

Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power

By Alexandra Robbins

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This is the only exposé of one of the world's most secretive and feared organizations: Yale University's nearly 200-year-old secret society, Skull and Bones. Through society documents and interviews with dozens of members, Robbins explains why this old-boy product of another time still thrives today.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Robbins (Quarterlife Crisis) begins by setting readers up with the ridiculous myth of Yale's Skull and Bones, an exclusive society whose powerful members including both presidents Bush are sworn to secrecy for life about the club's activities: the myth says that the society's members form a clique that rules the world. Robbins then proposes demystifying the group. On the one hand, she propagates the myth, spelling out how Bonesmen have promoted one another in enormously successful political and business careers; they presided over the creation of the atomic bomb as well as the CIA, she says. On the other hand, Robbins turns up much that is prosaic, as she traces the society's origins back to 1832, when William Russell founded it as retribution for a classmate's having been passed over by Phi Beta Kappa; she discovers that the club's cryptic iconography is derived from German university societies. She reveals the inventory of the Tomb (an evocative name for what is essentially a frat house) and details about the group's oddly juvenile fraternal ritual. The narrative never gets more dramatic than Robbins staking out the Tomb for President George W. Bush during Yale's tercentennial celebrations in 2002, and while she relies heavily on the testimony of many Bonesmen, she never names names. While the book may demystify Skull and Bones, it also imparts the sense that Robbins, herself a Yale graduate and member of a rival society, believes in Yalies' elitist entitlement to power and prestige.
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From Booklist
Robbins, herself a Yale graduate and secret society member, aims to debunk the myth of one of the oldest secret societies, Skull and Bones. She begins with a superstitious, melodramatic account that suggests the society is both immensely rich and so powerful that it influenced politics. What follows is an extremely detailed account that traces the history of Yale and that of secret societies in general and that of Bones in particular, founded in 1832. Fifteen initiates, who are often among the smartest and most talented in their class, are tapped their junior year. They are initiated in the tomb (the Bones headquarters) and taken on a retreat to Bones-owned Deer Island, off the coast of New York. Much like a fraternity, Bones has many secret rituals and traditions. Robbins reveals some of these--special "Bones" names, the Bonesmen's theft of the bones of Geronimo. She also names some of the members, including both George Bush and George W. Bush. An interesting study, though the casual reader might find it too detailed. *Kristine Huntley*
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Review
"Readers will find themselves guided by an excellent stylist and a first-rate mind."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Adam Whittington:

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Sandra Passmore:

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