

Death's Garden Revisited

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH CEMETERIES

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Edited by Loren Rhoads



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WELCOME TO DEATH'S GARDEN

Loren Rhoads

I grew up in Michigan, down the road from the country graveyard where my grandfather was buried. After I left home, my maternal grandmother and her second husband—the only grandfather I ever knew—joined him there. Then my dad's mother and my younger brother were buried in that little patch of ground beside a cornfield. My parents have their own plot reserved beside my brother. In my naiveté, I assumed that everyone had a home cemetery like that.

Then I moved to San Francisco, where the cemeteries had been torn out by real estate interests in the first half of the twentieth century. Those massive cemeteries were replaced with apartment buildings, shopping centers, playgrounds, and a public pool. Elsewhere in San Francisco, museums were built atop former graveyards, as were the main public library, and even Dolores Park. In some instances, as in the ethnic cemeteries beneath Lincoln Park's golf course, only the headstones were removed. The graves—and the bodies they contained—were conveniently forgotten, only to be rediscovered whenever construction crews reopen the ground.

Relics of San Francisco's Victorian-era grave monuments still exist: in an art installation called the Wave Organ, in gutters lined with broken headstones at Buena Vista Park, beneath the shifting sands of Ocean Beach or under the waters of the San Francisco Bay at the Municipal Pier. Because the population of San Francisco ebbs and flows like the tide, constantly churning in and out, the memory of those who once were buried here is continually being reawakened. People are horrified by how the dead were mistreated and forgotten—as they were in Denver, Chicago, New Haven, Tampa Bay: all across the United States, in fact—wherever the dead lay in the path of “progress.”

Cemeteries, as we know them, are more ephemeral than they look. That's the reason I wanted to assemble this book.



In 1994, as he was dying of AIDS, my friend Blair Apperson gave me a shoebox of photographs he had taken at cemeteries on his travels to the Bahamas and the California Gold Country, from Cabo San Lucas and in Yosemite National Park.

Blair's photos inspired me to put together a book I called *Death's Garden*. I

planned initially to write all the text, even though I was just discovering cemeteries myself. As I talked to people about the book, everyone seemed eager to tell me a story about a cemetery they related to: somewhere they'd grown up, somewhere they'd visited on vacation, somewhere their idols were buried, somewhere they had family.

In the end, *Death's Garden: Relationships with Cemeteries* blossomed into a collection of over two dozen essays and more than two hundred photographs involving twenty-seven contributors, ranging from spoken word diva Lydia Lunch and artist/poet Jane Handel to ceramics artist Mary Jo Bole. The contributors included writers for the *LA Weekly*, zinesters, underground musicians, and high school girls. As the book came together, it blew away my expectations. I only wish that Blair had lived to see it.

In *Death's Garden: Relationships with Cemeteries*, graveyards from Argentina to Wall Street provided a quiet place for meditation, the best place to gossip about dead celebrities, and the only place to really connect with others in our tumultuous modern world. Authors reflected on teenage suicide, the death of parents and friends, their own mortality, the transience of fame, and the nature of death itself.

The initial print run sold out eighteen months after the book came out in January 1995. In those days before ebooks, once the books were gone, *Death's Garden* went out of print. Over the years, I've lost track of many of the contributors. Some have sunken into the anonymity of a pseudonym on the internet. Others are dead and have a different relationship with cemeteries now.

Two of those original *Death's Garden* essays are included here: Brian Thomas's "Hotel Resurrección" and Benjamin Scuglia's "Ghost in the Graveyard." Even though these stories were written almost thirty years ago, when both authors were at the start of their careers, I think you'll agree that they're both as atmospheric as when they were initially published.

Inspired by the success of the *Death's Garden* project, I spent ten years editing *Morbid Curiosity* magazine. *Morbid Curiosity* collected confessional essays from contributors around the world. Two of the cemetery stories originally published in the magazine are reprinted here: George Neville-Neil's "Communing with the Dead" and Paul Stansfield's "Exhuming Corpses for Fun and Profit."

I should take a moment to warn you that Paul's essay is explicit. I think it's important for cemetery visitors to understand the reality of what happens when cemeteries lose their meaning to the surrounding community, when the dead no longer have anyone to speak for them.



After *Morbid Curiosity* closed in 2006, I wanted to assemble a second volume

of *Death's Garden*. I longed for more voices. I wanted to explore more reasons that people treasure cemeteries.

Seven years ago, I started a *Death's Garden* project on my Cemetery Travel blog. I invited people to write about a cemetery to which they felt connected. The stories ranged from falling in love in a cemetery to exploring vacation sites, from leading cemetery tours to visiting family members' graves, from pilgrimages to famous gravesites to rediscovering the forgotten and caring for the abandoned.

Some of those Cemetery Travel essays appear in this book. One of them is Sharon Pajka's "Marking Fred Gwynne's Unmarked Grave with Flowers," which has consistently been one of the most popular posts on CemeteryTravel.com.

Another of the reprints from the blog is M. Parfitt's "Tale of 25,000 Tales." Her joyous story about serving as a tour guide at the Old City Cemetery of Sacramento, California is tempered now. During the Pandemic, the City of Sacramento removed most of the cemetery's nationally recognized rose garden, which contained historic roses that had traveled across the country in covered wagons and survived nowhere else. The Adopt-a-Plot program was also scrapped, leaving dozens of plots with no one to care for them. The historic cemetery survives, but its beauty has been irrevocably damaged.

As I write this, M. Parfitt has agreed to host one more tour—so I selfishly hope that the city will come to its senses and allow the cemetery to return to its beauty someday.

And cemeteries do sometimes have to change in order to survive. St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in New Orleans, which appears in several of the essays that follow, is no longer open to tourists just wandering in. Because of ongoing vandalism, the cemetery is only open to visitors who come with an official tour guide. St. Louis No. 1 has been a tourist destination—as recorded in picture postcards—for well over a century. I'm glad the Catholic Diocese has found a way to allow people to continue to visit.

About half of the stories in this volume are new to my nearly thirty-year-old *Death's Garden* project. Some pieces were written specifically for this volume, including Saraliza Anzaldúa's "Brown Bodies and Burials," Mary Rajotte's "Ebb and Flow," Denise Tapscott's "The Swirl of Silence," Priscilla Bettis's "Not a Tourist Attraction," and Frances Lu-Pai Ippolito's "The Silence of Block 14."

Like the original book, *Death's Garden Revisited* explores all the different ways people relate to cemeteries, whether pursuing genealogy or paying respects at famous people's resting places: through family ties, as sites of history, settings for one-of-a-kind artwork, or as stops during a busy vacation itinerary. *Death's Garden Revisited* contains essays from genealogists and geocachers, tour guides and travelers,

historians and anthropologists, bloggers, cemetery authors, horror writers, and people who've never written anything before but have a good story to tell.

These authors share first dates, find true love, and perform weddings in cemeteries. Kids grow up in graveyards. Adults choose their own final resting places or have them chosen for them. Superstitions are shared, ghosts are chased, and more than anything else, life is celebrated.

In every interview I do about cemeteries, I get asked, "Why would anyone visit a cemetery?" Unspoken, usually, is the rest of the question: "By choice?"

I'm not sure when Americans were taught that it's weird or disrespectful to visit cemeteries, if you don't drive straight to the gravesite of someone you're related to, say a few words, and leave as quickly as possible. People have even asked me if it's legal to visit a graveyard where you don't have a family connection.

During the nineteenth century, people flocked to burial grounds. They considered visiting grave sites part of a moral education. They took carriage rides through cemeteries. They strolled in the shade of world-class arboretums, many of which still exist. They studied the statuary and epitaphs. They picnicked or read poetry. They fed flocks of birds or watched the wildlife.

It's time to reclaim that. Study after study has proven the benefits of forest-bathing: walking in nature, absorbing the peace that comes from seeing trees, watching water, and listening to birdsong. I'd like you to consider how much you could gain from visiting cemeteries. What better place to stop and smell the roses?

One of the last places I went before the Pandemic Lockdown took hold was Cypress Lawn Memorial Park in Colma, California. Cypress Lawn was created in 1892 and is home to the Pioneer Mound, where 35,000 people were reburied in a mass grave after being exhumed from San Francisco's Laurel Hill Cemetery in 1940. I attended a lecture in Cypress Lawn's lovely reception center, then took advantage of the glorious February day to wander alone among the graves. The memory of that afternoon sustained me through the isolation that followed.

I hope the adventures in this book inspire you to explore a cemetery. It's good for the cemetery—and I promise it will be good for you.

