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Book Review

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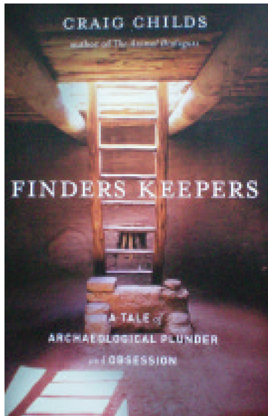

Finders Keepers: A Tale of Archaeological Plunder and Obsession by Craig Childs. Hardback 288 pages 6.2 × 1 × 9.5 inches. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2010.

In the Introduction to his book *Finders Keepers*, author Craig Childs says that it is "…about the underbelly of archaeology, from both a personal and global perspective." That statement, and the book's subtitle "Archaeological plunder and obsession," should get the attention of any Central States' member. The book will in turn amuse, intrigue, and appall the readers of the *Central States Archaeological Journal*. It's not a great book, but it is an interesting one which raises some important questions.

Author Childs is described by his publisher as a naturalist, adventurer, desert ecologist, and NPR radio commentator. He writes that when he was a child his father frequently took him on trips into the Arizona desert where together they examined thousands of pot sherds, and that he was later for ten years a member of a gang of desert relic collectors notable for being "smelly yahoos." For a time he served as a guide for high school students on trips to the desert country of the lower Colorado River.

The book's focus is on western archaeology and western Indian relics. However, the issues that surround these relics are not specific to any region of the country, and collectors of prehistoric Indian materials from the Southeast will find familiar the topics covered by the author.

Overall, Childs has written an uneven-quality, patched-together book that combines some serious discussion of the present state of archaeology and relic collecting, mixed with extended personal anecdotes, such as stories of wilderness backpacking excursions—including some taken with his pregnant wife.

The book's value is less for what it actually says, than for the fundamental questions that it raises: For example, what is to become of the tons and tons of American Indian cultural material that have accumulated all around the country in the repositories of Federal Government agencies, the Army Corps of Engineers, state agencies, and university and college storage facilities, as well as in private collections? The book never quite answers that question, nor its obvious sequitur: What is the purpose of this gigantic, accumulated hoard? The author labels the present situation a "curation crisis." Lots of money and massive effort will be needed to properly care for the vast quantities of field recovered materials currently held in public trust: "In a climate where space is equated with money, archaeologists must face the hard reality that we can't simply keep everything," writes Childs. Yet despite the existence of these vast collections, much of the material excavated over the past 150 years is poorly documented and irretrievably lost.

Another question that the book raises is by what right, and on what authority, do archaeologists claim the past as their exclusive own. The author quotes the old-school field archaeologist Bruce Anderson, who died in 2008, as saying he "thought archaeologists were turning overly political and embarrassingly self-righteous," and that he "found their papers increasingly arcane, nearly impossible even for him to decipher." Those are opinions that this reviewer can readily share.

Relic collector Art Cooper (a pseudonym), whose home the author describes as a half million dollar repository for pre-Columbian ceramics, is quoted as saying that "Archaeologists are but johnny-come-latelies with an attitude that only they have a right to collect and interpret the past." This reviewer is troubled by the efforts of professional archaeologists to control the nature of archaeological evidence by declaring objects held in private collections to be "looted" and unprovenienced and thereby somehow inappropriate or improper for analysis and discussion. It is obviously scientists and historians, not archaeologists, who have the long-established professional authority needed to decide what is or is not evidence. The transformation of Indiana Jones into the thought police is bizarre and absurd.

For regions of the United States where only non-professionals have been historically active, this assertion of prohibition against certain artifacts amounts to an act of cultural genocide against the makers of those artifacts, who are thereby condemned to being ignored by the dogmatically pronounced ineligibility of their cultural heritage. In southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee, the Yuchi tribe, which is currently fighting for Tennessee state recognition, exemplifies an American Indian people who are in danger of being excluded from history because their many engraved gorgets were not professionally excavated. Woktela the Yuchi historian (who is currently working with relic collectors) has written "It remains the last act of genocide to write a culture out of history."

Yet another important question that the book raises concerns the ethics of archaeology itself and specifically the complex issues raised by the ownership of cultural material—by anyone except members of the cultures who produced such material. Citing the work of archaeologist Julie Hollowell, who writes about archaeological ethics, author Childs tells the story of the Yupik-speaking Alaskans of St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Strait. Their ancestors made and buried many objects carved from walrus ivory and whale bone. Today's islanders are digging up and selling such objects for an annual income $1.5 million. Is this an act of economic necessity, or cultural desecration, or something else?

Childs' essay on so-called salvage archaeology is a particularly revealing account of the modern business of contracted archaeology undertaken to meet the specific legal requirement of Cultural Resource Management (CRM) laws. He writes that for the employees of such contractors "It is a job. Workers go out and dig." The long-term, and frequently unanticipated consequences of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is a theme through the book. The most striking story the author tells of CRM, for-hire archaeology is of the woman who is given the task by the digging crew chief to excavate most of the skeletons because she cries while she excavates.

Childs central conclusion is: "We have no choice but to live among contradictions. If anyone tells you there is only one right answer to the conundrum of archaeology, he is trying to sell you something." Just so.

The principal lesson that this reviewer learned from Childs' book is that archaeology is far too important to be left to the archaeologists.

Reviewed by Jim Glanville
[www.holstonia.net]

The text in red above was inadvertently omitted from the as-published article.