



## Rest in Pieces: The Curious Fates of Famous Corpses

By Bess Lovejoy

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**Rest in Pieces: The Curious Fates of Famous Corpses** By Bess Lovejoy

A writer and researcher behind the bestselling *Schott's Almanac* brings us a delightfully macabre collection of morbid curiosities: tales of what happened to famous people after they died.

### IN THE LONG RUN, WE'RE ALL DEAD.

But for some of the most influential figures in history, death marked the start of a new adventure.

The famous deceased have been stolen, burned, sold, pickled, frozen, stuffed, impersonated, and even filed away in a lawyer's office. Their fingers, teeth, toes, arms, legs, skulls, hearts, lungs, and nether regions have embarked on voyages that crisscross the globe and stretch the imagination.

Counterfeiters tried to steal Lincoln's corpse. Einstein's brain went on a cross-country road trip. And after Lord Horatio Nelson perished at Trafalgar, his sailors submerged him in brandy—which they drank.

From Mozart to Hitler, *Rest in Pieces* connects the lives of the famous dead to the hilarious and horrifying adventures of their corpses, and traces the evolution of cultural attitudes toward death.

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## **Rest in Pieces: The Curious Fates of Famous Corpses By Bess Lovejoy Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #806423 in Books
- Published on: 2013-03-12
- Released on: 2013-03-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.20" w x 4.50" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 352 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“A tasty, sharp, wonderfully unusual book. I enjoyed it like a jar of perfect dill pickles: when the mood strikes, nothing else will satisfy.” (Mary Roach *bestselling author of Gulp and Stiff*)

“If really, we’re all sitting in the undertaker’s waiting-room, then *Rest in Pieces* is the perfect easy read, preparation for the moment when the nurse steps out of the shadows and quietly calls your name.” (Simon Winchester *bestselling author of Skulls and The Professor and the Madman*)

“The world is awash with legendary body parts, from Einstein’s brain to Napoleon’s most intimate organ, and this wildly entertaining account proves that the fate of the grisly relics tells us a huge amount about history—and ourselves.” (Tony Perrottet *author of Napoleon’s Privates*)

“Deliciously morbid and delightfully macabre, *Rest in Pieces* is required reading for those of us who intend, one day, to die.” (Ben Schott *bestselling author of Schott’s Original Miscellany*)

"[A] historically beguiling, stranger-than-fiction compendium, which unearths the surprising fates of famous corpses, from Beethoven's to Eva Peron's." (*Elle*)

“Marvelously macabre. . . . A fascinating foray into the way of all flesh.” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

#### About the Author

Bess Lovejoy is a writer, researcher, and editor based in Brooklyn. She worked on the Schott’s Almanac series for five years, and her writing has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, *The Boston Globe*, and elsewhere.

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#### Rest in Pieces



A corpse is always a problem—both for the living and for the dead. The problems are both conceptual and practical: a dead body hovers uneasily between the animate and the inanimate, the past and the future. Even ordinary deaths often lead to questions about who has control over the memory and estate of the deceased. Famous corpses are more complicated still: not just family and friends but the church, state, admirers, and enemies often lay claim to the famous dead.

As a result, some of the most notable lives in history have had surprising postscripts. Famous corpses have been bought and sold, studied, collected, stolen, and dissected. They’ve been used to found churches, cities, and even empires. Pieces of them have languished in libraries and museums, in coolers and filing cabinets, and in suitcases underneath beds. These stories often have something to say about what the dead meant to the living: it’s no coincidence that Descartes lost his skull, Einstein his brain, or Rasputin his penis (supposedly).

This is a book about how the living have tried to solve the problems of the dead—or gotten them into even deeper trouble—by using their bodies in different ways. Many of those uses have been political, religious, or scientific. Alexander the Great’s bones established the Ptolemaic dynasty, the last in ancient Egypt, while the

allegedly miraculous powers of relics from saints such as Thomas Becket made their bodies the hot commodities of the Middle Ages. The nineteenth-century pseudoscience of phrenology led to a rash of skull-stealing across Europe, which is how Haydn (to name but one example) lost his head. Criminals, too, have used corpses for their own ends, from the counterfeiters who tried to steal Abraham Lincoln's coffin to the modern-day body snatchers who sold the bones of broadcaster Alistair Cooke.

The living have also used the dead simply for the consolation of memory. Bodies can become mementos, as when Mary Shelley kept Percy Shelley's heart, or when Greek independence fighters asked for Lord Byron's lungs. And famous corpses sometimes become museum pieces symbolic of genius or notoriety, which is what happened to the skulls of Mozart and the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly.

But the living don't always override the wishes of the deceased. The philosopher Jeremy Bentham left explicit instructions about turning his body into a statue—stripped, stuffed, and mounted in a cabinet like an exotic bird. Musician Gram Parsons left an even weirder request—to have his body burned in the Mojave Desert—but that, too, was fulfilled, much to the chagrin of his family. Both Timothy Leary and Hunter S. Thompson also went out the way they wanted: with a bang, and major parties.

Strange as these stories are, this book intends to deliver more than a rich supply of inappropriate cocktail chatter. Although I don't believe in heaven or hell, it's hard to deny that how you live often has something to do with what happens after you die. The postmortem journeys of controversial corpses (like that of Argentina's first lady Eva Perón) often look like a game of hot potato, while those of widely revered geniuses, like Beethoven, are stories of carefully guarded treasure. These tales can tell us something about their subjects, and the times and places in which they lived. What does it say about Voltaire's France that he was terrified of his bones ending up in the trash? What does it say about Restoration England that Oliver Cromwell was posthumously hanged? What does it say about America that Lee Harvey Oswald was exhumed to make sure he wasn't a Russian spy?

The stories in this book also sketch the evolution of our attitudes toward death and mourning. Not so long ago, death was both more familiar and more sacred, and it wasn't so strange to keep a famous skull around, or to wear a ring showing off some strands of a dead friend's hair. These attitudes have faded, but their shadows remain. Putting the pieces back together might help us understand famous figures—and our own ancestors—a bit better.

I've collected these strange stories with that goal in mind. But humans have been dying as long as we've been living, so a book like this could easily run to several volumes if I didn't set some boundaries. For one thing, everyone in these pages was famous before becoming a corpse. This is not just a book about all the weird things that can happen to any dead body, fun as that might be.

Secondly, while there are plenty of tall tales about famous bodies (my favorite being that Walt Disney's frozen corpse is buried beneath the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disneyland), I've included only stories that could be documented. However, the history of the deceased is often murky territory, so where sources conflict, I've presented multiple variants of a story, or chosen to trust the most-respected source. For those who want to take their own stab at unraveling the mysteries, there's an extensive bibliography at the back of the book.

Because the stories in this book reflect the culture of their time, you'll notice a lot of dead white men. The corpses of women and people of color have also suffered many misadventures, but because most of their owners weren't famous, they often didn't fit the framework of this book—not that this is a project anyone would clamor to be included in.

But while death troubles us, it also intrigues us. Death is the ultimate mystery, and contemplating it does us good. Kierkegaard said, "The thought of death is a good dancing partner." The more you dance, the less you fear. This book is a form of exposure therapy, looking directly at the thing many of us most want to avoid. Spending time with famous dead bodies has made me worry a little less about the Grim Reaper. I hope that this book will do the same for you.

## **Users Review**

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