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Book Reviews

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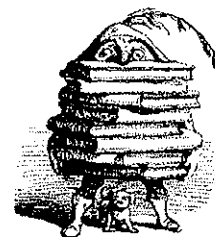
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Books! Books! Books! Books!



HOW WE SEE A LIFE AFTER DEATH

Hume, Janice. *Obituaries in American Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

Reviewed by Russell D. James, Graduate Student, University of West Florida, Pensacola, Florida.

Janice Hume has studied obituaries in depth, doing statistical research into what obituaries of the past have said and not said, what American culture has valued most at crucial times in history. Hume examined obituaries from the first week of each month in a predetermined set of years: 1818 and 1838 (ten years before and ten years after Andrew Jackson's rise to the presidency); 1855 and 1870 (five years before and five years after the Civil War); and 1910 and 1930 (ten years before and ten years after the watershed year of 1920). Hume looked at obituaries — articles about the death of a person as well as death notices — paid narratives of death.

What Hume discovered was that we Americans are obsessive about heroes. In the early years of the Republic, Americans valued the lives of anyone who had contact with George Washington. Later on, war veterans themselves were singled out for obituary notice because of the courage they showed on the battlefield. In the early part of the twentieth century, courage was honored if it was demonstrated in business or industry, the amassing of a fortune making good fodder for editors.

In all cases studied, Hume found that men were more likely to be honored in an obituary than women. If a woman did receive a death notice, it was because her family paid for the item or because of her association through blood or marriage to a man who was worthy of mention. In many cases, women were not even mourned by their first name, only "Mrs. So-and-so." But as the decades passed, women were honored for the virtuous activities in the home and within the community-at-large.

Similarly, blacks were not honored with obituary notices unless they had been a slave or servant of an important white person or because of their advanced age. Even in 1930, few black people were honored with an obituary in the newspapers studied by Hume.

The only criticisms I have concerning to this crucial study of one of our most American of death memorials are the poor editing of the manuscript and the lack of coverage of Southern obituaries after

the Civil War. Many words were misspelled and, at times, sentences didn't flow due to an added or deleted word or phrase. It is also interesting to note, for the South's sake, that Hume examined obituaries in Southern newspapers before the Civil War, but afterward no such newspapers were covered. One wonders if the South has changed any from its earlier obituaries of gentility, honor, and hospitality?

A reader wanting to know more about the history and importance of obituaries need only open Janice Hume's book to see the reflection of American popular culture in the obituaries of our nation's first century and a half.