**Lives in Ruins: Archaeologists and the Seductive Lure of Human Rubble
by Marilyn Johnson**

**About the Book**

The author of The Dead Beat and This Book is Overdue! turns her piercing eye and charming wit to the real-life avatars of Indiana Jones—the archaeologists who sort through the muck and mire of swamps, ancient landfills, volcanic islands, and other dirty places to reclaim history for us all.

Pompeii, Machu Picchu, the Valley of the Kings, the Parthenon—the names of these legendary archaeological sites conjure up romance and mystery. The news is full of archaeology: treasures found (British king under parking lot) and treasures lost (looters, bulldozers, natural disaster, and war). Archaeological research tantalizes us with possibilities (are modern humans really part Neandertal?). Where are the archaeologists behind these stories? What kind of work do they actually do, and why does it matter?

Marilyn Johnson’s Lives in Ruins is an absorbing and entertaining look at the lives of contemporary archaeologists as they sweat under the sun for clues to the puzzle of our past. Johnson digs and drinks alongside archaeologists, chases them through the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and even Machu Picchu, and excavates their lives. Her subjects share stories we rarely read in history books, about slaves and Ice Age hunters, ordinary soldiers of the American Revolution, children of the first century, Chinese woman warriors, sunken fleets, mummies.

**About the Author**

Marilyn Johnson is an American writer (b. 1954) and the author of the nonfiction books *Lives in Ruins: Archaeologists and the Seductive Lure of Human Rubble* (Harper, 2014); *This Book Is Overdue! How Librarians and Cybrarians Can Save Us All* (Harper Perennial, 2011); and *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and the Perverse Pleasures of Obituaries* (Harper Perennial, 2007)—three professions that Johnson says “contribute immeasurably to our collective cultural memory,” and “are less a job than a passionate calling.” Publishers Weekly called Johnson “dangerously good at what she does. By dangerously, I mean drop-what-you're-doing-start-a-new-career-path good,” and named Lives in Ruins one of the 100 best books of 2014.

**If you enjoyed *Lives in Ruins***

* *Stealing History: tomb raiders, smugglers, and the looting of the ancient world* by Roger Atwood
* *If stones could speak: unlocking the secrets of Stonehenge* by Marc Aronson
* *The Historian by* Elizabeth Kostova
* *Jane Goodall: the woman who redefined man* by Dale Peterson
* *Encounters at the heart of the world: a history of the Mandan People* by Elizabeth Fenn

**Discussion Questions**

1. The demolition of the last building in Deadwood’s Chinatown and the bulldozing of ruins in Babylon by US soldiers making a base camp are two examples from this book of archaeological sites destroyed. Can you think of other sites that have been spoiled for archaeology? How can archaeologists and others encourage historic preservation?
2. Why do you think the author included fictional characters like Indian Jones in a book about real archaeologists?
3. What do you think most archaeologists have in common? Which specialty most appeals to you?
4. What is the point of archaeological excavation? What do you think should happen to artifacts that they unearth?
5. Why do some archaeologists make stone tools, re-create beverages based on the chemical residue found in ancient jars, and try to boil animal bones in pits instead of pots? Can you think of other historic practices that might be interesting to re-create?
6. Why is the underwater archaeologist in the book taking so long to excavate a fleet of sunken ships?
7. How does modern technology help archaeologists? In what ways can it be problematic?
8. What can we learn by conducting archaeology in current landscapes? Can you think of any places in our community that might benefit from the methodology and insight of a contemporary archaeologist?