

## Who They Were: Inside the World Trade Center DNA Story: The Unprecedented Effort to Identify the Missing

*By Robert C. Shaler*

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### **Who They Were: Inside the World Trade Center DNA Story: The Unprecedented Effort to Identify the Missing** By Robert C. Shaler

In "Who They Were," Dr. Robert C. Shaler, the man who directed the largest and most groundbreaking forensic DNA investigation in U.S. history, tells with poignant clarity and refreshing honesty the story behind the relentless effort to identify the 2,749 victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center. No part of the investigation into the 9/11 attacks has taken as long or been less discussed than the daunting task of identifying the victims -- and the hijackers -- from the remains in the rubble of Ground Zero. In *Who They Were*, Dr. Robert C. Shaler, former director of the Forensic Biology Department at the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, tells the inside story of the relentless process of DNA identification and depicts the victories and frustrations that he and his team of scientists experienced during more than three years of grueling work. On September 11, 2001, New York City was unprepared for the mass-fatality event that occurred at the World Trade Center. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner had to completely reconfigure itself to process and identify the nearly 20,000 remains that would eventually come through its doors. Facing an astonishing array of obstacles -- from political infighting and an overwhelming bureaucracy to the nearly insurmountable task of corralling personnel and supplies to handle the work -- Shaler and his team quickly established an unprecedented network of cooperation among public agencies and private labs doing cutting-edge research. More than a story of innovative science at the frontiers of human knowledge, *Who They Were* also tells the very human story of how Dr. Shaler and his staff forged important and lasting bonds with the families of those who were lost. He shares the agony of mistakes made in the chaos and unintended misidentifications resulting in the excruciating difficulty of having to retrieve remains from families of the lost. Finally, Dr. Shaler shares how he and the dedicated team of scientists who gave up more than three years of their lives when the rest of the world had moved on had to face the limits of science in dealing with the appalling level of destruction at Ground Zero and concede that no more victims would be sent home to their families. As of April 2005, when the process was suspended, only 1,592 out of the 2,749 who died on that fateful day had been identified. With compelling prose and insight, "*Who They Were*" reveals the previously untold stories of the scientists determined to

bring closure to devastated families in the wake of America's largest disaster.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

While there can be no question that the staff of the New York City Medical Examiner's forensic lab, under the leadership of Shaler, did heroic work in trying to identify those who perished in the Twin Towers on 9/11, this book will frustrate and disappoint many. Despite having a fascinating story to tell—interagency turf battles, the analysis of DNA data, families' frustration while waiting for information—Shaler spends time on trivia and on his own emotions, and fails to make memorable any of the numerous dedicated scientists involved, apart from himself (an approach epitomized by the penultimate chapter title, "Again, Why Me?"). The book's greatest failing is its inability to make the technical aspects of the work accessible to the lay reader, who will be befuddled by jargon and detailed descriptions of competing technologies. Clichéd descriptions of the biologists ("Petite and perky, her ponytail bobbing and swaying as she briskly walked through the lab...") fail to bring fellow scientists to life. Given the significance of the accomplishments of Shaler's team, one hopes that someone else will give them the narrative they deserve. 8 pages of b&w photos not seen by *PW*. (Oct. 3)

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About the Author

**Robert C. Shaler** was the director of the Forensic Biology Department of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City from 1990 until his retirement in 2005. He is currently professor of biochemistry and molecular biology and director of the Forensic Science Program at Pennsylvania State University. He divides his time between State College, Pennsylvania, and Flemington, New Jersey.

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