

More Praise for *Stiff*

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A *San Francisco Chronicle* "Best Book of 2003"

An *Entertainment Weekly* "Best Book of 2003"

Named one of *Las Vegas Mercury's* "Best Books of 2003"

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"Roach is authoritative, endlessly curious and drolly funny. Her research is scrupulous and winningly presented."

—Adam Woog, *Seattle Times*

"This quirky, funny read offers perspective and insight about life, death and the medical profession.... You can close this book with an appreciation of the miracle that the human body really is."

—Tara Parker-Pope, *Wall Street Journal*

"'Uproariously funny' doesn't seem a likely description for a book on cadavers. However, Roach...has done the nearly impossible and written a book as informative and respectful as it is irreverent and witty."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"One does not skim this book. Every detail is riveting. It is impossible to tear one's eyes away from Roach's description."

—Henry Kisor, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"Surprisingly lively."

—Mark Rozzo, *The New Yorker*

"The author's witty voice breathes new life into the study of human cadavers and their role in research.... She proves that it's never too late to contribute something good to society."

—Chrissy Persico, *Daily News*

“Mary Roach is one of an endangered species: a science writer with a sense of humor. She is able to make macabre funny without looting death of its dignity.”

—Brian Richard Boylan, *Denver Post*

“A joy to read.... This is wonderful stuff.”

—Tim Redmond, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*

“Roach writes in an insouciant style and displays her métier in tangents about bizarre incidents in pathological history. Death may have the last laugh, but, in the meantime, Roach finds merriment in the macabre.”

—Gilbert Taylor, *Booklist*

“Roach adopts the Michael Moore approach to the unliving...by getting very up close and personal with the cadaver industry. Splicing humorous anecdotes and historical tidbits she leaves no corpse unturned.”

—Tony McMenamin, *Maxim*

“Roach’s conversational tone and her gallows humor bring her subjects to life.”

—Alex Abramovich, *People*

“Roach seems intent on helping us (and herself) get a better handle on the meaning of death, or, at least, on making one’s own death meaningful.”

—Steve Fiffer, *Chicago Tribune*

“Roach deftly treads the line between glib flippancy and somber reverence...without sentimentality.... [She] describes cadaver superhuman feats with cleverness and poignancy, and makes a convincing case that as long as death is fatal, it might as well be interesting.”

—Erica C. Barnett, *The Stranger*

“With determined probing, a focused eye, and a delightful sense of humor author Mary Roach has written a compelling study of the history and current use of cadavers.”

—Deborah Love, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“*[Stiff]* is a fascinating book and, once you pick it up, you won’t likely put it down.”

—William R. Wineke, *Wisconsin State Journal*

“[Roach] has written a curiously funny, touching, respectful study.... [She] bravely goes where we wouldn’t want to go.”

—Nancy Summers, *Tampa Tribune*

“Mary Roach’s *Stiff* is genuinely funny and destined to be a classic read.”

“[Roach’s] style is genuinely warm, and she has a keen eye for observation of unique and ironic details...dead bodies have never been more fascinating.”

—Michael Jaffe, *Express-News*, San Antonio

“Droll, dark, and quite wise, *Stiff* makes being dead funny and fascinating and weirdly appealing.”

—Susan Orlean, author of *The Orchid Thief*

“As fascinating as it is funny, as sensitive as it is probing, Mary Roach’s *Stiff* is above all an important account of how we treat the dead—literally. The research is admirable, the anecdotes carefully chosen, and the prose lively.”

—Caleb Carr, author of *The Alienist*

“Mary Roach proves what many of us have long suspected: that the real fun in life doesn’t start until you’re dead. I particularly enjoyed the sections about head transplants, black-market mummies, and how to tell if you’re actually dead.”

—Joe Queenan, author of *My Goodness:
A Cynic’s Short-Lived Search for Sainthood*

“Mary Roach is the funniest science writer in the country. If that sounds like faint praise—or even an oxymoron—there’s proof to the contrary on almost any page of this book. *Stiff* tells us where the bodies are, what they’re up to, and the astonishing tales they sometimes have to tell. Best of all it manages, somehow, to find humor in cadavers without robbing them of their dignity. Long live the dead.”

—Burkhard Bilger, author of *Noodling for Flatheads*

STIFF

THE CURIOUS LIVES OF HUMAN CADAVERS



MARY **R**OACH



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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.

If I were to take a cruise, I would prefer that it be one of those research cruises, where the passengers, while still spending much of the day lying on their backs with blank minds, also get to help out with a scientist's research project. These cruises take their passengers to unknown, unimagined places. They give them the chance to do things they would not otherwise get to do.

I guess I feel the same way about being a corpse. Why lie around on your back when you can do something interesting and new, something *useful*? For every surgical procedure developed, from heart transplants to gender reassignment surgery, cadavers have been there alongside the surgeons, making history in their own quiet, sundered way. For two thousand years, cadavers—some willingly, some unwittingly—have been involved in science's boldest strides and weirdest undertakings. Cadavers were around to help test France's first guillotine, the "humane" alternative to hanging. They were there at the labs of Lenin's embalmers, helping test the latest techniques. They've been there (on paper) at Congressional hearings, helping make the case for mandatory seat belts. They've ridden the Space Shuttle (okay, pieces of them), helped a graduate student in Tennessee debunk spontaneous human combustion, been crucified in a Parisian laboratory to test the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin.

In exchange for their experiences, these cadavers agree to a sizable amount of gore. They are dismembered, cut open, rearranged. But here's the thing: They don't *endure* anything. Cadavers are our superheroes: They brave fire without flinching, withstand falls from tall buildings and head-on car crashes into walls. You can fire a gun at them or run a speedboat over their legs, and it will not faze them. Their heads can be removed with no deleterious effect. They can be in six places at once. I take the Superman point of view: What a shame to waste these powers, to not use them for the betterment of humankind.

This is a book about notable achievements made while dead. There are people long forgotten for their contributions while alive, but immortalized in the pages of books and journals. On my wall is a calendar from the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. The photograph for October is of a piece of human skin, marked up with arrows and tears; it was used by surgeons to figure out whether an incision would be less likely to tear if it ran lengthwise or crosswise. To me, ending up an exhibit in the Mütter Museum or a skeleton in a medical school classroom is like donating money for a park bench after you're gone: a nice thing to do, a little hit of immortality. This is a book about the sometimes odd, often shocking, always compelling things cadavers have done.

Not that there's anything wrong with just lying around on your back. In its way, rotting is interesting too, as we will see. It's just that there are other ways to spend your time as a cadaver. Get involved with science. Be an art exhibit. Become part of a tree. Some options for you to think about.

Death. It doesn't have to be boring.

There are those who will disagree with me, who feel that to do anything other than bury or cremate the dead is disrespectful. That includes, I suspect, writing about them. Many people will find this book disrespectful. There is nothing amusing about being dead, they will say. Ah, but there is. Being dead is absurd. It's the silliest situation you'll find yourself in. Your limbs are floppy and uncooperative. Your mouth hangs open. Being dead is unsightly and stinky and embarrassing, and there's not a damn thing to be done about it.

This book is not about death as in dying. Death, as in dying, is sad and profound. There is nothing funny about losing someone you love, or about being the person about to be lost. This book is about the already dead, the anonymous, behind-the-scenes dead. The cadavers I have seen were not depressing or heart-wrenching or repulsive. They seemed sweet and well-intentioned, sometimes sad and occasionally amusing. Some were beautiful, some monsters. Some wore sweatpants and some were naked, some in pieces, others whole.

All were strangers to me. I would not want to watch an experiment, no matter how interesting or important, that involved the remains of someone I knew and loved. (There are a few who do. Ronn Wade, who runs the anatomical gifts program at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, told me that some years back a woman whose husband had willed his body to the university asked if she could watch the dissection. Wade gently said no.) I feel this way not because what I would be watching is disrespectful, or wrong, but because I could not, emotionally, separate that cadaver from the person it recently was. One's own dead are more than cadavers, they are place holders for the living. They are the focus, a receptacle, for emotions that no longer have one. The dead of science are always strangers.*

Let me tell you about my first cadaver. I was thirty-six, and it was eighty-one. It was my mother's. I notice here that I used the possessive "my mother's," as if to say the cadaver that belonged to my mother, not the cadaver that *was* my mother. My mom was never a cadaver; no person ever is. You are a person and then you cease to be a person, and a cadaver takes your place. My mother was gone. The cadaver was her hull. Or that was how it seemed to me.

It was a warm September morning. The funeral home had told me and my brother Rip to show up there about an hour before the church service. We thought there were papers to fill out. The mortician ushered us into a large, dim, hushed room with heavy drapes and too much air-conditioning. There was a coffin at one end, but this seemed normal enough, for a mortuary. My brother and I stood there awkwardly. The mortician cleared his throat and looked toward the coffin. I suppose we should have recognized it, as we'd picked it out and paid for it the day before, but we didn't. Finally the man walked over and gestured at it, bowing slightly, in the manner of a maître d' showing diners to their table. There, just beyond his open palm, was our mother's face. I wasn't expecting it. We hadn't requested a viewing, and the memorial service was closed-coffin. We got it anyway. They'd shampooed and waved her hair and made up her face. They'd done a great job, but I felt taken, as if we'd asked for the basic carwash and they'd gone ahead and detailed her. Hey, I wanted to say, we didn't order this. But of course I said nothing. Death makes us helplessly polite.

The mortician told us we had an hour with her. and quietly retreated. Rip looked at me. An *hour*

What do you do with a dead person for an hour? Mom had been sick for a long time; we'd done our grieving and crying and saying goodbye. It was like being served a slice of pie you didn't want to eat. We felt it would be rude to leave, after all the trouble they'd gone to. We walked up to the coffin for closer look. I placed my palm on her forehead, partly as a gesture of tenderness, partly to see what a dead person felt like. Her skin was cold the way metal is cold, or glass.

A week ago at that time, Mom would have been reading the *Valley News* and doing the Jumble. As far as I know, she'd done the Jumble every morning for the past forty-five years. Sometimes in the hospital, I'd get up on the bed with her and we'd work on it together. She was bedridden, and it was one of the last things she could still do and enjoy. I looked at Rip. Should we all do the Jumble together one last time? Rip went out to the car to get the paper. We leaned on the coffin and read the clues aloud. That was when I cried. It was the small things that got to me that week: finding her bingo winnings when we cleaned out her dresser drawers, emptying the fourteen individually wrapped pieces of chicken from her freezer, each one labeled "chicken" in her careful penmanship. And the Jumble. Seeing her cadaver was strange, but it wasn't really sad. It wasn't *her*.

What I found hardest to get used to this past year was not the bodies I saw, but the reactions of people who asked me to tell them about my book. People want to be excited for you when they hear you are writing a book; they want to have something nice to say. A book about dead bodies is a conversational curveball. It's all well and good to write an article about corpses, but a full-size book plants a red flag on your character. *We knew Mary was quirky, but now we're wondering if she's, you know, okay.* I experienced a moment last summer at the checkout desk at the medical school library at the University of California, San Francisco, that sums up what it is like to write a book about cadavers. A young man was looking at the computer record of the books under my name: *The Principles and Practice of Embalming*, *The Chemistry of Death*, *Gunshot Injuries*. He looked at the book I now wished to check out: *Proceedings of the Ninth Stapp Car Crash Conference*. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. It was all there in his glance. Often when I checked out a book I expected to be questioned. Why do you want this book? What are you up to? What kind of person are you?

They never asked, so I never told them. But I'll tell you now. I'm a curious person. Like all journalists, I'm a voyeur. I write about what I find fascinating. I used to write about travel. I traveled to escape the known and the ordinary. The longer I did this, the farther afield I had to go. By the time I found myself in Antarctica for the third time, I began to search closer at hand. I began to look for the foreign lands between the cracks. Science was one such land. Science involving the dead was particularly foreign and strange and, in its repellent way, enticing. The places I traveled to this past year were not as beautiful as Antarctica, but they were as strange and interesting and, I hope, as worthy of sharing.



1

A HEAD IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

Practicing surgery on the dead

The human head is of the same approximate size and weight as a roaster chicken. I have never before had occasion to make the comparison, for never before today have I seen a head in a roasting pan. But here are forty of them, one per pan, resting face-up on what looks to be a small pet-food bowl. The heads are for plastic surgeons, two per head, to practice on. I'm observing a facial anatomy and face-lift refresher course, sponsored by a southern university medical center and led by a half-dozen of America's most sought-after face-lifters.

The heads have been put in roasting pans—which are of the disposable aluminum variety—for the same reason chickens are put in roasting pans: to catch the drippings. Surgery, even surgery upon the dead, is a tidy, orderly affair. Forty folding utility tables have been draped in lavender plastic cloths, and a roasting pan is centered on each. Skin hooks and retractors are set out with the pleasing precision of restaurant cutlery. The whole thing has the look of a catered reception. I mention to the young woman whose job it was to set up the seminar this morning that the lavender gives the room a cheery sort of Easter-party feeling. Her name is Theresa. She replies that lavender was chosen because it's a soothing color.

It surprises me to hear that men and women who spend their days pruning eyelids and vacuuming fat would require anything in the way of soothing, but severed heads can be upsetting even to professionals. Especially fresh ones ("fresh" here meaning unembalmed). The forty heads are from people who have died in the past few days and, as such, still look very much the way they looked

while those people were alive. (Embalming hardens tissues, making the structures less pliable and the surgery experience less reflective of an actual operation.)

For the moment, you can't see the faces. They've been draped with white cloths, pending the arrival of the surgeons. When you first enter the room, you see only the tops of the heads, which are shaved down to stubble. You could be looking at rows of old men reclining in barber chairs with hot towels on their faces. The situation only starts to become dire when you make your way down the rows. Now you see stumps, and the stumps are not covered. They are bloody and rough. I was picturing something cleanly sliced, like the edge of a deli ham. I look at the heads, and then I look at the lavender tablecloths. Horrify me, soothe me, horrify me.

They are also very short, these stumps. If it were my job to cut the heads off bodies, I would leave the neck and cap the gore somehow. These heads appear to have been lopped off just below the chin, as though the cadaver had been wearing a turtleneck and the decapitator hadn't wished to damage the fabric. I find myself wondering whose handiwork this is.

"Theresa?" She is distributing dissection guides to the tables, humming quietly as she works.

"Mm?"

"Who cuts off the heads?"

Theresa answers that the heads are sawed off in the room across the hall, by a woman named Yvonne. I wonder out loud whether this particular aspect of Yvonne's job bothers her. Likewise Theresa. It was Theresa who brought the heads in and set them up on their little stands. I ask her about this.

"What I do is, I think of them as wax."

Theresa is practicing a time-honored coping method: objectification. For those who must deal with human corpses regularly, it is easier (and, I suppose, more accurate) to think of them as objects, not people. For most physicians, objectification is mastered their first year of medical school, in the gross anatomy lab, or "gross lab," as it is casually and somewhat aptly known. To help depersonalize the human form that students will be expected to sink knives into and eviscerate, anatomy lab personnel often swathe the cadavers in gauze and encourage students to unwrap as they go, part by part.

The problem with cadavers is that they look so much like people. It's the reason most of us prefer a pork chop to a slice of whole suckling pig. It's the reason we say "pork" and "beef" instead of "pig" and "cow." Dissection and surgical instruction, like meat-eating, require a carefully maintained set of illusions and denial. Physicians and anatomy students must learn to think of cadavers as wholly unrelated to the people they once were. "Dissection," writes historian Ruth Richardson in *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, "requires in its practitioners the effective suspension or suppression of many normal physical and emotional responses to the wilful mutilation of the body of another human being."

Heads—or more to the point, faces—are especially unsettling. At the University of California, San Francisco, in whose medical school anatomy lab I would soon spend an afternoon, the head and

hands are often left wrapped until their dissection comes up on the syllabus. “So it’s not so intense,” one student would later tell me. “Because that’s what you see of a person.”

The surgeons are beginning to gather in the hallway outside the lab, filling out paperwork and chatting volubly. I go out to watch them. Or to not watch the heads, I’m not sure which. No one pays much attention to me, except for a small, dark-haired woman, who stands off to the side, staring at me. She doesn’t look as if she wants to be my friend. I decide to think of her as wax. I talk with the surgeons, most of whom seem to think I’m part of the setup staff. A man with a shrubbery of white chest hair in the V-neck of his surgical scrubs says to me: “Were y’in there injectin’ ’em with water? A Texas accent makes taffy of his syllables. “Plumpin’ ’em up?” Many of today’s heads have been around a few days and have, like any refrigerated meat, begun to dry out. Injections of saline, he explains, are used to freshen them.

Abruptly, the hard-eyed wax woman is at my side, demanding to know who I am. I explain that the surgeon in charge of the symposium invited me to observe. This is not an entirely truthful rendering of the events. An entirely truthful rendering of the events would employ words such as “wheedle,” “plead,” and “attempted bribe.”

“Does publications know you’re here? If you’re not cleared through the publications office, you’ll have to leave.” She strides into her office and dials the phone, staring at me while she talks, like security guards in bad action movies just before Steven Seagal clubs them on the head from behind.

One of the seminar organizers joins me. “Is Yvonne giving you a hard time?”

Yvonne! My nemesis is none other than the cadaver beheader. As it turns out, she is also the lab manager, the person responsible when things go wrong, such as writers fainting and/or getting sick to their stomach and then going home and writing books that refer to anatomy lab managers as beheaders. Yvonne is off the phone now. She has come over to outline her misgivings. The seminar organizer reassures her. My end of the conversation takes place entirely in my head and consists of a single repeated line. *You cut off heads. You cut off heads. You cut off heads.*

Meanwhile, I’ve missed the unveiling of the faces. The surgeons are already at work, leaning kiss-close over their specimens and glancing up at video monitors mounted above each work station. On the screen are the hands of an unseen narrator, demonstrating the procedures on a head of his own. The shot is an extreme close-up, making it impossible to tell, without already knowing, what kind of flesh it is. It could be Julia Child skinning poultry before a studio audience.

The seminar begins with a review of facial anatomy. “Elevate the skin in a subcutaneous plane from lateral to medial,” intones the narrator. Obliging, the surgeons sink scalpels into faces. The flesh gives no resistance and yields no blood.

“Isolate the brow as a skin island.” The narrator speaks slowly, in a flat tone. I’m sure the idea is to sound neither excited and delighted at the prospect of isolating skin islands, nor overly dismayed. The net effect is that he sounds chemically sedated, which seems to me like a good idea.

I walk up and down the rows. The heads look like rubber Halloween masks. They also look like human heads, but my brain has no precedent for human heads on tables or in roasting pans or anywhere other than on top of human bodies, and so I think it has chosen to interpret the sight in a

more comforting manner. *Here we are at the rubber mask factory. Look at the nice men and women working on the masks.* I used to have a Halloween mask of an old toothless man whose lips fell in upon his gums. There are several of him here. There is a Hunchback of Notre Dame, bat-nosed and with lower teeth exposed, and a Ross Perot.

The surgeons don't seem queasy or repulsed, though Theresa told me later that one of them had to leave the room. "They hate it," she says. "It" meaning working with heads. I sense from them only mild discomfort with their task. As I stop at their tables to watch, they turn to me with a vaguely irritated, embarrassed look. You've seen that look if you make a habit of entering bathrooms without knocking. The look says, Please go away.

Though the surgeons clearly do not relish dissecting dead people's heads, they just as clearly value the opportunity to practice and explore on someone who isn't going to wake up and look in the mirror anytime soon. "You have a structure you keep seeing [during surgeries], and you're not sure what it is, and you're afraid to cut it," says one surgeon. "I came here with four questions." If he leaves today with answers, it will have been worth the \$500. The surgeon picks his head up and sets it back down, adjusting its position like a seamstress pausing to shift the cloth she is working on. He points out that the heads aren't cut off out of ghoulishness. They are cut off so that someone else can make use of the other pieces: arms, legs, organs. In the world of donated cadavers, nothing is wasted. Before their face-lifts, today's heads got nose jobs in the Monday rhinoplasty lab.

It's the nose jobs that I trip over. Kindly, dying southerners willed their bodies for the betterment of science, only to end up as practice runs for nose jobs? Does it make it okay that the kindly southerners, being dead kindly southerners, have no way of knowing that this is going on? Or does the deceit compound the crime? I spoke about this later with Art Dalley, the director of the Medical Anatomy Program at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and an expert in the history of anatomical gift-giving. "I think there's a surprising number of donors who really don't care what happens to them," Dalley told me. "To them it's just a practical means of disposing of a body, a practical means that fortunately has a ring of altruism."

Though it's harder to justify the use of a cadaver for practicing nose jobs than it is for practicing coronary bypasses, it is justifiable nonetheless. Cosmetic surgery exists, for better or for worse, and it's important, for the sake of those who undergo it, that the surgeons who do it are able to do it well. Though perhaps there ought to be a box for people to check, or not check, on their body donor form:

*Okay to use me for cosmetic purposes.**—

I sit down at Station 13, with a Canadian surgeon named Marilena Marignani. Marilena is dark-haired, with large eyes and strong cheekbones. Her head (the one on the table) is gaunt, with a similarly strong set to the bones. It's an odd way for the two women's lives to intersect; the head doesn't need a face-lift, and Marilena doesn't usually do them. Her practice is primarily reconstructive plastic surgery. She has done only two face-lifts before and wants to hone her skills before undertaking a procedure on a friend. She wears a mask over her nose and mouth, which is surprising, because a severed head is in no danger of infection. I ask whether this is more for her own protection, a sort of psychological barrier.

Marilena replies that she doesn't have a problem with heads. "For me, hands are hard." She looks up from what she's doing. "Because you're holding this disconnected hand, and it's holding you

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