



American Afterlife: Encounters in the Customs of Mourning

Kate Sweeney

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Someone dies. What happens next?

One family inters their matriarch's ashes on the floor of the ocean. Another holds a memorial weenie roast each year at a greenburial cemetery. An 1898 ad for embalming fluid promises, "You can make mummies with it!" while a leading contemporary burial vault is touted as impervious to the elements. A grieving mother, 150 years ago, might spend her days tending a garden at her daughter's grave. Today, she might tend the roadside memorial she erected at the spot her daughter was killed. One mother wears a locket containing her daughter's hair; the other, a necklace containing her ashes.

What happens after someone dies depends on our personal stories and on where those stories fall in a larger tale—that of death in America. It's a powerful tale that we usually keep hidden from our everyday lives until we have to face it.

American Afterlife by Kate Sweeney reveals this world through a collective portrait of Americans past and present who find themselves personally involved with death: a klatch of obit writers in the desert, a funeral voyage on the Atlantic, a fourth-generation funeral director—even a midwestern museum that takes us back in time to meet our deathobsessed Victorian progenitors. Each story illuminates details in another until something larger is revealed: a landscape that feels at once strange and familiar, one that's by turns odd, tragic, poignant, and sometimes even funny.

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