



The Victorian Book of the Dead

By Chris Woodyard



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The Victorian Book of the Dead By Chris Woodyard

Chris Woodyard, author of the *The Ghosts of the Past* series, digs through long-buried newspapers and journals, for this fascinating look at the 19th-century obsession with the culture of death. *The Victorian Book of the Dead* unearths extraordinary tales of Victorian funeral fads and fancies, ghost stories, bizarre deaths, mourning novelties, gallows humor, premature burial, post-mortem photographs, death omens, and funeral disasters. Resurrected from original sources, these accounts reveal the oddities and eccentricities of Victorian mourning. Packed with macabre anecdotes, this diverting, yet gruesome collection presents tales ranging from the paranormal and shocking to the heartbreaking. Some of the stories in *The Victorian Book of the Dead* *mourning bicycles, black boudoirs, and sable cigarettes for the up-to-date widow *a child ghost who beckoned for her father to follow her into death *black dogs and shrieking banshee who foretold death and disaster *the widow who fired the undertaker who would not give her trading stamps. *a corpse that spontaneously combusted in the coffin *the fiendish parrot who murdered his mistress *The petrified corpse furniture created by Professor Segato *visions of the Grim Reaper and the Angel of Death *the man who lived in the tomb of his wife *A mourning wreath made from the hair of a murdered family *interviews with undertakers, post-mortem photographers and morgue attendants And many more tales from the crypts.



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Editorial Review

Review

Take a new source-rich favourite the Victorian Book of the Dead by Chris Woodyard, which has been haunting Beach's dreams for a couple of months now....Now CW has been offering the world readers on various unusual, typically anomalous subjects, for a decade..The author not only finds obscure sources, she then illustrates these obscure sources with other obscure sources and the whole is told with her edged sense of humour. These sources are sewn together into chapters with similar sources and CW offers general conclusions or has the supreme good taste to let the sources do so themselves. She calls her method selecting and editing and this is a better description than reader, but it doesn't really tell the whole story either: the truth is that CW has taken a despised genre, the source manual, and made it into an artform; she found the reader brick and left it marble...Now if we had a Professor Death from, say, the University of Rhode Island doing the same thing, he would have straightforward chapters in his death book: there would be the death bed, (inevitably) gender and death, the coffin, the funeral, the religious rites (with some reflections on the death of God), mourning and just possibly an interesting preface... However, CW is not Professor Death. Some of the chapter headings are included here because they open a crack of light into her disturbing mind: Crape: Its Uses and Abuses, The Corpse Sat Up: Wakes and Watches Gone Wrong, Died of Lizards: Strange Deaths ... Professor Death from RI will raise his eyebrows at this partial list: he will probably find it infantile and will be astounded when his word search for Nietzsche turns up nothing. But you and I have only the money to buy and read one book. So who will you go with? CW and the lizards (15.94 USD) or Professor Death and his footnotes on Foucault (79.99 USD)? Thought so. Make no mistake death is a difficult subject and BotD is not a page turner: the stories, however, stay with you like head-lice; there is, for example, one description of a newborn's death that you will never be able to forget... Beach, in fact, has read this book on and off slowly over three months for the simple reason that he doesn't much like the idea of his own demise: and he kept skipping the page with the dead baby photograph (p. 161), but accidentally and repeatedly opened the book there....He came out learning, though, more than he ever would had he gone with Professor Death's Death and Dying, 1850-1903, the one that retails for just under 80 dollars hardback and 78 dollars on Kindle. It is true that there are lots of infantile details in CW's work: the child who was buried after twisting up his insides by somersaulting or the children who perished from skipping, the woman who had to be shaved on her deathbed, as unknown to the world, she had facial hair; the spiritualist who killed herself to make a prediction work; the mother who drank poison and threw herself into her child's open grave; the man who survived being butchered by the doctors who had grave-robbed him; the letters from the dead (the 19C equivalent of phonecalls from the dead?); the graveyard in which amputated fingers and legs of railwaymen were buried... So a raspberry to Professor Death... The truth is that we come much closer to the essence of the experience of nineteenth-century death through CW's infantile examples than we would, say, in an essay by Ruskin, carefully annotated by Prof Death. And what do we learn from her infantile details? Remember the old adage, a historian must read until they can hear the dead speaking? Well, when you finish this they they'll be shouting and what they say is not very nice... --Beachcombing's Bizarre History Blog

About the Author

Chris Woodyard grew up with the stories and artifacts of Victorian death: the post-mortem photograph of an infant in a family attic, the tale of how the body of her great-great-Grandfather was never found when he was killed at the Battle of Chickamauga and how one of his daughters would never turn away a tramp, thinking it might be her father, come back. This, combined with a family love of ghost stories and a personal taste for the grim and the gruesome, inspired this book. She is the author of the Haunted Ohio series, The Ghosts of the Past series and the chronicler of Mrs Daffodil, an efficiently murderous Edwardian housekeeper (See A

Spot of Bother: Four Macabre Tales.)

Users Review

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