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Death, The Dead and Popular Culture, by Ruth Penfold-Mounce, UK, Emerald Publishing, 2018, 143 pp., £40 (paperback), ISBN 9781787430549

Penfold-Mounce's *Death, The Dead and Popular Culture* is one of those books that will have you stopping every fifteen minutes to share an anecdote, stifle a laugh in a public place or add another article, book, film or tv show to your ever-growing list of reading and watching. The author does an excellent job of using brilliantly entertaining examples to further intellectual debates and consequently the book is theoretically informed, whilst remaining accessible and engaging. Penfold-Mounce provides a persuasive challenge to the "long-standing public wisdom that Western culture is comprised of death denial societies where death is taboo" (p.114), arguing that the proliferation of death and the dead in popular culture undermines this thesis. This is not to say that Penfold-Mounce dismisses the notion of death denial. Rather, both scholarship about death denial and a wide range of literature from different disciplines are engaged with throughout the book, reflecting the author's interest in furthering interdisciplinary debate.

The book commences with an introduction to one of its central ideas, which is that "the dead possess agency within popular culture" (p.8). Chapter 2 offers the first example of this via the notion of dead celebrities' posthumous careers. The chapter posits different categories of celebrity deaths and emphasises some of the inequalities that seem to persist after death, informing the reader that dead men still earn more than dead women – though Liz Taylor didn't do too badly. Chapter 3 provides a stimulating and at times spectacularly weird account of mythology around organ transplantation in popular culture before chapter 4 offers a fresh look at the vampires and zombies. This chapter presents the fruitful

concepts of 'morbid sensibilities' and 'morbid spaces', both of which will provide a springboard and touchstone for future research. Chapter 5 focuses on the 'authentic dead' in popular culture (think *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*) where "morbid sensibilities are filtered through the expert lens allowing the viewer to confront the dead and stare death in the face" (p.109). A range of stimulating and provocative arguments emerge throughout the chapters and central themes are always revisited, leaving the reader feeling that, despite the relative shortness of the book, they have covered a great deal of ground.

Death, The Dead and Popular Culture provides a much-needed reminder, made explicit in the conclusion, that in these neoliberal times value and impact need to be understood as far from straight forward in research and academia. There is abundant value in what the author refers to as 'glossy topics' and their study, though this value might not always be measurable in neat and tidy ways. As Penfold-Mounce states "although popular culture may appear superficial, frivolous, fun and entertaining, it has something significant to say about society" (p.115). This book reaffirms that this is certainly the case in relation to death, where "popular culture is a crucial site for cross-cultural and cross-generational understandings of global society" (p.115-6). It will appeal to a wide range of scholars and would make an excellent contribution to reading lists in a range of disciplines. I have no doubt it will be a rewarding summer read for anyone who enjoys *Mortality*.

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