, and totes, and mugs, and more at OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you, Susan Hale, for managing that and keeping *Ologies* running in so many ways alongside Noel Dilworth who does the scheduling. Erin Talbert admins the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group with assists from Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus of the podcast, *You Are That*.

Emily White of The Wordary makes our professional transcripts, Caleb Patton bleeps episodes and those are available for free at AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras. Kelly R. Dwyer makes the website look nice and can make yours too, and Nick Thorburn made the theme music and he's in a very good band called Islands. The lead editor is none other than published poet, Jarrett Sleeper, he has a book of poems called, *The 100 Poems*, and one time when we first met 11 years ago, I gave him a ride to his scooter and I had to shove a box of Lactaid and some jelly bra inserts under the seat of my car, and now, we're married and he has to make up to me forever. Ha!

Now, if you listen to the end of the episode, I tell you a secret and that was definitely one of them. But another is that for decades I've had this recurring dream that I find some kind of hidden room, or chamber, or tunnel in wherever I'm living. And in the dream, I'm stoked, like, "Oh! Possibilities! What am I going to do in here with the furniture?" And I always thought this was just because I lived in a studio apartment for like a decade, up until very recently. My bed was in the dining room, my bed was maybe three feet away from my stove. But now, I'm wondering, maybe if like the French arm of my ancestry has just been whispering to me in my sleep like, "Heyyyy, we're down hereeee in this hidden roooooom. It's chill as fuck there's so much storage space, it's so quiet, there's so many square feet. Come party." Does anyone else have these dreams? I talked to an Uber driver once who had these dreams too. Has anyone ever found a real room? Can you imagine?

Okay, anyway. Go sniff a flower, tell someone you like their sweater, get yourself a cup of spicey chai, we're all going to die, we just are, it's okay. We're all on this side of the Parisian sidewalks, for now, so, enjoy it. Okay, berbye.

*Transcribed by Aveline Malek at TheWordary.com*

### **Links to things we discussed:**

Dr. Legacy's book, "Making Space for the Dead: Catacombs, Cemeteries, and the Reimagining of Paris, 1780-1830" on [Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org) and [Amazon](http://Amazon)

[Catacombs tickets](#)

A donation went to: [Planned Parenthood of Greater Texas](#)

[Dr. Erin-Marie Legacey's 2017 paper, "The Paris Catacombs: Remains and Reunion beneath the Postrevolutionary City"](#)

[Clip from Scariest Places on Earth](#)

["Tombology"](#)

[Héricart de Thury: the Walt Disney of a mass underground grave attraction?](#)

[Description des catacombes de Paris \(Description of Paris catacombs\) published in 1815 by Héricart de Thury](#)

[Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, also called BHVP](#)

[Catacombes de Paris. Registre des visiteurs, \(1809-1813\)](#)

[Human fat deposits turned into soap and candles](#)

[Soap on a bone: how corpse wax forms](#)

[How the Paris Catacombs Solved a Cemetery Crisis](#)

[Paper mentioning the collapsing cellar](#)

[La Mexicaine de la Perforation \(LMDP\), a band of outlaw urban explorers devoted to turning Paris' disused city spaces into zones of creativity](#)

["As Above, So Below" trailer](#)

["Skyscraper of bones!" Fun For Louis scoots through the bones](#)

[Philibert Aspairt disappeared in the catacombs in 1793, found 11 years later](#)

[Teenagers rescued from Paris catacombs after three-day ordeal](#)

[Rethinking Utopia: the search for 'topias' in the Paris catacombs](#)

[Roman Catacombs](#)

[Parisian Sinkholes of yore](#)

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[Heat-Induced Brain Vitrification from the Vesuvius Eruption in c.e. 79](#)

[Pierre Giraud's vitrification process](#)

[Vitrified brain](#)

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[Assassin's Creed Unity Walkthrough The Death of Philibert Aspairt Murder Mystery Gameplay Let's Play](#)

[Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn's Concert in the Catacombs](#)

[Video: Party in the Paris Catacombs, But Don't Tell | The New York Times](#)

[Author Will Hunt recollects his experiences in the catacombs](#)

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