

Encyclopedia of Death & the Human Experience

Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck, eds. *Encyclopedia of Death & the Human Experience*. Los Angeles: Sage Reference, 2009. 2 vols: 1102 pp. \$350.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781412951784 (set).

Into the crowded field of death and dying publications comes the *Encyclopedia of Death & the Human Experience*. Published by Sage, *EDHE* has a sterling pedigree. Clifton Bryant and Dennis Peck, editors of the two-volume set, have between them well over a half century of teaching experience in sociology. Their careers have resulted in an impressive list of awards and publications, including the recent *Handbook of Death & Dying* (2003). *EDHE* has 230 contributors, the majority hailing from institutions within the United States. Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America are also represented. An obvious effort was made to provide a global perspective to the topic of death and dying.

Structurally, the *EDHE* is as well planned as an encyclopedia can be. In the first volume Sage has conveniently placed a content page for both volumes, an extant list of entries, and a Reader's Guide all before the obligatory word about the editors, the preface, and introduction. This allows the readers not interested in publishing matters to immediately access the help that will guide their research. The Reader's Guide is an especially effective tool. It places the entries under sixteen topic headings ranging from the grounded "Religion" and "Causes of Death" to the more esoteric "Conceptualization of Death, Dying, and the Human Experience" and "Unworldly Entities and Events." A seventy-three page index at the end of volume two also provides for a fairly concise representation of the encyclopedia's contents. The editors conveniently have differentiated between entry titles, including material found within those entries, and illustrative materials. The only thing missing is either a separate names index that includes contributors' names or their listing in the regular index. This omission makes searching for a contributor's entries a time-consuming task.

The *EDHE* also includes two appendices totaling twenty pages. The first is comprised of Death-Related Websites and the second of Death-Related Organizations. The downside is that, inevitably, due to the ever-changing nature of the internet, several of the websites the reviewer tried to visit were misdirected or broken links. Still, many links did work and brought the reviewer immediately to scholarly sites with enigmatic titles such as the *Association for the Advancement of Gestalt*, diverting sites such as *Find a Grave* (which lets the reader find and in some instances view the gravesites of celebrities), and some more immediately practical sites including the *Children with AIDS Project* and the *National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization*. The Death-Related Organizations appendix has similar entries which include mailing addresses, phone numbers, and, at times, web addresses. The short annotation describing almost each entry in this appendix makes this section slightly more useful than the Death-Related Websites appendix, which has few annotations.

The range of topics is broad, as 330 entries and sixteen topical categories would suggest. The editors' intent, as explained in the preface, was to "offer insight into the process of dying and the phenomenon of death. Along with a special focus on the cultural artifacts and social institutions and practices that constitute the human experience . . ." (xxix). The editors have examined almost every open space and hidden crevice of society's fascination with,

perversion of, and obsession over death and dying. One major section deals solely with mass death and encapsulates both the individual expressions of it, such as the “Angel Makers,” those who agree to care for foster children for money yet neglect them until their deaths, and the more national or international expressions described in articles on the “Holocaust,” “Genocide,” and “Terrorism.” Another section deals with the more philosophical ponderings on death including works on the commodification of death, Freud’s thoughts on death, and disengagement theory. Other sections include the study of death and religious attitudes and rituals, legal issues, cross-cultural concerns, and the actual physical process of death. Each section includes a definition of the topic, an examination of how society interacts with that particular topic, and, when applicable, some historical perspective. The scope of information covered makes the average entry about two and a half pages in length, which is just about right for an encyclopedia.

Even with such a diverse collection of contributors, the writing style is well suited to the upper division undergraduate student which the editors state is their intended audience. Readers with a tenth grade reading level will have little difficulty understanding the entries. The drawback of this writing style and reading level, however, is the lack of nuance and complexity needed for upper-level graduate or seminary student research. Tables and statistical references add evidence to many of the entries and give them the weight encyclopedic entries sometimes lack. A neutral approach also seems to have been encouraged. For example, in the entry for “Abortion,” a highly charged subject, the preferred language of each camp (pro-life and pro-choice) is used to give balance to the article while facts supporting both positions are included without any editorial comment. The reader is left to make a decision without bias. “Euthanasia” is treated in a similar manner. Both religious and secular views are given equal weight and the preferred language is used for each position.

Each article ends with “see also” references, which guide readers to related subjects, and a Further Readings bibliography of resources related to the topic, which provides, in almost all cases, ample resource options to aid continued investigation. Many of the works listed on the bibliographies are, necessarily, older foundational works. A random sampling of several entries revealed that many of the bibliographies seemed to depend on resources that do not even reach into this millennium. A larger sampling of more recent publications would have provided more assurance that an accounting had been made for the latest research.

While the pedigree may be impressive and the content is appropriate and suited to its target audience, the question remains as to why Sage felt it was necessary to add another volume into what is already a well-represented field. Routledge’s *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (2001), *The Macmillan Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (2003), Sage’s aforementioned *Handbook of Death and Dying* (2003), and ABC-CLIO’s slimmer *Death and the Afterlife: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (2000) appear to provide adequate coverage of the dying experience for this millennium without the addition of yet another encyclopedic set. Tight collection development budgets and the likelihood that most libraries already have one or two of these other volumes may be good indicators that this publication needs to wait for better economic times. The exception to this would be an undergraduate library that does not have any other volumes on the death and dying experience. For it, if budgetary constraints allow, *EDHE* would be an excellent addition to its collection.

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