

**This Book Will Make You Want to Buy (or Forego...) Life Insurance**  
by Emma Burris



Tuition paid in corpses. Cannibalism as palliative care. Human head transplants and crucified limbs. What twisted, R-rated, dystopian horror plot is this?

No, actually—these are just a few of the many topics covered in bestselling popular science book *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, published by comedic science writer Mary Roach.

In *Stiff*, Roach deconstructs our pre-existing ideas of the utility of human cadavers by highlighting “notable achievements made while dead,” a feat you probably had not considered until this very moment.

“Death,” Roach argues, “doesn’t have to be boring.” With Roach’s macabre quips (“My nemesis is none other than the cadaver beheader”) and determination to

ask all the questions we're socialized *not* to ask ("Will he be wearing anything, or will his penis just be hanging out?"), she makes it riveting. Roach constructs seamless transitions from present-day to historical contexts, indulging all our most taboo curiosities in a stream-of-consciousness manner. She is blunt and doesn't hold back, which will satiate the morbidly curious and horrify the squeamish, easily offended, and sufferers of existential dread.

With some masterful combination of cunning and wit, Roach manages to get the approval to walk through doors that will be forever closed to the rest of us. She marches us through several dissections, an operating room, plastic surgery practice on severed heads, and leads us on a quest to fact-check reports of medicinal cannibalism, among other escapades.

I made the mistake of reading the chapter "Life After Death," on the 1 train on my way to see an ENT. Here, Roach visits a "body farm" where scientists study the process of untampered human decay. As she likened maggots burrowing into corpse's belly buttons to a "rice grain mosh pit," I was compelled to avert my eyes. Who can stomach such things on their way to get their swollen lymph nodes checked out?

As I took desperate glances away from my book, I noticed the characters surrounding me. Someone biting their dirt-ridden nails. A woman holding sheet music and quietly humming an opera score to herself. A man putting new batteries in a digital camera. I kept imagining them around me in a state of putrefaction. Even if we're embalmed, us humans will all still face the same fate, get eaten up by our own bacteria, bloat and pop and melt.

Occasionally, Roach's signature humor fell flat for me. While it usually served to engage readers and normalize conversations about death—for example, during a tangent where Roach grapples with the best way to ask a Chinese translator to convey wanting to speak to cannibals—there were some notable exceptions. I was especially put off by comparisons of a spiritual moment in the operating room to her childhood attempts at telekinesis, likening of the embalming process to frat parties heavy with alcohol poisoning, and lazy jabs at people's personal characteristics (for example, Roach judges people as "loopy" or their names as "humiliating"). Roach best describes this approach herself: "I asked tactlessly," she writes about whether or not a polymer-preserved body is presented nude.

As my reading progressed, I began to take a more open-minded outlook towards what we deem as "disgusting." Activities that once evoked visceral revulsion within me—finding strangers' pubes on public toilet seats, fishing a dropped earring out of a bulging wet trash can, accidentally touching foreign goo on the subway seat—became appreciations of the fact that we are all made up of the same organic material. A prize peacock and decaying roadkill, the soft cheeks of a newborn and an undigested heap of dog vomit—we are all one and the same.

Roach comes to a similar conclusion, focusing on the great equalizing power of death. She writes, “There is no dignified way to go...It takes the careful application of a well-considered euphemism...to bring it to the point of acceptance.”

In *Stiff*, we’re left to ponder—why do modern-day humans hate thinking about cadavers? We tackle the spiritual speculations of death often, from organized religion to back-and-forths between friends, but rarely the physical reality. Our current methods of coping with human decay are just that—a way to cope. Instead, Roach argues, we should embrace the eccentricities that await us after our last breaths, make ourselves comfortable with our inevitable gore, and take that opportunity to choose to leave a positive impact on the world with our deaths.