

Review of:

Dying to Eat:

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife

Candi K. Cann, ed. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017. Pp. 208, acknowledgments, index, contributors.

Review by: Tiff Graham

Dying to Eat: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife, edited by Candi K. Cann, is a culinary and cultural expedition, where the reader travels to China, Taiwan, Korea, Mexico, United States, Morocco, and South Africa to learn how the living bury, honor, and remember their dead with food, drink, and ritual. The compilation's eight well-researched contemporary essays are grounded in ethnographic fieldwork, historical research, and scholarly insight. Although the connective ingredient in each is the study of food and death, the book will appeal to diverse scholarly interests in folklore, anthropology, history, culture, religion, gender, class, education, age, geography, funerary and mortuary practices, psychology, economics, public health, or technology. Individual essays or the entire book could be assigned in undergraduate or graduate level courses aimed at foodways, food culture, death studies, or religious beliefs and practices.

In the introduction, Cann explains the book's interdisciplinary approach and variety in themes addressed as they focus on the subject of death and food. A central premise, evident in works by several authors, including Cann, is that food serves as a conduit for a living community to relate to their dead by preparing, serving, consuming, and/or offering food to them, and in their remembrance (4-8). Drawing on scholarship of bereavement studies, they invoke "continuing body theory," which holds that people cope better when they renegotiate bonds with the deceased.

Structurally, each essay includes a funerary cooking recipe, and sometimes a photograph of the food, in a familiar cookbook style. Yet the multi-layered analyses and explorations of social, cultural, and economic influences shaping beliefs and practices suggest anything but cookbook writing. In "Moroccan Funeral Feasts," for example, David Oualaalou first distinguishes Morocco from other Muslim countries using couscous, its daily dish and funerary food. He then examines changing viewpoints, food, and activities associated with the dead, and explains how generational, educational, rural versus urban geography, social class, and technological influences shape the Moroccan funeral. In "Eating and Drinking with the Dead in South Africa," Radikobo Ntsimane vividly details funeral stages and ancestral homecoming rituals with specific food and drink ranging from pre-funeral scones, tea, and coffee for visitors to *mogoga* (funeral meals) for everyone, and post-funeral offerings of meat and sorghum beer to the deceased (174-180). Alongside descriptions of food and ritual, Ntsimane addresses modern issues of the economically disadvantaged, large payout funeral insurance policies, HIV/AIDS pandemic-related deaths, Christianity, and white people's influence on funerary foods and practices (174).

The theme of religion is embedded in many of the essays. Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, Islam, Protestant and Catholic Christianity, African Spirituality, folk Catholicism, and as one author suggested, “religion of no religion” (155), emerge as shaping attitudes, beliefs, and practices around food and the dead. In “The Eating Ritual in Korean Religiosity: Young San Jae for the Dead and for the Living,” Jun Eun Sophia Park focuses on Confucianism, Shamanism, Buddhism, and Catholicism in relation to Korean ancestor veneration and food traditions. She builds a multi-sensory personal account of the Bong Won Temple monks’ “symbolic reenactment of the last festival the historical Buddha had with his disciples” and reveals that offerings such as the three tower plates of nuts and fruits, oil and honey pastries, and rice cakes symbolize “wishes of dedication, blessing, and invocation” (42, 45). Joshua Graham’s “Funeral Food as Resurrection in the American South” explores Southern Christian “denominational funeral food patterns” and how offerings of food and drink vary by an individual’s closeness to the departed, religious denomination or congregation, and social class (98). While Episcopalians might offer alcohol, Graham explains, Baptists would not; Methodists frequently offer “funeral goo” dishes with processed ingredients made for longer shelf life; and “Episcopalians prefer aspic, small rolls, cheese straws, and fudge cake” (98).

Although religion plays a strong role in the book’s essays, plenty of other themes are discussed, such as: women’s roles; the ability of the dead to connect and renew bonds with the living who prepare and serve them special recipes (95); and the conjuring of the body or bringing human remains to life through vivid detail in the care and preparation of flesh and bones. This latter topic made a particularly memorable impression on me. In “Chinese Ancestral Worship: Food to Sustain, Transform, and Heal the Dead and the Living,” for example, Emily Wu conveys esoteric knowledge about the ideal body conditions for a bone-picking master, among descriptions of other Chinese traditions that relate to worshipping deities and ancestor spirits with appropriate food offerings. Similarly, Lacy K. Crocker and Gordon Fuller’s essay, “The Circle of Life: Memorializing and Sustaining Faith,” details Jewish traditions for preparing the unadorned body and sitting shiva with symbolic foods, while also explaining how Judaism shapes attitudes, behaviors, and practices related to death and dying bodies. In a surprising historical and macabre turn, Christa Shusko’s essay, “Alcohol Consumption, Transgression, and Death,” reports on the alcohol-fueled rituals of death-themed activities of the Whitechapel Club, a nineteenth century men’s social group in Chicago Illinois. Shusko specifically looks into how this group came to burn a deceased body on an outdoor pyre.

While most of the essays in this collection are focused on one culture’s foodways approaches to death, Cann’s “Sweetening Death: Shifting Landscapes of the Role of Food in Grief and Mourning,” challenges the reader to compare multiple culture’s funerals and holidays of remembrance (such as Day of the Dead, Qing Ming) through similarities in funerary food ingredients.

In sum, *Dying to Eat* offers a multifaceted study of death in relation to food. In each essay, the reader steps into another country, culture, and bittersweet human experience that reveals distinctive food histories, cultural rituals, and ways of thinking about the dead. This reader found the essays appealing, exhausting, saddening, and yet deeply educational.