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Don't mention the D-word

PHIL BROWN

at medical school, which must have made it easier for him to handle cadavers in all sorts of condition. His descriptions of cremating people and poking around in furnaces to make sure all the bits are properly burned are gruesome enough to put you off your next barbecue. Flashes of black humour help, but not much, and the overall effect is depressing. He ends, however, with a humorous flourish, heading south to the US and the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association trade show at the Mandalay Bay Casino in Las Vegas, where undertakers spruik like preachers at a revivalist tent show, all in the name of death. Oh well, it's a living.

In *The Deadly Dinner Party*, Jonathan Edlow deals with the sort of events that might see you in a funeral parlour before your time. Edlow, an emergency medicine specialist and associate professor of medicine at Harvard, has a fascination with real-life medical detective stories, which will make this book confronting reading for death deniers and hypochondriacs. Several chapters in, I found myself experiencing a slew of symptoms and fighting the urge to take my temperature.

The first story is a cautionary tale about food poisoning: a botulism breakout at a dinner party in upstate New York that demonstrates just how dangerous even a normal meal can be. I was reminded of the Monty Python sketch in which the grim reaper arrives to claim a party group, who ask how they could have all died at the same time. It was, they are told, "the salmon mousse". In Edlow's story the culprit is a jar of garlic preserved in oil, and thanks to modern medicine the victims lived.

But others have not been so lucky, as Edlow reminds us in a potted history of botulism. "In one small outbreak, in Loch Maree, Scotland, in 1923, eight members of a fishing party lunched on duck pâté sandwiches; within a week all eight were dead." Edlow's second section, *Human Meets Pathogen*, deals with typhoid, but as with the opening story the contemporary case he discusses fairly briefly is merely a foil to allow him to indulge his macabre professional fascination with the history of disease. So we get a primer on the notorious Typhoid Mary Mallon, a cook who famously carried the disease around the US in the early 1900s and was eventually locked up.

Edlow explores various other threats to humankind in two other sections: *The External Environment* and *The Internal Milieu*. The story titles read like something out of Conan Doyle:

The Case of the Wide-Eyed Boy, A Study in Scarlet and *The Case of the Overly Hot Honeymoon*", which sounds racier than it is. None of them, however, lives up to those titular literary pretensions and for the most part the modern cases merely lead into long, albeit interesting, explorations of the histories of various pathogens and obscure infections and illnesses.

As with the dinner party of the book's title, most of Edlow's contemporary patients survive, meaning their families don't need Sue Brayne's book *The D-Word*. Well, not yet, anyway. Brayne is a British academic with an MA in the "rhetoric of rituals of death", and she has also worked as a nurse in palliative care.

The D-Word can be seen as a 21st-century update on the themes Elizabeth Kubler-Ross explored in her groundbreaking 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. Brayne acknowledges spirituality as an inherent human need, which sets her apart from the other authors discussed here. Jokinen affects a nihilistic dismissal of religion and spirituality, while Edlow is more interested in facts. Brayne, however, acknowledges faith can have a central role in matters of living and dying:

Today dying is a very different experience. Most of us will die in hospital, and while the medicalisation of death provides structure at a time of uncertainty and fear, it does little to help us face the emotional challenge of dealing with the actual dying experience, whether our own or someone else's.

Brayne provides case studies, including a fascinating one about the British actor John Thaw, star of the *Inspector Morse* television series, who died of cancer in 2002. Until the end of his life, Thaw refused to admit to himself or to others that he was dying. As his wife, Sheila Hancock, wrote in her memoir *The Two of Us*, she found it heartbreaking to listen to her husband choosing the colour for his new Jaguar four days before his death. Thaw's denial was the path he chose and so was appropriate for him, Brayne concludes.

As for more metaphysical questions about God and the afterlife, readers will have to look elsewhere, because none of these books explores in any depth the intriguing matter of whether anything of us survives after the botulism has got us and the undertaker is done, leaving only the grieving relatives and friends. *

IN this trinity of books about disease, death and dying, the authors muse on the fact that, as a culture, we are reluctant to acknowledge our mortality. Why is this so? Surely the answer is in the category of the bleeding obvious. Why confront the grim reaper before you need to? But it's this attitude that makes talking about death one of our most enduring taboos.

As far as Canadian writer Tom Jokinen is concerned the only way to deal with such a no-go zone is to go there, which he did by chucking in his job as a journalist and radio producer to become an apprentice undertaker at a funeral parlour in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Winnipeg is a good choice, Jokinen writes, as it has "more funeral homes than Starbucks outlets".

Jokinen's motivations are never clearly articulated in *Curtains*, but I have a sneaking suspicion he saw the job as a springboard to a new career as an author. Becoming part of the story to get the story would have been considered gonzo journalism in the 1970s and it's a formula that still has literary currency. John Howard Griffin's American classic *Black Like Me*, in which a Caucasian poses as an African-American to explore the racial divide, is an earlier example.

But if Jokinen had any such lofty aims, they remain buried in this book, where he prefers to get right down to the nitty gritty of a business that most of us prefer to remain ignorant about:

People don't want to know. There's a time, from when someone dies to when they magically pop up at the funeral or the cemetery or as a bag of ashes, that remains a black hole, invisible to the rest of the world, and everyone's happy with the arrangement. We in the funeral service cover the gap. People pay us to keep to ourselves what goes on there.

Mind you, Jokinen is only too happy to spill the beans. He revels in the bald facts and isn't one for philosophising, only fleetingly reflecting on the human condition when he quotes American psychologist Sheldon Solomon, who is best known for his work on "terror management theory", how we, alone among animals, have to deal with the knowledge of our mortality. To cope with this, Sheldon says, humans collaborate in "the construction of a culture to give us a sense that we live in a world that has meaning, a world with art and industry and borders and trade rules and quality daytime talk television, all earthly distractions from the nasty fact parked in our heads: we are doomed".

Jokinen acknowledges his debt to Jessica Mitford's 1963 exposé of the US funeral industry, *The American Way of Death*, and the updated 1998 version, *The American Way of Death Revisited*. He quotes Mitford often, though his own view, having worked in the business, is perhaps less cynical than hers. Mitford sees the funeral industry as a gauche rip-off: "Gradually, almost imperceptibly, over the years the funeral men have constructed their own grotesque cloud-cuckoo-land where the trappings of Gracious Living are transformed, as in a nightmare, into the trappings of Gracious Dying."

His stint as an undertaker gave Jokinen more empathy with an industry that is struggling to survive modern trends, such as cremation, which is expedient but is putting a serious dent in the funeral business. There's more money to be made in embalming, so corpses can be viewed as part of an expensive funeral service (not something we do much here), than in being put in an oven and then sprinkled over the garden.

The practicalities of preparing bodies makes for grim reading. Jokinen spent a couple of years