

BOOK REVIEW

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The Near-Death Experience: A Reader, edited by Lee W. Bailey and Jenny Yates. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996, 409pp. + x, \$24.95 pb.

Billed as the most "up-to-date and comprehensive survey of near-death studies," this anthology by Lee Bailey and Jenny Yates marks the third collection of the near-death literature, succeeding Craig Lundahl's *A Collection of Near-Death Research Readings* published in 1982 and Bruce Greyson and Charles Flynn's *The Near-Death Experience: Problems, Prospects, Perspectives* from 1984. While this one contains much valuable material, it fails to live up to its billing.

The problem seems to be a weak conceptualization for the thrust of the book and confusion about the target audience. Although the editors' desire to compile this book arose from teaching about the near-death experience (NDE), this anthology is not intended as a textbook. Its tone is more scholarly and interpretive than would appeal to a popular audience, with only seven chapters out of 24 focusing on NDE narratives; yet its value for researchers and professionals is limited.

In the first place, the book adds little to the coverage provided by scholarly journals; in fact, much of the material is surprisingly dated. Chapters by a number of prominent living authors were excerpted from very old sources: Raymond Moody's is reprinted from a 1988 book; Carol Zaleski's, from 1987; Kenneth Ring's, from a 1986 article; and Ian Stevenson and Bruce Greyson's, from 1979. Knowledgeable readers are well aware that some of these authors' views, notably Moody's and Ring's, have changed substantially since these pieces

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were first written. Bailey and Yates have chosen not to present these authors' newer ideas, but rather their classics. These essays have not lost their appeal, but like flies in amber, they speak to us of past beauty rather than where the field is today.

This assessment may seem harsh, since it is not the nature of anthologies to be on the cutting edge. Nevertheless, I wish that the editors had attempted to produce a collection more reflective of the maturity of near-death studies at this time. The anthologies produced in the early 1980s address the state of the art, clinical issues, and interdisciplinary questions and interpretations from a wide variety of contributors. Now, more than a decade later, the field could benefit from a new one that represents the scope of contemporary studies, places them within an interdisciplinary context represented by voices from those fields, points to the growth of subspecialties or special interest groups among researchers, and assesses the gaps and shortfalls in the literature.

The editors' stated objective is surveying the "interdisciplinary research debating ways to interpret this challenging phenomenon from biological, psychological, philosophical, and religious viewpoints." And indeed they present some of the larger interdisciplinary issues and their advocates in the introduction. There, the editors briefly relate the status of the literature concerning the definition of death, characteristics of NDEs, distribution of NDEs in the population, distressing NDEs, aftereffects of NDEs, ways to relate to experiencers, and biological, psychological, philosophical, and religious interpretations of NDEs. This summary is a promising starting place for a sketch of the field; but unfortunately, the selections that follow are less satisfying.

I found the introduction too selective and uncritical to provide a solid foundation for the rest of the book. Bailey and Yates omitted some major studies, and did not mention methodological weaknesses or differences between studies. For example, they trotted out yet again the Gallup Poll results; although most researchers consider it unlikely that 12 to 15 percent of American adults have had a textbook NDE, the editors do not qualify this information. Furthermore, it might have been more useful to distinguish in the introduction among various death-related experiences, rather than lumping in, with NDEs, crosscultural studies of other thanatologic events, such as Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson's studies of deathbed visions.

Another unfulfilled hope raised by the introduction is that that summary would obviate a repetition of essentials already covered,

such as the characteristics of the NDE. However, the editors did not excise this material from each author's contribution, so the reader must wade through this same information in chapter after chapter. Not only is this repetition numbing to the reader, but length constraints prevented some authors from developing important themes, such as Sogyal Rinpoche's differentiation between NDEs and events described in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

I had hoped that the book would flesh out the issues raised in the introduction, for example by providing a chapter summarizing all the crosscultural surveys concerning the distribution of NDEs, the consistency of their findings, methodologies, and so on. However, I could find no clear relationship between the issues in the introduction and the contents of the book, and in fact wondered why some selections were included at all.

The editors divide the book roughly into two portions: experiences and interpretations. Although the first part purports to contain "representative cases of near-death experiences," I found it more accurately "NDEs of the rich and famous." Accounts of the experiences of Mellen-Thomas Benedict, Betty Eadie, Dannion Brinkley, George Ritchie, and Carl Jung, each of which rated a chapter, were uniquely interesting, but hardly representative of the typical NDE. A single chapter with the oxymoronic title "Unknown Well-Known Near-Death Experiences" adds into the celebrity mix near-death narratives from Peter Sellers, Eddie Rickenbacker, Plato, and Black Elk.

The later scholarly chapters include truly representative NDE accounts. However, I found it confusing that the interpretation section intermingled survival issues, biological arguments, religious and philosophical views in no apparent order, rather than grouping them by topic. Welcomed exceptions were a coherent four-chapter section on Jungian psychological interpretations and a three-chapter grouping of mystical interpretations. Here again, the selections were not representative of the breadth of the literature. The only psychological view presented was the Jungian, a rather surprising omission considering the prominence of different transpersonal psychologies.

Along these lines, later chapters provided religious and spiritual perspectives from Tibetan Buddhism, mysticism, and the more general discussion of spiritual enculturation. The editors' introduction shows a familiarity with Judeo-Christian issues and interpretations of NDEs, but they included no substantive selections from these more familiar Western perspectives. Likewise, beyond the editors' introduction, the only biological arguments represented are those of Karl Jan-

sen and Melvin Morse, leaving the reader to wonder what happened to the biological arguments of the 1980s, and whether they have been invalidated. The value of this book could have been enhanced had the editors placed these essays in the context of other biological interpretations, qualified the researchers and their results, or presented a fuller spectrum of a single class of possible interpretations, as earlier books had done.

On their own merits, several of the interpretive chapters are valuable contributions, reflecting the general excellence always to be enjoyed from these scholars' works. It is a pleasure to read again, in this succinct form, their interpretations of the NDE. The more critical writers, such as Robert Kastenbaum, have assessed the current state of near-death research, identified gaps and concentrations in the literature, and defined many of the outstanding questions in the field. For example, many studies, such as Morse's work with children, have not been replicated by other investigators—a problem in any scientific field. The editors might have pointed out the overreliance on a few sources for certain types of data, the preponderance of anecdotal data, small samples, and questionable methodologies, or otherwise qualified findings that continue to be presented without critical evaluation. Some theories, such as Morse's temporal lobe model, have other proponents and antagonists but remain unproven. This book would have been more valuable if, rather than providing the familiar NDE experts, it had discussed the state of theoretical exploration or brought in new voices for a truly interdisciplinary discussion.

Much good material can be found in *The Near-Death Experience: A Reader*, but it requires some digging. It provides a comfortable selection of familiar views, but little that is new.

References

- Greyson, B., and Flynn, C. P. (Eds.). (1984). *The near-death experience: Problems, prospects, perspectives*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
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