



Making an Exit: From the Magnificent to the Macabre -- How We Dignify the Dead

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With the surprising humor of Mary Roach's Stiff and the globe-spanning bravado of Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations, this is a journey into the astonishingly diverse ways in which we send off our dead

Journalist Sarah Murray never gave much thought to what might ultimately happen to her remains—until her father died. Now, puzzled by the choices he made about the disposal of his “organic matter,” she embarks on a series of voyages to discover how death is commemorated in different cultures.

Death's Doors is Murray's exploration of the extraordinary creativity unleashed when we seek to dignify the dead. Along the way, she encounters a royal cremation in Bali, Mexico's Dia de los Muertos, a Czech chandelier made from human bones, a weeping ceremony in Iran, and a Philippine village where the casketed dead are left hanging in caves. She even goes to Ghana to commission a coffin for herself.

Her accounts of these journeys are fascinating, poignant, and funny. But this is a very personal quest—on her travels, Murray is also seeking inspiration for her own send off.

Making an Exit: From the Magnificent to the Macabre -- How We Dignify the Dead Details

Date : Published October 11th 2011 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9780312533021

Author : Sarah Murray

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Death, History



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Mollie says

Just ok.

I thought this was going to be a book about grief and how people handle death from a cultural perspective. There was some of that but it was mostly about how different cultures deal with the bodies of the dead such as different burial techniques and cremation. It was interesting but I wanted more. I also was not interested in her personal story of her father's death or the last 3 pages where she outlined exactly where she would like her ashes scattered and why.

Shana Dennis says

This was a well written, funny, and emotionally satisfying book. The author weaves her own experiences with the stages of death, planning/holding a funeral, and mourning with places/cultures she has traveled to and from history around the world. The author also contemplates her own mortality seriously while at the same time not becoming uptight about the subject, which is admittedly a difficult one to tackle.

Melissa says

I was hoping this book would be better than it actually was.

Sarah Murray's dad died (which you will hear about in every chapter) causing her to confront her own death. Instead of the normal route of researching her options she decides to explore death rites and customs around the world. So she travels to a few places and experiences mummies, a royal cremation, fantasy coffins, and many more things.

Sounds really interesting right? Well it would but those things only take up so many pages in a chapter. So each experience relates to the topic of the chapter. I have read many death books and this book sounds just like a bunch of other ones. Many times she mentioned things that if she took the time to tell us more about would have added some interesting material. She is English so she finds our death practices exotic (her words not mine). I can imagine she was snubbing us in a polite way though her disdain is obvious. She refers to Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* and even takes it with her when she travels to America for the funeral director expo. I may not have read it myself but I know enough about it to realize it is not completely honest and things have changed.

Eric Mccutcheon says

This book was a surprise. The title is certainly descriptive and much of the book is devoted to the myriad ways we deal with the dead around the world. What took me by surprise, and what I enjoyed even more, was the personal journey that the author took with her own father's death. Often when authors of nonfiction start talking about themselves, I tune out. This was a well woven, and touching, portrayal of the loss of a loved one and it really helped the stories about the other cultures. It went from a factual account to a more well rounded one.

Patricia L. says

The book was okay but I never felt close to the author or her dead father. For all you morbidly positive readers like me I would love to hear what you think of my literary fiction 'Going Out In Style'.

LOGLINE: Boris Schecter is 'on God's hit list.' It's 2016 and he's 68 years old, intelligent, crude and knee-deep in male menopause. He wants to put something between himself and death. Okay then... he'll play his last pool game on the Luminous Liminality, the surreal luxury cruise for the terminally ill.

Three chapters are on my website so maybe you could let me know. patriciamorris.com

Jenny Brown says

Murray sets out to do something ambitious, braiding a personal memoir about her father's death with a survey of burial practices around the world, highlighted by her own trips to visit places with particularly unusual funerary customs.

It didn't work for me because none of these three strands was developed enough for it to satisfy. The narrative darts from topic to topic without ever developing any theme fully. Her breezy post-modern ironic tone comes across as superficial and self-involved. The authors travels are described with not much more detail than a blog post you'd find on Facebook if your FB friends, like mine, include a lot of articulate people who write well.

It's not a terrible book, mind you, but not a particularly interesting one.

Nmdb22 says

Fascinating and well written. The author traveled to many parts of the world to describe funeral and burial customs and beliefs, intertwined with the narrative of her father's passing, his wishes and her and her mother's handling of his "disposal". Her observations are backed up by research on the funeral industry and practices in the US and the beliefs and practices around death in the different places she visited. This book is often humorous, overall fascinating and not at all morbid.

Rob Ballister says

Sarah Murray 19s MAKING AN EXIT is a well-written, insightful read about customs surrounding death around the world.

Initially, one might shy away from such a book about seemingly so macabre a topic. But Murray 19s treatment of the topic is anything but depressing. She traveled extensively to find the unique ways that cultures around the world send people to the afterworld. Readers learn about coffins shaped like cars, burying people by hanging them in a cave, and loading ashes into fireworks for a bang-bang sendoff into the sky.

The journey Murray takes the readers on comes with a lot of introspection into her own thoughts on death, including planning her own exit from the world.

Book takes a little bit of time to get going, but once it 19s rolling, you will want to hang on until the end.

Tracie says

Maybe 3.5 stars! There were a lot of poignant moments and the memoir parts were endlessly endearing but the actual "journalism" parts were a little thin. It needs more visual aids! But it did make me think about how I want my organic material taken care of after I die (do NOT embalm me, and then just do whatever is cheapest/least harmful to the earth with my meat and bones), and I love the idea of leaving a will with chunks of money for certain people to do fun things.

Alicia says

UUUUUGGGGGHHHH!! This book should be called, "I am an atheist and so is my father. And he died and I wanted to write something to honor him, but no publisher will make a book just based on that premise alone. So I told them I would write a book about how people around the world celebrate and revere the dead. But really I just want to talk about my dad. And the fact that we are both atheists."

I think Random House to hire me in their marketing department.

But seriously, about page 80 I decided to speed read this, and I am not sad I did. The only cool parts were when she talked about the other countries. But there was WAAAAAY too much about her dad and his plans to be cremated, and where they would scatter his ashes, and then that made her consider where SHE wanted to be buried, or scattered or whatever. And then she would mention again that they were BOTH atheists, so it didn't really matter because they KNEW (underlined tree times) that this was the end of their existence.

I did not like this book.

Margaret Sankey says

Somewhat taken aback by her reaction to her own father's ultra-secular, low key posthumous demands, Murray investigates the other end of the funeral spectrum around the world--Sicilian mummies, Oxacan Day

of the Dead, monastic ossuaries, pig raising for Philippine funerals, Chinese stores selling replica objects in cardboard to be burned as offerings to ancestors, Ghanaian coffins in the shape of absolutely anything, British cemeteries in former colonies, Balinese royalty cremated in a giant papier-mache cow, commemorating the Battle of Karbala in Iran and Parsi sky burials.

Vera Marie says

Sarah Murray has chosen an intriguing subject for *Making an Exit*--how we deal with death. And she has a winning style of writing. I loved the concept--travel around the world to check on their customs and practices and decide how she herself would like to "Exit". A travelogue of death rites.

She says that death is scary stuff...

"But we humans are practical beings. When we need shelter, we build a house. When we're hungry, we hunt, farm, and cook. So when confronted with the terrifying vision of our impending mortality, we get really creative. After all, there's perhaps no human condition to which more attention has been devoted than death."

Her two main purposes alternate with section of memoir about her father, whose recent death and skepticism about memorials led to her exploration. Her book is arranged in chapters that visit fascinating places, like Bali, Sicily, and Ghana, each of which she describes with enticing detail.

Each place she visits illustrates a particular way of dealing with death but the material inside the chapters sometimes gets confusing. Murray jumps from the anthropological, to a tourist's view, to memories, to technical explanations of things like what happens to a body as it decays or how exactly embalming works, and then to her consideration of her own death and back again to the first two points.

History writer Barbara Tuchman said, "Research is seductive."

Unfortunately, Murray succumbs to seduction. As a result, we get a lot of repetition. Some is necessary in order not to lose track of where we are and whose customs we are focusing on. But I lost patience after awhile and just wanted to skip to the tourist's and anthropologist's views. I actually understood after the first chapter that her father did not want a gathering to mark his passing, but she told me over and over.

My impatience made me rather sad because she really is an excellent writer with a wonderfully wry British wit. Stylistically, each sentence is a gem.

This review was excerpted from the one I wrote at [A Traveler's Library](#). [Read more.](#)

Christiane says

After her father's death, Sarah Murray begins to think seriously about death and what comes after, both spiritually and materialistically (how remains are disposed of) and what that might say about us, our families, our beliefs, and our culture. She travels the world to witness fantastical death rites in Bali, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Oaxaca, and other places. What might be a morbid subject is enlivened (um, no pun intended)

by Murray's good humor and insights.

laz says

The *Washington Post's* review of *Making an Exit* as "an *Eat, Pray, Love*" for the afterlife is accurate. Well written, but more travelogue than ethnography.

Paul Pessolano says

“Making An Exit” by Sarah Murray, published by St. Martin’s Press.

Category – Death and Dying

Death and Dying is not high on most peoples reading list. It is a subject that most of us would prefer not to discuss; however, we all will face this fact of life at one time or another.

Sarah Murray came to this realization on the death of her father. Her father, an atheist, wanted to be cremated and his “organic matter” (his words) scattered over a Christian cemetery.

It was at this time that Sarah began to think about her own death and what she wanted to do with her remains. She began a journey that took her to different parts of the world. She explored how different cultures approached death and how they disposed of “organic matter”.

Sarah traveled to Bali where the remains were cremated in an elaborate ceremony that was a ceremony of joy not sorrow. She visited the catacombs of Palermo, Sicily, where bodies were hung on racks or laid out in chambers to rot. In the Philippines there is an independent people called the Igorots who place dead bodies in coffins and suspend them by rope from a mountaintop.

These stories are all very interesting and informative, but the crux of her book lies in her explanation of cremation and the burying of the dead in graves. Although, she does not propose either one (she will be cremated) she puts out a strong case for cremation.

I sincerely doubt most people are aware of the techniques used by funeral directors in preparing a body for burial. It is quite gruesome and I doubt many of us would choose this if given the opportunity. Not only does she go through the embalming process but she also explains what happens to the body once it is put in the ground.

“Making An Exit” is an eye opener that is very reminiscent of the books, “Stiff” and “The American Way of Death”. These books are about a subject that most of us would like to shun, but they are important because they could be instrumental in providing a dignified ending no matter which method we choose for our “organic remains”.
