

REVIEWS

Death Websites

Love, Zachariah. **The Lee Atwater Invitational Dead Pool.** <http://www.stiffs.com/>, Pp. 20, mail, archives. Usually updated daily.

Danse Macabre. **Danse Macabre.** <http://www.dansemacabre.com/>, Pp. 12, order form. No date.

The Virtual Pet Cemetery. http://www.lavamind.com/pet_menu.html, Pp. 25, instructions, 16 plots, links, virtual pet shop. No date.

Lynn Gelfand

The anguished. The tantalizing. The forbidden. The subversive. The downright weird. These qualities, found so amply throughout the World Wide Web, have many points in common with people's responses to death in general and with websites dealing with the topic of death in particular. Though little more than eight years old, the Web has already spawned a variety of sites dedicated to some of the stranger aspects of death. Games involving death? Got 'em. Gift shops specializing in items about death? Step right in. Want to "bury" your pet in a virtual cemetery? No problem. Let's visit a few of these offbeat death-related web sites, shall we?

Games About Death

Tasteless, deviant, and wickedly funny, *The Lee Atwater Invitational Dead Pool* invites you to play along and "root for your favorites as we go for the gold that lies in the back of the teeth of the rich and feeble." A dead pool is a game where each player makes up a list of famous people (usually ten) that she or he thinks are most likely to die within a given time period (usually a calendar year). Whoever gets the most right, wins. Submit your entry form, encourages the site, and "let the dying begin."

Gleefully resentful of the rich and famous "haves" in a world of "have-nots," *The Lee Atwater Invitational Dead Pool* is "pretty darn proud" that its celebrity dead pool game has "blossomed into a nation-wide corpse-counting craze" that extends from Texas to Toronto. "We like to think," the authors write, "that the harmonious success enjoyed by our twisted little amusement is a microcosmic manifestation of the greed and bloodlust that made America great. Amen."

While the game is simple in principle, experience has created a host of special rules and warnings that resemble traditional case law. For example, there is The Carl Sagan Stipulation that demonstrates the danger of sending in the entry form too soon in the year, causing the player to miss a good celebrity death that is clearly in the making. The Pol Pot Provision deals with those pesky rumors of death involving high ranking world leaders vs. the official denial of said rumors. The Tom Bradley Blunder illustrates the unlikely but ever-present danger of actually meeting a celebrity on your list and realizing that (gulp) he or she is a real, flesh-and-blood human being, often leading to a crack in your armor of fashionably ruthless cynicism and usually followed by an uncontrollable desire to remove the name from your list.

An email to *The Lee Atwater Invitational Dead Pool* site perhaps best sums it up: "This is the sickest display of insensitive depravity I have ever seen. God, I loved every second of it."

Gift Shops Specializing in Death

Looking for that special something to give to a Gothic loved one who seems to have everything this side of the grave? Look no further. *Danse Macabre*, an on-line gift shop "for the morbidly inclined," has just the thing to make her or his eyes open wide and say "Oh...a sculptured severed arm for me? You shouldn't have." Other items for sale include syringe-shaped writing pens, ceramic skull mugs, leather coffin handbags, oil paintings of corpses, Mexican Day of the Dead figures, plaster gargoyles, sculptured fetal candy dishes, death's head tombstone reliefs, and miniature electric chairs and guillotines.

The site is well designed, managing to be both atmospheric and restrained. Upon entering the site, the customer is greeted by the shop's name in softly scripted, purple letters with Gothic capitals against a black background. Animated flames dance on either side of the shop's name. An animated grinning skull smokes a cigar, its head nodding up and down as a skeletal hand beckons you forward. Below the shop's name, a carved stone face scowls with its mouth agape. There aren't many whistles and bells here, just enough to evoke a sense of the eerie and otherworldly.

The site is also easy to use, employing a simple frames-based form (a format resembling a window in which different panes of glass show different information). A scrolling vertical menu sits to the left of the page and a large main window to the right where the items the customer clicks on in the menu are displayed. All in all, it's an enjoyably creepy way to do business.

Pet Cemeteries

The Virtual Pet Cemetery contains more than the usual listing of names, dates, and formulaic expressions of sorrow common to most cemeteries. Pictures, poetry, and detailed narratives in *The Virtual Pet Cemetery* pay tribute to every animal from fish, turtles, gerbils, guinea pigs, rabbits, and parakeets to cats, dogs, and horses. The site is divided into "virtual plots" composed of epitaphs. Several of these epitaphs are funny. Some relate accounts of heroic deeds. Others are almost heartbreaking in their expressions of grief. All are written by people who wish others to remember their pets as they remember them.

Many epitaphs offer detailed backgrounds on the pets' lives. For example, there is Tonka (so named because he was "a tough little toy for the kids"). Tonka was almost named Quadpod, a name that was luckily overruled since a few days later he was hit by a car and lost a front leg, in which case he would have to have been renamed Tripod, "creating who knows what kind of canine psychological havoc!" He was with the family for ten years. After his death, "it took us many years to consider getting another dog (mainly because they all had too many legs)...Tonka the Wonder Dog, we miss you."

Another story is that of Touché the Turtle, a desert tortoise whose broken-hearted owner came home from school one day to find that Touché had burrowed a hole in the backyard and died. He was given a loving burial, complete with cardboard box, garden flowers, and prayers. Several years later, the owner discovered that desert tortoises dig holes in order to hibernate for the winter. The epitaph ends with "I'm sorry Touché...where ever you are! Please forgive me!"

The adventures of Popeye, the "very last of all the Carolina Yeller Dogs," are vividly recounted. "Pop" was given to roaming, "not because he didn't love us. Just because [of]...Doggie wanderlust and a crazy need for adventure. The old man always ran ads in the paper for him (sure, Pop could read)." During one of these adventures, it was discovered that

some old redneck had him and was going to breed him with his dog, that's just how good looking Popeye was. I suppose the only time Pop didn't want to come back home was the time he ran off and landed on easy street. Be damned if some rich one wasn't riding Pop around on his yacht, feeding him top sirloin and calling him 'Handsome.' But the old man whistled and Pop sailed right on up into the bed of that pickup truck. Think he held a grudge about being found that time....Popeye, here's to you, boy. Thanks for being a fine friend and courageous companion.

Other epitaphs recount acts of heroism or inspiration. A 125 pound dog named Bear defended his wheelchair bound owner from an intruder. A St. Bernard named Lady Louise would cheer up her cancer-stricken owner: "You were my best friend. When I cried because of the pain from the cancer, and when I got sick because of the chemotherapy, you were there. You would lie next to me and lick the tears away from my face. I want you to know how much you meant to me and how much I loved you."

From games to gifts to grief, the World Wide Web runs the spectrum. Stop in and have a look at the flip side of life.

National Public Radio. **The End of Life: Exploring Death in America.** <http://www.npr.org/programs/death/>, Pp. 7, Transcripts, Resources, Bibliography, Readings, Tell Your Story, Feedback. No date.

Elinor Levy

In November 1997 National Public Radio's (NPR) "All Things Considered" launched a year long, multi-disciplinary investigation into death in America, entitled *The End of Life: Exploring Death in America*. This massive endeavor explores death from the perspectives of folklore, religion, personal experience, science, business, and art, among others. The radio broadcasts are augmented by a website that provides visual images and resource information.

The main page of the website features a photo of a sculpture by Augustus Saint Gaudens, later titled *The Peace of God that Passeth Understanding*, providing a fitting undertone to what many Americans fear most—death. The main page acts as a jumping off point to the other links: "Transcripts," "Resources," "Bibliography," "Readings," "Tell Your Story," and "Feedback."

"Transcripts" includes both the complete transcript of each segment and the audio tracks from the broadcasts. This is an unusual and very welcome link as NPR does not usually provide transcripts on its websites, only summaries. The "Transcripts" section offers many opportunities for folkloric discussion and points for further research. The segments range from round table discussions on scientific, medical, and religious aspects of death, to personal narratives of the dying, to handling grief and suicide, and to roadside memorials. A few examples include stories about Do-It-Yourself Funerals, thanomusicology, and death and society. The "Resources" link offers a list of organizations for people coping with death and life-threatening illness. The "Bibliography" link provides books and journals, both fiction and nonfiction, on a wide variety of topics relating to death and illness.