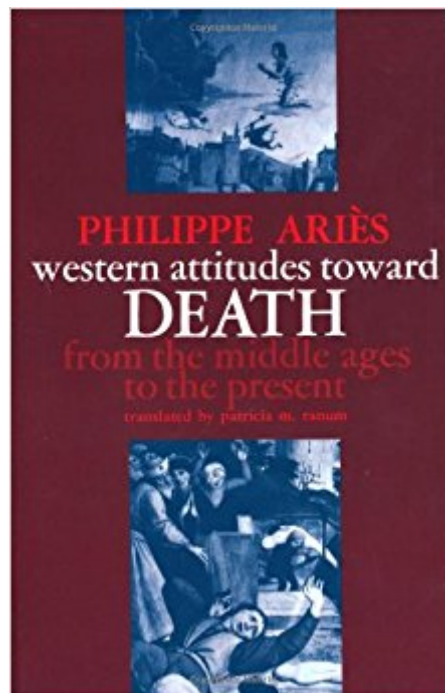


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Western Attitudes Toward Death: From The Middle Ages To The Present (The Johns Hopkins Symposia In Comparative History)



Synopsis

Ariès traces Western man's attitudes toward mortality from the early medieval conception of death as the familiar collective destiny of the human race to the modern tendency, so pronounced in industrial societies, to hide death as if it were an embarrassing family secret. -- Newsweek

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I initially started reading this for a "Sex and Death" class I took at school. Amazingly, "Western Attitudes Towards Death" has been one of the most inciteful books I've ever read. Ariès makes it interesting to look at death in a historical aspect. For me, it was most interesting in the fact that you can see how people lived during a specific time period by studying how they viewed death. The parallels between life and death in EVERY society has become astonishingly clear to me. It's short reading...definitely in a day...and well worth the time.

i had a certain agenda in reading this book . . . there is a conspiracy of silence regarding death in america/europe. ariès takes the reader on a morbid but a fascinating journey through western history of death. the conclusion is that death has become the "new pornography" (quoting goré) in a modern/enlightenment based societies. death is the great scandal in the western culture where everything is, or at least hoped to be in the future, controlled by the development of science. but death lies beyond that hope. at least that's my take on it.

A fantastic read - both brief and accessible as well as informative and challenging. Phillipe Aries' seminal study of how the treatment of death and dying has changed dramatically in Western Civilization should provoke the reader to think about death as more than something to be avoided, but something to be anticipated. In American culture obsessed with youth, death has been shoved into the closet to be peeked at only when absolutely necessary. We deny our own mortality, hiding our advancing years with surgeries and fad diets and fashion and promiscuity. Effectively, we are completely un-equipped to handle death, whether someone else's or our own. We not only don't wish to think about it, we can't. It's hidden, and we are supposed to deny ourselves even the visible grief which a true loss of any kind merits. We are often expected to be more emotional about a damaged vehicle or a bad meal or a rude person in traffic than we are when dealing with the death of a loved one. Read and learn. Read and re-evaluate the wisdom of such intentional ignorance, and what you might wish to do differently for yourself and for those around you whenever the time comes to shuffle off this mortal coil.

I feel that the book is too short. In the noble attempt to give a short overview, the author touches much but leaves us feeling less informed at the conclusion than before we knew about the book's existence. Some of the criticism might be attached to the translation, so I cannot hold the author exclusively responsible. I might be inclined to read the author's larger work on the subject in order to get more in-depth and actually understand what he's trying to say. But I fear that at the end I would be left with the same unanswered questions which would just frustrate me.

A lot of the claims of this book have been superseded by more recent research on managing the final moments of life. I'd recommend Allan Kellehear, Atul Gawande and Joan Lynn. In terms of the medieval material, I'd encourage more specialized treatments, such as Amy Appleford's recent study on the Art of Dying. Ashby Kinch's study of the "Imago mortis" is also good (albeit specialized).

This book is a classic, and it has all the merit to be one. The author did a very thorough study of how death was understood for most of history starting from earlier than the middle ages, and presents customs and points of view that one wouldn't expect of western civilization, human beings or the catholic church. Where, how and why cemeteries were built, how people thought and acted upon deathbeds and the more recent attitude towards death and its relation to hospitals are some beautiful discoveries that the author provides clearly, without pushing any of the issues at all, but

definitely convincing(at least me).

P. Aries provides us with a wonderful exposition of the progressive (and ongoing) transformation of our understanding and handling of death as an important aspect of western civilization. He reviews and explains the process of dying, the fate of the remains, and the familial and societal responses to death in this brief, well-translated study. He is truly a masterful "historian of mentalities". WRGreenfield MD

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