

ON THE BOOKSHELF

"My Father's Wake—How the Irish Teach Us To Live, Love, and Die"

By Kevin Toolis (Da Capo Press)

In the South, there are many funeral traditions, passed down to us by our Irish ancestors who came to these shores over the centuries. We visit the family of the deceased, share stories of him/her, weep, mourn, bring food, go to the services, the burial, the home afterward. All these things are a derivation of what the Irish have been doing at wakes for centuries.

A traditional Irish Wake reads like a death decades ago in the poor South: laying out the body in the parlor, sitting up with the dead, people coming by to see the family but also to visit with the dead one last time. Because in the cycle of life, death is not a surprise. As Ecclesiastes taught millennia ago, "There is a time to be born, and a time to die. A time to mourn and a time to dance." To celebrate a life is to remember that every life is a gift, even the most ordinary and humble person's life. They still had friends, family, loved ones, acquaintances, connections. Of these are lives built.

Carrying a coffin is one of the last things we can do for a friend, a parent, a child. It is a solemn duty, not to be taken lightly, for ta life is never to be taken lightly. When we do, we diminish not only that human but ourselves as well.

The author spent a long time away from his island, his home, seeking for answers after his older brother died of leukemia. What did it mean? Why had it happened? Would it happen to everyone he loved? Would it happen to him? Across the globe he traveled, a journalist asking so many who had lost a loved one, pondering what it all meant. Death is the one absolute constant. We are all terminal. We will not, cannot evade that inescapable reality. But it need not define us or limit us. A life well-lived deserves a wake.

The author rediscovered that the Irish in his hometown see Death differently than the corporate West does. What he calls the "The Western Death Machine" treats death as a disgrace, something the doctors couldn't fix, and the body must be hidden. In private it is sliced apart and reassembled and pampered and presented then sealed, carried away by technology and buried by professionals. In the poorest county of Ireland, everything is lovingly done by hand, by those who want to show their respect for the dead and their living kinfolk.

"Learning to die", Kevin writes, "is the very opposite" of the hidden death. "It is to expose yourself to your own mortality and question the rationale of many of the common devices we employ to fool ourselves. To accept death is to question the value of many of our (life's) desires. To face the best of our fear instead and look up toward the far horizon. All of us need to find a way to handle death. It will be a lot easier if we just copy what the Irish already do."