

# **Anthropodermic Biocodicology with Megan Rosenbloom & Dr. Daniel Kirby**

## **Ologies Podcast**

### **October 20, 2020**

Oh hey, it's that pumpkin that you carved too early and now it looks extra terrifying, Alie Ward, back with another spooky, literally kinda scary episode of *Ologies*. It's about... are you ready for this? Books! Oooh! Shiver me timbers, just creeping my peepers, tombs of horror. Well, not usually. But sometimes.

But before we tiptoe through the stacks, let's say some thanks to everyone at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://www.patreon.com/Ologies) for supporting the show. Thank you to everyone who is passing along these SpoOoOktoOober episodes to friends and people who you call canvassing. Thanks to everyone who is subscribed, and who rates, and of course reviews the show, which, earnestly, I read every review and they make my dark nights glowier, such as this one left this week by Peg Leg Sally, saying:

*Hey there, it's me, the listener who kept procrastinating on reviewing this amazing podcast. If you need to expand your world (and let's be honest, after the last six months of social distancing, we all do) then this podcast has an episode (or several) for you to dive into. Thanks, Ologies, for helping me get through this.*

Thanks for leaving the reviews, y'all.

Okay, so, anthropodermic biocodicology. How sexy is that? Don't you want to make that your Netflix password? Or like a secret utterance that buys you admission into a basement speakeasy? Anthropodermic biocodicology. So what does it mean?

I'll let the Ologists explain – and that's right, there's two Ologists on the horn. A twofer, kiddos! One anthropodermic biocodicologist got his Bachelor's in Analytical Chemistry, and a Master's in Bioanalytical Chemistry, and then a PhD in Analytical Mass Spectrometry. (He explains what that is.)

Now, the other Ologist is an author, a medical librarian, currently the Collections Strategies Librarian at the UCLA library, and a co-founding director of the Death Salon events. I have known her for over a decade through those events. I have always adored her. She has a degree in journalism and a Master's in Library and Information Science and she's just exceptional at digging up correct information and presenting it in a really charming, affable way. I have wanted to interview her about this for years. She's not only a friend, she's also an *Ologies* listener; she's weighed in on chats in the Facebook group about this topic as she was writing this book. Her brand-new book is called *Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin*, which is released October 20th! The date this episode comes out! Also known as tomorrow, since I'm recording this on the 19th from my parents' house in the beautiful creepy woods.

A perfect Spooktober episode: one guest is a bookworm, the other is a scientist who literally studies book worms. But how creepy are these skin books? What do they look like? Are they hairy? How many of them are there? Who owns them? Are they cursed? What's the deal? And should you judge a book by its cover if you find out that it's made of people?

Welp, brew a steamy beverage, drag a chair up to the fireside and lean in to hear about forbidden binding, spines made of skin, medical oddities, museum treasures, rumors, flimflam, highway

robbers, jars of tattoos, and of course, *Dark Archives* with Anthropodermic Biocodicologists Dr. Daniel Kirby and Megan Rosenbloom.

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**Alie Ward:** So we've got all kinds of questions, from silly ones, to 'how do you analyze' and 'how do you care for these items'.

**Dr. Daniel Kirby:** Let's have the silly ones first.

**Alie:** Okay! [*laughs*] Will do. There's no shortage. Trust me.

The first thing I'll have both of you do is if you can say your first and last name to make sure I pronounce it right, and also the pronouns. So... she/her, he, them/they, whatever you go by.

**Megan Rosenbloom:** Megan Rosenbloom. She/her.

**Daniel:** Daniel Kirby. He/him.

**Alie:** Okay. So. I'm gonna need a little bit of help pronouncing this ology. Anthropodermic biblio... pedi... codic-ology? No?

**Megan:** I have a confession to make... a secret. Which is: for an embarrassingly long time, I said this wrong. The thing I was doing, the thing I was writing a book about, I was walking around saying, 'anthropodermic BIBLIopegy'. It is 'anthropodermic': so *anthropo* (human), *dermic* (skin), *biblio* (book), and *pegi* (fasten). So to fasten or bind a book in human skin is 'anthropodermic BIBLIopegy'.

**Alie:** Ohh!

**Megan:** Which my friend Dr. Lindsey Fitzharris – she's a historian of medicine – she did a video about this and she called it 'anthropodermic bibliOpegy'. She's American but she lives in London, and I thought, "Oh, she's just being fancy and British by saying it that way." Looked it up and found out I was saying it wrong the whole time.

**Alie:** Oh no! [*laughs*] Then... biocodiCOlogy?

**Megan:** Yeah. Biocodicology.

**Alie:** What does that mean? And Daniel, is that your wheelhouse from an analytical, lab-based, scientific perspective?

**Daniel:** Well, probably closer than Megan. We're kind of in a crossroads, because what this is all about is using science (and I'm at the science end of things), and the librarian and their collections, and marrying the two together and getting new information. 'Codicology' really means studying books or the study of books; we're now digging in a little bit deeper and scraping things off the surface and analyzing to see what they are and analyzing the materials themselves. So it's kind of a frontier thing.

**Megan:** Traditionally, the idea of codicology has existed for a while, and that is the studying of the physical aspects of the book: how it was bound, what paper it's made out of, what you can tell from looking at the physical object, not so much the text that it contains. You might learn things about how books were made because of the manuscript scraps that were used underneath the binding and things like that, and that's more traditional codicology. You can tell from different kinds of handwriting where a manuscript was created, for instance, and what time period. There are all these interesting 'hands', they call them, like '18th-century secretary hands', or you can tell that that was a French 18th-century person. But

*biocodicology* is using the physical aspects of the book but studying them with various biological methods.

**Alie:** I feel like they'll look back and see bubble lettering and they'll be like, "Early '90s, sixth grade, female. Nailed it." [*Daniel laughs*] Or like "Stüssy 'S', male, seventh grade." [*excerpt from Mean Girls: "It's our burn book."*]

**Aside:** Megan, sidenote, says that some historians predict that our textbooks and highlighted, underlined books will be the treasures of tomorrow, to see handwriting and notes that give clues about what was important in our current culture. So, doodle away... if you have no plans to sell the book. Or if it's not a library book, of course. Librarians like Megan would not like that.

**Alie:** And now, how did you both come to make a career out of this? Megan, obviously I've known you for like a decade, and you were always the book lady, the death positive book lady. But how did you end up studying anthropodermic biblio... peda... blaaah. How did that end up becoming your field?

**Megan:** It's kinda funny when you end up at a place and then you go back and you think, "Oh, of course you would end up being the human skin book lady, given all of this." [*Alie and Megan laugh*] But that was not my intent or expectation for my career. I guess the human skin book life found me in a certain way. [*Alie laughs*]

I started off as a journalist, I used to work at an NPR station in Philadelphia and I did a story on librarians and the Patriot Act. And interviewing librarians, I was kind of like, "Oh, I think these are my people. This feels good, you know?" And then when I decided, well, maybe I wanted a career that was perhaps a little more stable than journalism – oddly prescient – I was like, "Oh, well I could go back to school for library science." You need a master's in library science to be a librarian, generally. While I was in school I got really interested in rare books and special collections, but at the time it was right at the beginning when people started doing online library school, so they didn't really have a way to study that stuff. So I just kind of found my ways of doing that, by volunteering at various places. I know you've done similar things, volunteering at places because you loved it, and then whoops! You end up...

**Alie:** Yeah!

**Megan:** [*laughs*] So I know you get that, for sure.

I was docent at the Rosenbach Museum, which is such a cool book history museum in Philadelphia, and right down the street is my other favorite museum in Philadelphia, which is the Mütter Museum. That is a 19th-century teaching collection of rare medical presentations of various kinds. And it was there at the Mütter Museum that, among a colon the size of a small car and the conjoined livers of Chang and Eng Bunker, there are these books in a case with their covers closed. I was like, "Why would you put books in a case with the covers closed?" And then I read the descriptions and they said that they were all bound in human skin, and I'm just looking around like, "Did- did- does anyone know this?? Should we call somebody?? This is not okay!" I was so surprised! Even though I was in a room full of hundreds of corpses, the book was the thing that blew my mind, and freaked me out, but fascinated me at the same time.

Fast forward many years later, and I'm a librarian and all that. I was working on another idea for a book, and I was traveling around going to different libraries and doing some

research. And every time I would go I would ask whether they had any human skin books because it was just one of the things I was asking, among other things. And then a surprising amount of places were like, “Oh yeah, I think we have one or two of those,” or, “I think we used to have one but we don’t anymore.” People seemed to not fully know whether they had them or not, sometimes. Or, “The campus tour guides say we do but we don’t, and it’s so annoying.”

And during one of those trips I went to Harvard, because that was the first place – in 2014, I believe it was – that tested their three alleged human skin books for the first time to find out whether they were really human. Two of them turned out to be not human, and then one of them turned out to be real. And there was this sort of ‘whoa!’ moment in libraryland where people were like, “Wait, okay, these things aren’t just rumors that people talked about, there’s actually a real one,” and it was a big controversy.

**Aside:** Okay, quick aside, when this news broke in 2014, international headlines breathlessly blared things like, “Harvard confirms antique book is bound in human skin.” Now, historically speaking, this confirmation was a big deal, and it still is. And the person who did those tests was someone by the name of Daniel Kirby, who is... on this call. Who’s a guest on *Ologies*. Right now. So Megan was like, “Oh heyyy, let’s chat, my dude.”

**Megan:** While I was there, I arranged to meet with Daniel and talk to him about how he performed those tests. Then we started comparing notes and, “Oh, I heard there’s one here,” or, “I heard there’s one there,” and the rest is history.

**Alie:** And Daniel, how did you end up being the guy swabbing the human skin book? How did your résumé lead you there?

**Daniel:** That’s a very good question. I can answer in a long form, but it’s all happenstance, completely happenstance.

**Aside:** Daniel had worked with IBM in semiconductors for a long time, and then headed to Boston and worked at Northeastern University.

**Daniel:** Then at the Harvard Proteomics Center – proteomics is really the analysis and study of proteins – and worked for a couple other drug companies. In 2003, I took a year off and did a long bike trip with a group going around the world. And when you’re on a long bike trip going around the world, you have plenty of time to think about what you’d really like to be doing. [*Alie laughs*]

And the conclusion I came to is that I enjoy chemistry and I enjoy analytical chemistry very much. What I didn’t enjoy with some of the drug companies etc. was being so isolated. You do your work and you throw an answer over the wall and you never have any idea where it’s going.

So I started thinking about other things, and about that time the Harvard Art Museum was advertising for a position for a postgraduate person, which I was, although very post-post. And this was one of the so-called Mellon Fellowships, where they would bring in a PhD to work in conservation.

**Aside:** Daniel said he applied, but didn’t get it, but ended up working with them as a volunteer on some archival projects.

**Daniel:** We started looking into the idea of doing protein analysis. And this was about the same time that the archeologists were using mass spectrometry and protein analysis to identify bones and other artifacts from archeological context. I began to do this, and especially

looking at samples like parchment. Can I tell the difference between parchments? Well, this got to be known around the conservation group in the immediate area, especially in the Weissman Preservation Center, which is the preservation center that services the libraries at Harvard. My friend there, Alan Puglia, happened to be a working on – I don't know whether it was a survey or an actual treatment – one of the Harvard books that was supposedly bound in human skin. And this was the beginning of this lovely journey. [laughs]

So he called me, and he knew that I was working in identifying proteins... analyzing proteins to understand the origin of the material, which animal it was. And he said, "Why don't you come over and take a look at this book?" which I did. And it turned out to be the Spanish law text from the law library, which turned out not to be human skin. So this story got around in the papers and out of the woodwork came the other two libraries at Harvard who had other books that were purported to be bound in human skin. I analyzed the first one and it was not. And finally, the one from, I believe, the Houghton Library turned out to be human skin. This actually set off quite a bunch of fireworks and even made *The Irish Times*, which is what I use as the high watermark.

**Aside:** So, he came out of retirement and ended up being "the guy" in proteomics, which is protein analysis. So when it comes to having your alleged human leather book gently, respectfully swabbed, he's the go-to. *Is it swabbed?*

**Daniel:** That's just the niche I've gotten into. I've never regretted it, and I hope I can keep doing it for a long time to come.

**Alie:** How is that sample collected? And how is it analyzed? And how do you determine if it's a different type of mammal or another type of animal skin?

**Daniel:** Very good questions. I can take you through that. The sample collection, it's always a big issue with conservators. They don't like to see you running after them with a scalpel to take a chunk of something, [horror film music screech-screech, followed by a record scratch and a male voice saying, "No."] or in other cases we use a very fine abrasive to take an infinitesimal amount of sample. If there's a place on a book, for example, that there's previous damage, you can usually go in and just pick out a teeny fiber.

The analysis that we do is extremely sensitive. I generally tell people who want to submit a sample that if you can physically see the sample under about 30x magnification, that's still more than enough to use. So, it's usually pretty straightforward to get a sample of a bookbinding. The way the analysis is done, you have to realize that a bookbinding is made from collagen, which is the material that makes up about 30% of the protein in our bodies. The skin, your hide, and the bones are actually a large percentage of collagen.

**Aside:** For more on boones, see the Osteology episode from last year's Spooktober, to learn that you are just an alive Erector set. You're just a breathing, meat scaffold. Gorgeous.

**Daniel:** Any of your connective tissues, your gut tissues, things like that... Ivory is actually a large percentage of collagen. Collagen is a very durable material, and durable in the sense that in archaeological context where a leather object or a bone has been buried for a long period of time, we can still generally obtain enough collagen from it to be able to do the analysis. And the way the analysis is done, collagen is a protein. Proteins are made up of strings of amino acids. Each protein has a different sequence or different types of amino acids in a row.

So the way we identify a protein is to cut the protein into smaller pieces, and then use mass spectrometry to weigh the different individual pieces that we've obtained. From the

weights of these different peptides, they're called, we can relate that to a reference material which produces the same assortment of masses or peptide weights. And this is called 'peptide mass fingerprinting'. It's really just a matter of cutting up the protein, doing the mass spectrometric analysis, and you get a spectrum... it looks like a field of grass with each tip of the grass has a mass associated with it. We just look for masses that correspond to reference samples that we know.

**Aside:** So mass spectrometry is hard to say, and it accelerates, then throws a curveball at, and deflects particles, measuring the deflection path to figure out what we're working with. Megan says when she hears news from Daniel's lab results, it's a bit thrilling because it's raw knowledge. It's something that hasn't been known before, definitively.

**Megan:** People have extremely different reactions to the news, right? Some people are very excited because of the discovery aspect, or just a general morbid curiosity. Some people are really disappointed to find out when they're real, because then they have to deal with the fact that they have a real human skin book and how do we address having this thing in our collections? Or some places that have found out that their books are fake, then print out the little things to hand out to campus tour guides to tell them to *stop* telling people there's a human skin book there. There's a real, sort of, wide variety to how people react.

So it's always very exciting to me whenever we get results, regardless of whether they're real or fake. And if they end up being fake, then the big question is always, "Well, why would you fake that?" Who, at what point, wrote "bound in human skin" on that book, and why did they do that if it wasn't actually true?

**Alie:** How many now have been confirmed?

**Megan:** In public collections – libraries, museums – we've confirmed 18 books as human skin, 13 have been proven to be not human skin. We've also, as a team, done a few side journeys, I guess, of testing objects that aren't actually books and some private collectors have now gotten wind that we're doing this and have gotten interested in getting their books tested as well.

**Aside:** Megan is part of the Anthropodermic Book Project, and when she reads the emails submitted to the site... well, she finds some real doozies.

**Megan:** If it wasn't detrimental to the privacy of the people who email, I wish I could just do a dramatic reading of some of the emails that I get. I get emails pretty much once every week or two weeks from someone saying they think they have one, or they heard there's one at this place, or "I think my grandfather has one in his attic," and inquiring about testing without actually going through with it, necessarily.

**Alie:** And I have to ask, that first Harvard book that was confirmed, what was between the covers? What kind of book is that?

**Megan:** It's a French book. [*clip from Will and Grace: Karen, "The French..."*] It's by a writer named Arsène Houssaye. It's called - please forgive my French - *Des Destinées de l'Âme*, [*pronunciation of the title by French speaker*] which is like "destinies of the soul." It's this, sort of, meditation on the soul, and does it persist after death, and this kind of really philosophical thing that was written by someone who was mourning the loss of their wife. And his friend was a doctor, because there's always a doctor.

**Aside:** I'll repeat this: there's always a doctor. Also, I looked up the first confirmed book from the Harvard archives made from the back of an unwitting patient, and it looks like soft

leather. Kind of yellowish undertones, maybe some brownish mottling from time and wear, but you zoom in closer and you see the delicate texture of goosebumps. It kind of looks like my winter legs, I'll be honest.

**Megan:** One of the main threads in my book is, how do you get to the point where you're a doctor who says, "This is proper. This is a proper, okay thing to do. There's nothing weird or creepy or gross about doing that." So that has a lot to do with the investigation in my book and what these objects tell us about the history of clinical medicine.

**Alie:** In general, are you finding something thematic in all of the ones that end up being bound in human skin? Is there something thematic about existence, or mortality, or religion, or the occult? Or are these cookbooks for lentil stews and, like, *Sweet Valley High*? There's got to be something that they have in common. [Megan chuckles]

**Megan:** There are general schools, I would say. There is the anatomy or old medical book rebound in human skin. Like maybe the nicest medical book that you had as a doctor book collector. There's the vaguely philosophical. There are some that we haven't actually tested but are on the list of potential books that are like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and that kind of thing.

**Aside:** Okay, yeah, I looked it up. I wasn't sure. I was like, "What's *Paradise Lost*?" It's a 10,000-line biblical poem written by John Milton, who at the time of working on this, was in his 60s. So if you have excuses for not writing a book, just open a Google Doc! Start noodling around. Other topics bound in people? Megan says literature, poetry books, and a certain dark genre of Anglo anthropodermic biblioplagy... bibliop... oh my god... bibliopogy.

**Megan:** Then there is the school of English books that are – allegedly because we haven't tested them yet – the trial transcripts of horrible murderers that are bound in the skin of the murderer.

**Alie:** No! After execution?

**Megan:** Yeah. Apparently, it was very easy to get the death penalty in England in the 19th century. You could get the death penalty for things like stealing and stuff like that. So if you were a murderer, then they wanted to make it an extra horrible punishment for the crime, and also because it was really hard to get ahold of bodies for dissection. Murderers were one of the few easy-to-get bodies for this rapid increase in need for anatomical learning specimens.

So they would publicly dissect bodies, they would take pieces of skin, they would take different souvenirs. There was a lot of weird trophy gathering stuff. They would then take the skeleton, and those are the skeletons that would sometimes end up in the anatomy schools, or in the hospital, or whatever as articulated skeletons. So they really used a lot of the parts there. And some of them ended up as books. Allegedly.

**Aside:** On the topic of anatomy classes, if you ever want to see actual photos of young, 19th-century doctors lying like a corpse on a table, surrounded by their cadavers posed in lab coats above them, feel free to google, 'a student's dream', but not if you're prone to nightmares.

**Alie:** I have a very stupid 'anatomy of a book' question, speaking of anatomy. When you're talking about the binding of the book, is that the leather-bound cover, or the spine, or... Where is the skin actually used?

**Megan:** It depends on the individual book. Some of them are just the spine covered in skin, and some of them are the entire book covered in skin. In terms of the books that we've found,

some of them are very sophisticated, obviously very professional bindings and some are a little cruder. A lot of the ones that end up being fake, people think that it's a creepy looking, gross book that has hair growing out of it. And literally, you could see big follicles, and it's stained, and it looks like something you'd find in a serial killer's lab or something. Those end up almost always being sheep.

**Alie:** Ohhh! Sheep! Big pores! Sheep are like, "Yikes! Gotta get some pore minimizer!" Who knew?

**Megan:** You'd think they would be pig because pig skin is similar to human. There have been a few that were pig, but mostly sheep.

**Alie:** Huh. I have to ask. What does it feel like? What is the texture? Can you even touch it, or is this a 'gloves only' situation?

**Megan:** The number one question I get as a librarian is always, "Shouldn't you be wearing gloves?" [sassy voice] "Don't judge me." But librarians, or people who are working with rare books, in general you do not wear gloves because you are more likely to rip a page or damage a book if you cannot use your skin to be able to tell what you're doing to it. So you're supposed to wash and dry your hands frequently when you're handling rare books.

I've touched over a dozen alleged human skin books with my bare hands. Almost every institution lets you actually hold the book.

**Aside:** But when you hold them, they must all look like a book-shaped naked person. Right?

**Megan:** Maybe one of the creepiest things about them is that they look like pretty much any other book. They can come in any sort of color, any level of decoration or not. You wouldn't really know you were holding one unless someone told you, and there are stories in my book where I was holding something and then they told me, "Oh, that's our human skin book," and I'm like, "Oh! Uh..." You're just kind of like, [high pitched voice] "Ahh!"

**Alie:** A little heads up, please!

**Megan:** I will say, personally, everyone has their line of squickness of what is the grossest thing. For me, it's the ones that are human suede.

**Alie:** [horrified] Ohhhhhh.

**Megan:** Sometimes, appropriately, disgustingly, called an ooze binding.

**Alie:** I do not want to know.

**Megan:** So suede, just like in an animal, it's either the underside or a split skin. It's like the inside part that is rough, and kind of soft, and rawhide-ish or something instead of being that smooth kind of leather follicle side where the hair comes out. Those are gross. I will fully cop to that.

**Alie:** [quietly horrified] I did not know that humans could be suede.

We're going to get to listener questions. The biggest listener question I got, of course, was, "WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY?" But before we get to that, I do want to ask, is there anything emotional that happens when you're handling this, or when you are looking at your peptide spectroscopy and you realize that this is the product of a human life? Is there a moment where you stop to acknowledge it? What happens emotionally to you? Is it pretty scientific, or does it feel like a gut punch?



**Daniel:** If you're asking me, it's really pretty much scientific. Maybe that's a personal fault, I don't know. [laughs]

No, I look at these pretty objectively. And I'd have to say that Megan's comments about what the bindings look like is part of the problem, because there is no real way of looking at the binding, and the pores, and the texture of it and making any kind of decision as to what it is. We've been fooled by that a lot of times.

I think of the books from Brown where there had been some forensic person looking at them and said, "Oh absolutely, this is human skin" or, "Absolutely it isn't," and that turned out to be wrong, and so we've highlighted the fact that there can be room for doubt in some of these things.

**Megan:** Yeah, and it makes sense too because Daniel is really dealing with an Eppendorf tube with some chunks in it. For me, it can be a little bit more complicated and emotional because I am digging into the backgrounds of the books. Not only who owned them and how they got into the collection, but as much as I can about the creation of the books and the texts. I do get to spend a little bit more time with this stuff that, sort of, connects you to the people. And the truth is that most of these books were created by doctors that were book collectors and felt entitled in this way because of the, kind of, 'clinical gaze'; about how, before clinical medicine, you just had a few patients that you dealt with all the time in your village. You knew everyone and their families.

Then, around the French Revolution, this idea of clinical medicine came about where you would be able to learn at the bedside in a hospital and you would have a lot more patients. You would be able to see a lot more things and you would be a better doctor as a result, which everyone agrees is true.

But if you don't actively work on making sure that you're constantly reminding yourself in a real way that these are people that you are dealing with and not collections of body parts and diseases to be cured, it's really easy to get this distanced perspective of people. And what's the worst that can happen? This is an example of the worst it can happen, when you're so focused on these tiny parts of a person that you're not really thinking of them as a person at all.

For me, the ones that are the most moving are the ones where we've been able to find any sort of information about who the person was or may have been.

**Alie:** Right. Did you find that in writing your book *Dark Archives*, that was part of the quest to write it at all?

**Megan:** Yeah. The book as an object is kind of this incredible thing, because as we learn from biocodicology, it is this physical object that can contain tons of biological information from hundreds of years, and it holds information really well in a very stable way. But it also contains stories, not just of the person who wrote it, but the people who made the paper and put the book together, and of their previous owners, and their lives, and the institutions that have owned these books, and everything. There's just so many people who have touched the book in one way or another for *any* old book, let alone one that actually is containing a part of a person.

I was like, I want to know more about, when we can, who these people were. Could I trace to find out, in some cases, who the doctor was that was involved in this? And so, in terms of the humanity, I would say my favorite in that regard, and anyone can go online and look this up, is at the Boston Athenæum, and their book is an ooze suede book. That was the

only book I was not physically allowed to touch, because in general suede bindings are a lot more likely to have conservation issues anyway.

**Aside:** Anyone who has owned suede shoes and avoided puddles knows this suede anxiety, so imagine if you had a book made of human ooze. That's going to be in the No-Touchy-Please category.

But okay, a suede human skin book must mean the most weirdly sadistic of the anthropodermic specimens, right? I'm just afraid to hear this origin story.

**Megan:** The book is a narrative written by the person whose skin it is, [*Alie gasps*] who actually requested this for themselves. Which is, as far as I can tell, the only example of someone who actually wanted this done and had it done.

He has a ton of aliases. He was a person who died in prison of tuberculosis, but he was a sort of charming, swashbuckling kind of highway robber. The entire book is digitized on the Athenæum's website, so you can actually hear about his life in his own words. I found him so charming, in a way. [*everyone laughs*]

It was so interesting to hear how he would just constantly fool the prison guards and escape over and over again, but they still kind of loved him anyway, and then towards the end it just sort of hits this sort of balk.

**Aside:** This charming, incarcerated highway robber got too ill to dictate to the wardens any longer, and anyone who tried to write it for him just didn't have the same flare of old George Walton. If that was his name.

**Megan:** I call him Walton, but truly he had five or six aliases on the cover of the book, including my favorite, Burly Grove.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Huh. Well!

**Megan:** I just think that's the best name ever.

**Alie:** Yeah. It sounds like if Brad Pitt in *Thelma & Louise* got caught and then they made a beautiful suede book out of his beautiful body.

[*clip from Thelma & Louise*]

"You're a real live outlaw, aren't ya?"

"Well I may be an outlaw, darlin', but uh, you're the one stealin' my heart."

**Megan:** Yeah, so he made one for the doctor who removed the skin and everything. He gave one to him as payment. Okay, eww, but yes. That one has never surfaced, so we have no idea what happened to the doctor book. The other one was given to the family of the man who he found to be the bravest man that he ever robbed on the highway.

**Alie:** Wow.

**Megan:** I have a whole chapter in my book about this guy's story because it was so compelling. I had so much of his life, because he gave it to us, you know, in this way.

**Aside:** In *Dark Archives*, Megan recounts how it fell into the hands of one of his greatest adversaries turned buddies, and these two bros have one of the best meet-cute scenes you've ever heard. I mean, what says BFF more than your printed deathbed confessional biography bound in your own suede for your friend to cherish as an heirloom?

**Megan:** There was a family lore there that apparently the family used to point to the book on the shelf and warn naughty children that if they misbehaved they would be beaten with it.

**Alie:** Oh, damn! Oh, beaten with a skin book! So much worse than a wooden spoon. So much worse than getting grounded.

**Megan:** Yeah! It sounds really effective and psychologically scarring, so I can understand why someone decided to donate it to a museum instead. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** They're like, *[snobby girl voice]* "You know what? You guys, actually, you guys can just have it, just take it. You guys can just have it."

But the process of tanning a human, is it wildly different from a sheep or a cow or a pig?

**Megan:** No. I think it's pretty much the same as an animal would be, and, when you read the few things you can find in the literature of a binder who's like, "Yeah, I bound human skin books, what of it?" They're like, "Oh yeah, I just did it in the normal fashion," and then I'm like, *[pleading voice]* "What's the normal fashion?!" *[laughs]* There are a lot of different ways to preserve skin and to make things that are leather, or parchment, which is less processed skin, but could bind a book in parchment. And you had Allis Markham on the show talking about how you can use brain and all sorts of things.

**Aside:** Sidenote: see the Nassology episode about taxidermy. Lots of very moist, pulpy skinning and tanning info there. And Allis Markham is just a dream.

**Megan:** Animal dung, brain, urine, all sorts of different naturally-occurring gross things in order to make leather or leather-like treatments of stuff.

The actual mechanics of how artisans used to make things can get lost over time because they didn't really write these things down. They were passed down through apprenticeships and stuff. So part of what I tried to uncover in the book... and it was sort of a last minute addition to the book, I hadn't planned on doing it, but I kept getting asked, "How would this have been made?" and there was just this big question mark over my head. So I found this guy, Jesse Meyer, in upstate New York at this place called Pergamena. He's one of the few places in the United States that still does leather tanning in the historical fashion. He let me come up, and walked me through the process, and it was... I ruined a pair of shoes.

**Alie:** How so?

**Megan:** So, I was wearing Keds, which was a poor choice.

**Alie:** Okay. *[laughs]*

**Megan:** Sponsorship, call me!

**Aside:** Keds: Jump right on that.

Also, I looked up Pergamena, and it's this Hudson River Valley cute-as-hell leather supplier, and should you want skins or parchment, they sell them straight up on their site.

Megan had heard about Pergamena through her friend Kevin, who had taken a tanning course there and been warned about what to expect when you visit, and Kevin said: Boots. Rubber.

**Megan:** So, they told us to wear these, like, big wader boots, and I thought, "Well that seems like overkill. I don't see why I should have to do that." And then he's standing there, and then

they open this drum, and then this cascade of effluent comes out and washes by all their feet, and he said, "I'm pretty sure that I saw some goat balls in that." *[everyone laughs]*

And I said, "Kevin, this is going to sound weird, but I feel like I need to see these goat balls for myself." I'm not going to be able to write this without being able to describe what it smells like, what it looks like, thereby be able to sort of understand just how disgusting it is to take someone's skin and make a book out of them, right?

That sort of disconnect that we have when we look at a book, a finished product in our hands, and not think about how the cow became the book, or how the person became the book. So then yeah, I went up there and *[chuckles]* the same kind of... not quite a cascade, but he was walking me around from this drum, to the dehairing area, to this place, to that place. The stuff that was on the ground, I would say, was sort of like Mountain Dew with chunks of fat floating in it. *["Baby, you gotta stew goin'."]*

*[Alie lets out a grossed-out vocal fry]* That's what it looked like. It was like this yellow, bright, non-natural yellow-green color. I had rented a car to drive up to this place, and then after I was all done, I'd spent hours there, and I got back in the car to drive back to Philadelphia and it smelled so bad that I was like, "I'm not going to get my deposit back on this car if I don't get rid of these shoes." So I threw them in a trashcan on the street, and luckily I had flip flops, and I put them on and drove down to Philadelphia with those.

**Aside:** RIP, Philly Garbage Keds.

**Alie:** Can I ask you Patreon questions?

**Megan:** Yeah, let's do it!

**Aside:** Okay, but before we simmer in those, a few words from sponsors who make it possible to donate to a cause. This week Megan requested that it go to the Black Mamas Matter Alliance, BMMA, which is a national network of Black women-led organizations and professionals who work to ensure that all Black mamas have the rights, respect, and resources to thrive before, during, and after pregnancy.

Black women and others who carry babies are three to four times more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes than white folks. BMMA is composed of existing organizations and individuals whose work is deeply rooted in reproductive justice, birth justice, and the human rights framework. For more info you can see the link in the show notes, [BlackMamasMatter.org](https://BlackMamasMatter.org). Thank you, Megan, for choosing them, and that was made possible by show sponsors who you may hear about now.

*[Ad Break]*

Okay, your pressing questions! I want to list all your names for this first question, but I would honestly have to print it in a book and just... bind it in a slice of ham or something. Like, it was all of you.

**Alie:** Okay, number one question we got... "Why, why, why, why, why, WHYYYYYYYY, why, why, why, why?" So many people want to know why.

**Megan:** Yeah! I mean, "why" is the big question! Would I love to uncover the diary of a human skin bookmaker that says, "This is my grand motivation for the reason why I thought this was totally cool to do!" Yeah, I would love to know that, but the best I could come up with was really about the circumstances in which these doctors... because the doctor-bibliophiles were really the main people who were creating them. Although, I did mention a couple

other instances, like the state creation of them in England for capital punishment reasons. But you know, what were the circumstances in Western clinical medicine that allowed for multiple doctors who didn't know each other to feel like this was an okay thing to do, and they didn't end up, you know, getting run out of town?

**Aside:** This next question was asked by a ton of you, including Mary Salotto, first-time question-askers 'A' and Emily Warner, as well as Mardee Goodwin, RJ Doidge, Cat Lindsay, Brendan Dean, Michael Satumbaga, Nicklas Zemp, Big John, Jaime McNear, and Samantha Steelman, and it's a really deep, nagging, existential question.

**Alie:** This is another important question, very pressing, very much a hardball question. Uh, *Hocus Pocus* or *Evil Dead*? When it comes to cinematic depictions of books made of anthropodermic materials... Have you seen either?

**Megan:** I've seen both. I had only just seen *Hocus Pocus*, like, this year.

[clip from *Hocus Pocus*:]

"This is the spellbook of Winnifred Sanderson. It was given to her by the devil himself."

"The book is bound in human skin and contains the recipes for her most powerful and evil spells!"

"I get the picture."

So, I think that some of its charm is probably lost on me as an Old watching that movie, right? Like, it's not as awesome as it would have been if I watched it when it first came out, I guess. So I'm gonna go with *Evil Dead*.

[clip from *Evil Dead*:]

"Far from the groves of academe, I believe I have made a significant find in the Kandarian Runes. A volume of ancient Sumerian burial practices and funerary incantations. It is entitled 'Naturom Demonto,' roughly translated 'Book of the Dead.' The book is bound in human flesh and inked in human blood. [thunder] It deals with demons, demon resurrection, and those forces which roam the forest and dark bowers of man's domain."

I just really, like... I want to call him by his Instagram name because I'm totally blanking. It's like, "Shep Malone, what's his real name?"

**Alie:** Bruce Campbell?

**Megan:** Bruce Campbell! Bruce Campbell, The Chin! He's an amazing guy. He always just seemed like the coolest guy. I have good friends back where I grew up in Philly that did '70s grindhouse horror screenings. And Bruce Campbell would come to the *Evil Dead* screenings, and he would sit there until like four in the morning, and talk to everybody, and sign all their stuff. He just seems like such a great dude, so I'm just very pro-Bruce Campbell, so I'm going to go with *Evil Dead*.

**Alie:** Okay! Do you want to get him a copy of *Dark Archives*?

**Megan:** I do! I do want to get him a copy of it.

**Alie:** Let's get him a copy. Let's tweet at him!

**Megan:** Yeah!

**Aside:** Hey Bruce Campbell, do you want her book? You should get a copy of her book. By the way, follow Bruce Campbell on Twitter @GroovyBruce, because like his films, he is just a delight in an otherwise hellscape. Groovy Bruce.

**Alie:** Okay. Elle McCall wants to know: Do all of these books work best by the light of a black flame candle? Do you have to be reading them in a situation that is a little bit spooky?

**Megan:** I think the best spooky situation I read one in was at Brown, because there's this really tall... the reading room has these super tall windows, and it looks out on this field, and the field is, like, rolling with fog. I was like, "This is good. This is correct."

**Alie:** [laughs] Art design: 100%! Okay this next question, little bit scientific, was asked by Patrons Kerri, Jessica Beard, Dorit, Lora Donnelly, Nick Mikash, Kathleen B, Meagan Walker, Samantha J Guenther, and Jess Swann. So many people had a similar question and they all want to know, in Jessica Beard's words: After the tanning and the binding of the books, not to mention the passage of time, how intact is the DNA? Like, could you find the skin donor? Can you see if there are living relatives? How intact is that?

**Daniel:** That's not very likely because the DNA doesn't survive very well over time and especially with any chemicals and other treatments that would go into making the binding. So, DNA is... of the material itself, the leather material, I don't know of any cases offhand that I have done that. The reason we use the collagen protein is because that survives very nicely over very long periods of time. So, so far no one that I'm aware of has dug into that level of information. With the protein analysis, all we can say is that it's human. We can't say whether it's a male or female, or old or young, or anything else about it.

**Alie:** Yeah, I figured that would probably be something that would be, like, the next step, or something that was executed – that's a horrible use of the word executed – you know, if it were possible. But yeah, it seems like that would be pretty rough on those double helixes.

**Daniel:** Well, another limitation is that the DNA testing generally requires a lot more material, so that might be prohibitive.

**Alie:** Liz Powell and Kayla McNabb want to know: Are human leather books legal to own? Is it legal??

**Megan:** That's a great question. I went down a big rabbit hole. If you ever want to know anything about legality of various body disposition methods, I highly recommend checking out Tanya Marsh. She literally wrote the book on the subject called *The Law of Human Remains*. She helped me walk through the process in the book of trying to determine, "Is it legal to own human skin books in various places? Or would it be legal to create one now that we live in an age where there's consent around your body?" Right? With the exception of Walton, these were all made not only without consent but without the *concept* that you would have consent over your body.

It wasn't a thing that was a legal, you know, construct that existed, which seems so crucial to our understanding of what our rights are today. It's hard to put ourselves in the mindset of a time where that didn't exist, right? In terms of ownership, in the US it's really state-based what is considered 'desecration of a corpse', because at different points in history a cremation would've been considered desecration of a corpse. They're often judged by what's called community standards.

So, it's not expressly 'human skin books are illegal to make', but if you made one, and someone caught you, could they say that you violated community standards and

desecrated a corpse? And do you really want to be on the other side of that potential lawsuit? A lot of times the law is complaint-based, so it's sort of hairy, but then – [laughs] again, poor choice of words for that. [“It’s no skin off my butt!”] But the other thing is, like, are they legal to own and sell, the antique ones? It was actually kind of fascinating that the different countries where I found human skin books, all of them have different rules and different lines where they draw what is an acceptable kind of human remain to sell or not sell. Or what is even considered a human remain.

Scottish laws are stricter than English law about human remains. And the French are the strictest of all. That is part of the reason that we get a lot of emails from private collectors, French private collectors, who are interested in potentially testing books. They have to be sort of hush-hush about even having an alleged book, because if someone knew you had one that's, like, not legal to own.

**Aside:** So Megan mentioned Britain’s Human Tissue Act, which I’ll just summarize the very complicated legal and ethical text. Essentially it means: If it falls off you or out of you, and you’re still cool to hang, we’re good. So you know, teeth, hair, nails. You DO regrow skin, and to anyone who’s listened to the last two weeks of end-of-the-episode secrets, you know some of us have some extra to spare. But TATTOOS don’t just fall off. Who asked about those? Patrons Koryn, Lulu Hall, Stephanie Broertjes, Keslie Naffa, Eileen Prince, Hannah Quist, Maria Hancox, Marija Pejicic, first-time question-asker Luke LaFemina, Hope, Jen Woods, Adrienne Hollister, Megan Moore, Arianna Mattson, Karen Burnham, and Cat Lindsay.

**Alie:** And actually on the topic of tattoos, first-time question-asker Amy Robson as well as a TON of other patrons want to know: Can you use tattooed skin? Does that ever show up in any of these human skin books? I’m going to guess no?

**Megan:** Yes. [Alie, surprised, “Oh!”] I’m really hoping for the day my little email pings and I hear from one of these private collectors. But while I was at the *Nationale* in France, I came across this book about the history of book bindings, and in the French book there were pictures of books that clearly had tattoos on them. So I’m thinking, “Did someone tattoo a cow? I kind of doubt it. I feel like this is probably real,” but they’re these, like, not good, black-and-white pictures, and they just say stuff like someone’s initial and their last name of the private collection.

But there’s no, like, you know, me trying to find out who that person was and see where that book might have ended up, especially in France where they’re illegal. That makes it really, really hard to find. So I’ve not actually seen in real life a book that is bound in human skin that has a tattoo. But I’ve seen a picture of something that very much looked like that could be the case.

**Aside:** This next question I was sure was just from a work of fiction.

**Alie:** Ayshia Yaeger wants to know: What’s up with that one story about human skin being stored in a basement lab and being cured with urine? Was it even a lab or was it just someone’s basement? I’m pretty sure the skin was made into, like, five books? Am I just making that up? Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?

**Megan:** Yes! [Alie, surprised, groan-screams oooAAAhhhh!] [Daniel laughs] They’re talking about three of the five books at the Mütter museum, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia Historical Medical Library, which is also where the Mütter museum is. The books are actually part of the library, not the museum, but they’re all in one building together. The

books were all made by the same guy, John Stockton Hough. He allegedly had saved the skin of a woman who the previous librarian there, Beth Lander, was able to trace in the archives to name her as Mary Lynch. It was, like, three pieces of the spine binding from the same person because Dr. Hough had, like, written inside the book that it was 'made from the skin of Mary L' and what hospital she was from. So then the librarian was able to go back and find Mary Lynch from that certain area and be able to put two and two together.

**Aside:** The three books bound from Mary Lynch were historical works from the 1600s and 1700s about – what else? – women's health and childbirth. Dr. Hough himself is said to have lost his own wife in childbirth. And though rates of maternal mortality have lowered a lot since that era, some groups are safer than others. For more on that, once again, see [BlackMamasMatter.org](http://BlackMamasMatter.org). Now in terms of Mary's timeline from autopsy to library...

**Megan:** It was not a wet jar of skin in urine, in a basement. Part of what I worked through with the tanner was exactly how he would have been able to save the skin for what was a really long time before he actually bound the books. The tanner believes that he may have used urine to just stop the skin decay process because skin can decay super, super quickly. You can arrest the decay just long enough. Then you have to change the pH before you just disintegrate it. So you can stop it until you get it to the place where then you can do regular leather, tanning type processes on it to keep it. It was probably the tanned piece of dry leather that was kept for a long time before he actually bound the books.

**Alie:** This actually dovetails nicely with another listener question. First time question asker Pascale Lanthier-Bourbonnais wants to know: Does a book with human skin smell different depending on the person it's made out of?

**Daniel:** *[laughs]*

**Megan:** No, they don't smell like anything.

**Alie:** Okay. I didn't think so but it's a good question.

**Megan:** Well, you know, they smell like old books. That lovely kind of broken vanilla smell.

**Alie:** But not a jar of urine. Good to know.

**Daniel:** Alie, you could put all these books on a shelf with a whole bunch of other books and you would never be able to pick them out. They are absolutely normal looking, normal smelling, normal feeling, and I've handled a lot of them. I handled all the books at Brown and at the Mütter, even the one at the Athenaeum, and a few other ones. And you really would never know that they were human skin.

**Aside:** Daniel and Megan say, depending on how well it was tanned, different animal leathers have really similar durabilities. But what if you wanted a modern, ethically sourced human wallet or belt? I mentioned this in the Cosmetology episode, but [HumanLeather.com](http://HumanLeather.com) has got you covered, selling these items with raw materials donated by folks who consented before their demise. I could not find a price list, but they do note on the website that they only take bitcoin. Sounds above board...

There's also a project called Pure Human, which examines the biotech of using DNA samples to lab-grow human leathers of specific people, with prototypes made to reflect the skin of late fashion designer Alexander McQueen. Pure Human is looking to explore the commodification of human flesh as a new form of luxury, which is just a little rich for some budgets, I'm sure.



Now, provided it was willed to you, is there like a... hack... for this process? Like DIY?

**Alie:** A few people had, kind of, Pinterest-y, DIY questions. Travis Brooks and Michael Hamby want to know: How much skin does it take to bind a book? Travis says they're 5'9" and 170, how many books could I bind? I guess with their own skin? I mean, was there not a lot of, like, square inches used in this?

**Megan:** A lot of the books that I've seen are about the size of, or slightly larger than, your modern iPhone. A lot of them are not very big, or it's just the binding, just this little strip that you could get. However, there's one book that still kind of blows my mind. It's at Brown. It's this Vesalius' anatomy book. It's huge and the entire thing is covered in skin. I cannot figure out how they did it. It's 32 centimeters.

**Aside:** That's about a foot. Oh man, inopportune unit of measurement there. But yes, 12 inches.

**Megan:** I picked it out of its box, and it was so much bigger than any of the other ones I had seen. I was like, "Yeah, there's no way that this is real."

**Aside:** It was very fancy looking and... it was real.

**Alie:** Actually speaking of that, a listener Anakin Janiak wants to know: What is the worth of a human leatherbound book? Is that even measurable? Because we're talking about a life, we're talking about, typically, stolen property, all kinds of things. Is there monetary value put on these?

**Megan:** The best that I can say, because it changes all the time, would be that if you had the same exact edition of a book, and one was just bound in leather and one was allegedly bound in human skin, the human skin one will be worth many times over what the regular one would be because of the scarcity of it. It's just that scarcity equals value in certain ways. There is probably a buyer out there who would be interested in having this kind of object.

That's part of the reason why a lot of the fakes that we see are in the occult market, because the idea of having a spell book, or a book about the devil or something like that, that is bound in human skin is very appealing. But it turns out that no one who actually made an occult book maybe had that access to a doctor at a certain point who would be able to steal that skin for you. I don't think we have yet to affirm an occult book that is actually bound in skin.

**Alie:** So if you bought a spell book at Hot Topic, you got hosed.

**Megan:** Yes. And especially the *Hocus Pocus* one with the eyeball in it. Bad news.

**Alie:** It's probably fake.

**Aside:** Now any levity aside: moving on to something that is very real, and very unsettling.

**Alie:** You know, a lot of people had a really good question. Catherine Gilbert and Sarah Howell-Miller, both wanted to know: Are certain pigmented skins used more than others? Sarah Howell-Miller asked: Okay but for real, racism has got to show up somewhere in here, right? Other than the abject cruelty of taking something without consent, what type of evidence did you find in that vein?

**Megan:** I tried to be extremely careful to get this as complete as I could without speculating things in the book. There's a chapter in the book which deals with any of the books that have any sort of racial claim or connotation to them. Thus far, any of the books that we had tested

where a note said something about the race of the person who was used for the book, like 'bound in the skin of a Moorish chieftain' or something like that, have tested to be fake. Not human at all. But then there are a few books that we still haven't tested of course so I can't totally say blanket statement.

There are two confirmed books that are poetry books by Phillis Wheatley, who was the first African American published woman in the United States in colonial times. When I started digging into the provenance of these books, I'm kind of holding my breath, like, "Eeuughh! What am I going to find here?"

The bookseller who put the bindings on these books was someone who was a huge proponent of trying to save works of Southern writers and African-American writers and build a market for people to want to buy them and collect them in libraries. He would do things like put famous authors' works into incongruently expensive bindings, like Japanese vellum. Like why would you bind Phillis Wheatley's work in Japanese vellum? Because Japanese vellum is expensive.

So why did he send three books (we've lost track of one) to a binder using 'leather supplied' and then two of them ended up being human? From the evidence I could find, it seemed to just be that it would add monetary, collectible value to it, but he still got that skin from somebody. There is a big question mark there. He used to work with these writers from the Harlem Renaissance. He was like really seen as a champion of Black literature. It's really murky.

One of the things that you can't really tell by looking at a book, is what the color of the skin of the person was before it became leather. When you take off the top of epidermal layer, everyone's skin looks the same, and you can dye leather any color under the sun.

**Aside:** Now of course because there isn't any confirmation of this practice does not mean it didn't exist, and there's a very high likelihood that it did. In fact, during a boom in anatomy and medical advancements in the late 1800s, human cadavers were sold and stolen at alarming rates, and those who were victims of social oppression or had fewer economic resources were the most vulnerable to those practices.

In terms of finding out who are these people who are bound for centuries around poetry and prose, DNA testing has its limits from a chemical perspective. It's not as robust as collagen proteins. And even if it were sequenced, Megan says:

**Megan:** Testing DNA is not a really good way of judging what race a person would have been perceived as, because race is a social construct. I would never say, you know, "No, this never had any racial elements to it," because we know that marginalized communities were abused by the medical profession throughout the history of clinical medicine and continue to have those effects to this day.

**Aside:** One enduring example of this are the cells of Henrietta Lacks, who was a 31-year-old woman who died in 1951 and whose cells divided rapidly and were dubbed immortal. They were obtained without consent from a doctor as she was undergoing cancer treatment.

Since that discovery, HeLa – for Henrietta Lacks – cells have been used in thousands and thousands of experiments for biomedical research including cancer therapy, virology, and product testing. Millions of metric tons of her cells have been cultured and used for therapies that have made billions of dollars.

Her family only found out about HeLa cells 25 years after her death, and they never gave consent nor received compensation. Oprah Winfrey was a producer on the 2017 film *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, which I would now like to see.

As long as we're sad and angry, let's stay in that zone for a sec...

**Alie:** What is the most annoying thing, or the worst thing, or the thing you hate the most about this work? And I will ask your favorite after.

**Megan:** Do you want to go first, Daniel?

**Daniel:** I can't think of anything that annoys me about it. I enjoy the analysis. The reason I do what I do is because I like to solve little mysteries, and these are always little mysteries that come along. I've read every one of Agatha Christie's books and probably re-read several of them.

The thing that motivates me is, as Megan said very early on, we're finding knowledge or we're uncovering knowledge, that's there to be uncovered, but it hasn't been yet. That's kind of the exciting part. I really can't think of any downsides, sorry.

**Aside:** Scraping books, doing some peptide mass fingerprinting, maybe listening to jams as he does. I like to picture Dr. Kirby just waiting for the drop on some EDM as the centrifuge reaches full speed.

**Alie:** What about you, Megan?

**Megan:** I would say the downside is that sometimes, because people rightly have big reactions to hearing about books bound in human skin, they're like, "Eww no" and then they project onto me as if I'm trying to go into the human skin book binding business or something. Like, "Eww, how dare you? That's disgusting." I'm like, "You know I didn't *make* these, right??" And I'm not saying that we should. But I studied them and it's okay to study things that are disgusting without then becoming yourself disgusting.

Sometimes people have such huge reactions that they end up being kind of mean – that would be the bad part. Or they're like [*annoying dude-bro voice*] "Oh, so is your book also bound in human skin?" My go-to is, "Are you volunteering?" [*Alie and Daniel laugh*] Of course that's a joke that people would make. I get it, and I am the only one who hears it all the time. So it's not a problem.

The best part, I would say is more aligned with Daniel's. It's just the thrill of tracking down a book, and learning all the things about it, and then actually being able to answer a question about it. Anyone could have researched the provenance and learned a lot about a book before, but this is the first time we can learn this part of its story.

**Alie:** I know that you get asked if it's bound in human skin, but I have to ask, given the topic, [*asks almost sheepishly*] would you ever want it bound in your own skin after you depart?

**Megan:** Uh, no. I wouldn't want that. However, one of our other team members is the wonderful Anna Dhody, who's the director at the Mütter Museum. As my book-finishing present to myself, I got a tattoo on my arm that is basically a collaboration of a couple things that were on book plates of some of the books that I was researching at the Mütter. It's also the logo for the library at the College of Physicians. It's got a book with a skull on top, and a moth, and then it's got a banner that says: "*Que sais-je?*" like, "What do I know?" which is Montaigne. I showed it to Anna and she's like, "That's jar worthy." She's like, "If you want to donate it to the museum, I'd be happy to take it." I'm like, "Hmm. Maybe!"

That's weird in a way that I get and understand. Also, because there are all these fascinating people that are in the Mütter museum, and it's one of my favorite places because it's so fascinating, this idea of being there forever because you decided to be there is kind of interesting to me. But I don't know. I am not signing over any tattoo preservation paperwork just yet.

**Alie:** You got some time. This has been an absolute joy despite the topic. I mean, what a way to treat a topic that is otherwise a little spooky and grim, but absolutely fascinating. You guys are doing awesome work. And congratulations on the book! Thank you for all the science that you're doing.

**Megan:** Alie, thank you so much.

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You know what I always say y'all: cut your bangs, text your crush, have some pie, ask smart experts about human leather stupid questions, because we're all just alive purses, crammed with organs and thoughts.

Megan Rosenbloom is on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) – she's @LibraryAtNight. Her book [Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin](#) is released October 20. That's right – tomorrow. I have gotten to see an advanced copy, and it is charming, and respectful, and informative. If you like Mary Roach, you're gonna love this book. Mary Roach even blurb'd it. And there is a mention of your own Dad Ward, and the Ologies podcast in it! So keep your eyes peeeeeeled for that. There are links to Megan's stuff in the show notes as well as to [BlackMamasMatter.org](#).

I am @AlieWard on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), and *Ologies* is @Ologies on [both](#). Merch is available at [OlogiesMerch.com](#), that's managed by the lovely Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch, who also host the comedy podcast *You Are That*. Erin Talbert admin's the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](#). Thank you to Emily White and all the transcribers who make transcripts available for free at [AlieWard.com](#), there's a link in the show notes. Caleb Patton bleeps the episodes so they're kid-friendly. Thank you to Noel Dilworth, who keeps tabs on schedules, and to assistant editor Jarrett Sleeper, who also is around for so much moral support day to day. And of course, thanks to lead editor and top 'stache, Steven Ray Morris of the *Purrrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*, who pieces together all my slices and dices each week. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music.

This week I blissfully have no foot skin secrets for you, but I do want to say, if I ever write a book of my swashbuckling adventures, or a pocket guide to insect friends, I would not be mad if y'all bound it in my back skin. I mean, I'm done with it anyway at that point. Have at it. It's like leftover lunch fries – get it!

Okay be safe and get ready for next week's final 2020 [*spooky voice*] Spooktoooooober episode. Also, please vote. Okay, berbye.

*Transcribed by Anna Murray*

*Wendy Fick*

*That one paperback you've read so many times the back cover is torn off, Elena Horne*

*Madison Campbell*

*Transcribed by Hana Snook, Wellington, New Zealand* 😊

**Some additional links you may enjoy:**

Buy [Dark Archives: A Librarian's Investigation Into the Science and History of Books Bound in Human Skin](#) anywhere books are sold!

Megan Rosenbloom's website: <https://meganrosenbloom.com/>

A donation went to: [BlackMamasMatter.org](https://blackmamasmatter.org)

Megan's Death Salon: <https://deathsalon.org/>

More on [Dr. Daniel Kirby](#)

Headline: [Harvard confirms antique book is bound in human skin](#)

["The Law of Human Remains"](#) by Tayna Marsh

[The Mütter Museum](#)

[AnthropodermicBooks.org](https://anthropodermicbooks.org)

[How the science of Anthropodermic Biocodicology works](#)

["Des destinees de l'ame:"](#) the first confirmed human skin book \_

[Pergamena](#) leather tannery & store

[Henrietta Lacks & HeLa cells](#)

["The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks"](#) trailer

["A Student's Dream"](#) photos: a Twitter thread

Let's all follow Bruce Campbell at [twitter.com/GroovyBruce](https://twitter.com/GroovyBruce)

[Human wallets, belts, anyone?](#)

[How mass spec works!](#)

[George Walton's swashbuckling deathbed confessional autobiography bound in his own suede](#) aka  
["Narrative of the life of James Allen : alias George Walton, alias Jonas Pierce, alias James H. York, alias Burley Grove, the highwayman : being his death-bed confession, to the warden of the Massachusetts State Prison."](#)

[Racism and anatomy cadavers:](#) one Detroit artist's exploration

["The poor, the Black, and the marginalized as the source of cadavers in United States anatomical education"](#)

[Fashion that Gets Under the Skin: Alexander McQueen leather](#)

*For comments and inquiries on this or other transcripts, please contact [OlogiteEmily@gmail.com](mailto:OlogiteEmily@gmail.com)*