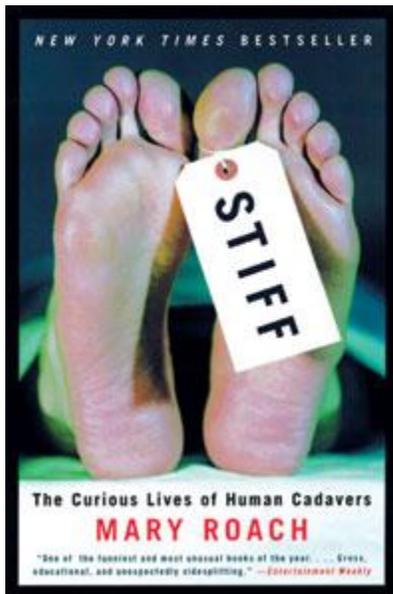


STIFF - THE CURIOUS LIVES OF HUMAN CADAVERS



BOOK DETAILS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

"One of the funniest and most unusual books of the year....Gross, educational, and unexpectedly sidesplitting." —*Entertainment Weekly*

Stiff is an oddly compelling, often hilarious exploration of the strange lives of our bodies postmortem. For two thousand years, cadavers—some willingly, some unwittingly—have been involved in science's boldest strides and weirdest undertakings. In this fascinating account, Mary Roach visits the good deeds of cadavers over the centuries and tells the engrossing story of our bodies when we are no longer with them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In her introduction to *Stiff*, Mary Roach remarks that "death makes us helplessly polite." Why is it that we're compelled to use polite language when discussing death? Why are we often afraid to discuss it in the way Roach has done here?

2. Roach discovered that students in anatomy classes tend not to enjoy touching and smelling cadavers, even though they relish the opportunity to study them. Does this surprise you? Why might someone want to work with cadavers?
3. Could one remain more psychologically and emotionally balanced in their dealings with cadavers by humanizing them, as Roach frequently does, or by objectifying them? Explain.
4. Roach describes the smell of a decomposing human: "It is dense and cloying, sweet but not flower-sweet. Halfway between rotting fruit and rotting meat." But modern embalming methods allow us to present odorless, good-looking corpses at funerals. Has modern mortuary science made death more aesthetically pleasing?
5. Dennis Shanahan, who investigated the grisly human wreckage of downed TWA Flight 800, told Roach that the hardest thing about examining Flight 800 was that most of the bodies were relatively whole. He said, "Intactness bothers me much more than the lack of it." Why might he feel this way? Do you agree or disagree?
6. Many research studies that make use of cadavers raise questions about maintaining the dignity of the deceased. For example, a ballistics study might involve decapitating a cadaver or shooting one in the face—all for the sake of gathering data to ensure that innocent civilians who are hit in the face with nonlethal bullets won't suffer disfiguring fractures. Do you think that the humanitarian benefits of experimenting on cadavers can outweigh any potential breach of respect for the dead? Why or why not?
7. The heart, cut from the chest, can keep beating on its own for as long as a minute or two. This, Roach says, reflects centuries of confusion over how exactly to define death. Have modern scientific experiments on cadavers helped us to pinpoint the precise moment when life ceases to exist and all that's left is a corpse? Explain.
8. Roach says, "On a rational level, most people are comfortable with the concept of brain death and organ donation. But on an emotional level, they may have a harder time accepting it." Some organ recipients even worry that they will take on certain characteristics of their donors. What might this say about how we link the physical human body to the human soul?
9. In Chapter 10, Roach takes us on a grand tour of cannibalism across cultures. She's compelled by the idea that economics accounts for why people throughout history have never dined regularly on each other. Humans, she says, turn out to be lousy livestock, because you have to give them more food to feed them than you'd gain in the end by eating them. How do you react to this idea?
10. In Chapter 11, Roach journeys to an island in Sweden, where a forty-seven-year-old biologist-entrepreneur has made a business of producing compost from cadavers. This business has major corporate backing and an international patent, and mortuary professionals in many countries, including the United States, are interested in representing the new technology. Do you think that the "human compost movement" could gain traction where you live?
11. Roach concludes that "it makes little sense to try to control what happens to your remains when you are no longer around to reap the joys or benefits of that control." Do you agree with her?

An interview with Mary Roach

Questions for Mary Roach, author of *Stiff* | As taken from bookbrowse.com



What got you interested in the "lives" of human cadavers in the first place?

One day I was talking to a man who designs crash test dummies. He told me that actual humans--both living and dead--have also been used by automotive safety researchers. He explained that you not only need to know how much force an impact is unleashing on a body (dummies tell you that); you also need to know what kind of damage that much force will cause to an actual body. And for anything other than very minor impacts, you would want that body to be dead.

Anyway, I began to realize there's this whole work force of donated cadavers out there, being put through their paces in labs and universities. Like any new and foreign world, it was fascinating to me

and I wanted to know more.

What was the creepiest place you visited during your research?

I visited a lab where plastic surgeons were practicing new techniques. I remember walking in, and there were these 40 heads, set up in pans on tabletops, all in a row. Your brain doesn't really know what to do with this. Mine chose to pretend we were in a rubber mask factory, and these were just very realistic Halloween items being worked on.

When I began to talk to the surgeons and to see how useful it is for them to have a chance to practice on someone who's not going to wake up and look in the mirror anytime soon, what had started out seeming quite ghoulish began to seem sensible and right. Even the fact that the heads had been cut off -- this was done so that other doctors or researchers could make use of the rest of the body. When you donate your remains, nothing is wasted.

So do you plan to donate your body when you die?

I haven't signed any papers, but I do like the idea. You get to feel really virtuous and righteous about yourself. I mean, if you've ever felt undervalued as a human being, this might be a good thing for you. Lab specimens are really valued. Everyone wants a piece of you.

One thing that appeals to me -- if that word can be used -- is to have my organs plastinated and used in classrooms. I could be happy as a kidney on a shelf. Plastination is forever -- it's the closest thing to immortality that I've come across. And there's no icky formaldehyde. No muss, no fuss. Of course, in reality, you don't get the luxury of pre-ordering what's done with you. You go where you're needed.

Do you think more people would donate their bodies to science if they could choose what happened to them?

Yes, I think that what puts some people off is the element of the unknown, the lack of control over the fate of their remains. You can specify things that you DON'T want done to you, but you can't put in a request, for say, a gig as the skeleton at the Harvard Med School anatomy lab. In fact, even if you willed your body to Harvard Medical School, you might end up someplace else,

if Harvard happened to have a surplus of cadavers and a nearby medical school was in need, off you'd go.

Have you encountered anyone so far who was offended that you wrote a book about dead bodies? What was/would be your response to that?

Perplexed, maybe, but not offended. But I would understand. Cadavers evoke a lot of complicated reactions and emotions. If someone had recently lost a family member or close friend, I could imagine that a book about dead bodies might remind them of what they'd just been through and therefore evoke some negative feelings. It's certainly something that I've thought about.

What was it like to spend so much time around dead bodies? Did it change the way you feel about death?

It was less difficult than I'd anticipated. The dead -- and I'm talking about the anonymous dead of science, not the bodies of loved ones -- are fairly easy to be around. They're the same sort of company as people across from you on subways or in airport lounges, there but not there. Your eyes keep going back to them, because they're the most interesting thing in the room, and then you feel bad for staring.

Did it change how I feel about death? I'm still plagued by all the same questions - do we go somewhere else when we die? Looking at a body, you are hit with this unwavering sense that the person whom this body used to be, is simply and absolutely not there. Closed for business. Nobody home. And it suddenly becomes even harder to imagine it all stopping there, with this mass of inert tissue. It just seems like such an unjust anticlimax. You very much want to believe that this person has simply shed one hull, one motor housing, for another kind. And moved on.

Do you sense a trend in the fact that dead bodies seem to be discussed and shown more in public than they used to be (for instance, on *Six Feet Under*, and *CSI*)? If so, what do you think that says about society?

Certainly the interest and the fascination have always been there. I think it's not so much a trend as an opening of the floodgates. I imagine plenty of network execs had long wanted to air shows on these topics, but no one wanted to go first. Once someone did, then everyone else felt free to follow suit, and now you've got two dozen shows with bodies on slabs.

Why is it that most people are willing to donate their organs, but very few want to donate their bodies to science once they're dead?

Sadly, most people actually aren't willing to donate organs. The majority of families in a position to donate organs - i.e., those with a braindead loved one being kept "alive" on a respirator -- will refuse. Which is really tragic: There are some 80,000 people on the waiting list for donated organs, and 17 die every day.

But you're right, more people feel positively about donating organs than about willing their body to a medical school. I imagine most people simply don't want to think about what might happen to them. It takes a special kind of person, a very practical-minded person, to say, hey, who cares, I'm not going to be there, divvy me up and do what you will. Especially when you swap the immediate and known heroism of donating organs with the unknowns of the anatomy or research lab. But if you can get past all that, it's a noble thing to do. Besides, decomposing or burning up isn't especially pretty either. Might as well do something useful.

In your opinion, are there any "bad" uses for dead bodies?

Historically, there've been plenty. There was a doctor in Paris in the 1930s who put cadavers up on a homemade cross in his lab, to try to prove the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin. I'm sure there are religious people out there for whom this might be their first choice as a body donor, but it's hardly the sort of good-for-all-mankind research you expect doctors to be involved in. This is the sort of thing for which you want to have express, specific signed consent.

Some uses of bodies for cosmetic procedures are questionable. Tissue donors' skin is sometimes used as wrinkle filler and I've even heard of it being used to extend penises. I have no preconceived notions about the hereafter, but I stand strong in my conviction that it should not take the form of someone else's underpants. Perhaps there should be an option on the willed body form that says "Not OK to use me for cosmetic purposes."

But even applications that sound "bad," often turn out to be quite justifiable. For instance, the only accurate, dependable way to test protective footwear worn by landmine clearance teams is to expose an actual leg to a landmine (for obvious reason, this is rarely done). Is this "worse" or more horrific than cutting a leg up bit by bit in a med school anatomy lab? I don't think so. Both are medically, ethically conscionable uses of a donated body. One's just a bit harder, on first presentation, to swallow.

Do you think human bodies will be disposed of differently in the future (i.e. are there alternatives to cremation and burial)?

I think that what's been going on in Sweden - a new method of organic composting of remains, which are then used to grow a memorial plant - could catch on here eventually. Out in California first, of course. The body is frozen and then broken down via ultrasound into small pieces, which are then freeze-dried and buried in a biodegradable box, to become compost. The Swedes are perhaps more practical than we are, and certainly more environmentally aware. They don't like frou-frou funerals or embalming, and they object to cremation because of the mercury from dental fillings that gets into the atmosphere. And in polls, they seem to very much like the idea of one's molecules being directly taken up into a plant. Sort of a literal reincarnation. The inventor of the process has already spoken to people in the U.S. who are interested in licensing the process. It'll be a while though. The machinery is still being tested.