

# Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers Topics for Discussion

## Mary Roach

### AUTHOR BIO:

Mary Roach is a science writer renowned for her ability to tease out the quirky, unconventional aspects of science, which she does with humor and wit. Roach makes complex topics accessible to the general reader by placing them in context and creating a general overview.



Roach is not trained as a scientist, which makes her writing all the more appealing. Because Roach is an outside observer, she can translate complicated Science topics into words that the lay reader can understand. Her writing style is eminently readable, with frequent dashes of humor and witty observations, and her ability to tease out the quirky, unconventional aspects of science engages readers, even those who typically avoid science writing. But though she is not a scientist, her grasp of science and research is thorough. She carefully places her topics in context, exploring relevant history and current practices, to create a general overview.



Mary Roach is the author of additional books: *Gulp: adventures on the alimentary canal*, *My Planet: exploring the world with family, friends, and dental floss*, *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void*, *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex*, *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife*, and *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*. Her writing has appeared in *Outside*, *Wired*, *National Geographic*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, among others. She lives in Oakland, California.



**Stiff** has won multiple awards and has appeared on these Recommended Reading lists:

- Alex Award: 2004
- Booklist Editors' Choice - Adult Nonfiction for Young Adults: 2003
- Garden State Teen Book Awards (New Jersey): Teen Nonfiction
- School Library Journal's Adult Books for High School Students: 2003
- YALSA Best Books for Young Adults: 2004
- YALSA Outstanding Books for the College Bound - Science and Technology: 2004
- YALSA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults: I'm Not Making This Up (2007)

### AUTHOR INTERVIEW:

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm/author\\_number/898/mary-roach](http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/898/mary-roach)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In her introduction to *Stiff*, Mary Roach remarks that "Death. It doesn't have to be boring." What do you think about death before and after reading the book?
2. Mary Roach remarks that "death makes us helplessly polite." Why is it that we're compelled to use polite language when discussing death? Why are we often afraid to discuss it in the way Roach has done here?
3. The author separates cadavers and dead bodies from the concept of a living person. How do you feel about this separation? Are a dead body and a living body different ethically?
4. Some chapters seemed more "icky" than others, in terms of subject matter. Did you skip any chapters, or browse only, due to subject matter? Which ones?
5. Did you find the author's dry humor helpful or disturbing during your reading?
6. Roach discovered that students in anatomy classes tend not to enjoy touching and smelling cadavers, even though they relish the opportunity to study them. Does this surprise you? Why might someone want to work with cadavers?
7. What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of surgeons using cadavers to practice new surgical techniques?
8. The author talked about objectification of human corpses. Do you think most people who work with or around corpses objectify them? If you work with mice, rats, or other living organisms, do you objectify them?
9. Why do professional report that it is emotionally more difficult to see an intact corpse than it is to see one that has "come apart?"
10. Roach describes the smell of a decomposing human: "It is dense and cloying, sweet but not flower-sweet. Halfway between rotting fruit and rotting meat." But modern embalming methods allow us to present odorless, good-looking corpses at funerals. Has modern mortuary science made death more aesthetically pleasing?
11. Dennis Shanahan, who investigated the grisly human wreckage of downed TWA Flight 800, told Roach that the hardest thing about examining Flight 800 was that most of the bodies were relatively whole. He said, "Intactness bothers me much more than the lack of it." Why might he feel this way? Do you agree or disagree?
12. Were you surprised to learn that cadavers are used in so many different areas and kinds of research? How do you feel about that? Which area of research surprised you the most?
13. Do you agree/disagree with the use of cadavers in automotive impact research?

14. Many research studies that make use of cadavers raise questions about maintaining the dignity of the deceased. For example, a ballistics study might involve decapitating a cadaver or shooting one in the face—all for the sake of gathering data to ensure that innocent civilians who are hit in the face with nonlethal bullets won't suffer disfiguring fractures. Do you think that the humanitarian benefits of experimenting on cadavers can outweigh any potential breach of respect for the dead? Why or why not?
15. The heart, cut from the chest, can keep beating on its own for as long as a minute or two. This, Roach says, reflects centuries of confusion over how exactly to define death. Have modern scientific experiments on cadavers helped us to pinpoint the precise moment when life ceases to exist and all that's left is a corpse? Explain.
16. Roach says, "On a rational level, most people are comfortable with the concept of brain death and organ donation. But on an emotional level, they may have a harder time accepting it." Some organ recipients even worry that they will take on certain characteristics of their donors. What might this say about how we link the physical human body to the human soul?
17. In Chapter 10, Roach takes us on a grand tour of cannibalism across cultures. She's compelled by the idea that economics accounts for why people throughout history have never dined regularly on each other. Humans, she says, turn out to be lousy livestock, because you have to give them more food to feed them than you'd gain in the end by eating them. How do you react to this idea?
18. In Chapter 11, Roach journeys to an island in Sweden, where a forty-seven-year-old biologist-entrepreneur has made a business of producing compost from cadavers. This business has major corporate backing and an international patent, and mortuary professionals in many countries, including the United States, are interested in representing the new technology. Do you think that the "human compost movement" could gain traction where you live?
19. At the end of the book, Roach discusses the process she has gone through to decide whether or not to donate her body. What did you think of her including this personal touch?
20. Did reading this book affect your own plans for burial?
21. Roach concludes that "it makes little sense to try to control what happens to your remains when you are no longer around to reap the joys or benefits of that control." Do you agree with her?
22. Before each chapter, Roach includes a photo that represents the content of the following chapter in some way. What did you think of the inclusion of these photos?
23. It is said that the living should treat the dead with dignity. What does this mean? What sort of behaviors are dignified? What sort of behaviors are not dignified?
24. If nothing can stop the decay of organic tissue, what is the point of burying the dead in a coffin or embalming the corpse?
25. Why is American culture opposed to research that involves blowing up of cadavers?

26. What aspect of Pierra Barbet's research did the author take issue with. Do you agree? Why or why not?
27. Each chapter is such a unique and interesting topic on the life of cadavers, did one stand out more than the others for you, and why?

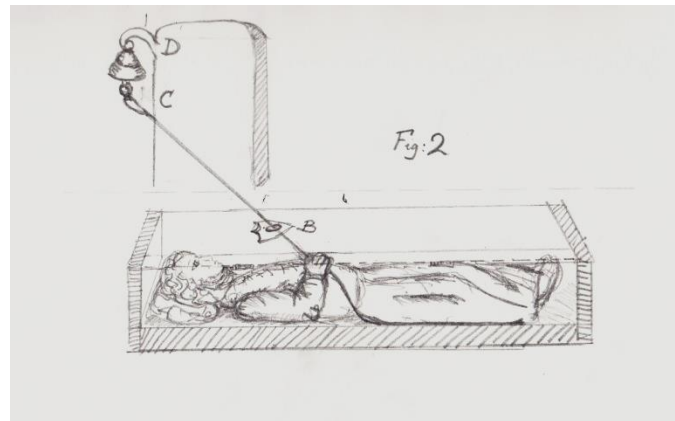
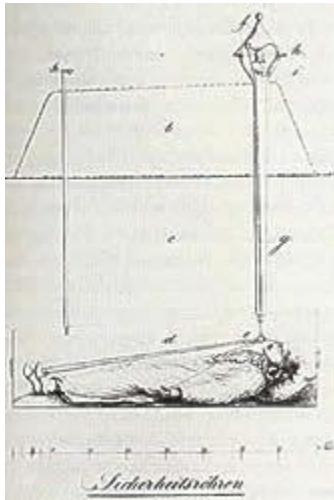
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- <http://www.greenburials.org/FAQ.htm>
- <http://www-library.ncifcrf.gov/bookclubdis/cadavers.aspx>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safety\\_coffin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safety_coffin)

**Green Burials:** (<http://www.greenburials.org/FAQ.htm>)

Where can I find green cemeteries in the United States?

- GreenSprings Natural Cemetery - 93 acres in New York, opened in 2006 - [www.naturalburial.org](http://www.naturalburial.org)
- Forever Fernwood - 32 acres in California, opened in 2004 - [www.foreverfernwood.com](http://www.foreverfernwood.com)
- Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve - Memorial Ecosystems has 350 acres in Florida. Opened in 2002 - [www.glendalenaturepreserve.org](http://www.glendalenaturepreserve.org)
- Ramsey Creek Preserve - Memorial Ecosystems has 32 acres in South Carolina. Opened in 1996 - [www.memorialecosystems.com](http://www.memorialecosystems.com)
- White Eagle Memorial Preserve - 20 acre cemetery is set within 1300 wild acres - [www.naturalburialground.com](http://www.naturalburialground.com)
- **Foxfield Preserve - 43 acres in Ohio - [www.foxfieldpreserve.org](http://www.foxfieldpreserve.org)**
- Honey Creek Woodlands - Georgia - [www.honeycreekwoodlands.com](http://www.honeycreekwoodlands.com)
- Eternal Rest Memories Park - Florida – [www.eternalrest.com](http://www.eternalrest.com)
- Cedarbrook Burial Ground - Maine
- Steelmantown Cemetery - New Jersey
- Praire Wilderness Cemetery - Colorado (under construction currently)



A Safety Coffin employed a bell as a signaling device, for anybody buried alive.  
(wikipedia)