

“To Die Will Be an Awfully Big Adventure”*

Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers

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By Nicole A.

People typically look at death in two ways. Either it is the inevitable, melancholy doom that awaits us after our endless possibilities to change the world have run out, the river of human potential has run dry; or death is agonizing, evil, and cruel, stealing unknown lives and morphing them into victims and sob stories. But as Mary Roach, the author of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* tells us, death may just have a third side. She inspires a new way of thinking that is foreign to almost all: the dead are the bravest, the most revolutionary, and they certainly are not dull.

As I began to read *Stiff*'s first chapter, Roach's sharp and persuasive words immediately changed my thoughts about mortality. "But here's the thing: they don't *endure* anything. Cadavers are our superheroes...what a shame to waste these powers, to not use them for the betterment of humankind." As the author goes globe-trotting, she covers almost all of the topics one can think of when pondering dead bodies. Roach sets off on a journey beginning with the mystery that is human postmortem decay (the enticing maggots and rotting flesh, of course), and then dives bravely into the uses of our corpse friends - medical research, helping save lives in vehicle accidents, determining causes of plane crashes, and helping reform the military and battle, to name a few. She explores the cultural and religious history behind cannibalism, investigates the creative options one has following death, and even examines forensics and

decapitation. It is wrapped up with her personal thoughts on what she'll do after she faces her end of existence. Roach spares no gruesome detail.

Roach's explorations are so refreshingly abnormal because she dares to be contradictory. She mixes scientific research about death, which is full of gravity, with insightful wit and humor. Few can provoke readers like her: "not that there's anything wrong with lying on your back. In its way, rotting is interesting too, as we will see...Death. It doesn't have to be boring." She also challenges death's reputation, proving it to be beautiful, interesting, and not so scary after all.

And there's nothing dead about the structure and organization of *Stiff*. Each chapter begins and ends with a concise analysis of the topic, complete with pictures and playful titles. Roach pushes her personal account along with historical quotes and reliable research done by both herself and experts. She shares how each of her interviewees reacts to her strange questions about death-related occupations, morbidity and cadavers. She persuades readers to believe that an after-death body is not in fact terrifying, by her awareness and word choice. Even in the title, the author gets ironic. In naming the book *Stiff*, she sets herself up to disprove this very fact; that the adventures of dead human bodies are very much alive. Roach uses sarcasm and literary humor to display her voice and opinion, which in turn influences the readers'.

Stiff's weakness resides in the repetitiveness of this structure. The interviews with topic experts can be long, too full of facts and statistics. Readers' intrigue may fade. Her spark and honest wit shine brightest at the beginnings and ends of chapters, making the middles read like a textbook or medical research article. But this is Roach's first venture into a blurry world of myth versus fact, journalism immersed in medicine. Roach has a background in journalism and surprisingly, not medicine, which is interesting considering the depth of her research and

understanding of human anatomy. The author admits “I often write about science, though I don't have a science degree and must fake my way through interviews with experts I can't understand.” She is highly educated, graduating from Wesleyan, going on to win numerous awards in journalism like the Engineering Journalism Award in publications from *Outside* to *The New York Times Magazine*. She practices what she preaches, revealing she would like to be a brain donor, telling readers that she learned the benefits of giving from her travels and crafting her tale.

Not exactly the average teenage read, *Stiff* is not for the faint of heart. Only those with a strong interest in science, medicine, and mystery will be able to stomach its content. However, I would rank it very highly and was both entertained and informed with its conclusion. *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* is an intriguing, vivid approach to the somber connotations we associate with dead bodies. Roach has certainly convinced me that the dead are truly the unsung saviors of the living.

*From *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie