



Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America

Gary Laderman

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Though it has often been passionately criticized--as fraudulent, exploitative, even pagan--the American funeral home has become nearly as inevitable as death itself, an institution firmly embedded in our culture. But how did the funeral home come to hold such a position? What is its history? And is it guilty of the charges sometimes leveled against it?

In *Rest in Peace*, Gary Laderman traces the origins of American funeral rituals, from the evolution of embalming techniques during and after the Civil War and the shift from home funerals to funeral homes at the turn of the century, to the increasing subordination of priests, ministers, and other religious figures to the funeral director throughout the twentieth century. In doing so he shows that far from manipulating vulnerable mourners, as Jessica Mitford claimed in her best-selling *The American Way of Death* (1963), funeral directors are highly respected figures whose services reflect the community's deepest needs and wishes. Indeed, Laderman shows that funeral directors generally give the people what they want when it is time to bury our dead. He reveals, for example, that the open casket, often criticized as barbaric, provides a deeply meaningful moment for friends and family who must say goodbye to their loved one. But he also shows how the dead often come back to life in the popular imagination to disturb the peace of the living.

Drawing upon interviews with funeral directors, major historical events like the funerals of John F. Kennedy and Rudolf Valentino, films, television, newspaper reports, proposals for funeral reform, and other primary sources, *Rest in Peace* cuts through the rhetoric to show us the reality--and the real cultural value--of the American funeral.

Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America Details

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From Reader Review Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America for online ebook

Rachel says

Much of this book is about the funeral industry, but there's some good, weird pop culture stuff as well. I particularly like the part about Walt Disney and *Snow White*.

The evil queen is convinced that after Snow White eats from the poisoned apple, she will be "buried alive" and no longer a threat to her own status as the "fairest in the land." ...

The dwarfs foil the queen's plans by not burying the young woman. Like many Americans at the time, the dwarfs were fixated on being close and seeing the beautiful body in repose, too entranced by it to say good-bye forever, but unencumbered by professional managers whose job is to ensure the final, unbridgeable separation between the living and the dead.

Although the dwarfs eventually have to say good-bye to the revitalized Snow White after the reanimating kiss from the handsome prince, the vision of their ascent to a castle above the clouds conveys a central message in Disney films: The happy ending comes after death has been overcome, or vanquished, by virtuous actions that reconstitute the integrity of an eternally-loving, transcendent family unit.... Early Walt Disney films, like many early Hollywood productions in general, exhibited an enduring fascination with bringing the dead back to life, an imaginary exercise that resonated with modern Americans transfixed by the reality of death.

Kelly Lynn Thomas says

Got to page 96, then had to return to the library. Don't have time to check it out again right now, so I'm backlisting it and home to finish it at some point in the near future.

Julianna says

Wow! Eye opening read!

Noran Miss Pumkin says

thanks again for the nod on another cool looking book!

Cynthisa says

From my old book log: "About the funeral biz. Coulda been fascinating, but instead was quite boring. Too bad."

Tracey says

393 Laderman 2003 -- Referenced in Remember Me (Lisa Takeuchi Cullen)> Ginnie gave 4 stars & Rachel Stults gave 5 stars
