



American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning

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Someone dies. What happens next?

A family inters its matriarch's ashes on the floor of the Atlantic. Another holds a memorial weenie roast at a green burial cemetery. An 1898 ad for embalming fluid promises, "You can make mummies with it!" while a contemporary leading burial vault is touted as impervious to the elements. 150 years ago, a grieving mother might tend a garden at her daughter's grave. Today, she might tend the roadside memorial she erected at the spot her daughter was killed. One woman wears a locket containing her brother's hair, the other, a necklace containing his ashes. Someone dies. What happens next depends both upon our personal stories and where those stories fall in a larger tale--that of death in America. It's a powerful tale, yet it's usually hidden from our everyday lives until it happens to us.

American Afterlife explores the experiences of individual Americans involved with death in a culture where even discussing such things is practically taboo. These chapters follow ordinary people making memorial choices as well as the purveyors of those choices to investigate how we memorialize our dead, where these practices came from, and what this says about us.

The details in these personal stories build upon one another to reveal a landscape that's usually hidden in our ordinary lives--until the day it's not. At once strange and familiar, and by turns odd, poignant, and funny, *American Afterlife* brings fresh insight to the oldest of concerns.

American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning Details

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From Reader Review American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning for online ebook

Sienna says

Surprisingly quick & enjoyable read. Not super emotional, but very... human.

Gofita says

I thoroughly enjoyed Sweeney's journey through America's deal with death and mourning.

"These stories about mourning's interior worlds build something bigger. Together their echoes resound, a small note in one place playing up another elsewhere on the map or elsewhere in time. We catch glimpses of something bigger--the biggest "something bigger" we can conceive of. A death landscape that's as deep as it is wide--more-over, the landscape of our lives themselves."

Death started out more overt in America--"The Good Death" influences of American evangelism and romanticism (keeping sex hidden). Now sex and death have swapped places. Sex is everywhere while death (grieving it) is supposed to be a private thing.

In chapter 3 Sweeney discusses the history of the cemetery and how they came about after churches and families got out of the business of burying the dead. They were designed to be visited by the living; they were maintained and looked more like parks than graveyards.

Chapter 4 Sweeney discusses the obituary. She focuses on professional obituary writers and the fans that follow them. They are truth seekers. They contact families and do their own investigations into the life of the deceased. The good, the bad, and the in-between are all laid out to bear.

"There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. the second is when the body is consigned to the grave. the third is that moment, sometime in the future when your name is spoken for the last time."

The purpose of memorialization is to postpone the third death for as long as possible.

Green burials are discussed in chapter five. This is the way I'm thinking I'd like to be buried...get back to nature without the formaldehyde getting in the way...but there is something to be said for dealing with grief. Being able to see your loved one looking "good" before burial can do a lot for healing.

Chapter 6 discusses funeral homes and how they became an extension of what people used to do in their own homes...that parlor? Yeah, it was for hosting the memorial and viewing of our loved ones. But that got too gloomy so they became living rooms instead and the funeral homes took over.

Want to float with the fishes? Get your cremains infused into a coral reef ball and help nature all at once.

"Grief itself might be physically intangible, but people like having activities that create a tangible something out of this abstract emotion--especially activities that make us feel like we're helping shepherd life away from life."

Mourning is as different as people are. Each has her or his own variety. Memorial tattoos, roadside memorials, green burials, cremation and artificial reef balls, etc. It's a way for people to gradually let go; it's something to do until you don't need to anymore.

It was a fascinating look at the ways we grieve and mourn and how we don't but should.

Michael Nye says

American Afterlife is an exploration of American mourning customs and how they have changed over the generations. Cooling boards, urns, roadside memorials, obituary writers, embalming: this book takes a look at all of these customs, which, at one time, were often considered strange.

Sweeney opens the book by visiting the Museum of Funeral Customs, and then through each chapter, usually focused on one individual, she travels the country to get a hands-on experience with the subject. Each chapter stands alone but each chapter also reads as part of one continuous narrative of exploration. Sweeney is a character in the book - she's often in the scenes - but she's an intelligent guide who focuses the reader on the people she meets rather than herself. The humor in the book isn't surprising, but it's pitch-perfect and not overdone. Rather than feeling as if death is this horrible, avoidable subject, Sweeney examines all the ways death has been a part of our lives, and what it means when we mourn in the modern age.

You'll learn a tremendous amount from reading this book. Smart, witty, touching, and exacting: this is a terrific debut book of nonfiction from a writer whose work you'll be reading for decades to come.

Bonnie says

"American Afterlife" is not a history of mourning practices - although it does cobble together a number of historical facts within its narrative. The author, instead, opted to identify some of the now common - as well as some of the "off-the-wall" American rituals- used to memorialize our dead.

Sweeney meets with an urn maker - a woman who essentially takes everyday objects and turns them into personalized urns. She interviews obit writers - whose life careers are focused on telling a story about the uniqueness of every person whose death notice comes across their desks. There is a tattoo artist who uses ink and skin to memorialize a life. And, my favorite chapter was about the group called "Eternal Reefs". They provide burial at sea by creating artificial reef balls - composed of cremains and natural materials. With a ceremony at sea, the reef balls are dropped into the water building a "reef" on which real coral will grow and thrive. Later - as other family members die- they too can become reef balls and be settled near their loved ones at the bottom of the sea.

Rob Slaven says

Every once in a while I actually pay money for a book and in this case I rather wish I hadn't. Usually I go into a "positives vs negatives" analysis on books but in this case I think I'll opt for more of a "this is what this book is" concept.

Firstly, what I expected was hard non-fiction. I wanted a tightly-connected book that described the history of funeral practices in some level of detail. Instead what this book gives you is a rather loose cobbling together

of a few historical tidbits and a surprising amount of memoir. Imagine something of the form, "roadside memorials have become increasingly popular; Steve built a roadside memorial in 1976 when his wife died in a terrible accident. She was blonde-haired and blue-eyed and stood 5'8 with a wispy figure and a penchant for pancakes that would make any man weak in the knees." OK, I'm making all that up but that's the general form we're talking about. The book seems to be about 15% history, 15% current day practices and 70% personal anecdote from the author's time writing the book. It's well-written certainly and entertaining in some ways but it's completely not what I expected when I plunked hit the 'buy' button.

The second important thing to know is that the book is not really terribly historical. The first chapter talks about funeral practices of days gone by from hair jewelry to cooling boards but the second chapter is about memorial tattoos and from there we're very much stuck in the present day. So this is a book about TODAY and only remotely historical.

In summary, it's entirely possible that you'll love this book. The author is a good writer and entertaining in a certain sense of the word but you should not buy this book with the idea that it's going to teach you much about the history of the mourning process. It contains a plethora of anecdotes both relevant and not; some entertaining and some not but if you, like I was, are just looking for an exploration of the morbid history of how we deal with those most final of destinations.... this isn't that book. Mary Roach's "Stiff" is probably more your cup of tea.

Sue says

This is an interesting look at American society and the myriad ways it chooses to memorialize its dead both in the immediate act of holding funerals or similar ceremonies or in other manners. Sweeney steps back into our history to show that our forebears had their own customs, some as well known as the weeping willow and other motifs on 18th century gravestones or, more recently, memorial jewelry and photographs of the Victorian Era.

While I was familiar with some of what the author presented, I have to admit that the memorial tattoo artist was a new one for me. And while I'd heard of man-made reefs and a connection to memorials, I had no idea about the specifics. Of course the "just plain meat and potatoes" funerals are discussed too as well as the increasingly encroaching world of cremations and the newer and smaller concept of "green" burial. Of such a burial she states:

Most of us see something larger out of death---some promise of an afterlife, some assurance of permanence just when that permanence feels most threatened. At Ramsey Creek, assurance is found in a patch of impatiens growing where a son lies, or in the mountain laurel that blooms above a mother's grave....In this way, the dead literally become part of the living." from the chapter on green cemeteries.

All of the different forms of remembrance are attempting this in one way or another, with varying degrees of intimacy. As Sweeney says toward the end of the book:

Cultural precepts change and dissolve into obscurity and oblivion, but certain constants remain. A mourner's world fills with unwitting, de facto mementos: a room in a house, a

song, the unconscious gestures of surviving relatives. The trick is to choose the ideal surrogate object on which to displace our affection and tend lovingly, until the day we can stand not to. The stone, the tree, the canyon, the ocean. The small wooden cross up on the hill, catching the final rays of sun before they leave this part of the earth.
(loc 3101)

There is a lot of interest here for those so inclined. Sweeney has interviewed some interesting people who live and work in the thick of it and has visited the places she has studied. Recommended reading for those who have an interest in writings in the field of death and dying. This is really about practices post death and does not deal with religious observances per se.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley for the purpose of review.

Jon says

A thoughtful, insightful, sometimes sad, sometimes funny exploration of ordinary Americans who find themselves dealing with death and mourning--both those who have lost loved ones and those who work in the industry. The book includes a convention of obituary writers in the desert, a mother maintaining a roadside memorial, an artist who does memorial tattoos, a boat trip to drop artificial coral reefs containing cremated ashes, and many other stories.

The author is careful to keep the focus on the people dealing with mourning and their stories as she explores how we as a society deal with the near-taboo topic of death. She also offers some surprising and often amusing history that explains how we got from dreary Victorian mourning to where we are today--and the surprising parallels. Very entertaining and well written.

Paperclippe says

3.5 stars, probably, but I'll round up.

This was an enjoyable peak into American mourning customs and the culture that surround them, from a look inside funeral homes themselves into newer and more off-beat funerary rights like reef balls and even those memorial markers you find by the side of the road. Far and away my favorite part, though, were the interim chapters that dove inside what Sweeney dubbed the "dismal trades." These were little vignettes inside the lives of people who worked in the death industry, from chaplains to obituary writers to a woman who did postmortem photo shoots of parents with their deceased infants. I could have read an entire book just of these. I could have read an entire book on each of these people individually (and indeed, I did, stopping to read *The Dead Beat*, a book all about writing obituaries and the people who do that for a living.

There was, unfortunately, some misinformation about the funeral industry (there always is) regarding things like the legality and safety around embalming (though there was a whole chapter about green burial, which I appreciated immensely), which did unfortunately mean I had to knock some points off. However, this was a thoroughly enjoyable and sometimes tear-jerking look into the lives of everyday Americans who have to

decide what to do with their bodies and the bodies of those they love when they die, and inside the lives of the people who do the taking care.

Stephanie Popik says

In a culture where the subject of death is avoided with utmost anxiety, Kate Sweeney's book examines more than just the historical practices of mourning, she opens up a conversation about death and grief-- one that seeks to demystify an essential rite of passage in life. The book is organized as a set of short stories that Sweeney navigates for us as a narrator-protagonist. I liked that she openly applied her own analysis and understanding of the customs and people that she writes about because it gave a sense that the people in this story; ones occupied by death and mourning and loss, are just as relatable and interesting as the rest of the "living" world. She does not hide her discomfort and confusion, but lays her experiences out for us to interpret. I was really moved by this book in ways that I didn't expect, and I know it will stay with me.

Katherine P says

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from this book when I got it from Netgalley to review. I've read a few books from medical examiners that talks about the body but this books talks specifically about how those remaining deal with death. I was really surprised with how interesting and unusual the book was. I kept reading bits of it aloud to those around me and mentioning it in conversation. When you consider the topic of this book that's pretty impressive. Sweeney presented a wide variety of information in a way that was both extremely informative and retainable. I kind of feel like I'm an expert on funerary practices at the moment. I'm not sure when that will come in handy but if you want to know the differences in handling grief over the last 100 years I'm your girl. Sweeney is going on my short list of authors to keep an eye on. If she managed to make the subject of death fascinating, non-morbid and non-judgmental she could probably make just about any subject fascinating.

Paul Gordon says

According to the author, I am like most Americans in my avoidance of death and my hopeful belief that it is something I will not have to personally address until much late in life. What is fantastic about Sweeny's book is that it ushers us into the world of death gently, with a guide who is just as nervous as we are about the "foreign" customs taking place. It also forces one to think about death in a productive way...How would I like to be memorialized? How would I react when faced with the death of a loved one? And presents us with the full range of quirky and fascinating subcultures that are hidden just out of our view. This is a very funny and moving book, and also one of those engaging non-fiction books that presents fun facts and opinions that you instantly want to share a passage with the person next to you. A wonderful piece of journalism about a topic you might not expect to enjoy reading about. Also features gorgeous cover art to show off on your coffee table. 5 1/2 stars!

Jason says

Ranging from the quirky to the creepy to the profoundly moving, Sweeney guides readers through a number of stops along that Via Negativa we tend to ignore, the Way of Death. Whether she is examining the decline of obituary writing in American newspapers or anatomizing the grief of a mother who maintains a roadside memorial where her daughter perished, Sweeney writes with a keen eye and a ready wit that never forgets the power and pathos of death. There are parts of the book that will make you laugh out loud (see: online urns) and parts that will have you using up Kleenex (see: memorial photographer). Throughout you will be in the hands of a first-rate storyteller who has the confidence to let the facts speak for themselves, and the grace to assess and assuage the emotional trials that make many of us avoid and some of us obsess over death, dying, and how to remember the dead.

Rhiannon Johnson says

NPR Affiliate Producer Kate Sweeney Explores Americas Traditions and Trends Regarding Death in "American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning"

What originally began as a graduate thesis to explore why death dually fascinates and terrifies most Americans, eventually became the book "American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning." Atlantan Kate Sweeney was a fan of the HBO series "Six Feet Under," and found herself intrigued with "alternative" burials, as well as the Victorian memorial traditions of visiting cemeteries when courting, photographing the dead, and creating memorial jewelry incorporating the deceased's hair. She found that memorial photography was so popular at the end of the 19th century, not because of morbid fascination, but due to the fact that photography was a new technology and someone having their picture taken was rare. Family members chose to have photos made of their dead relative because that person may have never had their photograph taken while they were alive. A memorial photograph could have been the only photograph ever taken of that person. As for memorial jewelry, the prevalence was more sentimental than factual. The hair of the deceased was woven into "bracelet chains, earrings, wreaths—even purses and tiaras." Hundreds of years before Pinterest, Victorian women's magazines "featured vexingly difficult craft projects featuring hair."

Read my full review here: <http://www.ivoryowlreviews.blogspot.c...>

Amanda says

thanks for this beautifully put together and well researched study of death practices in america. fascinating and wonderfully done. i would put this next to "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes." well done, Kate.

Jessica says

American Afterlife is a collection of stories through the author's explorations into "customs of mourning." As with many nonfiction books these days, and not surprising coming from an NPR producer, the author is too present in the narrative. It is mostly a personal account of interviews and interesting bits of information that the author collects on a very broad topic that interests her and all are colored by her own feelings on death. Many of the chapters may be better suited as stand-alone pieces in a magazine but together they don't really hold a sustained and connected thesis of any type. I would have preferred something a little more focused like possibly just one topic like memorialization (roadside memorials, memorial tattoos, etc), or

either just historical or just modern day practices rather than some of both, or profile from the viewpoint of the grieving or the death professionals rather than both. Instead she covers a historic cemetery, a funeral home, green burials, obituary writers, an urn seller, cremation reefs at sea, and much more in a short book. It was a bit too all over the place. There were certainly interesting parts but overall it fell short of my expectations.
