

Thomas Lynch. **The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade.** New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997. Pp. x + 202, notes. \$23.00 cloth.

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"I wear black most of the time, to keep folks in mind of the fact we're not talking Buicks here" (3).

Thomas Lynch, a second generation undertaker and first generation poet (though not necessarily in that order), leads us through the life and times of a modern undertaker, the title he prefers over mortician or funeral director. Lynch lives and works in a small town in Michigan where it is not unusual for him to know his customers personally. He takes us on a lyrical journey through his life as one of nine children in a Catholic, Irish American family with a mother motivated by faith in God and a father motivated by a fear of perceived dangers. Whenever the children wanted to do something, his father replied, "I just buried so and so's child who did that." Lynch later remarks about having the same fears when he becomes a father.

Interspersed with his personal narratives are descriptions of funerals and other activities of interest to the folklorist, such as an account of the death and funeral of his Irish cousin, Nora. Another passage relates the life, death, and burial of an old friend: "And after everything had been said that could be said, and done that could be done, Mary and her daughters went home to the embraces of neighbors and the casseroles and condolences, and Russ's sons remained to bury him. They took off their jackets, undid their ties, broke out a bottle and dark cigars and buried their father's body" (9).

Lynch offers us his own quirky ideas for advancing the funeral industry and the role of death in American culture. One idea on which he expounds is the Golfatorium—a cemetery-cum-golf course. What a great way to get hubby to visit mom's grave, combine it with nine holes of golf. There is also an extended discussion of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, suicide, and the aftermath of death on the living.

Lynch is funny, poetic, and philosophical by turn. Part personal narrative, part cultural history, part poetry, and part informative essay, *The Undertaking* does not give us a picture of the average undertaker by any means. But, in the end we have come to know Thomas Lynch, undertaker and poet (not necessarily in that order).