



## The DNA Detectives: How the Double Helix is Solving Puzzles of the Past

By Anna Meyer

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What caused the Black Death? What really happened to the Russian Royal Family? Did Anastasia survive the Russian revolution? Could the unnamed victims of the Titanic be returned to their families? In *The DNA Detectives*, Anna Meyer provides a fascinating glimpse into one of the newest and most intriguing areas of scientific research. Any DNA that still exists in the remains of living things after their death is called "ancient DNA." But the death doesn't have to be recent — the DNA could be from an organism that died a few days ago, or from an extinct species, such as the Australian thylacine or the New Zealand moa, or from one that died tens of thousands of years ago, such as a Neanderthal or a mammoth. That DNA can survive for such a long time is one thing, but there is much more to it than that. The study of ancient DNA has been the key to some amazing discoveries. There's a whole smorgasbord of stories to sample — tales of murder, deadly disease, and mysterious disappearances, and even the origins of human life. From the Cretaceous period to the mysteries of the last century, the quest for ancient DNA is revolutionizing our picture of the past.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Watson and Crick had no idea what doors they were opening when they discovered the double helix structure of DNA. Now DNA is settling debates that have raged for centuries. Meyer presents some of history's greatest unsolved mysteries, unfolding each tale like a novel and showing how, in the end, one little molecule holds the key. Did young Louis XVII, son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, die in prison? What happened to the Russian princess Anastasia? Was the Black Death the same as the bubonic plague? Why was the 1918 influenza pandemic so deadly? New research into ancient DNA—which can be found in almost any well-preserved biological specimen less than 100,000 years old—is answering all of these questions and more. With a storyteller's flair, Meyer explains in simple terms the science that can finally settle the debate over the fate of the Neanderthals and answer the question: Could we ever clone an extinct species? Meyer packs a few jaw-dropping surprises even for history buffs, and the versatility of research into ancient DNA guarantees that there will be more answers unearthed in the future. We can only hope Meyer will regale us with those tales as well. (*May*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Addressing mysteries dispelled by DNA analysis, Meyer will appeal to readers who are interested in, but have scant knowledge of, the topics she raises. That includes DNA itself. After an introductory sprint through the double helix, Meyer sets the tone for her analysis by observing her husband's heavy brow ridge. Did she marry a Neanderthal? Impossible. That's the conclusive answer derived from tests on the original Neanderthal skeleton: *H. sapiens* is not descended from *H. neandertalensis*. Meyer picks up another popular idea, informed by the movie *Jurassic Park*--can scientists clone DNA to bring an extinct species back to life? Due to the molecule's fragility, woolly mammoths are unlikely ever to roam again, Meyers disappointingly reports. Forging ahead to recorded human history, Meyers samples pandemics clarified by DNA, such as the black death, and culminates with claimants to the French and Russian thrones--both were shown to be impostors by DNA. Acquainting her readers with the basic procedures of DNA investigation, Meyer sweetens the science and the history with an amiable sense of curiosity. *Gilbert Taylor*

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About the Author

**Anna Meyer** is currently completing a PhD in Science Communication at the Australian National University's Centre for the Public Awareness of Science. She has an honors degree in Genetics.

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