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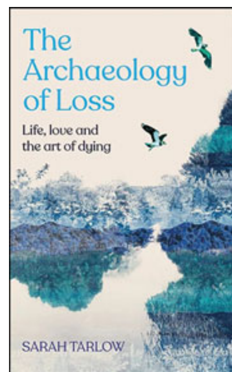
Sarah Tarlow. 2023. *The archaeology of loss: life, love and the art of dying*. Basingstoke: Pan Macmillan; 978-1-5290-9953-9 hardback £16.99.



Sarah Tarlow's frank account of love and loss has rightly been hailed as a ground-breaking modern take on the medieval *ars moriendi*—the art of dying. Her publications on historic mortuary practice, material culture and memorialisation are internationally renowned. Yet this expertise did not prepare her to care for a partner struck down by a terrifying and debilitating neurological disorder that defied diagnosis. At one level this is a memoir of loss but it is also an anatomy of academic life and marriage. It examines the practical, financial and emotional pressures precipitated by sudden illness and presents an unflinching account of palliative care at home. The story—told backwards from the moment Sarah discovers that Mark has taken his own life —is leavened throughout by reflections upon death and mourning from other times, other cultures. As she mounts the stairs, listening to the silence of his beloved radio, she realises he has made his decision privately and has died alone. Tarlow quietly rages against a UK legal system that seeks to prosecute those who 'assist' someone with a terminal diagnosis to choose the moment and manner of their death. The book is a moving plea to find a better way for the terminally ill to have more agency and more options when facing death, including the company of their loved ones: this was, she argues, at the heart of what medieval communities thought it meant to 'die well'.

I knew Mark Pluciennik as an inspiring archaeologist at Sheffield University: political and passionate, with an acerbic wit. Sarah charts their early years among the heady ferment of the post-processual paradigm shift in archaeology at Lampeter University, Wales, where they both worked, to family life in Leicester. Here, Sarah became a lecturer in funerary and historic archaeology while Mark took over the direction of its innovative distance-learning curriculum. He had only just taken early retirement from this role when the first symptoms appeared: memory loss and sensory change, seizures and falls. His dream of creating a bespoke Polish-inspired salami business faded. Sarah reflects thoughtfully on Mark's reaction to this new vulnerability; women are more accustomed, she suggests, to not being in complete control of their bodies, more used to medical intervention. She captures poignantly how their recent move to an old house, coupled with Mark's growing fear and lingering pride, quickly isolated them both. The department at Leicester is painted as quietly supportive of Sarah but academic life is increasingly interrupted by medical emergencies on top of a double-load of domestic work. Money becomes a worry. As Mark deteriorated, Sarah recorded (with an archaeologist's eye) the panoply of assistive devices they must master to manage his care and the exhaustion of hospital appointments, childcare, marking deadlines and research pressures. There are few books that directly address how the difficult balance of academic and domestic life can tilt when serious illness enters the frame, and I cherished these passages and their insights. The author also sensitively captures the

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micro-tensions of personal relations; as Mark's illness progresses, he resents her physical independence and the children's everyday noise. Even small moments of company or light-hearted relief become painful reminders of life slipping away. These are hard but moving chapters to read.

In tone, the book resembles Simone de Beauvoir's *A very easy death*; its title taken from a nurse's passing comment about her mother's final weeks in a Parisian hospital. De Beauvoir's account has the same raw narrative style, an attentiveness to material culture, the body and its behaviour as we die. She wants others to understand the experience of bearing witness to someone's passing and the limits of medical intervention. Yet while that death was certainly not easy, her mother was fortunate; they could afford a private room with attentive nursing staff and a rota of bedside companions with few responsibilities. Placing these books side-by-side reveals a surprising gulf in experiences and the ongoing issues that continue to shape death: wealth, social networks and rural versus urban medical infrastructure. In Sarah and Mark's case, there were no nearby cottage hospitals nor hospice care on offer; it was assumed they would cope with this 'at home' for as long as possible.

In one of the most poignant scenes, Mark raises the possibility of taking his own life over the unpacking of the weekly shop. He urges Sarah to understand that there might come a time when you are certain that life as you knew and relished it was being irrevocably taken from you, but you still had the power to do something about it. Sarah returns to this moment again and again, wishing she could have promised him that they would face it together. Under current law, however, she does not have this option: she can know nothing about it —with three children to look after, she must choose their care over his. Sarah compares Mark's decision to Carton's self-sacrifice in Charles Dickens' *A tale of two cities*: 'an act of supreme courage and love'. Mark's experience asks us to find better ways of managing death in Britain today.

So why should archaeologists read this book? Sarah's historical interludes foreground the ideas that helped her navigate the long nights of care or reflect on her loss while running around her local hillfort. She considers the care of the chronically ill through the lens of Middle Palaeolithic burials, as well as the hasty interment of the wrecked body of Richard III, whose rediscovery plays out as Mark's health fails. She finds herself engaging in the kind of 'magical thinking' that lies behind many of the apotropaic practices we encounter on archaeological sites such as protective marks, hidden objects, offerings and charms. After his death, Sarah connects with the concept of 'difficult stuff': used by sociologists to describe the problematic relations we have with belongings of the deceased. De Beauvoir also had something to say on this, as she passes on her mother's blotting pad, scissors and thimble: "Everyone knows the power of things: life is solidified in them, more immediately present than in any one of its instants" (2023: 104–5).

The 'continuing' but transformed bonds we have with the dead sustained Sarah through the extraordinary moment of conducting Mark's memorial; as a trained humanist funerary celebrant, she knows how to construct an effective rite of passage to help friends, family and colleagues negotiate their own loss. The author's experience is laid bare in this profound and poignant book, which is beautifully written. The slippage between past and present, between the archaeological and the personal, proves that our discipline has much to give

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back to this modern terrain of grief and may provide solace by learning how past generations of humanity dealt with death.

Reference

De Beauvoir, S. 2023 (reprint of 1964). *A very easy death*. London: Fitzcarraldo.

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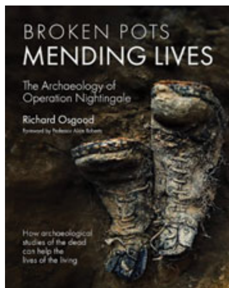
Richard Osgood. 2023. *Broken pots, mending lives: the archaeology of Operation Nightingale*. Oxford: Oxbow Books; 978-1-78925-938-4 hardback £25.



Since its inception in 2011, Operation Nightingale has captivated archaeologists as well as the public by suggesting that fieldwork and other forms of engagement with heritage could offer immediate benefits to the mental health of disabled military veterans. The veterans of Operation Nightingale have frequently been featured in both scholarly and popular journals, magazines and media, but *Broken pots, mending lives: the archaeology of Operation Nightingale* represents the first published text focused solely on this programme. In addition to co-founding Operation Nightingale, author Richard Osgood has been one of the most visible and most vocal advocates for the use of heritage work in benefitting veterans' mental health.

Broken pots has eight chapters featuring the programme's particularly long-running and/or significant projects, although this does not account for all Operation Nightingale projects and others are alluded to in passing. Each chapter is provided with a select bibliography relevant to that site. The ninth chapter is devoted to summarising the wellbeing results that Operation Nightingale has achieved with its veteran population, again supported by a bibliography. Operation Nightingale's trademark focus on the individuals carrying out fieldwork, as well as the archaeology itself, is readily apparent throughout the book. The author's conversational writing style and habit of relating memorable onsite moments pairs with outstanding photography to convey the warmth and sense of community present on Operation Nightingale digs. The opening acknowledgements highlight the vast network of supportive partners, veterans, and archaeologists who have collaborated to make Operation Nightingale a success.

The true complexity of helping veterans is displayed throughout this volume. The author's familiarity with, and obvious regard for, this population has resulted in a book that is as informative about the nuanced British veteran population as the archaeology itself. Anecdotal

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