

SOPHIE SEEBACH AND RANE WILLERSLEV (eds). *Mirrors of Passing: Unlocking the Mysteries of Death, Materiality, and Time*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2018. 294 pp. ISBN 978-1-78533-894-6.

We, the living, have always known that the dead are not really dead; recent film, tv, and literary favourites represent this fact to the audiences of today in *Game of Thrones* or zombie movies. Nor are the dead intended to be so in most cultures. The deceased continue their existence in the realm of the dead, whether we believe this is an actual place or just a matter of our imagination, and the living interact with them in various ways. The horror comes from the fear that the dead roam uncontrollably in the world of the living, and the living must also keep clear from the realm of the dead.

*Mirrors of Passing* was originally based on a museum exhibition at the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo. In the articles death and materiality are discussed in relation to various cultures and times. Time, perhaps, is the aspect that most thoroughly explains the ‘mysteries’ mentioned in the title of the book. Time is present and non-existent in the face of death; the dead have no time in their world; they are reborn in new family members and the deeds of the living.

There are thirteen research articles in the volume, divided into three parts: ‘Death’s Time’, ‘Materialities of Death’, and ‘Life After Death’. In the end we get a multifaceted picture of the planning of the museum exhibition and various ideas that were included in the process. In this brief review I can only shed light on some of the articles and aspects of the book. I hope they raise interest in this compelling collection in which anthropological research and its many traditions come to the fore.

The book opens beautifully with the introduction by Sophie Seebach and Rane Willerslev, in a parallel analysis of Neil Gaiman’s novel *The Graveyard Book*. I find this decision original and attractive. I read *The Graveyard Book* myself and found it fascinating, especially in the context of death studies. In Gaiman’s novel a small child loses his family and is brought up by the spirits living in an abandoned graveyard. Different aspects of this volume are displayed in the light of the experiences of the child. The dead experience the passing of time only in the presence of the living, as Seebach and Willerslev mention, comparing Gaiman’s novel to the findings in many texts of this book. Death also influences the temporalities of the living; death disrupts and interrupts the lives of people.

The realm of the dead is usually seen as the Other; the living are not allowed to enter it or are only able to do so with a high cost. The story of Orpheus, here presented by Marina Prusac-Lindhagen, has been popular through centuries. In the best-known version, the Legend, Orpheus descends to Hades to bring back his lover Eurydice, but tragically fails in the end. In the other version, the Theogony, themes of reincarnation and collective sustainability are discussed. Yet also in this case Orpheus meeting Hades in his realm is an intrusion on the relationship between death and time.

Death is always an emotional issue, to those who experience it in the first place, and also to the researcher. The reader is only allowed to see the shortened version of a process that

has taken years, sometimes decades, yet the feelings behind theoretical issues and the research process are often evident. In this book particularly heart-breaking are the narratives of Ebola: how the deadly disease has torn apart people's lives and even the few survivors are terminally marked by fear of death. In Theresa Ammann's contribution three people give a face to these tragic realities of Ebola-ridden West Africa. We may also find strong emotions behind making a five-year old boy a chain smoker, like his grandfather's brother whose name and character he is supposed to have taken over. The deceased is obviously missed greatly, even if we may consider it brutal to let a child smoke, as is described in Rane Willerslev's and Jeanette Lykkegård's article on the Chukchi culture of death.

Each text in the volume stands as an independent scholarly work, but comparisons can also be made between different ages and cultures. The Mongolian sacred stone cairns called *ooos* and the Danish internet mourning site Mindet.dk have certain similarities in their uses and place in the cosmos of the people. Malthe Lehmann discusses at length how Mongolians are rarely concurrent upon the age, origin, and meaning of the *ooos*. Yet we might find similar inconsistencies in asking the Danes about their online memorial sites; their creators and origin may be known, but the rituals, their contents, and personal experiences may vary greatly. Both the *ooos* and memorial sites are places where people connect with the dead. Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik point out how the death of an infant or stillbirth interrupts the narrative of a family, an expected future. In online sites the parents may tell a story of a child that never was or remember the little they got to know their baby. The parents use the online presence to

transform themselves from not being parents to the parents of a child, although a dead one. This way they create immortality to their child and continue their future as parents but in a different form.

Immortality may be given to many people and gained by various means. In the modern society media makes immortals of ordinary men: successful athletes are bound to become national heroes whose memory shall remain unaltered. In this context national and personal memories have taken the place of the transcendental; what afterlife people may have takes place in the media and people's experience.

Yet Biblical references and other religious imagery are easily used when discussing the rise and fall of sports heroes. Johanna Sumiala tells the story of the Finnish cross-country skier Mika Myllylä, who, after a shining career, was caught using doping in 2001. The media did not lose interest in Myllylä after this incident, on the contrary: his downfall and alcoholism were followed until his accidental death in 2011. Sumiala anchors her analysis to three key items: a photo of Myllylä struggling while training in a bog, a 'testament' Myllylä wrote 'to the people of Finland' after his positive doping test, and the media coverage of his death. Doping cast a shadow on Myllylä's achievements, unlike the recently deceased ski jumper Matti Nykänen. But also in Nykänen's case the public struggled to remember the person from his positive sides, forgetting the misery of the life after athletic career.

In modern Western thinking the idea of 'letting go' of the dead has been replaced with 'continuing bonds' in the past decades. This seems more realistic in the light of human history and anthropological evidence. People cannot let the dead lie in the sense that they are entirely forgotten after a certain period. In some

respect human cultures are primarily attempts to accept our own mortality and the mysterious world on the other side of existence. Yet we must also learn to live with the dead, or they will haunt us in many ways.

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