

A COLLECTION OF NEAR-DEATH RESEARCH READINGS. Ed. Craig R. Lundahl. Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1982. 240 pp. \$19.95.

ADVENTURES IN IMMORTALITY: A LOOK BEYOND THE THRESHOLD OF DEATH. George Gallup, Jr. Souvenir Press, London 1983 (First published 1982). 226 pp. £7.95.

Ten years ago the phenomena and experiences of death were rarely mentioned. Now research is springing up all over the world and books, good and bad, are being written to cash in on the popular interest in near-death experiences (NDEs).

These two books are totally different but both have something to contribute; the first mainly to academics and researchers; the second more to the general reader.

As its name suggests the first book is a collection of readings. It includes some of the standard papers on the subject, and adds some useful new ones. Some classic papers are omitted but only as a result of the editor's policy to restrict the book to material that is both recent and 'scientifically oriented'.

The book unfortunately begins with its weakest chapter, 'NDEs and the unscientific scientist'. Widdison points out that near-death phenomena are amenable to scientific method in spite of some scientist's beliefs to the contrary. However, his claim that scientists are pressured to give up near-death research is

not backed by any evidence. And he propounds an extraordinary list of postulates describing the 'scientific method' which I think most scientists would find unacceptable, inappropriate or laughable. He also refers to dubious research on Kirlian photography as though it were relevant to near-death research.

This is followed by a historical perspective contributed by Audette, including accounts of NDEs from the literature long before the current upsurge of interest. This is a useful counter to the tendency to think NDEs have only happened in the last few years.

The name of Raymond Moody has a special place in near-death research (or 'Circumthanatology' as the editor would have us call it). Moody's book *Life after Life*, published in 1975, was the first attempt to document modern NDEs. He contributes a brief foreword to this book and there is a useful chapter condensed from his original book.

Among other well-known papers is one by Noyes and Kletti, in which they describe near-death experiences as being a result of depersonalisation in the face of life-threatening danger. This has become one of the classic, if much criticised, psychological approaches to near-death phenomena.

Another well-known paper is Osis and Haraldsson's "Deathbed observations by physicians and nurses: A cross-cultural survey". This describes the results of a questionnaire given to nurses and doctors in America and in India which revealed remarkable similarities in the death-bed experiences of different cultures.

Among the most prominent of NDE researchers today are Ring, Sabom, Kreutziger and Garfield. Each of these contributes to the book. Ring describes his own research and analysis in terms of the 'core experience' at death. Sabom and Kreutziger, both physicians, describe a study of one hundred hospital patients who had suffered a near-fatal crisis, many of whom described consistent NDEs. Garfield reminds us that not all deaths are happy and blissful and that the experience depends upon the context and the care given to those who are dying.

Lundahl describes 11 NDEs of Mormons between 1838 and 1976. In spite of the age of some of the accounts they compare well with Moody's descriptions. All reported leaving the body and many met others and moved into different worlds.

There has been much interest in whether suicide victims experience the same NDEs as others. Ring and Franklin present evidence that they do, and that the NDE is independent of the method of reaching it. Having a pleasant or profound NDE does not encourage further suicide attempts though; rather it discourages people from wanting to try to kill themselves again.

The final section of the book aims at explaining the phenomena. Grosso outlines those features of NDEs, including paranormal ones, which need explanation. He then discusses the relevance of cerebral anoxia, drug effects, temporal lobe seizures and religious and other expectations. He refers to theories involving depersonalisation, schizoid defense, reliving of birth and denial of death, as well as the survival hypothesis, but understandably does not commit himself to any. The book ends with a summary by Lundahl, of directions for near-death research.

This book suffers from some, possibly avoidable, repetition and the chapters often seem unrelated. But my main criticism is the lack of an index which would greatly enhance its value. Otherwise it is certainly a very useful collection to anyone interested in the NDE.

The second book presents the results of a survey of beliefs and attitudes towards immortality, carried out by the Gallup organisation on a "scientifically selected sampling of people". It used face to face interviews and a detailed questionnaire for those who had had NDEs, and it presents a wealth of examples from the interviews.

The book is written in a very chatty and easy to read style and covers many aspects of close brushes with death such as the ways people reached 'other worlds', the beings they met, the places they saw and so on. Many out-of-body experiences are described, as well as cords, tunnels and heavenly scenes. The examples given fit very well with previous findings and have the advantage that they were gained from a large sample. People's beliefs and changes in beliefs are also described and the book ends with a consideration of what science, the clergy and psychology have to say about it all. There is an appendix containing a mass of data from the survey and a useful index.

This book is written to appeal to the general reader and as such is an interesting and informative read. It is less useful to the serious researcher. It has few, and rather arbitrary, references to other work in the field and shows little understanding of the current controversies involved. The results are presented patchily and important details (such as sample sizes) not mentioned. However, although the data are analysed only superficially, they are there in the appendix and have been collected at a cost far out of reach of most researchers, so it is to be hoped that they will be used by others to provide a greater insight into the NDE.

In their different ways both these books usefully contribute to our rapidly growing knowledge of what happens when we come near to death.

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