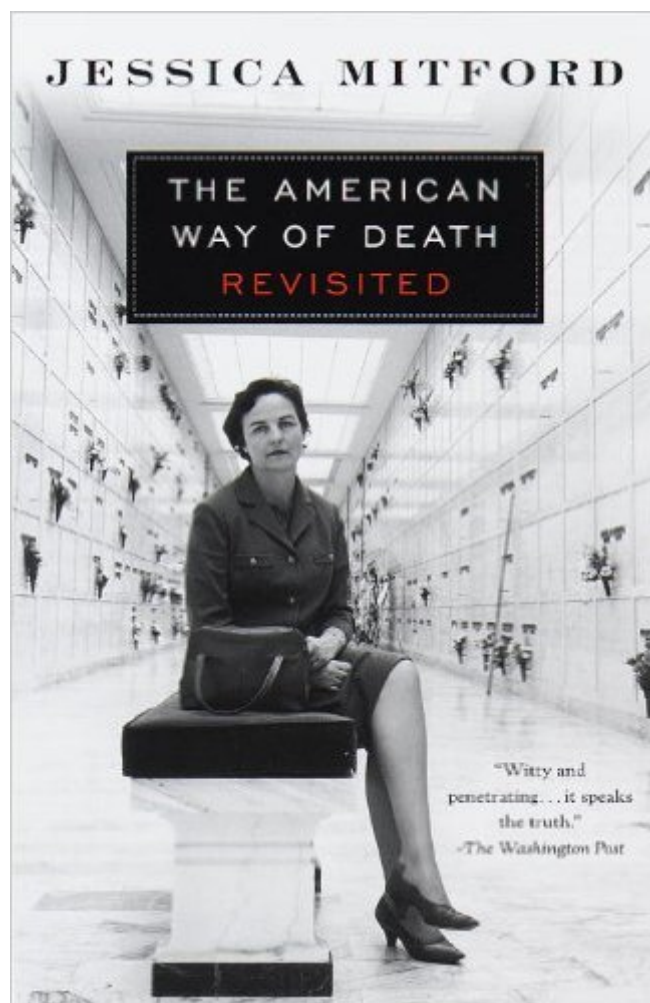


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The American Way Of Death Revisited



Synopsis

"Mitford's funny and unforgiving book is the best memento mori we are likely to get. It should be updated and reissued each decade for our spiritual health."--The New York Review of Books
Only the scathing wit and searching intelligence of Jessica Mitford could turn an exposé of the American funeral industry into a book that is at once deadly serious and side-splittingly funny. When first published in 1963 this landmark of investigative journalism became a runaway bestseller and resulted in legislation to protect grieving families from the unscrupulous sales practices of those in "the dismal trade." Just before her death in 1996, Mitford thoroughly revised and updated her classic study. *The American Way of Death Revisited* confronts new trends, including the success of the profession's lobbyists in Washington, inflated cremation costs, the telemarketing of pay-in-advance graves, and the effects of monopolies in a death-care industry now dominated by multinational corporations. With its hard-nosed consumer activism and a satiric vision out of Evelyn Waugh's novel *The Loved One*, *The American Way of Death Revisited* will not fail to inform, delight, and disturb. "Brilliant--hilarious--A must-read for anyone planning to throw a funeral in their lifetime."--New York Post "Witty and penetrating--it speaks the truth."--The Washington Post

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Customer Reviews

As a long-time fan of the original "The American Way of Death," it pains me to rate this edition at only three stars. However, this updated edition is really something of a mess. It's not quite "The American Way of Death, 30th Anniversary Edition" and not quite an update, either. Most of the text in this version of the book comes verbatim from the 1960-ish original. But scattered throughout are

occasional paragraphs and sequences that are new. The main problem is that there is usually no indication of which paragraphs are which: at any given time, "now" could be 1960 or 1996. Since the original book included a lot of chronologically comparative material, you can never tell while reading this book if the paragraph you're on is comparing 1996 with 1960 or 1960 with the first half of the century. You often can't tell whether "\$1,000" means \$1,000 in 1960 or 1996. It's a basic and pervasive error, and one that prevented me from getting what I wanted out of the book (I was curious to know what had changed since the first edition was published). Leaving all that aside, however, it's still a must-read, for several reasons: its deft, humorous writing, its information about the funeral industry, and its apparently broad influence on American culture. However, I'd suggest reading the original version. Judging from "Revisited", there's nothing much new under the sun: cremations are up, florists are less dependent on funerals, and funeral directors are just as weasily as ever.

Having lived half my life in the US and half in the UK, I was aware of fundamental differences in practices surrounding death and funeral rituals. Mitford's book provides a useful historical context with a biting criticism of the funeral industry's emotional and financial exploitation of the American public. It's baffling that such a consumer-wise nation could have such a huge blind spot when it comes to the one service which we will ALL use at some time. Depressingly, the mega funeral corporations are making their moves into the British and other world wide funeral markets -- with seemingly little opposition. In any case, I just hope I don't expire during my next visit to the US!"The American Way of Death Revisited" provides a wealth of information, presented in a tactful and witty manner, to prepare anyone for "battle" with the funeral industry in the event of a loved one's death. It is clear and thorough without being ghoulish or flippant. Read it now before you need it!

Leave it to Jessica Mitford, who died in 1996, to make the subject of death and the American funeral industry so hilarious. First published to huge acclaim in 1963, *The American Way of Death* was revised and updated by Mitford, who nearly finished it by the time she died. Her lawyer husband, Robert Treuhaft, completed it with the help of some research assistants. Even a quick and cursory read of this book will make you take out a membership in the Neptune Society as a preemptive strike against high-pressure tactics of funeral home directors to get people (caught as their weakest as they are grieving over someone's death) to spend, spend, spend "to honor the memory of your dearly departed." Mitford was known as the Original Muckraker for her habit of always speaking the truth, calling a spade a spade, and for probing into the cozy relationship between politicians,

morticians, monopolistic ownership policies, the FTC, and federal lobbyists. Interesting, updated, still drop dead (pun intended) funny, endlessly informative, witty and well-written with refreshing bluntness, *The American Way of Death* once again deserves to be read by everyone. And there's a terrific and informative appendix at the end.

I never read the original (1963) edition of this ground-breaking expose of the "death care industry" (to use that industry's own euphemism), so I can't compare the "Revisited" (1998) edition to it. But it seems, since Mitford primarily addresses methods and practices, that much of the earlier work has been preserved. As other reviewers have noted, it can be confusing when trying to distinguish the "then" from the "now." Sometimes you simply have to guess based on the prices being discussed. But sadly, the reader can't help but realize that in most matters regarding the disposal of our dead, what was true then (the lying to customers about the "necessity" and "benefits" of embalming; price gouging on caskets; secretive pricing and resistance to providing itemized price quotes and invoices; etc.) remains true today. Mitford's writing is enjoyable in its own right. Her description of what happens during embalming is downright poetic and her witty put-downs of funeral directors (who are by turns whiney, self-justifying victims and sly exploiters of the emotionally distraught). She also gives ample evidence of being an intrepid and relentless researcher; she seems to take special delight in being able to quote some of the nasty things funeral directors have said publicly about her personally. While Mitford gives some good advice on how to plan for the disposal of a loved-one (avoid making pre-need funeral arrangements; know that most funeral homes have a "don't walk" policy which means they will come down in price if you try to walk out during the negotiations; embalming isn't necessary or required by law; consider cremation without burial; contact your local not-for-profit funeral and memorial society), this is not "Funeral Planning for Dummies." It's more of a critique of American culture on the par with other great social activist writers of the 1960s and 70s, Vance Packard, Ralph Nader, and Tom Wolfe. Read, gasp, guffaw, and generally enjoy!

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