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Stiff: The Curious Lives Of Human Cadavers



Synopsis

An oddly compelling, often hilarious exploration of the strange lives of our bodies postmortem. For 2,000 years, cadavers-some willingly, some unwittingly-have been involved in science's boldest strides and weirdest undertakings. They've tested France's first guillotines, ridden the NASA Space Shuttle, been crucified in a Parisian laboratory to test the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, and helped solve the mystery of TWA Flight 800. For every new surgical procedure-from heart transplants to gender reassignment surgery-cadavers have been there alongside surgeons, making history in their quiet way. In this fascinating, ennobling account, Mary Roach visits the good deeds of cadavers over the centuries-from the anatomy labs and human-sourced pharmacies of medieval and nineteenth-century Europe to a human decay research facility in Tennessee, to a plastic surgery practice lab, to a Scandinavian funeral directors' conference on human composting. In her droll, inimitable voice, Roach tells the engrossing story of our bodies when we are no longer with them. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

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Customer Reviews

This is a book about dead bodies. As Mary Roach demonstrates in her new book, some bodies go on to do remarkable things, such as helping FAA investigators understand why a plane crashed or helping auto-makers design safety features that save thousands of lives. Others are asked to do nothing more than rot away quietly at a research lab where forensic scientists study decomposition in order to improve crime scene investigation techniques. Some are put to slightly more

questionable uses, such as the severed heads used by plastic surgeons to practice their facelift technique (surely not what people had in mind when they donated their bodies to science). Others have had even more bizarre adventures. Cadavers have been nailed to a cross in order to prove the authenticity of the shroud of Turin. Severed heads have been poked, prodded, and given transfusions in an attempt to revive them long after they and their bodies have parted ways. The anonymous cadavers that are the subjects of STIFF could hardly have asked for a livelier or more sympathetic chronicler than Mary Roach, who has managed to write a book that balances sensitivity and respect with a wonderfully sharp wit. In fact, STIFF is unexpectedly and quite blessedly hilarious, although the humor never comes at the expense of the dead bodies that populate its pages. Instead, Roach uses humor as a kind of psychic safety valve, a vital and much-appreciated tension release from what is, at times, some very intense subject matter. The real highlights of this book are the sections that delve into some of the more disreputable uses of cadavers. There is a droll and utterly hilarious history of body snatching and a short overview of medicinal cannibalism (human mummy confection, anyone?).

A few nights ago I made a weekend resolution that I'd tackle the much-neglected stack of fiction that teeters on my bedside table. However, while reverentially picking up 'The Body Artist' by Don DeLillo, I was distracted by a misplaced reader's copy of Mary Roach's 'Stiff'. Evidently, despite my best intentions, a modest volume of non-fiction had managed to steal its way into my fiction pile. As morbid curiosity has always been a personal failing, I cheerfully chucked aside 'The Body Artist' and eagerly cracked open Roach's book. For the first time in over two years, I read an entire volume in one sitting. Roach opens her book with the comparison of death to a pleasure cruise: The way I see it, being dead is not terribly far off from being on a cruise ship. Most of your time is spent lying on your back. The brain has shut down. The flesh begins to soften. Nothing much new happens, and nothing is expected of you....Stiff is, without a doubt, a bizarre yet remarkably engaging read: not surprising since Roach is such a terrific writer. The author possesses the ingenious ability of being able to make digestible the most repulsive of subjects. Curious, yet not callous, Roach manages to ask-and yes, answer-questions often best left unspoken (keeping in mind public decorum). Furthermore, Roach is hilarious. Quite honestly I was surprised at how many times the author prompted (albeit sometimes guilty) laughter. A neat trick that, keeping in mind the grisly subject matter. Roach gleefully covers merry topics such as: practicing surgery on the dead, embalment, body snatching, the process of decay, human crash test dummies, crucifixion experiments, live burials, human head transplants, ecological (read: green) releasments, and everyone's all-time

favourite- cannibalism.

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