

From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death  
by Caitlin Doughty  
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £14.99, 248 pp

All that Remains: A Life in Death  
by Sue Black  
Doubleday, £16.99, 339 pp

Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control  
by Barbara Ehrenreich  
Granta, £14.99, 256 pp

Erica Wagner

A cold November evening, and I went to collect my father from the funeral home. I mean my father's ashes, but even ten years after his death I instinctively type *my father*. At the Greenwich Village Funeral Home, on Bleecker Street in Manhattan, my father's *cremains* (what a word) were ready for me when I arrived. The gently smiling woman behind the reception desk handed me a box which had been put in a dark blue velvet bag, the same kind of bag they put fancy bottles of whisky in. I thanked her. I signed something. And then I walked out into the bracing chill, and raised my arm to hail a cab because the box was much heavier than I had expected it to be. It started to rain. The drops sat proud on the synthetic fabric of the bag.

But my father really didn't like taxis. He had been born in 1924; he grew up during the Depression, and the influence of early poverty shadowed him all his life. He resented the cost of eyeglasses, Christmas trees, shoes. He was a man who always, always took the subway. It suddenly felt totally wrong to put him in a taxi now.

It was rush hour. At Houston Street the platforms were packed. I was eventually swept into a subway car, the swell of humans behind me vast and forceful. I clutched my father's urn — wooden, the cheapest one they had, because what else would my Dad have wanted? — against my chest. The subway car lurched and swayed uptown. *You're good with this, right?* I said to my Dad, under my breath. *This is what you would have wanted, yes?*

I'm still glad I didn't take that taxi. I am in no way religious, but my belief that I was honouring my father in the way I travelled with his ashes connects me to our earliest human ancestors. Late last year the remains of "Mungo Man" were returned to New South Wales from the Australian National University in Canberra, where they had been studied and stored since they had been found in 1974. The man had been buried on his back, his hands crossed in his lap, his body painted with red ochre that came from as far as 200km away. He was reinterred in a secret location in Mungo National Park — 42,000 years after his death.<sup>1</sup> The rituals around death are powerful enough to transcend time.

But what are those rituals? How do you choose what's meaningful to you or to your family? In the 21st-century Western world, death has become medicalised, professionalised — even, as undertaker Caitlin Doughty argues, masculinised. Doughty is a young, hip Los Angeles-based mortician; she owns and runs an alternative funeral home, Undertaking LA. Her first book, a memoir called *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, was a poignant and forthright look at her own journey from a teenager with a yen to work in a mortuary to a vocal spokeswoman for the "death-positive" movement, which seeks to help us mortals confront the end of life with openness and honesty, rather than with fear and dread.

As she reminds us in her new book, *From Here to Eternity*, up until the early 20th century death was a familiar presence, not only because miracle drugs such as antibiotics had not been developed, but because when family members died they were usually laid out in their own homes,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-australia-42020675>

and the women in the family would prepare the bodies for viewing and burial. But then all that changed. “Caring for the corpse went from visceral, primeval work performed by women to a ‘profession,’ an ‘art,’ and even a ‘science,’ performed by well-paid men. The corpse, with its physical and emotional messiness, was taken from women.” [FHTE, 136] Doughty, with her jaunty prose and “Ask a Mortician” YouTube videos is reclaiming that space — though it’s fair to say that her work owes a debt to that of Thomas Lynch, whose wonderful book *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, was the inspiration for the television series *Six Feet Under*.

Like Lynch, Doughty invites us to wonder what cultural constructs lead to the belief that death is intrinsically repellent or frightening. In *From Here to Eternity* she goes on a globe-trotting jaunt from Crestone, Colorado’s open-air cremation site to the Ruriden columbarium at Tokyo’s Koukokuji Buddhist temple, where a sophisticated lighting system makes a glowing memorial show. In Mexico City she attends the annual *Días de los Muertos* parade, a grand spectacle of skeleton floats and costumed revellers which may be familiar from the opening of the 2016 James Bond film *Spectre*. What you may not know is that, as Doughty reveals, it hasn’t been an annual parade for long: it was created for the film, and the Mexican government has since invested in recreating it, lest tourists be disappointed. [FHTE, 78]

Which may prove that people long for a closer contact with the world beyond — though perhaps not as close as that which she finds in Tana Toraja, Indonesia. Here, the bodies of the dead are kept in their families’ homes until the funeral: “that might not sound particularly shocking,” Doughty writes, “until I tell you that period can last from several months to several years”. [FHTE, 56] She describes an intimate contact with the deceased which is startling even to her. It’s notable that her trip to Indonesia causes her to reflect for the first time on the habit of meat-eating when she’s served a hunk of pork from a freshly-killed pig: she’s never had meat that didn’t come from a supermarket. She quotes the work of the French anthropologist Noëlie Vialles who wrote of the public’s wish to erase the idea of slaughter from the consumption of meat: “It must be as if were not.”

And so it is with death, for most of us. Doughty believes our lives would be improved if we spent some time considering what will happen to our bodies when breath leaves them: but not everyone gets the luxury of that kind of consideration. There are those who die violently, suddenly; those who are victims of conflict, innocents massacred for the sake of politics. In June 1999 Sue Black — now Professor Dame Black — took a call from a Home Office pathologist, informing her that she’d be flying out to Kosovo: eventually she became the lead forensic anthropologist to the British Forensic Team there, deployed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on behalf of the United Nations in order to identify victims of ethnic conflict. She would go on to work in Iraq, and in 2005 participated in the Thai Tsunami Victim Identification operation; that work would lead to her role in restructuring how training was conducted for disaster victim identification in the UK, a remarkable achievement in itself.

If you are wondering what a forensic anthropologist is, Black sets out her terms clearly in the opening pages of her engrossing memoir, *All that Remains*. She’s aware that many of her readers will have watched a lot of crime dramas, and indeed may be fans of one of Black’s chums, Val McDermid. “Forensic pathology” — the work you see being done in those dramas — “seeks evidence of cause and manner of death — the end of the journey — “whereas forensic anthropology reconstructs the life led, the journey itself, across the full span of its duration.” [ATR, 5] If we know that Mungo Man was a hunter-gatherer, and indeed that he suffered from arthritis, that’s thanks to forensic anthropology.

Dame Black was born in Stonehaven, and now is Professor of Anatomy and Forensic Anthropology at the University of Dundee. Her book is an affecting mix of the personal and professional. She describes with enthusiasm her Saturday job, begun at the age of 12, in a butcher’s shop: her fascination with anatomy began early. She brings the reader into the dissecting room in Aberdeen when, as a student, she encountered her first corpse, that of a man who had donated his body for just this purpose. Her book is laced with gratitude and respect for those who choose to be “silent teachers”, as she calls them. “As a living person, you remain separate from death, but the

mesmerising beauty of human anatomy has created a bridge into the world of the dead, one that few will cross and none who do will ever forget.” [ATR, 23]

It’s a very different viewpoint on cadaver dissection than that taken by Barbara Ehrenreich, the American writer whose 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* was a striking expose of the lives of many low-wage workers in the United States. In *Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control*, she calls the process “a violent and transgressive undertaking”. [NC, 48] Ehrenreich’s is a strange book, which veers between detailed discussions of the role of microphages in the human body (she has a PhD in cellular immunology) and somewhat disordered discussions of things like the mindfulness industry and whether fast food can really be that bad for you, since she’s eaten a lot of it in her time. “I hope this book will encourage you to rethink the project of personal control over your body and mind... you can think of life as an interruption of an eternity of personal non-existence, and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the living, ever-surprising world around us,” she writes in her introduction. [NC, xvii]

Yet Doughty and Black’s books do a better job of making the reader reconsider that ever-surprising world by helping us look clearly at the plain fact that life has, as Thomas Lynch has written, “a 100 per cent death expectancy”.<sup>2</sup> Even the best physician, finally, can’t keep us out of our graves.

How we will be guided there, how we will guide ourselves, are questions worth addressing directly. Burial or cremation? A wicker casket or a simple shroud? (Shrouds4All can boast “100% satisfied customers”.<sup>3</sup>) Come to that —taxi or subway? If you’re concerned you’re not up to the task, let yourself off the hook. “Death avoidance is not an individual failing; it’s a cultural one,” Doughty writes; it’s up to the next generation of “death professionals” to facilitate a “safe, open interaction with death”. [FHTE, 232] Or perhaps you can’t imagine the courage required for a job like Sue Black’s. Be reassured by learning that she too has her terrors: mice. Why did she turn to human identification for her honours research project? Simply “to avoid the prospect of handling dead rodents”. [ATR, 291]

Black notes that in many languages, death is female, and throughout the book Black refers to her as “she”, which is striking and pleasing. She waits for us, death; the anniversary of the day of our dying lies “sly and unseen among all the other days of the year,” as Thomas Hardy wrote. If we don’t wait for her with open arms, we may at least do so with open eyes.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v16/n24/thomas-lynch/the-undertaking>

<sup>3</sup> <http://shrouds4all.blogspot.co.uk/>