

# Stiff: the curious lives of human cadavers



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In what critics have called and I agree with, “ fascinating and oddly fun,”

Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers explores a world left normally untouched by humor and brings it into a new intriguing light. This work of non-fiction is nothing like I’ve ever read before. I enjoyed reading every page of this book and I learned facts that I hadn’t know prior to. The writer’s style is totally cool and funny.

If the approach to reading this book would be like reading a boring textbook, that assumption should be thrown out the window because I was giggling all throughout the book. I can personally relate to the book because it has a sense of humor that I really enjoy that touches on an odd subject matter. Usually seen in a morbid and creepy light, Mary Roach takes death and puts a humorous twist to it. The mentality that she has to choose to laugh instead of crying (or rather puking) I share with her, too.

The first chapter of the book is called A Head Is a Terrible Thing to Waste in which she observes plastic surgeons practicing techniques on decapitated heads. One of her first comical lines delivered was, “ so he got together with the heads—sorry, chiefs—of surgery at Baltimore’s hospitals and worked out a system” (Roach 27). The last line of the chapter is equally funny if not more so. “ As she slides back her chair, she looks down at the benapkined form and says, ‘ May she rest in peace. ’ I hear it as ‘ pieces,’ but that’s just me” (Roach 33). Her aspect of life and death definitely lets you view the world from another angle if only for a short time.

This particular text doesn’t really clash with my view of the world, but as I said already, I just see it from a different perspective. I definitely believe in

the phrase, “waste not, want not,” which could apply to using as much of the cadaver as humanly possible. Medical advances should not be held back nowadays because of religious views and beliefs. One could get into the debate over religion, science and politics and it would go in a hopeless circle with everyone debunking one another and so on. There will always be that argument between religion and science.

Religion relies on miracles and hope while science helps create those miracles by using facts, solid proof, and trial and error. As far as right and wrong goes, if the scientists have respect for the dead and an extended respect for religion (and vice versa) then the world could be less wrapped up in those silly little debates about what’s what and who’s right or wrong. To show an example of a scientist’s respect Roach says, “Many of the students gave their cadavers names. Not like Beef Jerky. Real names,” said one student” (Roach 39). I learned quite a few things from Stiff such as all the different uses for cadavers and more into the history of medicine.

It’s really kind of cool to find out things that I would have never given thought to if I had not read this book. I also came away with quirky ways of taking a common phrase and making it sound more intellectual. “Others must feel the same; there isn’t an anhydrous lacrimal gland in the house” (Roach 38). In other words ‘there wasn’t a dry eye in the house. Besides all of the fascinating information about the origins of the discipline of anatomy, and incredible behind-the-scenes glimpses into the medical realm, there’s a lot of unsettling and potentially disturbing information in Stiff. The book had a mesmerizing quality, but at times, it almost feels like an overload of information.

Reading it made me think about my own mortality, what I believe in and what I want to happen to my body after I die, yet there were places when I felt overwhelmed. There were certainly moments when I considered that my response to Stiff would differ greatly if I had recently lost a loved one after prolonged illness, surgery, or in an accident. After this thought occurred, I then thought how certain parts had to be serious because not everything in this world is a joke. “ They focus on the parts, not the person. During the autopsy, they’ll be describing the eyes, then the mouth.

You don’t stand back and say, ‘ This is a person who is the father of four. ’ It’s the only way you can emotionally survive” (Roach 116-117). I absolutely loved this book. It was compelling, interesting, and I would most definitely read something similar to this again.

If I were to recommend this book to someone, it’d be the type of person with my sense of humor; my dad for instance. I think I’d say that this is an important book for people to read because it takes some of the mystery out of the physical part of death. I don’t think it is a book for everyone, because I doubt everyone could remain distanced enough to get through the detailed descriptions in most of the chapters . Roach, Mary. Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers.

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