Book Reviews


The Matter of Death is an ethnographic work that addresses the complexities of life and death and how these manifest in the western culture. This edited volume has its focus on how death is ‘managed’ by the western world and how the meaning of death for them is culturally and historically situated. This collection originates from the symposium on The Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement (2006). Research for this volume was conducted in ‘spaces’ like hospitals, a place where death occurs, and the morgues, where lifeless bodies are mourned, viewed and examined after death. Building on the concept of materiality, the main argument of this book is to show the ‘management’ of death through belief systems and discourses mobilised by the materialities embodied in the society. The editors argue that people respond to death and its other manifestations as a result of the influence of space, place and the material culture. These, they suggest, shape and guide the memorialising process. Borrowing from different disciplines like psychology, philosophy, sociology, history and theology, the editors lay out the theoretical ground for exploring the meaning of death as a human experience. In the opening chapter of the book the editors provide a social constructionist and phenomenological approach to the matter of death and material culture. The editors ‘make sense of death’ by dwelling on the idea that bereavement and grief are socially constructed. Death and its various manifestations get the expressive language from the culture, social interactions between human beings and their socially constructed experiences of loss and grief. The phenomenological approach seeks to examine materiality from the perspective of first-hand accounts and the lives of the people.

Susie Page in Chapter 2 presents the case of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) mediated deaths in a hospital space. Page tries to explore the
relationship of ‘material artefacts’ like space, place, objects, bodies and actions with CPR-mediated medical practice. She examines the process of dying, the medicalisation of death and resuscitation. Page describes the institutional control and ‘management’ of the boundary between life and death by hospital doctors and staff. She highlights “the cultural meaning associated with . . . hospital space . . . [as] that of life-saving by virtue of medical intervention” (p. 30). Page’s description of how people make sense of death in a hospital space and its design, make the reader think of death as a biological process in nature. The process of CPR is so mechanised (materialised) and intervened upon by technological advances that it blurs the line between being life-saving or associated with death. In Chapter 3 Ken Worpole presents his analysis of hospices – its architecture and landscape as ‘sacred spaces’ where the ‘end of life’ takes place. The single bedroom offered to patients is perceived as a sacred space that allows the patient to spend time with loved ones before they depart. So the architectural design of the hospice, Worpole suggests, has the ability to hide death from other patients. Carol Komaromy in Chapter 4 presents data from residential homes for older adults. Her description of how care home staff ‘manages’ death and the process of dying, could make the reader think of the old age and residential homes as institutions of death. Care homes are places where the staff is in fact managing ‘good albeit predictable deaths’ and meeting the needs of the dying. The successful management of good deaths is thrown out of place in case of an unexpected death. This is when ‘institutional control of death’ ends. Komaromy argues that “institutional practices framed the physical and emotional spaces within which dying and death in the care home were produced and experienced . . .” (p. 54). Therefore in Chapters 2–4, the editors examine the theme of dying and death. They show how in various institutions, the space for this process is intentionally delineated or segregated to mask death.

Chapters 5, 6 and 12–14 deal with the theme of materiality of death. They illustrate the importance of death’s material presence and “how particular materialities can mobilise emotion, commitment and action” (p. 18). The different sites of investigation were stillbirths, coroner’s court, suicides, roadside memorials, and spirits. Chapters 7 to 11 focus on the theme of body disposal. The editors identify the different materialising sites/spaces for the dead. These include natural burial grounds, cemeteries, and private gardens/fields. They also reveal how these practices of burial are managed