

BOOK REVIEW



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Death rules: how death shapes life on earth, and what it means for us

By Will Cairns



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ONE OF THE most potent functions of our mind is to distract us from our evolutionary

heritage. This may be protective at various stages of living, but it can also be maladaptive and risky to our community's survival. Not until death is on our horizon, or a punchy book like this one comes our way, do the psychological defences ring-fencing our animalism relax. Mankind's phylogenetic development is both morphological and psychological. The slow, conservative and thrifty process of evolution has been contaminated by our ability to manipulate and dominate nature. Modern medicine's ability to protract dying is one such example.

Dr Cairns, the respected North Queensland palliative medicine specialist, elegantly confronts us with the pivotal role of the death of an individual in the survival of a society. This electronic *magnum opus*, admittedly addressed to the general reader rather than a scientifically informed readership – and perhaps too lengthy, though it reads so easily – commands reflection by those whose profession it is to care for the dying.

Cairns uses the turtles, birds and sea life of Raine Island, near the Great Barrier Reef, and a host of other natural life vignettes to illustrate biological concepts, particularly the presence, purpose and inevitability of death for all living creatures, including ourselves. Sprinkled with personal revelations, scientific explanations and philosophical speculations, this is a fascinating eBook. Cairns contrasts his own cloistered academic developmental background with the cruel, harsh and majestic world of nature. It is the seeming diametrically opposing influences of human sophistication and the realism of the brief life and death in the wilds which fuel Cairns' insights into the naturalness and normality of individual death. The expectations of longevity of life of baby boomers, supported by modern technological medicine, are prohibitively expensive challenges, even for developed countries.

Such hopes are not based on biological principles, Cairns is at pains to labour. There is a growing mismatch between our biology and our social and cultural mores. Our human world has lost touch with our evolutionary forebears and psychologically and philosophically these ideations are reinforced by aberrant cognitions. Freud's theories, unfashionable as they now are, were bedded in evolutionary ideas whereas cognitive psychotherapies swim in the soup of our mind's contortions, far removed from our physicality and history. Even our psycho-oncological interventions often lack greenness. Yet we have all witnessed the raw, grubby and real atmosphere of the death scene, and, like Raine Island, it is wonderful.

Death does shape life and Cairns urges us to rediscover our biological fragility, accept the transience of the human lifespan and admire the social creativity of death. Cairns doesn't offer solutions, yet his book does. Reconnecting palliative care with phylogenesis is the part that we can play and Will is leading the way. This book is a joy to read and one that leaves a thought-provoking, nervous taste in one's mouth – for society's tipping point may be near, and so probably is one's own death. It was for me a great privilege to read and review it.

Reviewed by Sandy Mcleod