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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harriet Griffey. *Secrets of the Mummies.* New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing Inc, 1998. 48 pp. $12.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7894-3764-8.

Reviewed by Alexandra O'Brien (University of Chicago)
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We all have a fascination with ancient Egyptian mummies and other mummies as well as with other preserved bodies from the past. Actually seeing people who lived in ancient times, who believed in the ancient religion which, for the Egyptians, required such elaborate preparations for life in the beyond, humanizes otherwise often dry and dusty ruins of former towns and temples and reminds us that people like us did live and use them. This book aims to give young readers between eight and ten years old an overview of not only Egyptian mummies but other preserved bodies from regions throughout the world, ancient and modern.

The book is divided into several chapters: People from the past, Making a mummy, The mummy's curse, Inca emperor mummies, Inca ice maiden, Sicilian mummies, The mummy mystery, Mummies today and a one page glossary.

The first chapter, "People from the past," is a double-page spread, serving as an introduction to the history and types of mummies as well as explaining the aim and content of the book. "Making a mummy" is an eight page overview of how the ancient Egyptians went about mummifying people (and producing the best known of mummies!), as well as introducing their funerary and religious beliefs. "The mummy's curse" presents eight pages on the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, its significance and some discussion of the contents. However there is an over-emphasis on the "Curse" of Tutankhamun's tomb which was a concoction of newspapers of the time, eager for any way to grab the attention of the public. The ending of this section with "were these deaths all coincidences, or was the curse of the mummy to blame? No one knows for sure" is most unfortunate. Few people connected with the discovery died within a few years of the tomb's opening. To quote Bob Brier "Of the 26 people present at the opening of the tomb, only six died within ten years, of the twenty-two people present at the opening of the sarcophagus, only two died in the next ten years." Finally, of the ten who were present at the actual unwrapping of the mummy, none died within ten years. Indeed Dr. Derry, who conducted the autopsy on Tutankhamen's mummy, lived another two decades, and Howard Carter, the first to "defile" the tomb, died in 1939."[1] The curses allegedly written in tombs and on coffins are also mentioned on page 13; this is equally inappropriate and inaccurate and perpetuates an unfortunate misunderstanding of the sophisticated religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians.

The chapter "Inca emperor mummies" contains information on the religious beliefs of the Inca and the practice of preserving their leaders. The following section continues with the Inca focusing on the "Inca ice maiden," who isn't a real mummy as she was preserved by the freezing cold on the mountain top. This chapter explains why this girl and other children were sacrificed by the Inca to the mountain god.

Modern mummies are looked at in the next chapters. "Sicilian mummies" discusses the mummies in Palermo made by monks in a monastery there until the 1920s and includes a description of the mummification process. The following chapter, "The mummy mystery," focuses on the mummy of Eva Peron (Evita). A short description of her life and background, the reasons for and the process of mummifying her body are briefly described along with the political problems of Argentina at that time. The last two pages describe the disappearance and eventual rediscovery of her body after the death of her husband's opponent.

The last chapter, "Mummies today," surveys modern investigative techniques used in studying mummies, such as CAT scans and X-rays and briefly describes modern mummification methods such as cryogenics.

The one page Glossary lists terms used in the book and explains them in one or two sentences. I have quibbles with three of the definitions presented here. Firstly, the glossary defines "ancient Egyptians" as living in Egypt from "around 3000 BC to 300 BC." I think the chronological definition is unnecessary and inappro-

priate (why discount the Ptolemaic and Roman period?-). Secondly, a mummy is described as "A body that has been preserved by nature or by people." Though today we lump all such preserved bodies under the convenient heading "mummy," (which is tolerable as it provides a reasonably acceptable rubric under which to place such material especially for the purposes of writing such a book as this one currently under review), the term mummy quite specifically refers to artificially preserved bodies which were/are intended to survive the natural decay process. This is not the case with bodies preserved by nature (by cold or peat bogs), and the term mummy here is a misnomer. I will mention though that the author does explain the difference between natural and artificial mummies in the introductory text (pp. 4-5) but I feel it should be have been made clearer in the glossary entry. Finally, the title pharaoh, according to the glossary, ceased to be used in 300 BC; this is incorrect, rulers of Egypt continued to use the title after this date (again the inappropriateness of the chronological definition is a problem).

As this book is intended to be an introduction for eight to ten year olds (grades 2-4) it would have been a good idea to include an index as well as a list of further reading, and possibly even a list of major museums where one might find mummies of all types on display.

A similar book has already been published by Dorling Kindersley in 1992 (1993 in the US) written by James Putnam.[2] Study of both books suggests that much of the first book has been "recycled" in the second book. Although the later does contain more text on each of the aspects chosen as the focus in the newer book, Putnam's book has more text and pictures in general (as well as a more balanced presentation of the "mummy's curse"). Putnam's book includes an index, but not a glossary.

Overall, *Secrets of the Mummies* is a good introduction to mummies and mummification for younger readers and at $12.95 is reasonably good value for the softback, though given the choice between this book and James Putnam's I'd go for the latter (at $20.99 for the hardback, it is a much better value for a school library). Slightly older readers will get a lot out of Bob Brier's book too, which contains a wealth of fascinating facts about just about any kind of mummy one could think of (and at $17.95 for the softback is great value).

Notes

[1]. Bob Brier. *The Encyclopedia of Mummies*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997. p. 37.

[2]. James Putnam. *Mummy*. [Eyewitness Books]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 1992 (still in print), list price $19.00. (Prices are quoted from Bowker's "Books in Print.")

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