

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Way To Go by Alan Spence; Phoenix 1998 pp294  
£6.99 paperback ISBN 0-75380-732-7**

Most doctors have what one might term Dealings With Death at some stage in their careers. My earliest recollection of a dead body is a shaven cadaver on the slab in the anatomy room at medical school. For added ghoulishness it had been bandsawed in sagittal section to show the midline structures. It was not a pleasant experience. It was the first dead body I had seen (I was deemed too young at 7 to attend the wake for my grandmother.)

Few of us face the daily gruesome task of the pathologist, but all doctors at some stage certify deaths, hopefully try to comfort the bereaved and handle the paperwork efficiently before handing on the work to our fellow professionals, the undertakers. We share some facets of their work - along with ministers of religion we are, in the public mind, associated with terminal demise and so take on the mantle of the Grim Reaper. To many people we are quite literally, as a collection of professionals, the last people you would want to see.

This novel is in fact a long meditation on death and dying and is preoccupied throughout with the question: "What happens when you die?" The story of Neil McGraw, the narrator and central character of the book is enacted in a traditional three act narrative. This is used as a framework on which to hang nuggets of spiritual wisdom about death, dying and loss.

Neil is the only son of a widower, an undertaker in Glasgow whose life and spirit have withered after the early death of his wife - a man who carries out

his most necessary task with grim efficiency. The motto of the family firm is 'Rest Assured'.

The author runs the Sri Chinmoy meditation centre in Edinburgh and this informs his writing. His themes about death and dying are culled in large part from the deep wells of wisdom of the religious traditions of the Far East and the Indian Subcontinent. This leads one to the only real criticism that could be levelled at the book: given that it is aimed at a European audience, it at best ignores and at worst parodies the traditions of the monotheistic religions of the West and Near East - Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The only identifiable character from the Judaeo-Christian tradition is a dour, extreme Calvinist - a caricature who expires in a wild rage at the mourning over the death of the Princess of Wales. No meaningful reference is made to less extreme theologies of death.

For a novel about death and dying, this is an oddly life-affirming piece. It is well-written and engaging. It is thoughtful and thought-provoking and not afraid to make connections between sexuality as the life-urge and death. The story follows Neil in his travels and adventures and the book has a neat circularity to it. The characters are believable and their dialogue is marked by a sharp, recognisably Glaswegian wit and the blackest of humours - laughter in the face of death. The laughter and the story have a very unexpected sting in the tail. Most importantly it is a goldmine of ideas about the one place we are all headed.

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