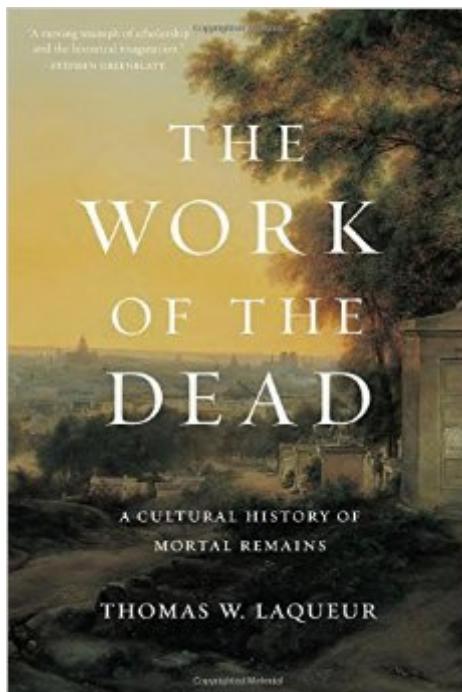


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The Work Of The Dead: A Cultural History Of Mortal Remains



Synopsis

The Greek philosopher Diogenes said that when he died his body should be tossed over the city walls for beasts to scavenge. Why should he or anyone else care what became of his corpse? In *The Work of the Dead*, acclaimed cultural historian Thomas Laqueur examines why humanity has universally rejected Diogenes's argument. No culture has been indifferent to mortal remains. Even in our supposedly disenchanted scientific age, the dead body still matters--for individuals, communities, and nations. A remarkably ambitious history, *The Work of the Dead* offers a compelling and richly detailed account of how and why the living have cared for the dead, from antiquity to the twentieth century. The book draws on a vast range of sources--from mortuary archaeology, medical tracts, letters, songs, poems, and novels to painting and landscapes in order to recover the work that the dead do for the living: making human communities that connect the past and the future. Laqueur shows how the churchyard became the dominant resting place of the dead during the Middle Ages and why the cemetery largely supplanted it during the modern period. He traces how and why since the nineteenth century we have come to gather the names of the dead on great lists and memorials and why being buried without a name has become so disturbing. And finally, he tells how modern cremation, begun as a fantasy of stripping death of its history, ultimately failed--and how even the ashes of the victims of the Holocaust have been preserved in culture. A fascinating chronicle of how we shape the dead and are in turn shaped by them, this is a landmark work of cultural history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a licensed funeral director, funeral historian, anthropologist and amateur thanatologist, I've got to say this book is everything I expected it to be. Scholarly, yes; but the surprise comes with Laqueur's often very beautiful prose. I love the book, and can recommend it to anyone who enjoys a well-researched and well-written academic investigation of the relationship we have with the dead. As Laqueur writes, "the history of the work of the dead is the history of how they dwell in us--individually and communally. It is the history of how we imagine them to be, how they give meaning to our lives, how they structure public spaces, politics, and time."

Yes, the author is a bit verbose; yes, the manuscript could've been trimmed a bit, but honestly I still enjoyed the entire thing. I often race through books but this one made me want to take my time and contemplate death itself, one of the most difficult and pressing things to contemplate. I agree with the reviewer who noted the book's more-narrow-than-expected scope, especially given its length. Still, the territory the author covers is fascinating, and I hope it prompts other scholars to pick up the themes and examine other cultures, geographies, and time periods.

I marveled at how Mr. Laqueur was able to make such a strange topic so interesting. After reading this book, you'll never look at a cemetery the same way again - especially if you ever visit an old church yard in England. If your current concept of a cemetery is the one that your grandparents are buried in, learning how their grandparents (and the generations before that) were buried will be quite eye opening. I rather think that this is a view of a set of western cultural traditions that may be on the way out. Cremation and environmental disposal of the ashes may become the norm rather than the exception. PS: try to find the Johnathon Winters movie, *The Loved One*. A darkly funny look at the topic from the 60's. I kept hoping it would be cited in this book as a suggested reference.

The Work of the Dead by Thomas W. Laqueur is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in early October as a more academic, anthropological counterpart to Mary Roach's *Stiff*. *The Work of the Dead* covers the who, where and when of burial, final religious rites, corpse disposal, and recognition of the dead in Europe and the Mediterranean. Laqueur's narrative is studied, knowledgeable, and witty without veering toward dark humor and sardonicism.

This is an amazing book. To understand how humans shaped their entire city layouts because of human remains and their culture is quite revealing. Thomas W. Laqueur researched this detailed scholarly work and it is written and organized so well I could not put it down.

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