

# Review

***Embody the Skeleton: A Guide for Conscious Movement*** by Mark C. Taylor (Handspring Publishing, 2018)

Reviewed by **Christina Fenendael, Certified Rolfer®, LMT**

In a world still adapting to teaching, learning, and working during a pandemic, in some ways Mark C. Taylor's book could be considered 'ahead of its time'. The book is an educational experience, organized more or less like a self-study bodywork/somatics course for hopeful teachers-to-be and practitioners-to-be. It contains a wealth of deep anatomical information, experiential movement and meditational exercises, hands-on practice for bodywork and energetic techniques, and priceless basic guidance on communication, empathy, and respect for boundaries.

However, the structure of the book is confounding in some ways as well. It presupposes a certain level of familiarity, and it sometimes favors jargon and complexity over simplicity and succinct language. It is not at all appropriate for the beginning student who is lacking in actual in-person guidance and can frustrate even the experienced practitioner, especially when read cover-to-cover.

I originally received this book in a stack for review in early 2020, just before COVID-19 shut down Seattle, Washington. I skimmed it a bit, found it promising, then set it aside to focus on other books on my list. When I picked it back up again in October 2021, I was optimistic after reading the introduction, which details the goals of the book (extremely ambitious goals). It describes guidelines for safe, nonjudgmental, explorative touch, and effective, compassionate communication between practitioners and clients (or between students practicing those roles). As a pragmatist, I also appreciated the author's *initial* admittance that science has not explained or proven all of the theories behind somatic practices or some of his proposed explanations. I was surprised, then, later, when scientific facts, somatic theories, metaphors, and philosophical

musings were often presented intertwined together in the same paragraphs, or even sentences, without distinction or citation. Thus, I suggest this book be approached with a grain of salt and a certain level of critical thinking.

While the introduction suggests the book be used by experienced movement teachers or bodywork practitioners, manual therapists, or psychotherapists, it is organized like a class with the clear goal of organizing and leading pedagogical sessions for others in the form of clients/students. The latter seems unlikely to be possible for a student to learn this content at home who is new to movement, somatic studies, or skilled touch. I'm sure the author was aware of this limitation, but the book *could* be a fantastic source for veteran practitioners who are teaching since it has many solo movement explorations as well as hands-on partner exercises.

From the context of the isolated reader, however, the book is a challenge. While there are eight or so QR codes that you can scan to listen to prerecorded solo meditation exercises, which are valuable in their own right, much of the explorations and skill-building sessions suggested cannot be effectively done at home unless you record yourself reading out loud and play it back, or if you happen to have a willing human to do this for you.

In general, the information presented is very useful as a whole. Yet the author's choice to deviate from standard anatomical terminology was unusual and perplexing – in one example, recategorizing what bones belong to the axial and appendicular skeleton.

The sequence of the information presented is also somewhat illogical. An early exercise suggests that you 'map the bones of your partner's entire body', long before the sections on the pelvis and shoulder girdle, where it's *then* mentioned that these areas need extra sensitivity and communication to safely work with. The author uses what could very well be novel terminology for many readers to describe something, for instance, the term 'retroversion' to describe pelvic positioning. But the author does not define what that term means until the next page, and in some cases, not at all. He also describes the edges of the sacrum as being like the transverse processes of the vertebrae, many chapters before actually discussing spinal body anatomy.

The fact that spinal and cranial anatomy is not discussed until the end of the book

makes it seem that a certain level of foreknowledge is presumed. Add to that, terminology from ballet dance form and other terms I'd assume are from Body-Mind Centering® are often used. Many of the illustrations have very limited captions/explanations. Even when I was applying my own foreknowledge, I found many descriptions of very familiar concepts confusing simply due to the language that was chosen. For these reasons, I would suggest using discretion as far as recommending this book (and how it is applied).

If you can get past the blending of dense, nitty-gritty anatomy and physiology with flowery imagery and conjecture, this book is a goldmine for teachers and established practitioners. I'm experienced enough to know that many hands-on practices (like bone mapping for example) are extraordinarily helpful for improving efficiency and ease of movement and widening a person's kinesthetic options, even if we don't always know exactly why that is the case yet – so I would recommend this book purely for the exercises within. Some of them may be a little tedious for more seasoned movers/meditators, some may be a bit 'out there' for people to completely follow (myself included), and some are frankly just uncomfortable or inappropriate in the modern world. For instance, placing your lips onto someone's skin in order to vibrate their bones is not something that I endorse. (Instead, I'd recommend getting some tuning forks and studying with a qualified sound healer.) With that said, the majority of the exercises are absolutely worth trying.

What it lacks in clarity and concision, it makes up for in depth, and I found the sections on complex joint biomechanics and integration exercises particularly helpful. Under the guidance of a teacher with a discerning eye, experienced touch, and a strong grasp of anatomy, *Embody the Skeleton* could be a priceless tool for teachers as a source of interactive learning practices and selected readings to assign to students, as well as useful exercises that could help clients of Rolfers who are looking for a more holistic, exploratory, and proactive experience. I will certainly keep it in my treatment room for both anatomical refreshers and inspiration for movement sessions and recommend it as a useful resource for other practitioners. ■