

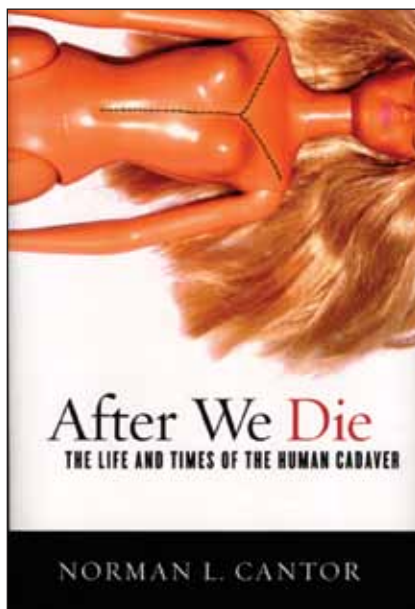
# THE HUMAN BODY AFTER DEATH

REVIEWED BY FR. KEVIN O'ROURKE, OP, J.C.D., S.T.M.

At first glance, the human cadaver does not in itself excite much interest. In a certain sense, the cadaver is simply the lifeless vestige of a person. If we knew or loved the person when alive, we may feel concern or interest in regard to the disposition of the remains. We care for the dead body as a way of showing respect and even love for the deceased person.

Having said this, it is clear that Norman Cantor has taken a subject that could be dull and dry and written an extensive and interesting account of the various customs and practical questions that might arise concerning the care of a corpse. He attributes a quasi-human spiritual meaning to human remains.

His interest in a book of this nature was stimulated by the desire of his half-brother for a New Orleans-style burial, but also by the events that followed the death of "The Splendid Splinter," one of baseball's greatest hitters, Ted Williams. Amid criticism from other family members and fans of Williams' outstanding career, the ballplayer's son arranged to have Williams' corpse permanently frozen, "ready for restoration whenever science mastered the tech-



**AFTER WE DIE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE HUMAN CADAVER**

BY NORMAN L. CANTOR  
Georgetown University Press, 2010  
372 pages, \$26.95 hardcover

nique of reviving and restoring dead human beings."

For the most part, Cantor places his emphasis upon the legal norms that govern the care of cadavers, but he also presents customs followed throughout the world. Cantor acknowledges that "for most Americans, the cemetery is not the end of the line; it is the gateway to some other realm, however ill-defined." He considers the certainty that

divine faith brings to many people concerning life after death, but he does not endorse or explain any particular religious stance.

The book contains 13 chapters, divided into four parts: "Status and Rights of the Cadaver"; "Disposition of Human Remains"; "The Multiple Roles of a Cadaver"; "Abuses of the Cadaver: What Does Decency Demand?" In the course of these chapters, the author considers everything from autopsy to embalming, from quality of life to quantity of life decisions and from persistent vegetative state to whole brain death. Cantor's ingenuity is manifested by his ability to present lively examples and intriguing anecdotes. The contents of the book, however, are not well advertised by the cover, which features a doll's torso marked with autopsy stitches.

The book leaves the reader with two reasonable conclusions: one, be sure to leave instructions for your loved ones indicating how you wish to be cared for as death approaches, as well as instructions for disposition of your body after death, particularly if you have some idiosyncratic desires. And two, consider donating your body to a medical facility so that you will benefit the education of future health care professionals.

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**EXCERPT FROM AFTER WE DIE**

*The rules surrounding the treatment of corpses in American culture are appropriately "driven by a desire to treat the dead with dignity."*

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, March-April 2011  
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