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SKELETON KEYS  
The Secret Life of Bone  
By Brian Switek  
288 pp. Riverhead Books. 2019.

Riley Black is a self-described [fossil fanatic](#) writing under the nom de plume Brian Switek. In *Skeleton Keys*, Switek takes readers on an armchair hunt for human bones across millennia and from multiple perspectives—evolutionary, biological, and cultural. The first stop is Burgess Shale, British Columbia, where, in 1911, evidence is found of our earliest known progenitor: the [Pikaia gracilens](#), an eel-like chordate dating back over 500 million years. Bony armor becomes internal scaffolding, becomes a fish out of water onto land and upright. At La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, Switek gives an anatomy lesson. Either compact (for strength, as in our legs) or spongy (to absorb shock, as in our skulls). Comprised of collagen and minerals (hydroxyapatite). In a constant state of renewal and resorption, thanks to osteoblast and osteoclast cells. The author detours to a parking lot in Leicester, England, for the 2015 exhumation of Richard III (1452–85) (his battlefield wounds were fatal, unlike the scoliosis); a Native American land in the Midwest as archeologists raid a burial mound; and even an [online marketplace for human bones](#) (yes, it's legal). Switek explores individual exceptions due to malnutrition, stress, and osteopathology, from syphilis to cavities. Culturally influenced alterations are both fetishized (corsetry) and macabre (trepanation, drilling a hole in the head to release a spirit). Finally, through bones' normal fusion, we die with fewer bones than we are born with, about 206 vs. 270. Twenty-four are ribs—for Adams, for Eves, for all. —Lisa Thaler (author, *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*), 17 September 2021