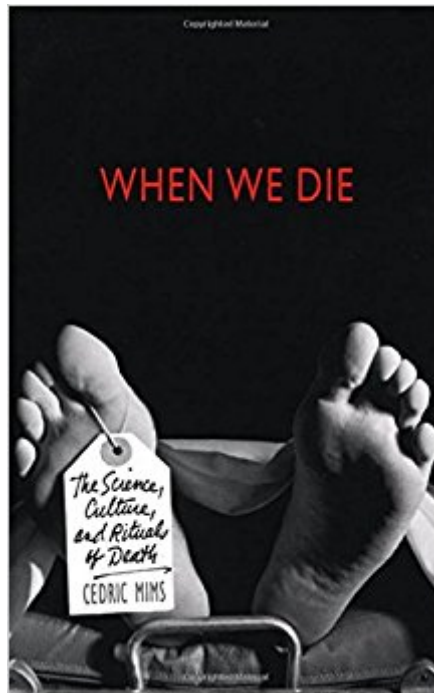


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# When We Die: The Science, Culture, And Rituals Of Death



## Synopsis

An unusually comprehensive study of death as both a social and scientific phenomenon, *When We Die* is as frank as it is informed. This far-reaching discussion considers mortality from the personal and the universal perspective, generously citing past and present poets and physicians from a diverse and telling range of traditions. Mims, who for two decades served as Professor of Microbiology at London's Guys Hospital, brings a humane, inquisitive, and learned sensibility to his topic. "This book is a light-hearted but wide-ranging survey of death, the causes of death, and the disposal of corpses," writes Mims. "It tells why we die and how we die, and what happens to the dead body and its bits and pieces. It describes the ways corpses are dealt with in different religions and in different parts of the world; the methods for preserving bodies; and the ways—fascinating in their diversity—in which corpses or parts of corpses are used and abused." The volume also explores such crucial death-based notions as the afterlife, the soul, and the prospect of immortality. By way of the book's main focus, Mims continues: "We should take a more matter-of-fact view of death [and] accept it and talk about it more than we do—as we have done with the once taboo subject of sex." This is a work that any student of social anthropology will find equally enlightening and essential.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

We'd like to think that only depressed teenage poets and heavy-metal gods are obsessed with death, but let's face it—we're all interested in the great equalizer. Microbiologist and world traveler Cedric Mims writes, "We should accept it and talk about it more than we do—as we have done with

the once taboo subject of sex." To that end, he has written *When We Die: The Science, Culture, and Rituals of Death* and started the conversation with wit and grace. Covering the physical facts and metaphysical beliefs concerning our last exits, Mims shows us that not all is dark and dreary, or even peaceful, on "the other side." The broad, largely untouched topic offers much fascinating material: cannibalism, organ transplants, mummification, and euthanasia all receive their due. Mims explores questions such as "Are corpses dangerous?" and "Who owns a dead body?" from many perspectives, drawing on his extensive reading and travels to create an intricate mosaic of answers. Though written almanac-style, with facts and stories loosely grouped into chapters, *When We Die* still possesses a cohesion that makes reading straight through as much fun as browsing. Taking care neither to offend nor to give in to the rigorous solemnity normally weighing on such discussions, Mims takes death out of the goth closet, dusts off the romance, and shows us how it really is. --Rob Lightner

Nearly encyclopedic in scope, this superb investigation of death in its medical, social, cultural and spiritual aspects will serve as a consciousness-raising tool for anyone who wants to come to terms with the inevitability of his or her eventual demise. Mims, a microbiologist and former professor at Guys Hospital in London, crams an enormous wealth of information into his concise yet meaningful coverage of a multitude of topics: cemeteries, ghosts, murder, capital punishment, crucifixion, religious relics, infanticide, abortion, mass extinctions of species and so forth. He digs up mind-boggling facts and figures: Every hour, 80-100 people commit suicide; auto safety researchers in Germany use corpses in car-crash tests; 43% of all deaths in the developing world result from largely curable infectious or parasitic diseases. Yet this is no mere compendium of data, thanks to Mims's lively writing style, impressive scholarship and unusually matter-of-fact approach. His survey of funeral rituals?from the austere, cheap nocturnal rites of the Puritans to the Dyaks of Borneo, who regaled a dead chief with food and drink?treats burial practices as a mirror of religious, social and economic history. He gives a blow-by-blow account of the aging process, explains death as nature's strategy to ensure evolutionary change and unravels the ethical, legal and medical issues surrounding euthanasia and organ transplants. Chapters on the exposure and cremation of corpses, cannibalism, medical cadavers and mummification (in Egypt, Peru, the Canary Islands) may prove unsettling for some, yet they are written with consummate tact and a broad historical perspective. Although Mims accepts death as permanent personal extinction, he surveys beliefs in an afterlife as well as near-death experiences. This remarkable tome is one of the best introductions available to a difficult topic. Eight pages of b&w photos. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Who wouldn't want to read this book? This book is amazing! It discusses anything and everything you can possibly think of involving death and the process of dying (Scientifically) Very interesting, especially if you are studying science.

Very detailed and an excellent read for those who wish to know what happens right down to cell level.

In "When We Die," Biology Professor Cedric Mims provides a succinct overview of all things macabre. He touches upon standard death and dying subjects such as embalming, burial, cremation, organ donation, and bereavement, as well as more unusual topics, including cannibalism, cellular suicide, mummification, compostoriums, acid baths, and necrophilia. No stone is left unturned in his discussion of death, dying, and "the science, culture, and rituals of death." As much as I enjoyed "When We Die," it was not without its flaws. For starters, it doesn't seem as though the book was properly edited. I wouldn't go as far to say that Mims is a BAD writer, but it could have been better. His misuse of commas, for instance, is atrocious. He also tends to have trouble transitioning between topics. Some of the awkwardness probably stems from the fact that Mims lives in England and spent some time in Australia and Africa. His phraseology can be clumsy and cumbersome, and I'm willing to bet that it's due to cultural differences. The book was initially released in the UK, and it doesn't appear to have been "cleaned up" for its US edition. Spelling and word usage differences remain intact, when his editor really should have changed them in the US version to reflect his new audience. Additionally, I found some of his statements to be questionable, while other claims were just plain incorrect. For example, he says that \$6 million, "spent over 10 years," is enough to clean all the water in third world countries and eliminate deaths due to diarrhea (that estimate seems awfully low, no?). He also refers to the 1978 Jonestown massacre as a "mass suicide" (despite overwhelming evidence that many members were murdered outright), and makes the dubious claim that, "in all cases [of sensational homicides] the murderer is mentally deranged." Taken together, these errors made me question the rest of the information Mims included in "When We Die." Though he does list 4+ pages of references, he does not use footnotes in his text - so it's usually impossible to tell what information he pulled from which sources. Nonetheless, "When We Die" is a fascinating and largely enjoyable read. Serious scholars may want to pass this one by, but it's an interesting and manageable discussion for laypeople.

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, the subject is fascinating, and Mims delves into many aspects of it: religious, ethical, archaeological, medical, etc. On the other hand, it is extremely poorly written. It reads as if it has not yet gone through an editor. Actually, mistakes like "This treatment costs at least \$120,000 dollars" make me think it may \*not\* have, at least not a competent one. And consider this passage on suicide: "The very careful, practical suicide may use multiple methods. An extreme example would be blowing one's brains out as one drives a car (with the exhaust directed into the car) over a cliff, having taken an overdose beforehand." A lame attempt at humor, and badly constructed at that. Makes you wonder how much care was given to the research conducted for the book. At any rate, it's bad for Mims' image, and hence for the book's. "When We Die" might be worth picking up at a deep discount as a quick overview of the subject, but I can't recommend it at full price.

Death is one of the great taboo subjects- you can't get the real story because no one wants to speak frankly about it. The subject is just too profound. You feel like a teenager trying to find out what sex means. You eventually find out what that means through study and experimentation-separating fact from fiction. But with death you only get to experiment 1 time-hard to separate wheat from chafe. If you have an interest in life's 2nd greatest landmark(after birth), I couldn't recommend this book more. Mr Mims is a very entertaining writer and seems to cover every imaginable aspect of death. His style is straight talking, stripping the subject of its mystery. Some of the things he covers include the mechanics of dying and burial, forms of suicide, what most people can expect to die of, how death is different than sleep, the hazards of immortality, how embalming works, forms of mummification, crime & how the police obtain clues from corpses, the religious side of death, and the possibility of the afterlife. I know this sounds pretty deep but it's very readable. Of particular interest were these little side articles...human relics in Christian Churches(8 churches claim to have Jesus' foreskin), the commercial use of Egyptian mummies in the 19th century, the body snatchers of England, and human sacrifice among the Aztecs. It's an excellent book.

This literary work is fascinating. It covers so many areas in a concise yet thorough manner. Almost addictive reading. Mims takes an obscured subject and breathes into it a new retrospect.

This book is wonderful. I learned something on every page. If you read one book on death this year, read this one. Better than an episode of Quincy.

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