

Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory

Author: Caitlin Doughty

One of the privileges of being an American is not feeling surrounded by death. Our society takes great pains to bury the notion that everyone will eventually become a corpse and that their bodies will one day end up one of two ways: embalmed and interred, or cremated by another living soul with the unceremonious push of a button to start the flames. Most American children will never see an actual dead body and will rely on zombie narratives and ghost stories to fill in their knowledge gaps about the afterlife. Caitlin Doughty was not so lucky. At age eight after winning a mall's Halloween costume party dressed as a corpse bride, she saw a little girl fall to her death from the second level, landing with a sickening thud onto marble mezzanine below. Ever since that day, thoughts of death followed her in the periphery of her life. Fifteen years later at the age of twenty-three, Doughty took her first post-grad job at the family-owned Westwind Cremation & Burial in Oakland, CA to make sense of her near lifelong preoccupation with mortality and, "as a way to fix eight-year old me."

In her Author's Note, Doughty cautions readers about the graphic content the next 227 pages contain: "For those who do not wish to read realistic depictions of death and dead bodies, you have stumbled onto the wrong book." And she delivers what she promises, outlining an average day in the life of a cremation machine operator and sometimes body pickup van driver. It is certainly not a novel for the death phobic, squeamish, or those afraid to read about the unctuous, putrid aftermath of a bariatric cremation gone wrong. But—and Doughty would agree—how does the fact that it makes us uncomfortable to talk about these things absolve us of the need to address them? After all, everyone needs to have a plan in place for when they kick the bucket. She's just a little more upfront about you figuring that out now.

Her first days on the job are filled with moments most people would never find themselves experiencing; in fact, they regularly pay good money not to. But, where a memoir about working at a crematory might be characteristically macabre, Doughty uses her wit to revive the reader, keeping the mood from becoming too dark. "A girl always remembers the first corpse she shaves," read Doughty's first lines of text. As a medieval literature major, she feels woefully underqualified for her new career as an undertaker; "Did Byron's family know a twenty-three-year-old with zero experience was holding a razor to their loved ones' face?" After the initial blast of the surreal subsides, she begins to enjoy her time at Westwind. But Doughty is far from happy about the state of her industry.

Unlike other countries, American death traditions are not rooted in meaningful rhetoric but rather something we just do because it's the norm. Using obscure examples from world cultures both past and present, Doughty questions why it is that we treat the dead like pariahs. No (tomb)stone goes unturned under her critical gaze: embalming is unnatural, cemetery directors are money-hungry bureaucrats, and cremation is the

cheaper yet still imperfect solution for a society that prefers their dead to be carted away by strangers as soon as their eyes close for the last time. Instead of fostering a meaningful connection to their chosen burial ritual, people bury their loved ones as their parents did, using the manner by which they did so. She insists, "We cannot possibly live without a relationship to our mortality, and developing secular methods for addressing death will become more critical as each year passes."

Doughty's diverse research regarding the mortality rituals of world cultures proves just how differently death is approached around the globe. She cements herself as an ethnographer of death, describing both obscure tribal rituals such as the Brazilian Wari tribe's cannibalism of the corpse and the eighteenth century French practice of displaying unclaimed corpses in the town square, an exhibition she compares to Dr. Gunter Von Hagen's *Body Worlds* as both were (and are) immensely popular in their respective times. Their popularity in no small way shows that the human urge to gaze at collections of corpses is just as strong as ever, a trait Doughty claims should be fostered, not stigmatized as morbid or strange. This historical grounding lends credibility to her constant claim that contemporary American culture has an abnormal, even avoidant relationship with death. She recalls the burial of a close friend's grandmother where the body was not lowered into the ground until every family member had left the premises. Ignorance of death remains a privilege of the developed world.

Industry lingo like "reefer" for the refrigerator where corpses are kept to "retorts" referring to the cremation machines and "The Cremulator," a post-cremation bone grinder portray a world in which everyone is just trying to do their job completely and efficiently so they can go home to be among the living. Doughty, while indisputably respectful of the dead, proves that, at the end of the day, any job, even one where you burn the dead, is just a job. One teary passage finds her cradling an eleven-month-old death infant as she shaves her small, cold head while the next talks about how she could crank out five baby cremations by five o'clock ("on a good day"). She explores this dichotomy; "Maybe she acted as a symbol of every other baby I didn't cry for. Those I didn't have time to cry for if I wanted to do my job and cremate five before five." Her unpredictable range of emotions seems reduced to a simple occupational hazard of dealing with the dead.

The most meaningful passage is, oddly, the parallel she draws between the process of infant cremation and her college thesis titled, "In Our Image: The Suppression of Demonic Births in Late Medieval Witchcraft Theory." After cremation, infant's bones are too small to be processed by the adult-sized "Cremulator" and require the more intimate process of hand grinding with a mortar and pestle. "I had written my thesis on medieval witches accused of roasting dead infants and grinding their bones. A year later I found myself literally roasting dead infants and grinding their bones." Life imitates art, even in college (a prophetic notion for a future career). But it makes one wonder; "Witches" were burned at the stake for their alleged treatment of infants yet Doughty is thanked by the deceased child's parents as she hands them their bag of baby bone dust. If this is not a call

for funeral industry reform, then Doughty has not done her job. "The only difference," she states, "in global death rituals is belief." We practice embalming, but we do not believe in it. She urges families to find their own meaningful belief systems when facing the deaths of their loved ones. After all, there is no law that states a body must be embalmed and a family member's dead body is legal property of the family. Did you know this? If not, is that not part of the problem Doughty warns against?