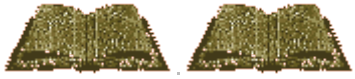
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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



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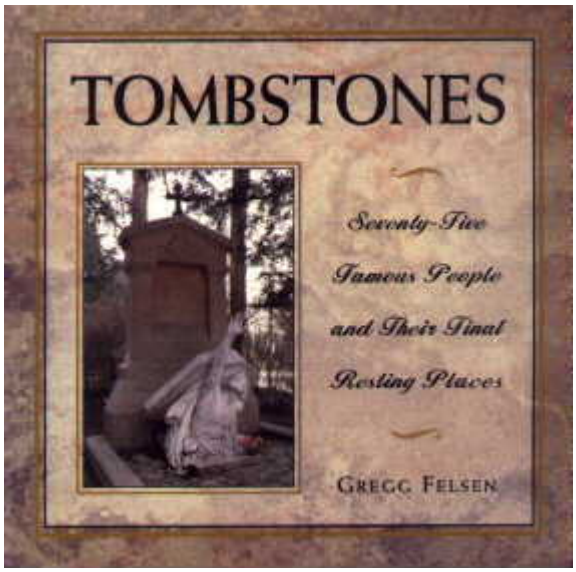
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AN UNUSUAL COLLECTION

Tombstones: Seventy-five famous people and their final resting places *by* Gregg Felsen
Ten Speed Press, Celestial Arts, Tricycle Press, P.O. Box 7123, Berkeley, CA 94707. : : viii + 151 Pages: Publication Date - 1996, ISBN 0-89815-860-5: Price $19.95

Click cover to buy from Amazon



A few weeks back, my son Tarun, who is studying for his Engineering entrance examinations, told me a very interesting fact. He was studying thermodynamics. He told me Ludwig Boltzmann (1844-1906), an Austrian physicist was the first to give a mathematical formula describing entropy (Entropy as we all know denotes the amount of disorder in a system). For those who are interested, the formula is $S = k \ln W$, where S is the entropy, ln stands for natural log, W is the multiplicity (a complex mathematical concept denoting the number of ways you can arrange the particles of a gas) and k, the Boltzmann's constant (1.38×10^{-23} J/K). To put it in plain and simple words, entropy is directly proportional to the natural log of the combination in which the particles of a gas can be arranged.

This was not so surprising. But what was surprising was the fact that *this formula is engraved on Boltzmann's grave in the Central Cemetery in Vienna*! This is what interested me the most.

View this book on Amazon

Study of graves and epitaphs could be interesting, I told myself. Quite coincidentally one of the editors of this journal, Dr. John H. Trestrail III visited Orfila's grave in France last year, and sent us an interesting report. For the uninitiated, Mathieu Joseph Bonoventure Orfila has been hailed as the *Father of Toxicology*, and wrote one of the first books devoted entirely to toxicology. The complete report on his tombstone can be accessed by clicking here.

Tombstones and graves interests us for a number of other reasons too. We are basically forensic pathologists and often have to exhume bodies in order to find out the cause of death. Many graves have to be exhumed for historical reasons. The remains of Zachary Taylor (1784-1850), twelfth president of United States, were exhumed in 1991 - 141 years after his death - in order to know if he was criminally poisoned with arsenic! Sometimes bodies are exhumed for other reasons. The remains of the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), were exhumed from his original resting place in Spring Green, Wisconsin, 26 years after his burial, cremated and sent to Scottsdale for reburial in accordance with the wishes of his third wife Olgivanna Milanov. In many exhumations, especially those with a medicolegal background, a forensic pathologist has to be present at the grave at the time of exhumation. Undoubtedly tombstones and graves do interest us.

Some tombstones from this book

Some tombstones from this book. Top row: left - Tombstone of Frederic Francois Chopin, (page 17); right - Tombstone of Robert Edwin Peary, (page 59)

Middle row: left - Tombstone of James Joyce, (page 85); right - Tombstone of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, (page 103)

Bottom row: left - Tombstone of Frank Lloyd Wright, (page 115).. and right - Tombstone of the heart throb Jayne Mansfield, (page 133).

The book under review gives you a total of 75 tombstones of famous personalities!













That is why, when this book came to me for review, I read it with interest. It gives the pictures of tombstones of 75 famous persons, and the story behind them. And the persons may not necessarily be adorable. All kinds of people - heroes and villains - are represented here. You find here the tombstones of not only politicians, film stars, pop singers, writers, architects, musicians, and scientists but such people as murderers (Robert Stroud at page 124-125), assassins (John Wilkes

Booth at page 28-29), spies (Ethel and Julius Rosenberg at page 102-103) and gangsters (Al Capone at page 92-93).

All the pictures are in full color and are of a high quality. And they are all a marvel to look at. The stories accompanying the pictures are extremely interesting too. I would give a few examples.

We all know about the American inventor George Eastman (1854-1932). He was the one who made photography possible for an average person. His tombstone appears on page 73 of this book, and on page 72, some high points of his life (and death). He was unmarried throughout his life. Shortly after noon on Monday, March 14, 1932, he dismissed his physician and nurse, with whom he had been chatting, saying, "I have a note to write". Minutes later a gunshot sounded. The doctor and the nurse rushed back to Eastman's room and found that he had shot himself in the heart. On a lined yellow sheet of paper, he had written his last words, "My work is done. Why wait?"

Or take the case of Alexander Hamilton who was killed in a duel with the Vice President Aaron Burr. We all know that they were political enemies, but very few of us know that in the dueling that took place between them on July 11, 1804 (at 7 am), Hamilton never wanted to kill Aaron. In fact he held an aversion to dueling, but as a man of honor had felt compelled to accept Burr's challenge. He fired an innocent shot into the air, striking a tree limb twelve and a half feet above the ground and four feet to Burr's side. Burr, on the other hand fired with deadly aim, and his bullet found its mark. The bullet struck Hamilton in the chest and lodged in his spine. The injured Hamilton was taken to the Greenwich Village home of a friend where doctors tried in vain to help him. After thirty-one hours of agonizing pain he died. Incidentally he left his wife and seven children heavily in debt, which friends helped to pay off. His tombstone appears on page 5, and his extraordinary story on page 4.

On page 124 appears the story of Robert Stroud, also known as the "Birdman of Alcatraz". He was imprisoned at the age of 19 for killing a man who beat up his girlfriend. He spent the rest of his 54 years incarcerated in federal penitentiaries. In jail, he studied birds and bird diseases and wrote a famous 500-page book "*Stroud's Digest of Bird Diseases*", which was published in 1943. In July, 1959, due to advanced age and failing health, he was transferred to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri, where he died in his sleep of natural causes four years later. His tombstone appears on page 125.

There are astonishing tombstones on several pages. Take for example the heart-shaped tombstone of Jayne Mansfield (1933-1967). Most of us know her as the Playboy Playmate of February 1955. With an astonishing figure of 40-18-35, she had a rare physical charm, but very few of us know that she was a childhood violin prodigy with an I.Q. of 163! In fact she appears to be the brainiest of the sexy ladies who appeared on Playboy's center pages as playmates. She is remembered today for her gruesome death she met at the young age of 34. She was on her way to a television interview in New Orleans. Her Buick hardtop hit a stopped truck so hard that the car's entire top sheared off, instantly killing not only her but also her driver and manager. Her blonde wig on the car's dashboard led to the enduring, but incorrect, story that she had been decapitated. Her tombstone appears on page 133 and her astonishing story on page 132.

There are more celebrities on these pages. You will find tombstones of such persons as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Golda Meir, J. Edgar Hoover, Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Ernest Hemingway, Frank Lloyd Wright, Billie Holiday, Jim Thorpe, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Marie Curie, Jean Harlow, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce, Anna Pavlova, Andrew Carnegie,

Jules Verne, Oscar Wilde, Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allan Poe and a number of other famous persons. And with each tombstone, there is a riveting story of that person's life - and death.

I said in the beginning, that this book would be of interest to forensic pathologists because of their interest in graves and tombstones. But this is not to say that the book would not interest a general reader. Indeed, this book has been written with the general reader in mind. If you are a general reader, and if biographies interest you, this book is certainly for you. This is a biography with a difference though. It does not give you the face of a person on its pages, which is the norm in biography books. Instead it gives you the picture of his tombstone. The biographies concentrate on the last moments of the celebrity - another peculiarity of this book. Incidentally these last moments are rarely found elsewhere. That is why I would like to call it *a biography book with a difference*. This is going to be one of rare nuggets in my collection, and if you are a lover of the unusual as much as I am, you surely are going to enjoy this book.

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