

# Bones of Betrayal – interview with the authors

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 27, 2009)

As many of you know, I have been providing support to the new Body Farm novel, *Bones of Betrayal* by Jefferson Bass (the writing team of Dr. Bill Bass and Jon Jefferson), set in Oak Ridge. I have thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of our developing relationship and the process of creating the story.

What started at the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary and Altrusa International of Oak Ridge Literacy Event last spring at the New Hope Center where this project was announced, to the reviews of the manuscript for historical accuracy, to the photo shoot for the cover photo with Rebecca Leigh, to finally helping set up the book signing *Books, Bones, and The Bomb* scheduled for February 3, 2009 again at the New Hope Center – has all been an exciting adventure for me.

Now is the time to unveil yet another great Oak Ridge story. I am convinced it will be a huge hit everywhere, but here in Oak Ridge, it will be a MUST HAVE! Be sure and come to the book signing at 7:00 PM on Tuesday, 2/3/09, at the New Hope Center and see Dr. Bass, Jon Jefferson, Arpad Vass and his “sniffer” and lot's more. Tickets are available for \$25 advance by calling 865-523-8008 or e-mailing [info@knoxheritage.org](mailto:info@knoxheritage.org).

The book release and signing event is sponsored by Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association and Knox Heritage with proceeds going toward Oak Ridge preservation efforts. Come join us at 602 Scarboro Road – The Y-12 New Hope Center!

What follows is an interview with Jon Jefferson and Dr. Bill Bass about *Bones of Betrayal*.

## 1. What makes the *Bones of Betrayal* story special?

“Two things are unique about *Bones of Betrayal*. First, it's set in Oak Ridge—modern Oak Ridge and 1940's Oak Ridge, during the height of the Manhattan Project. Second, there are stories within the story, told by another character—a woman who worked on the Manhattan Project when she was very young. So the setting and the narrative structure are unique among the four novels we've done so far.

## 2. Why did you decide to write a story with a setting in Oak Ridge?

“Oak Ridge has played such an important role—not just in East Tennessee history but in world history—that it really deserves to star in a book. The Manhattan Project was the biggest, most ambitious human endeavor ever attempted, at a time when the fate of the world was hanging in the balance. Who could resist setting a novel against such an epic backdrop?

## 3. What was your most rewarding experience as you did the research for this book?

“(Jon): It was fascinating to interview people who were part of the Manhattan Project, to hear their stories about what life was like in wartime Oak Ridge. All that urgency, all that mud, all that hardship, but also—often—all that sense of purpose and camaraderie. What an amazing adventure!

## 4. Tell us about Arpad Vass' role in the novel.

“(Bill): Let me give you a little background first. Arpad Vass was one of my graduate students in Anthropology at the University of Tennessee, and for his Ph.D. dissertation project, he studied the chemical composition of the volatile fatty acids that leach out of the human body when it decays.

# **Bones of Betrayal – interview with the authors**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 27, 2009)**

Arpad developed a way to analyze the soil from a death scene and determine when the person had been killed.

"Now Arpad is a senior research scientist at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and as a project for the Department of Justice, Arpad has invented a device that's nicknamed "the Sniffer," which can detect the presence of buried bodies or bones by the chemical vapors they give off. We thought it would be fun and interesting, in this Oak Ridge novel, to include a real-life ORNL scientist who's working at the frontiers of forensic science. So even though the story is fictional, Arpad and his sniffer make a cameo appearance and make a very important find.

## **5. Why did you choose the Katy's Kitchen location for the Manhattan Project death?**

"Katy's Kitchen is amazing—a storage bunker for weapons-grade uranium that was buried in a hillside and camouflaged with a fake barn. The best part is the "silo," a concrete guard tower with gun-ports tucked under the roof! Although Katy's Kitchen wasn't actually built until a few years after the Manhattan Project, we loved it so much we bent the historical timeline enough to include it in the wartime part of the story. Apart from inventing fictional characters and setting their stories against a factual backdrop, the chronology of Katy's Kitchen is the one historical fact we played really fast and loose with.

## **6. What is your impression of Ed Westcott? Why did you choose to use him in the novel?**

"Ed Westcott compiled an absolutely amazing visual record of wartime Oak Ridge---the creation of the city, the work of the Manhattan Project installations, and the lives of the people. He struck us as unique, too—the one person who could go anywhere, see anything, and takes pictures, to boot! He was the ultimate fly on the wall, witnessing and recording events and people that changed the world.

"Ed's photos were a crucial, crucial resource in understanding and writing about Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project. As for including him in the novel: well, the same qualities that made him unique in real life—his remarkable access to everything going on during the war—also gave him some interesting potential as a character in a fictional story, too.

## **7. Is it true that early on you wanted to "kill off the photographer" and Ed did not want you to do that? How did that happen?**

"(Jon): Yes, I must confess that I'm guilty of criminal intent there! As the story took shape, it became clear that I needed a character who had wide-ranging access and knowledge of the Manhattan Project work—and that that character might need to die, in the service of the story. So I floated the idea of 'killing off the photographer.'

"Ed, understandably enough, wasn't too keen on being killed off, even in fiction. I tried to persuade him that being murdered would be a huge compliment, in a backhanded sort of way, but he wasn't buying it. So I did a little 'writerly' sleight-of-hand and managed to spare him.

## **8. Who was most helpful in your research and why? What technical challenges did you face?**

"Ed Westcott's images were hugely helpful in visualizing wartime Oak Ridge. (This next sentence or two is embarrassing for me, but makes me proud at the same time...I hope you will make

## Bones of Betrayal – interview with the authors

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 27, 2009)

allowances for me and understand why I left it in the interview response – Ray) Ray Smith's *Historically Speaking* columns were a goldmine—I “borrowed” a story about Ernest Lawrence accidentally trashing one of his own calutrons from one of the reminiscences Ray has published.

“Ray’s access to historic sites and historic people was also enormously helpful. Bill Wilcox regaled Ray and me over a long, delightful lunch with tales of his wartime Oak Ridge experiences, and Bill Sergeant—who in recent years has helped Rotary International lead the worldwide fight to eradicate polio—was kind enough to lift the curtain and give me a glimpse at Manhattan Project security.

“Barbara Lyon’s special 1976 edition of the ORNL Review—which contained many firsthand reminiscences of the early days—was terrific. Richard Rhodes’s monumental and superb book, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, was a lifesaver. So were the wonderful reference librarians at the Oak Ridge Public Library!

“One major challenge was including enough science to make the story credible, but not so much as to overwhelm nonscientists. A second challenge was getting the science *right*. A third challenge was steering a middle course between fact and fiction, between history and invention.

### 9. Who helped you to understand the radiation contamination aspects of the story?

“Many people helped with the radioactive contamination scenario that’s in the book. Among the most helpful were Dr. Doran Christensen and health physicist Steve Sugarman at REAC/TS; medical physicist Wayne Thompson, at UT Medical Center; and Special Agent Chris Gay, the Weapons of Mass Destruction Coordinator at the Knoxville Field Office of the FBI. All of those people—experts in their field—were incredibly generous with their time and knowledge, and remarkably patient in answering countless questions.

The interview continues for nine other questions. Learn about the lady who inspired “Beatrice” as well as come along with Jon Jefferson as he explores some spooky storm drains in Oak Ridge in the next *Historically Speaking*.

## Bones of Betrayal – interview with the authors

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 27, 2009)



Jon Jefferson and Dr. Bill Bass standing on top of the underground storage vault where the Uranium 235 was stored and in front of the “silo” that was really a guard tower. This facility, “Operation Dog” when it was designed, was later to be dubbed “Katy’s Kitchen” for Katy Odom who routinely enjoyed her lunch in the peaceful solitude of the wooded setting of the facility.



## Bones of Betrayal – interview with the authors

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 27, 2009)



Rebecca Leigh gets the “cover shot” for the author’s photo on the book cover. She knew the control room of the Graphite Reactor would be THE shot and it was.