

BOOK REVIEW

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The Complete Idiot's Guide to Near-Death Experiences, by P. M. H. Atwater with David H. Morgan. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books/Macmillan USA, 2000, 450 pp + xxvii, \$16.95, pb.

P. M. H. Atwater, a near-death experimenter and researcher, has long been familiar to readers of the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* and to others who keep abreast of the literature and other media information on near-death experiences (NDEs). In this book, part of Macmillan's "Complete Idiot's Guide" series, she and co-author David Morgan introduce the field to newcomers.

In accordance with its intended audience, the style is lively and informal. Each chapter begins with several topic phrases or lines, and ends with a five- or six-line summary. The text is laced with eye-catching subheadings, drawings by experiencers, and humorously illustrated sidebars with titles like "Otherworldly Insights" and "A Message from Beyond." There are five useful appendices: "Bright New Words Glossary," "International Association for Near-Death Studies," "Further Reading," "Web Sites," and "Getting in Touch," the last named including contact information on various authorities and organizations given in the text.

The book is in five parts. The first, describing basic experiences near death and persons who undergo them, summarizes the history of near-death studies, describes Raymond Moody's model as unhelpful and gives alternatives, and presents Atwater's four-part typology of NDEs: initial experiences (which, despite the name, include union with the Light), unpleasant or hellish experiences, pleasant or heavenly experiences, and transcendent experiences. There is a chapter on

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analogous experiences not close to death, one on child experiencers and related birth issues, and one on would-be suicides.

Part Two deals with aftereffects. In addition to describing well-known physiological and psychological phenomena, the authors give considerable space to the differences between the aftereffects of children's experiences and those of adults, an area of focus in Atwater's own research. There is also a chapter on not-close-to-death experiences, and one giving suggestions for healthcare providers.

Parts Three and Four suggest some philosophical and religious implications of NDEs. The authors consider the difficult issue of what the criteria for death actually are. A chapter on research presents summaries of two early studies, and of the work of several major researchers. Atwater and Morgan give debunkers and other skeptics a hearing, and respond to their critiques; they do the same for those who reject the validity of NDEs on religious grounds. The authors show that cultural expectations and individual needs affect both what is experienced and how the tale comes to be told. They devote a chapter to particularly dramatic or evidential cases strongly suggesting that there is life after death. They explore analogies to NDEs in stories of otherworldly journeys, especially in myths, rituals, movies, and birth and prior-incarnation-type memories. A chapter on alternate realities touches on the questions of whether there is indeed life after death, whether reincarnation is a reality, whether there are other dimensions parallel to our familiar world, such as the realm of UFO beings. The authors offer different interpretations of the Light, and of such transformation of consciousness as shamanic flights and kundalini awakenings.

Part Five returns to aftereffects, including the physiological aspects of transformation of consciousness, NDErs' difficulties in communication, and other aspects of integrating the experience into daily life, as well as abuses of spiritual power. There are suggestions for easing the processes of integration both for experiencers and their associates. The text ends with various comments about the ways in which having an NDE has typically expanded the mental world of experiencers, and with generalizations about the phenomenon's possible effects on the evolution of consciousness.

This book contains a wealth of information about many aspects of near-death studies and some related areas, presented vividly, concretely, and simply, all of which will keep the naive reader turning pages despite the volume's otherwise daunting length. It is very useful for its intended purpose of introducing the field and orienting the

newcomer. Researchers and other seasoned readers will also find much that is helpful here, particularly in the abundant case studies, many from Atwater's own files.

At the same time, sophisticated readers are likely to find this book often frustrating to their own purposes of further exploration and deepening of the understanding. There are no footnotes, beloved of scholars and other researchers. Sometimes sources are cited by title or experienter's name; sometimes no source at all is given. When Atwater gives theories or generalizations based on her own research, she gives insufficient information for the reader to investigate their accuracy or appropriateness.

Many scholars and researchers hold popular books in low esteem, judging them to be hasty and unreliable. Often, of course, this is only too true. Yet there is a place for responsible popularization as a form of public education; popular writers who respect their readers and refuse to tamper with the material to make it more sensational can expand their readers' world, motivating some to a serious consideration of the material's implications for themselves. There is no doubt that Atwater respects both her readers and the truth; I found no instances where cases I knew were inaccurately recounted or embroidered (nor did I expect to find any). There are, however, some signs of carelessness of expression in this book. For example, the authors describe experienter Haisley Long as having amazed every theologian who heard him expound upon the Bible after his experience (p. 43). Except, perhaps, in a mystical state of cosmic knowledge, Atwater cannot know such a thing to be true of *all* Long's theological listeners (and in fact I know that it is not true). Also, some chapters dealing with areas auxiliary to near-death studies, such as the one on religion, could have profited by being submitted to scholars in the field for comment.

Nonetheless, this book succeeds in what it sets out to do: it brings together a great deal of valuable material and makes it accessible to the person new to near-death studies. Those who come looking for entertainment will find also the grounds for an education. And I am grateful for information I found here that proved useful in my own work.