



Body Brokers: Inside America's Underground Trade in Human Remains

Annie Cheney

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“You are a little soul carrying around a corpse.” —Epictetus

“Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will follow.” —*Matthew 24:28*

Body Brokers is an audacious, disturbing, and compellingly written investigative exposé of the lucrative business of procuring, buying, and selling human cadavers and body parts.

Every year human corpses meant for anatomy classes, burial, or cremation find their way into the hands of a shadowy group of entrepreneurs who profit by buying and selling human remains. While the government has controls on organs and tissue meant for transplantation, these “body brokers” capitalize on the myriad other uses for dead bodies that receive no federal oversight whatsoever: commercial seminars to introduce new medical gadgetry; medical research studies and training courses; and U.S. Army land-mine explosion tests. A single corpse used for these purposes can generate up to \$10,000.

As journalist Annie Cheney found while reporting on this subject over the course of three years, when there’s that much money to be made with no federal regulation, there are all sorts of shady (and fascinating) characters who are willing to employ questionable practices—from deception and outright theft—to acquire, market and distribute human bodies and parts. In Michigan and New York she discovers funeral directors who buy corpses from medical schools and supply the parts to surgical equipment companies and associations of surgeons. In California, she meets a crematorium owner who sold the body parts of people he was supposed to cremate, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in profits. In Florida, she attends a medical conference in a luxury hotel, where fresh torsos are delivered in Igloo coolers and displayed on gurneys in a room normally used for banquets. “That torso that you’re living in right now is just flesh and bones to me. To me, it’s a product,” says the New Jersey-based broker presiding over the torsos. Tracing the origins of body brokering from the “resurrectionists” of the nineteenth century to the entrepreneurs of today, Cheney chronicles how demand for cadavers has long driven unscrupulous funeral home, crematorium and medical school personnel to treat human bodies as commodities.

Gripping, often chilling, and sure to cause a reexamination of the American way of death, *Body Brokers* is both a captivating work of first-person reportage and a surprising inside look at a little-known aspect of the “death care” world.

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