

Caitlin Doughty. *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017. 248 pages. \$24.95.

That the American funeral industry overcharges and underwhelms in its ability to meet the needs of grieving families is not a new argument. However, Caitlin Doughty's recent book approaches the topic via an unconventional path and is remarkably effective at exposing the extent of the predicament. Doughty, a mortician, author of the best-selling *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, founder of the Order of the Good Death, and director of a non-profit funeral home in L.A., has a lot to say on the topic of funerary services and traditions. What she delivers in this fascinating and spirited traveler's memoir is less about what she has learned from her own many achievements than what she has learned from people and practices around the world whose perspectives differ radically from those representing the normative American experience. She explains this method in the introduction, urging us not only to consider how we tend to view death rituals that are different from our own as savage, unhygienic, naïve, or even dangerous (when they are not), but more than that, to see the beauty in difference. If we can put aside the impulse to recoil from the strange, we find there is a lot to learn from unfamiliar death practices.

The book's eight chapters center on eight extraordinary encounters with dead bodies and the living people who interact with them. In order, the chapters describe the following: open-air cremations in Crestone, Colorado; the care for and interaction with corpses in the house-graves of South Sulawesi, Indonesia; *Días de los Muertos* in Michoacán, Mexico; experiments with corpse composting in Cullowhee, North Carolina; "grave recycling" in Barcelona, Spain; the Ruriden columbarium of glowing Buddhas in Tokyo, Japan; the special powers of the *Fiesta de las Ñatitas* skulls in La Paz, Bolivia; and natural burial options in Joshua Tree, California. The chapters are written with a lightness and humor that embraces the ordinariness of death and of dead bodies. And, perhaps in anticipation of the reader's stretched comfort zone, the chapter's illustrations are just cartoonish enough to avoid perceptions of goriness, even where the descriptions of decomposition are fulsome. As a result, the reader is left having had a remarkably enjoyable experience for such a journey, in addition to an expanded understanding of the world's rich variety of rituals and beliefs about death.

The literary mode of *From Here to Eternity* is that of storytelling. Doughty's affection for the personalities and places grounding these eight encounters is apparent on every page. She also has a knack for telling stories within stories, weaving in additional anecdotes, such as that of the corpse hotel, or "Lastel," of Yokohama, Japan. We read descriptions of the sky burials of various lands, where corpses are ritually laid out for bird consumption. We learn about the wonder of whale falls, and what it's like to watch the ritual slaughter of a buffalo. Doughty also engages with the topics of miscarriage (Mexico chapter) and suicide (Japan chapter), suggesting, again, that a cross-cultural perspective is beneficial to understanding one's own way of thinking about and ritualizing death.

The aim of the book is part education and part activism. Doughty wishes to disabuse us of many popular myths about dead and decomposing bodies, such as that a corpse must be embalmed to be safe, or that ashes from a cremation will nourish the soil of a growing tree. She wants us to be critical of more traditional funerary services as well as some of the green alternatives being marketed popularly, and suggests ways to improve our practices with real benefits for the environment and for those who bury their dead. Fundamentally, this is a book about bodies and about grief. It is about the need for grieving people to be with the bodies they have so loved. She explains this in the Epilogue as a call for holding space: "Holding the space is

crucial, and exactly what we are missing. To hold the space is to create a ring of safety around the family and friends of the dead, providing a place where they can grieve openly and honestly, without fear of being judged” (232).

From Here to Eternity is a must read for anyone studying or teaching about death and/or immortality, and for anyone ministering to those who encounter their own mortality or grieve in the wake of a loved one’s passing.

Rebecca K. Esterson, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA