

Funeral Festivals in America: Rituals for the Living



When Evelyn Waugh wrote *The Loved One* (1948) as a satire of the elaborate preparations and memorialization of the dead taking place in his time, he had no way of knowing how technical and extraordinarily creative human funerary practices would become in the ensuing decades. In *Funeral Festivals in America*, author Jacqueline S. Thursby explores how modern American funerals and their accompanying rituals have evolved into affairs that help the living with the healing process. Thursby suggests that there is irony in the festivities surrounding death. The typical American response to death often develops into a celebration that reestablishes links or strengthens ties between family members and friends. The increasingly important funerary banquet, for example, honors an often well-lived life in order to help survivors accept the change that death brings and to provide healing fellowship. At such celebrations and other forms of the traditional wake, participants often use humor to add another dimension to expressing both the personality of the deceased and their ties to a particular ethnic heritage. In her research and interviews, Thursby discovered the paramount importance of food as part of the funeral ritual. During times of loss, individuals want to be consoled, and this is often accomplished through the preparation and consumption of nourishing, comforting foods. In the Intermountain West, Funeral Potatoes, a potato-cheese casserole, has become an expectation at funeral meals; Muslim families often bring honey flavored fruits and vegetables to the funeral table for their consoling familiarity; and many Mexican Americans continue the tradition of tamale making as a way to bring people together to talk, to share memories, and to simply enjoy being together. *Funeral Festivals in America* examines rituals for loved ones separated by death, frivolities surrounding death,

funeral foods and feasts, post-funeral rites, and personalized memorials and grave markers. Thursby concludes that though Americans come from many different cultural traditions, they deal with death in a largely similar approach. They emphasize unity and embrace rites that soothe the distress of death as a way to heal and move forward.

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