

The Lady Anatomist: Interview with Sue Black

by Victor Tsilonis

In Galway, a small town of exquisite beauty on the edge of Ireland, with a tiny airport compared to which the 'Macedonia' airport in Thessaloniki looks like the Heathrow Airport in London, I met for the first time the acclaimed professor in forensic anthropology Sue Black. As I soon discovered Professor Black had a vast experience in mass graves' exhumations in states where hideous war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed.

In the conference on "Human Rights and Forensic Anthropology", which was jointly organized by the Irish Center for Human Rights of the National University of Ireland and the University of Dundee, Professor Black presented an extremely interesting paper under the title "The International Forensic Spectrum of Anthropology". Moreover, she vividly participated during the discussions following the end of each session, by asking questions to the speakers and expressing her views based on her multifarious experience in mass graves excavations worldwide.

It was only then I spontaneously came up with the idea to request her to give us an interview for the forthcoming issue. Despite the fact that I did not meet her before, was unaware of her CV and activities in detail thus far and was seriously afraid I might seem as an odd character, I reached her at the end of the conference's first day and asked her to give us an interview for *Intellectum*, a journal she acknowledged she had not heard of before.

Fortunately my fears and doubts were swiftly refuted, since Professor Sue Black gave with an unexpected friendly face a positive answer to my request. Hence, we started the interview the following afternoon, but, for reasons regardless of our own will, it was abruptly interrupted in the middle. Consequently, having started at Galway, the interview was adventurously continued via telephone after the return of each one of us to our homelands, Scotland and Greece.

Victor Tsilonis: First of all, I would to ask you a little bit about your childhood.

Sue Black: I will tell you no secrets! What would you like to know?

V.T: How did you grow up? How did all this start?

S.B: Everything about me is Scottish. I was born in Inverness which is the capital of the Highlands in Scotland so it doesn't get much more Scottish than that. Both my parents were born and brought up in Inverness so I really do belong to that area but then when I was about five my parents managed a hotel on the west coast of Scotland and we lived there for six years. But there was an event there that became really pivotal, although I never knew at the time that it would be so important for what I would choose to do with the rest of my life. One overly hot summer the refuse men went on strike. And so we had a build up of rubbish at the back of the hotel and while I was walking there with my father he asked me to hand him a brush. He had a rat cornered in the middle of the wall and I watched him beat it to death. And to my mind, although it was only a tiny rat, I can just close my eyes and see its teeth, its eyes, hear it growling and watch my father beat it to death; he argues this never happened, he doesn't remember it but he definitely did. And from that time onwards I became terrified of rodents. I don't like rats, mice or hamsters. And when I went to University I was quite good at biology so I thought "I'll do a biology degree". But you had to dissect rats. And I couldn't do it. In our practical zoology I used to have to get a friend to lift the dead rat out of the bin, pin it out for me, and as long as I covered its head and its tail, I could dissect it but I couldn't touch any of it. And so there is the ridiculous irony of me, somebody who spends her entire life working on decomposing human remains, but who just goes to pieces around a dead rat or mouse. And it was absolutely pivotal to what I went on to do because in my honours year you had to do a research project and all the research projects involved things like lead levels in rat brain or carcinomas in hamster pituitaries, but I could not do anything that involved either killing or handling a rodent. Hence, the only other project opened to me was human bone. So I would do anything rather than rats and mice and completed my research project on human bone. It literally snowballed from there.

V.T.: And you studied at Inverness Royal Academy.

S.B.: Yes I did attend the 'Academy' as it was known in Inverness. Being the Inverness Royal Academy it would get abbreviated to the IRA. And the IRA in the 70's meant something very different from Inverness Royal Academy. So it was quite a joke when you were asked "Where do you come from?" and your answer was "The IRA".

V.T.: So how did the years in the IRA affect your life?

Black: It was wonderful, it was a time when the British government still believed in streaming schools. So you sat some exams at the end of your second year and if you got above a certain mark you went to the academy, if you didn't you went to another school. And I hated the other schools so much that I was absolutely determined come hell or high water that I would get into the academy. It was a small school, maybe only four or five hundred people and you got the feeling that you were in a real academic establishment. And something like 80 % of the pupils from there were expected to go on to higher education and so you were really driven as an academic from day one. Very few people can say they enjoyed their school but I loved it. It was a

wonderfully privileged academic background that stood me in tremendous stead for the route that I would choose to take.

V.T.: And then you became a forensic anthropologist?

S.B.: Not really. I became an anatomist first of all. I went to Aberdeen University mainly because it was the closest university, only two hours away from home, and I wasn't terribly brave since I have never been away from home before. I did lots of things like zoology and botany and genetics in my first year and then in the second year I again did botany and some human anatomy. At the end of the second year I was either going to become a botanist or an anatomist because those were the two things I really liked. So I went to speak to the botanist who happened to be mind numbingly dull and I didn't want to become like him. And so I did anatomy. So my third year anatomy was dissection and you had to dissect a cadaver from the top of the head to the bottom of the toes and I absolutely loved it! And so I became an anatomist and my head of department said "We have some money. Do you want to continue your research and do a PhD?" So I did my PhD in the anatomy department working on human bone.

And then I was offered a lectureship in anatomy in London at St. Thomas' Hospital Medical School. One day I was called down to the pathology department because several pieces of bone had been found on a rubbish tip. And they found not surprisingly lots of bones on the rubbish tip because it is exactly what you would expect. So they brought them in and somebody asked "Who knows anything about bone?" And so I got pulled down and it was a very mean spirited police officer who sort of looked at me as if to say "Girl, you don't know what you're talking about!" And I knew I was never going to win with him so we put the bones into a plastic bag and then left them on the radiator and when it warmed up a bit I put them under his nose and asked "What can you smell?" "That smells like roast lamb" he answered. "Exactly" I said. He was so impressed because he had solved it that the next time some bone came in he would ask for 'the girl from anatomy'.

V.T.: So you did it on purpose?

S.B.: Absolutely, and I just literally then fell into what I do. But I am an anatomist first of all and only applied the sciences I've learned.

V.T.: But you are now considered a forensic anthropologist and not a pathologist, right?

S.B.: Not a pathologist indeed. It's not my job to tell you how somebody died or the manner of that death. My job is to tell you what is it you are looking at so to be able to identify it. If it is human or not, and if it is which part of the human is it? Is there anything interesting about that part? And eventually it comes down to who is the person. So it is not about how did they die or what was the nature of the death, it's about what can we tell about the person. Anatomy is a really people based science.

V.T: Would you ever like to be a forensic pathologist, to find for example why Milosevic died?

S.B. : No, I am not interested. I like people and to find out a story about the person, not a story about what happened to that person that led to that final stage. I want to know what kind of life you have led, why you have the features that you have, the story behind the person. Anatomy is much more interesting to me than the more clinical science which examines how did they die.

V.T.: But you are still worried about your profession because you have recently stated that few disciplines have suffered as much from the intrusion of popular science as forensic anthropology. I quote: "The cameras have been admitted into our isolated academic world and sometimes it is difficult to live up to the public's expectations".

S.B.: I am worried about my profession because there is no current means of accreditation. Anything forensic is sexy. Everybody thinks it's a murder, it's a mystery and there is a little bit of a detective in all of us. And it's difficult to make subjects like membrane transfer or protein phosphorylation sexy, because it's really difficult to get that across to the public. But when it involves people and events the public understand then they want to be a part of your world. So forensic anthropology was viewed as being in many ways a back door into the forensic world. You didn't have to do medicine or dentistry or be a policeman. You could be a little bit of a scientist and that way you might find a way in. And because it is the understandable bit of science, the public understands it. The public has a good idea of what DNA is and roughly what you can do with it. But the minute you start talking about Y-STR or going into the real depth of the issue the public switches off. That is the boring part of core science we don't want to know but the anthropology sparks the imagination. It doesn't help us that people want to write novels and show television programmes about it because that is what the public finds compelling to watch!

V.T.: So you would never write a novel or a scenario like Kathy Reichs?

S.B.: Never, because the most important person in my childhood was my grandmother. Although she never left her tiny little village on the west coast of Scotland she seemed to know more about life than many others; she even knew she was dying of lung cancer. So when I was fourteen, knowing that I was going to be horrendously upset, she said: "I'll never leave you. For the rest of your life I am going to sit on your left shoulder and if at any point throughout your life you wonder if you're doing the right thing just ask me and you'll know". And it was the biggest 'curse' she could ever have given me because I often find myself doing that and feel her saying "No way!", especially about a casebook. It is not right because you are making money out of other people's misery. And she wouldn't allow me to do that.

V.T.: But what if it was fiction?

S.B.: If you write fiction in my discipline it will still have a basis of fact and if I had worked on a case that, God forbid, involved the murder of your mother

and then wrote a novel based around this tragic event and you could still recognise it I could never look you in the eye again.

V.T.: So what do you think of Kathy Reichs and CSI effect?

S.B.: They are awful. Kathy is a lovely lady and a very good forensic anthropologist. She has found a market God bless her she can exploit and people want to read it. Power to the elbow of those who do, but I don't. I don't think it has helped our discipline because there are a lot of impressionable young people who read these kind of books and then say "That's what I want to do" and then a great number of students I get are surprised when they realize that in order to do forensic anthropology you need some science. "No, I don't want to do science, I want to have a gun strapped to my leg, I want to be able to go out to dinner with the perpetrator and trap him". It doesn't work that way. And they are suddenly so surprised we actually want them to understand biochemistry, physics, mathematics and some statistics that I feel sorry for them because they get misled about our discipline.

V.T.: Now, let me go back a little bit to your professional career. Did you start lecturing in London?

S.B.: Exactly. I did start lecturing at St. Thomas Hospital Medical School in London.

V.T.: But how did you then leave academia for some time?

Black: What happened was that St. Thomas and Guy's Hospital merged and we then became a part of something that was called UMDS, United Medical and Dental Schools. I was small town girl and very much liked being in a small department, but now we were in a big department and I was less happy. Having been there for six years my husband one day said to me: "Come on, I've got an opportunity of a job back in Scotland. Let's go!" So I gave up academia in 1992 and went to Aberdeen which is not quite as far North in Scotland as you can go before falling off but close. I didn't know what I was going to do at fist but then decided to have two babies. But that was not enough, so I also wrote a textbook which took us nine years to write simply because it had not been done before; it is a reference text called Developmental Osteology. This kept me busy. And then Peter Vanezis, who was the pathologist in Glasgow, would call me every now and again when he had something and ask me to come over. So Peter helped me just to keep my hand in the forensic world. Moreover, the government sometimes would ask for an anthropologist going to Grenada and I did little treats. And then Peter did the drastic thing of being the first pathologist to commence work in Kosovo and he looked at a crime scene of 42 deceased remains in a very badly decomposed state, all commingled, partly burned, partly buried, partly disturbed and said "I cannot do this, but I know who can". And so he phoned me on Thursday to go to Kosovo on Saturday! I didn't know how long I was going for, I've never done anything like this before in my life, I had no idea. But my husband said "You've been training for this for the entirety of your life, go!"

V.T.: When did this happen?

S.B.: It was in May of 1999 I think. We were the first because at that point the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had requested gratis teams to go into Kosovo and the UK was one of the first gratis forensic team to say "Yes, we can go in". So we were one of the first teams to enter Kosovo. And it was a huge experience and I've never looked back since then so this forensic aspect of my career is purely due to Peter Vanezis for giving me this opportunity.

V.T.: So your first mission was in Kosovo in 1999?

S.B.: The first big mission.

V.T.: How long did you stay there?

S.B.: It was about 5 -6 weeks at first. And I am a red head with very white skin so 38 degrees every single day made me absolutely miserable. But I had never done anything like this before and so for me it was a huge learning curve. At the end John Bunn, the man who was in charge of the British team, acknowledged the importance an anthropologist could bring to the team and told me that he needed me to organize an anthropologist on every rotation of this team that we would have. Nevertheless, because we didn't have that many anthropologists in the UK, I ended it up coercing colleagues from around the world to become temporarily British. The first one was George Maat from The Netherlands and so he was the second anthropologist who came in, i.e., a Dutch anthropologist pretending to be British. That's great.

V.T.: Did you feel any danger during the first six weeks in Kosovo?

S.B.: I would be lying if I said "No" but I felt it was at a level I was comfortable with. I was aware we were entering a war zone, that there existed snipers in the hillside, explosive devices and clothing with hypodermic syringes and razors in the pockets. I knew that we were into areas where land mines had been placed but the antiterrorist police would inform us of the potential dangers and being aware of it was what was important. I still remember a story from that very first scene we had at the antiterrorist center with a bomb disposal expert. "I don't know what I should be looking for" I exclaimed and he said "Don't worry, if you come across anything you feel you don't know what it is just stop. We'll go down and look at it." So, while I was working through that floor of the house shifting through the rubble and the bodies I came across a piece of shining metal. I don't know what it is, I don't want to move it because it is embedded and I feel uncomfortable. I pull everybody out and inform the antiterrorist officer that he should examine it. He comes back, his face is absolutely grave and says "you have no idea how lucky you are you brought me down to have a look at that". From behind its back he produces it telling me it's a desert spoon. That was all! I felt such a fool but he reassured me that I should not because the most dangerous thing is somebody who isn't aware of what the potential dangers may be. So for the rest of the time I heard every joke you could imagine about exploding spoons. But it was a huge lesson

that if I didn't know I had to be prepared to look like an idiot rather than have my hands blown off.

V.T.: What was the first time that you really felt the danger in your mission?

S.B.: I don't think I really felt a danger in Kosovo, because we were very well guarded and as time went on there were fewer and fewer episodes causing us concern. So it was probably in Sierra Leone in 1999 I felt really being in danger during a UN mission regarding four soldiers who had been killed at Rogberi Junction by the RUF. Our mission was to go in, recover the remains and identify the deceased. We had been given plenty of security briefings and knew it was very dangerous, that the RUF would like to take British hostages because the British troops have been preventing them getting into Freetown. We knew also that they liked taking female hostages because the abuse of female rather than male hostages is so much more psychologically harmful to a community. So being British, female and members of the forensic team, we were very wary and conscious of the fact that we had to be helicoptered everywhere. It's just brought you to a different level of awareness. There wasn't any major event there, but I have to say we were very conscious of the security issues.

V.T.: But didn't you get bitten by a snake a Kosovo? Wasn't your Land Rover booby trapped there too?

S.B.: There was no booby trapping in my Land Rover and I am not quite sure where that story has ever come from. However, the bite of the snake is true. I was very stupid wearing shoes that had very little covering. Suddenly, I felt something really sore in my foot and soon realized I had been bitten, when the venom started tracking up my leg and the vessels got inflamed and red. I was immediately taken to a German military hospital and it was the most surreal experience to find yourself in a hospital with nurses who are armed at all times. I was left in hospital for a couple of weeks just to make sure that actually I was going to survive from this. But that was my own stupidity.

V.T.: Did you come near to death?

S.B.: I don't think so. But they had to make sure. They were worried. Nonetheless, I think I came near to death in Iraq. We left from Shaib airbase on a Chinook helicopter in order to go into El-Najaf and exhume some bodies from the cemetery. There was the forensic team along one side of the Chinook and the military personnel along the other side and in between us there was a row of coffins. Then one military officer said that if the helicopter was shot down we would all roll into the middle and all be ready packed into the coffins. In the helicopter everybody thought this was very funny, until the Chinook literally fell out of the air and everyone thought we had been taken out by an RPG; luckily, it was a flock of birds that came out of nowhere and gone through the rotor blades that just brought us down. It was terrifying.

V.T.: We discussed yesterday about the fact that although you were in Sierra Leone for the UN, you had also open channels of communication with the British government.

S.B.: The UN operation's aim in Sierra Leone was to recover these four deceased soldiers. Because I had undertaken some work for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office before and because they wanted police officers from the United Kingdom to be the ones who would exhibit the productions from the crime scene, we had to get clearance from the British government in order to join this mission. However, the advice from the British government was that we should not do it. And that was largely based on the security issue. But we answered that we evaluated the risk and believed as long as we were sensible about it we would be OK.

But then I was told by the British government that this wasn't just a simple repatriation of the soldiers' bodies. There was some witness testimony suggesting one of the soldiers had had his hands tied up. And if his hands had been tied up then we weren't looking at a normal combatant situation but a possible war crime scenario. Moreover, I had been informed by the Foreign Office that they had the rebel leader in custody. It would have been a 'simple' process but although I am not a lawyer, I am sure it's not that simple to extend the international criminal tribunal's jurisdiction to take in Sierra Leone at that time if there had been any evidence.

The UN never at any point told us that this was the reason we were going but instead completely coached it as a humanitarian mission. So knowing there were two slightly different versions of events I would have felt more comfortable going into a situation where my life is on the line if I had been told the truth. But when we had our initial briefing with the UN security officer I asked him: "Why is this so much of a hurry on this?" As Bill Haglund says "the dead are patient and will wait for you, they won't get any more dead if they have to wait a little while". The UN officer looked me in the eye and answered that they needed to get the boys home. And then I thought that the man in charge of my security had just looked me in the eye and lied, because I knew that the urgency was linked with the war crimes possibility. And so at that point we ended up almost with a team which was split. There was the team who knew what the foreign office told us and the team who were largely been directed by the UN. So I think myself and the other two police officers were prepared to do only certain things. We were not prepared, for example, to get on to these helicopters and go out to the site until there was an absolute confirmation from our own security forces that we were going to be safe.

V.T.: So it was difficult to do your job while knowing that the presented information by the UN were false?

S.B.: Yes, it was difficult and disrespectful too. If an organization is prepared to ask me to go into a dangerous situation, the least I expect them to do for me is to tell me the truth.

V.T.: However, how can forensic science and human rights can come closer if the forensic scientist, the forensic anthropologist or pathologist is forced to do what an organization or what a nation orders them to do?

S.B.: The truth is nobody ever really forces us to do anything. It does come down to a choice. Do we want to do it or not and is there a responsibility on us to find it and sometimes we forget that maybe we need to ask more questions

and learn the truth about a situation we are getting into? And then we have the right to say “No”. In Sierra Leone, although the UN were telling us that this was supposed to be a repatriation of the deceased, my own government informed me that there was another element to it. I suppose the real problem was that the UN did not specifically tell us that that this was one of the important aspects, so that we might have overlooked important evidence. So I think in many ways the UN played a very foolish game in some ways because the more information we had then the more likely it was that we would do our job properly. And it was the first time really I have ever come across the situation of where you had two different parties both saying the same thing in some way but seeing it in a different manner and giving different bits of information. The responsibility came down to us to scientists to be able to piece them together. And I do not think this is a very satisfactory outcome.

V.T.: And what about the rumours that somebody might have been handcuffed?

S.B.: We found no evidence. When we managed to get the bodies back to the mortuary and look at them -it doesn't mean that they weren't- but we couldn't find any evidence that this had occurred at that stage. The bodies were identified and they were repatriated and we unquestionably fulfilled the UN requirement of that mission. But if we had known from the outset that we were actually looking perhaps for evidence of a war crime then we might have approached this slightly differently. That's the way.

V.T.: From your experience could it be that somebody had his hands tied up and killed but then the ropes were removed?

Black: That could be so. But there was no evidence for us to say that those restraints have been there. Because of the fact that the bodies were left very close to the surface, they decomposed extremely rapidly. And with the speedy excavation that went on because of the security issue, we did not find anything.

V.T.: You've talked a little bit earlier about Iraq. Iraq was your 3rd or 4th major mission?

S.B.: I was in Iraq on two separate occasions. The first one was in relation to the attempt of identifying the location of Fred Nerac and Osman Hussein's remains who were the cameraman and interpreter traveling with Terry Lloyd, an ITN reporter. They were not embedded with the troops and were effectively a rogue reporting team, but their two vehicles had been caught in the crossfire between the Iraqi and American forces. Terry Lloyd's body was released and there was a survivor from his car but the other car was taken away and nobody knew what did happen to those remains.

V.T.: Did you identify the location? Did you find their bodies?

S.B.: Yes we identified them but did not find the bodies. What did happen was there was some military intelligence that the group involved in that incident

may also been involved in the murders of two British soldiers. And we knew where their bodies had been found. So it was very sensible to excavate in the same area to see if we could find any remains there. We did a lot of excavating there indeed but didn't find bodies and then the ITN news network, placed a reward for information on Fred Nerac and Osman Hussein. A lady came forward with a box of fragments of bones and her story was that these had been found in a burned out car. She initially assumed that there were the remains of her brother, but now she was not so sure anymore and, hence, we looked to those remains, pieced them together, stated what part of the body they came from and got some DNA. It matched that of Osman Hussein representing both of his legs below the level of the knee, but that's all. Now that we know where that car was I believe the intelligence is quite good in that they may have an idea where those bodies may be. But it's too dangerous to go there.

V.T.: I would like now to move to a quite different subject, education. I have read at your university's website that you are having a quite new undergraduate course in forensic anthropology in Dundee University, is that right?

S.B.: That's correct. We set up the first undergraduate program in forensic anthropology in the UK. I think it was about 2002 and we managed to persuade the British Government Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they should fund four students to come out and join us so that they would get some experience of what it would be like to actually work in the field, in a temporary mortuary and experience the difficulties not only of a day-to-day working environment but also the difficulties of language barriers, political actions and all sort of things. And so what we did was put an advert in the UK for any master students they wanted to come out and then we interviewed and selected a group. And when we had them in the mortuary I was so destroyingly depressed how little information they had, because they could quote me papers people had written but lacked a real understanding of the subject. And I came back to the UK and did what all women do best, i.e., complain! Eventually a senior officer told me that I had no right to complain because if I didn't offer anything as a solution to the problem then I had no right to complain. Luckily, at that point I was head hunted for the post at Dundee and they said to me I could run any courses I liked. So I decided to run this undergraduate four-year programme, which attracts students coming straight from high-school, as well as mature students who know the importance of dealing with the subjects in great detail.

V.T.: Remaining a little bit more on the education field, *lato sensu*, I was truly surprised when I read your CV and found out about all these medals and awards that you have received the last few years.

S.B.: You get those when you get old. The older you get, the more you receive!

V.T.: Moreover, I noticed that you are a notable alumni of Inverness Royal Academy and thus would like to ask you what difference have all these made in the way you perform your professional or academic duties or your life in general.

S.B.: Absolutely none. Because at the end of the day the thing that drives me is the subject I do. It's not about the personal reward that comes with it, it has never been. But if at the end of the day getting these awards helps to raise your profile, then what it essentially does is make your subject more accessible to a wider group. And I was very lucky because we have an organization in Scotland called the Royal Society of Edinburgh which is our National Academy and they run an outreach programme through which professionals go back and speak to schools. So I was asked if I could go back and give a lecture to the Inverness Royal Academy which was a tremendous honour to me. And my most important teacher, my biology teacher, who convinced me I should be the first from my family going to University, came along the lecture. When at the end one of pupils in the room asked "How did you achieve all these?", I answered quite simply that it was due to this particular teacher who believed in me and was committed to his work. It is really important for the pupils to know that their teachers can be the ones that will really shape their future, the way they can take their life forward. Teachers are hugely important.

V.T.: How did this teacher crucially encourage you?

S.B.: He was the one who stood by me. I did two days in a medical laboratory, a sort of work experience. When I came back to him in the class and said I was going to be a medical laboratory technician, he looked at me laughing and said "Don't be silly, you are going to University!", at a time when nobody had ever told me I could go and thus never imagined that this was an open option to me. However, he had noticed I had that capability and it's just opened up an entire new world to me.

V.T.: Would you like to give an advice to the ambitious new scientists who wish they could become quite successful as you are. I have read you saying that you are a workaholic, you have never watched TV and never planned anything. Is that all?

S.B.: I just love what I do and there is a very dear friend of mine who said "If you can find something that is your passion, that you really love doing, and if you can actually make that your job, then in reality you never work for a single day in your life because you would feel like being involved in your hobby. And I love anatomy and forensic anthropology. This does not feel like a job and I think what makes the difference is the fact that we cannot define enthusiasm. If you had a teacher in school who was enthusiastic but taught a subject that you maybe did not find interesting, his enthusiasm would help you through. I think that a lot of teachers really fail students either because they no longer have enthusiasm or simply never had it in the first place. And I believe that the teacher's responsibility is to pass on enthusiasm.

V.T.: I know you have given quite a few interviews. Is there something that you would like or expect to have been asked but for some strange reason nobody has ever asked you, but you still would like to say something about it?

S.B.: I suppose the thing is that everybody assumes you've planned and chosen where you want to go. Hence, nobody has ever asked me what I would

do if I didn't do this because at the end of the day I have never chosen to be here and when you don't choose something it is perhaps easier to give it up. My father, God Bless him, is in his 80s, and always asks me "What are you going to do when you leave school?" because as far as he is concerned I still haven't left school. So what would I do if didn't do this is the obvious question.

V.T.: So what would you do if you did not become an anatomist?

S.B.: Very good question! If I had no commitment and did not have to work, pay mortgage and raise children, I would write. But I would not write forensic material or crime novel. I would investigate into the life of people who had a much more interesting life than mine. So for example, one of the situations I found myself in 1991 was exhuming some lead coffins from the crypt of the church in London and there was one character in particular when I started to research that I would like to write his life story. So to be able to be locked in my ivory tower writing about somebody else's life whose much more interesting than mine, that's what I 'll do.

V.T.: I believe you have a very interesting life as well but, again, everybody tends to regard other people's life as being more interesting than his! But let's go down now to my last question. How optimistic one can be for humanity, when one has to conduct investigations and exhume mass graves like you do?

S.B.: I think you have to be very pragmatic about it. There are always going to be bad things happening in the world, but which are generally done by a very small minority of people. And I think you have to always keep in focus that there is a much greater proportion of people who are good than bad. For example, when we were standing at a grave site in Kosovo, we met a young woman who had lost everything. She had lost her mother, her father, her husband and her children. She stood at the grave site and thanked us for what we were doing and apologized for having nothing that she could give us in return. So, she brought us coffee. And to me that was the absolute shining light of humanity that even when you are in the worst possible place in the world not just physically but psychologically, you can still think about bringing a gift to somebody else. Nobody can make that light vanish from humanity, it will always shine through and you have to believe that ultimately that side of human nature will win.