

WHO WAS THE PILTDOWN MAN?

CHARACTERS

Narrator Ricki Fremont Arturo Sanchez Dr. Simms

NARRATOR: Three days ago, a construction crew that was digging a new airport runway found a skull and some bones. Dr. Simms, an anthropologist, determined that the bones were from a woman who had died more than 300 years before. The city asked a team of archaeologists and anthropologists from the local university to excavate the site. They also called for student volunteers to help dig.

ARTURO: You're kidding, right? Tell me you're kidding.

RICKI: They need volunteers to help them dig at the site.

ARTURO: Archaeology! What do you know about archaeology?

RICKI: It's the study of ancient people and times. You look at what's left of their buildings, tools, weapons, dishes—

DR. SIMMS: Step up, step up! Name?

RICKI: Ricki Fremont.

ARTURO: Yeah, she wants to be an archaeologist when she grows up—which will be never.

DR. SIMMS: Really? Why?

ARTURO: Well, she has these dreams that'll never come true.

DR. SIMMS: Why do you want to become an archaeologist, Ricki?

RICKI: The Piltdown Man.

ARTURO: Hey, is that like the Pillsbury Dough—

RICKI: No. Some workers near a village in England called Piltdown found this old brown skull one day. They took it to a man named Mr. Dawson, who collected fossils. He dug around some more and found more bones. This was in 1910. Some scientists decided the bones were the "missing link" between apes and humans, and they named him *Eoanthropus dawsoni*.

DR. SIMMS: Excellent, Ricki.

ARTURO: *Dawsoni?* Hey, if I dig around and find something, can I name it after me? *Sanchezi?* That sounds pretty good.

RICKI: The scientists were wrong. The Piltdown Man wasn't even a man at all! Everybody found out later that the skull was from an orangutan. The bones weren't even that old.

DR. SIMMS: That's right. It wasn't until 1950, after the fluorine dating technique had been invented, that the hoax was discovered.

ARTURO: "The fluorine dating technique"? That sounds like something my sister uses on Saturday night.

DR. SIMMS: The bones had been stained and doctored to make them look older, and the test was able to show that.

ARTURO: So somebody messed with some bones and made up a story about them. What's the big deal?

RICKI: Because real bones were being found in other places, like Africa, and nobody could make them fit in with the Piltdown Man. The Piltdown Man threw everybody off the track for a while. That's why I want to be an archaeologist. I want to make sure we don't get thrown off the track again.

ARTURO: I'm good at that, getting thrown off the track.

DR. SIMMS: How are you at digging carefully and patiently?

ARTURO: Can I keep any cool-looking rocks I find? I like to collect rocks.

DR. SIMMS: Afraid not. Our geologists are using the rocks to tell us about what the environment was like more than 300 years ago.

ARTURO: You can tell all that from rocks? Hey, maybe I'm geologist material.

DR. SIMMS: You're both hired. Here are your tools. Remember—

RICKI AND ARTURO: Dig carefully and patiently.

ARTURO: And don't slip any rocks into your backpack.

“WHO WAS THE PILTDOWN MAN?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What qualities do you think would make someone a good archaeologist?
- Why might archaeologists and geologists work together at a dig?

ACTIVITIES

WHODUNIT? THE PILTDOWN HOAX

So who were the perpetrators of the Piltdown Man hoax, and why did they do it? Students will enjoy researching the hoax, the debate about the identity of the culprits, and their motives for duping other scientists. Ask students to make a list of possible suspects and their motives, and open a discussion in which the class narrows the list.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ADVANCES

Challenge students to investigate and describe some 20th-century advances (e.g., carbon 14, fluorine, or DNA analyses) that have helped make archaeological research more accurate. A folded posterboard provides a perfect two-panel format on which students can display contrasting information, such as “Archaeology c.1900 vs. Archaeology c.2000” or “Old Dating Techniques vs. New Dating Techniques.”

MAPPING THE HOMINID HUNT

Invite students to map and label the areas in the Rift Valley and Ethiopian highlands where archaeologists, like the Leakeys and Donald Johanson, made important discoveries of hominid remains. Discuss why these areas may have turned up so many remains.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Archaeology (Eyewitness Books) by Jane McIntosh (Knopf, 1994)

Lucy's Bones, Sacred Stones, & Einstein's Brain: The Remarkable Stories Behind the Great Objects and Artifacts of History, from Antiquity to the Modern Era by Harvey Rachlin (Holt, 1996) Challenging text with excellent information. See “Piltdown Man,” pages 297–302, and “Lucy the Hominid,” pages 15–21.

Mummies, Dinosaurs, Moon Rocks: How Do We Know How Old Things Are? by James Jespersen and Jane Fritz-Randolf (Athenium, 1996)

WEBSITE

[The Museum of Unnatural History](http://www.unmuseum.mus.pa.us/piltdown.htm) (www.unmuseum.mus.pa.us/piltdown.htm)

Click on “Piltdown: The Man That Never Was.”