

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 6: The Science of Death

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hi, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a reader's advisory podcast. I'm Rachel.

Melody: And I'm Melody.

Rachel: And today we're going to be talking about the science of death. Dun, dun, dun! Right on cue.

Melody: (laughs) We've done that every single episode.

Rachel: I think so.

Melody: Maybe bar one.

Rachel: You may have to go back and listen, guys, and try to find the Easter eggs.

Melody: So, we just want to give a little forewarning about this episode. If you haven't guessed by the title, we are going to be talking about death, decomposition, and details about what happens to the body after death. So, if you're starting to feel a little squeamish or are uncomfortable with this topic, this is your warning: this is probably not the episode you want to listen to, but we have a recommendation for you. Last month's episode—episode five, it's called "Get Happy"—is a really great place to go to if you're looking for some feel-goods.

Rachel: Definitely. All right, so, before we jump into our recommended reads for today, we did want to talk a bit about our concepts of death and how we kind of feel about it in general to ease our way into this very dark topic.

Melody: Right, we're just jumping right in.

Rachel: Mhm. (laughs) So, I think people are almost always uncomfortable when confronted by death. It's the one of the absolutes in all of our lives, but we tend to distance ourselves from the very idea of not being around at some point. The simple truth is that, yes, we're all going to go. Still, either out of fear or grief or something else, there seems to be a lot of misconception about what exactly happens to our mortal coils after we, you know, shuffle 'em off. So, today we're going to talk about some of the books that you can read to get a better grasp on death. I myself am not really bothered by mortality as a big, huge, overarching concept. It's difficult to articulate, I think, whenever you think about something as all-encompassing as that. It's just such a large concept, like, how do you put it into words?

Melody: And a very unknown...it's a complete mystery.

Rachel: Mhm. If I think of someone I know—or someone who is close to me emotionally—the thought of them dying makes me feel devastated, obviously, and when you're brought face to face with the reality of those dying by tragic means, it is upsetting in every possible way, but maybe that's more to do with the reason, means, and mode rather than the death itself. When it comes to the fact that one day I'm

going to die, I don't really feel afraid or upset about it. It just is what it is, and I realize that that's not how a lot of people feel, and that's okay, too. There's no right or wrong way to feel about it, I think.

Melody: Right, I think—however you feel—your feelings are legitimate.

Rachel: Oh, definitely.

Melody: Yeah, I...I think as a human being I do have a fear when I think about death, but also as a...I mean, I'll just be personal: as a...as a Christian I do have some peace about it because I have this faith about what will happen after I die. Or, at least, knowing that, you know, there is hope for me afterwards, and it's not the end-all for me, which is a little scary to think about.

Rachel: Sure, yeah.

Melody: Especially if you're not necessarily happy with how your life is going, and if you think that death is the end that can be a little disconcerting. But yeah, I'm very thankful for me that I have some peace about that because it...while it is unknown—and it is possible I may be wrong, and, you know, I've come to accept that, and that's okay because I...it still gives me this peace. And if I'm wrong, then I'm wrong, and if I'm right, then you know...I feel like I...I will...something good will come afterwards. But yeah, I can definitely see why people of many faiths have more hope about death can be a lot more peaceful. I actually had a family member pass away within the past couple of months who was pretty young and had a...a...an illness that was causing a lot of suffering, and while it was really sad that he is no longer here, I think there's a lot of peace and kind of some relief that he's not suffering anymore. Yeah, so those kinds of deaths, while very difficult—especially for the loved ones left behind—I think still there is some hope in knowing there is no more suffering.

Rachel: Right, and I think that can be accepted by all people, even those who don't have faith—like I myself do not—but I think that that's...you're right, there is a peace in thinking that once you're dead, you're gone, and anything that happened you don't have to suffer from anymore—in this form, at least.

Melody: Mhm, right.

Rachel: The trickier bit for me is that I am squeamish. (laughs) And so, the other side of this...that aspect of physical decay is probably difficult for many people to come to terms with. Our minds want to go on living, right? So, when it gets a whiff of death, it sort of...reels away from it out of self-preservation. I don't think I'll ever get over that sort of instinctual fear of corpses. I don't know. Anyway, there is no way we're going to be able to get into all the nitty gritty of this topic. People have tried to explore death with philosophy, religion, and ritual pretty much since we first emerged as a species, so for this podcast let's just do the best we can.

Melody: Yeah. I think also that while you can logically tell yourself, 'Oh, it...the person is gone. It's just a body, they're no longer alive', there's that instinctive response to, you know, like, the horror.

Rachel: Yeah, I say 'whiff of death', and I mean the actual smell of a corpse.

Melody: And you can't reason yourself out of your instinctive reaction to it. Yeah, it's very interesting. This is going to be a fun discussion! (laughs)

Rachel: I am so looking forward to it. (laughs)

Melody: All right, so Rachel, do you want to get started?

Rachel: Yeah, yeah—moving onto our episode's reads, I want to talk about a book called "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory"—cream-atory?

Melody: I usually say 'cream-atory', but who knows?

Rachel: Yeah, there's no way in the first bit... (whispers) Cream-atory.

Melody: We should also disclaim this: neither one of us are scientists. (laughs) We're librarians.

Rachel: (laughs) Correct.

Melody: So, if we mispronounce things, or...

Rachel: Although, we did study English, so there's no excuse! (laughs) We're just bad at language.

Melody: (laughs)

Rachel: Anyway, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" is by Caitlin Doughty. I came across her YouTube channel called "Ask a Mortician" about five years ago. In general, Caitlin's goal is to boost death positivity by doing Q & As about the industry, shining a light on how people have interacted with the dead in the past, and drawing awareness about modern funerary options in order to make the process less intimidating. And by 'process' I mean yes, the rites and rituals, but also the process of death itself. Namely, decomposition. Some of my favorite segments on Caitlin's channel are part of her 'iconic corpses' series where she walks viewers through the history of famous dead bodies, like those of Lady Dai and Vladimir Lenin. It's weird stuff, but also a bit thought-provoking.

Melody: That is really interesting. So, does she show anything on her channel?

Rachel: Yeah. She does, yeah. She...not like, 'Ah, I'm in my living room talking into a camera for this vlog and oh! There's a corpse right next to me', but she does bring up images, so I guess a bit of a trigger warning. She does give loads of trigger warnings herself, too, so if you're ever worried, just head on in and she'll take care of you. Nothing to worry about.

Melody: I was just curious about...because it's a YouTube channel, that is visual. Yeah, interesting.

Rachel: Definitely, and she's traveled to a lot of these places herself. So, a lot of photos she owns, which is really interesting. It's not just a Google search, which she also does, because some of her videos are about, like, the Everest corpses, which has been in the media a lot lately. Yeah, and obviously she can't climb Everest herself with a video camera to...for her vlog. (laughs) I mean, I guess she could, but I wouldn't recommend it. (laughs) It's my understanding that Caitlin has received a fair amount of backlash from other professionals in the field for being so open and advocating so heavily to have average, everyday people take part in caring for the dearly departed. By watching any one of her videos it's obvious that not only is she knowledgeable about all things traditionally macabre but she is also dedicated to uprooting the lies told by others in the profession. For example, did you know that you don't have to hire a funeral home to take care of a deceased person's body?

Melody: This is something I learned while we were reading for this episode.

Rachel: Right? Yeah, I sound like a promotional hack. (laughs)

Melody: (laughs) 'Did you know...?'

Rachel: You do have hire a funeral home in certain areas, like if you want them to interact with the crematory or the cemetery and you want to have your corpse sent there, they do have to act as a sort of intermediary, but you do have rights where you can clean and clothe the body yourself. But yeah, for things like transportation or actually filing the death certificate, that's sort of legal, and in some states they do have to take part. But even with that, you do have a lot of say in how things go. So, do your research and make sure you know before you go. (laughs)

Melody: Oh my gosh. It's like the tagline.

Rachel: Yeah. It's just food for thought. Or worms, I guess.

Melody: Oh my god.

Rachel: (laughs) I'm so sorry.

Melody: (laughs) Oh.

Rachel: Mm. As for "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," the book is pretty much autobiographical. It's all about Caitlin's journey to becoming a mortician with an alternative funeral practice in California. If you want a taste of the style, I would suggest watching an episode or two of "Ask a Mortician," since the tone is very similar. I recommend "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" to anyone curious about the death industry's inner workings or anyone who just wants an insider's perspective on this, truthfully, unavoidable aspect of our culture. The author writes a bit about death history and practices around the world, too, which is always pretty cool. It's also a decent coming-of-age story: the book itself, I mean—not the YouTube channel. (laughs) I found the author relatable, and her sense of humor comes through on every page. Caitlin also did a TED Talk a couple of years ago about eco-friendly burial, so if you can't be bothered to read her book I highly recommend taking 10 minutes to watch that. Mortality can be a bit of a taboo topic, especially in our society, so making it something that people are no longer afraid to is, I think, a healthy goal.

Melody: Yeah, I think so, too. I would agree.

Rachel: Yeah. I haven't read it myself, but a recommended read is Caitlin's second book titled "From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death." Also check out her website, OrderOffTheGoodDeath.com, to join the death positivity movement and ease yourself into accepting dying as a natural progression of life. Again: promotional hack! (laughs)

Melody: Yeah, I think they need a shorter title. 'Death positivity movement'.

Rachel: Yeah. (laughs) There are a lot of taglines going on. But also, I wanted to shout out to the Order's own podcast, called Death in the Afternoon. So, get a little podcast love going around. Yeah!

Melody: "Death in the Afternoon." That's a good title. Okay, so that actually feels a little bit similar to the book that I read. The book I read is called "Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers" by Mary Roach.

Rachel: Again with the tagline. (laughs)

Melody: Yes! And Mary Roach is a...a science writer, but she's a...she has a really humorous feel, and she's got quite a few books that talk about kind of taboo topics in a very easy to understand way for people who aren't scientists. This this...this is a really easy read, this book. I'm someone who's not really interested in science, and I pretty much understood, like, 98% of what she was talking about. I guess we would call this 'science from an amateur's perspective', and so in this book she talks about what happens to the body after death, and there are many options happening. One of the things she really starts off with, which I would say I think is...is legitimate and I would probably agree with is that she's pretty pro-donation for science research after death. She...she argues that it's pretty practical for...to help scientists and doctors train and learn, and they can do research and practice surgery on someone who is not going to ruin the rest of their life, if that makes sense. So, she...she kind of starts off with that very pro...pro donate your body to science.

Rachel: You know, I've heard that it can be quite difficult to have your body donated to science after death. Like, legally there's a lot of stuff going on.

Melody: I believe it could, because I...I don't even know how I would go about it. I know you can do organ donation pretty easily with your driver's license.

Rachel: Right, but to donate your entire cadaver.

Melody: Yes, I'd have to look into that, because that is...that would be interesting. She also just asks the reader to think about—which, honestly, I don't think many people do—to ask yourself what do you want for your body after death? Which is scary to think about. But, I mean, that you have a few options. Your body can decompose, or you...your body can be donated for research or science. But why not be useful? After death! You can still be a, you know, a positive influence in the world somehow. So yeah, this...and she doesn't, like, push-push donation, but she just very logically says think about it. She also talks about...she gives some really...I don't want to get too grotesque here.

Rachel: Please do.

Melody: (laughs) But she talks about visiting a lab where doctors are practicing plastic surgery.

Rachel: Oh.

Melody: When you're practicing that, you really...all you need is the face, or a head.

Rachel: (laughs) Oh. See where this is going.

Melody: You don't need all of the other parts, and the other parts can go to someone else who needs to study something else. So, she goes into this...this session, and there's all these heads. And they do try to be very respectful as they're doing it.

Rachel: It still has to be pretty surreal, to walk into a room and be confronted....even knowing what it's going to be going in.

Melody: Yes, and she talks about how difficult it can be for the doctors or scientists, because either they can really over-personalize it and it becomes such a burden to them, realizing this is a person, it's a human being, what was their life like? Or they can overly, kind of, become blocked off so that they don't have to deal with that and objectify the part. I think there's probably a balance in between somewhere.

And that kind of thing is useful. I mean, if I had to go in for plastic surgery I would want an experienced surgeon.

Rachel: Right.

Melody: And part of that is studying and practicing. So, she also talks about this thing called a body farm. Have you heard of this?

Rachel: I have not.

Melody: This is a little bit worse. (laughs)

Rachel: Oh, dear.

Melody: So, it's where they observe the process of natural decomposition.

Rachel: (gasps) Yeah, I actually have heard of this, I think. Body farm is just such a (takes breath) intense term!

Melody: Yes, it is. And I would call it, like, a decomposition graveyard or something, but they just put...put bodies out in this location and just observe and take note of what's happening. And that is very useful for things like figuring out when a person died, if, you know, foul play was involved, how long it was, so that...that kind of thing.

Rachel: For CSI kind of stuff.

Melody: Yes. And like you said, the—what did you say? “The whiff of death?” That's part of it, too.

Rachel: Mhm, okay. (laughs)

Melody: We don't need to go any more into it. But it's a really good read, I recommend it. She does use humor quite a bit, and I think that kind of takes the edge off of thinking about death and what happens to the body after dying. So, yeah. It's a fascinating read. I would also recommend...she has a few novels. I just took one title to recommend. It's called “Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal,” and that's sort of about the science of eating and digestion and how you put fuel in your body and what happens after you put fuel in your body. So, it's kind of about...she...the concept is that the body is essentially a canal. (laughs) Food comes in, and it goes out.

Rachel: (laughs) One way or the other.

Melody: Yeah, and she...she's got a really humorous attitude about her books so I...that would be a really good read that I would recommend. The other recommendation I have is called—it's also a podcast—it's called This Podcast Will Kill You.

Rachel: Should I put another dun, dun, dun in there? (laughs)

Melody: Maybe. So, I discovered this a while ago, and it's essentially a podcast about different diseases and illnesses. And it's very...it's just absolutely fascinating. So, it's hosted by Erin Welsh and Erin Allmann Updyke. They're ecologists, and they talk about infectious diseases and illnesses, and they always have a cocktail recipe at the beginning of each episode.

Rachel: (laughs)

Melody: Which is interesting. And they...so, they talk about diseases from their history to their biology, and then how concerned you should be. (laughs)

Rachel: (laughs) From 'meh' to 'very'.

Melody: Yes. It's really fascinating. You know, if you're on a drive and you just want to be horrified or really interested.

Rachel: (laughs)

Melody: I recommend that.

Rachel: Nice! Well, we also wanted to talk about a film that Melody recommended to me.

Melody: Yes. Yeah. (laughs)

Rachel: And I watched it for this podcast! (laughs) It's an independent film called "Third Star." It's about an hour and a half long, and it came out in England in 2010. It stars Ben Barnes, JJ Field, Tom Burke, and Adam Robertson. If you're at all an Anglophile, you'll know that these actors are all very, very British.

Melody: Very, very British.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, you probably know Bend Sinister from "Sherlock," "The Hollow Crown," or "The Imitation Game," all popular works from out of the U.K. And I have hesitation with this movie because it broke me. Yeah. Melody, I do have to thank you because, of course...like I said, absolutely decimated after watching. I mean, it's so powerful and so good, but holy cow! It...it can be difficult to watch. It's a story about how a man—here portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch—he has terminal cancer and chooses to go on a fairly arduous trip to the Welsh coast with three of his closest friends while he's still healthy enough to do so. The relationships between these guys is central to the story, but it's also about how they keep on pushing through things for their friend. Like I said, Melody recommended that I watch it for this episode of the podcast because it deals with dying on your own terms. I can't really spoil the ending, because even if you know how it ends—and listeners can probably guess—you'll have to watch the film all the way through to be properly impacted by its message.

Melody: I agree.

Rachel: Yeah. Did you have anything you wanted to say? I've got more, but...oof.

Melody: Yeah, so I...I watched this movie for the first time a few years ago. Alone.

Rachel: (laughs) Same.

Melody: Yes, which I don't know if I...well, in some ways I would recommend it, because I, you know, I had a bit of a reaction. (laughs) Which it was better I was alone. But I rewatched it last night, actually, because I knew we were going to be talking about it today, and it still has a very profound feel to it. And I...I think, like you say, it's very much about the characters, the relationships, and also just kind of...tone of it. It's not super plot-driven, but it's really...focuses on the things that matter, I would say. Because...because of the terminal illness, you just move past all of that superficial stuff that's not important.

Rachel: Mhm.

Melody: And get right to, like, what relationships matter, what's important in a relationship that you, like, work through or just don't talk about. What are you doing with your life, what's worth it, yeah. It's just really...

Rachel: It escalates to that level very quickly at different points throughout the film.

Melody: I would also say it's just a really beautiful film.

Rachel: Oh, yeah. For sure. It's filmed really, really well.

Melody: I mean, we're talking...it's...this is heavy material we're talking about, but it's beautiful and gorgeous, so when you're in a good place I would recommend watching this. Yeah, mhm.

Rachel: Yeah. Like you were saying, it...I mean, it is a trip that they go on and they're enjoying themselves, right? But then it can take a turn really fast. At one point, one of Benedick Slumberhatch's friends—this one played by JJ Field—says "It disgusts me, it shocks me, I couldn't physically be around it," and I don't really know if he was talking about his friend's illness or the way others have been treating him due to that illness, or if it's the grief of his impending death that takes the cake. One way or the other I think that accurately represents what it's like for an onlooker when they go through something like that. The film deals with death and the loss which spreads around it in a very real way. Bendycat Cookiebatch's character talks about death as "a magic science we barely know anything about, like dark matter," and I'm prone to agree. That...there's what happens physically, but this story looks inward and gets into the mystery of what happens to, I guess, your consciousness once you die. Others would view it as a soul. Burlington Cramplescrunch asks his friends what they think happens "when we snuff it," and that's a direct quote. And one of them—again, JJ's character—says "I think there's nothing—"

Melody: Sorry, just don't mean to interrupt, but he was amazing in this movie. JJ Fields?

Rachel: JJ? Oh, yeah. It's one of his strongest works.

Melody: Yeah, okay, sorry—keep going. (laughs)

Rachel: No, that's fine! (laughs) Like I said, he says "I think there's nothing, that you'll rot, and that's it." Which is as valid a view as any, but what others believe doesn't really matter. "Third Star" asks that question, and it asks it of its viewers. I think we don't need it answered so much as we need it to be asked, to confront it and accept that no matter what, whether we 'rot and that's it' or if you think there's more to it—so long as we don't shy away from that discussion we might be able to come to terms with death as it is rather than as a dark, horrible, looming thing that a lot of people are in desperate fear of.

Melody: Right, yeah. I would agree. Actually, that kind of leads into the next thing that I watched which was also...it was a show called "End Game." It's on Netflix, there's a space between 'end' and 'game',—it's not "The Avengers: Endgame."

Rachel: (laughs) Good to know.

Melody: That's another episode.

Rachel: The snap!

Melody: But...so, that actually focuses on four terminally ill patients who are in palliative care, which is like hospice, so it's...it's care to kind of give them the best of the rest of their life. And it really is—like you're saying—it asks...it forces you to ask the question: what happens after death? What does it mean? There's no clear answer. But it's just giving...getting you to accept that it's coming. Especially for the families in this show. So, it's a documentary. It follows these patients, and it also follows their family and caregivers, and I have to say, the caregivers and volunteers in this documentary are amazing.

Rachel: They would have to be, yeah.

Melody: They're so compassionate but also very realistic. They don't try to sugarcoat anything. It's...this is a shorter documentary. It's about 40 minutes, and while it's difficult, kind of like "Third Star," it's very beautiful and I would recommend watching it. So...one of the things that the doctors have to do is talk about the difficult decisions about care and death and after death with the family or the people who are ill who don't have family with them. You know, when it's getting close, can we remove the tubes and not do CPR if we think it's going to be time? After you're dead, can...can we study your body and this disease in the hopes that we'll find a cure in the future and prevent someone else from going through it? And that's not an easy question to ask of a family member. There's a...a scene where the doctor is asking a mother...her...her daughter is probably, like, in her 40s or 50s and is terminally ill, and they ask the mother, 'Would you consider allowing us to study this disease', and the mother said 'I want to know specifically what you want to do'.

Rachel: Oof.

Melody: Yeah, and so he explained, 'Well, we would open her up and remove the organs that are affected by the disease and then close her back up and we would be able to proceed with whatever arrangements you want at that point', and the mother says, 'As a mother, I cannot think about letting you do that to my daughter, but also as a mother I can't imagine another mother going through this, and if this could help...' And it's a difficult decision. She doesn't decide.

Rachel: Yeah, I was going to say it sounds like an impossible decision.

Melody: Yeah, and we don't know what she decided. That's okay. That's personal. And that's difficult, but it...it's handled so beautifully and gracefully. One of the lines that someone says is, "Grief is difficult but also beautiful," and the heart of these experiences—with these people who are almost near death and with their loved ones—the heart of it is love for each other, and that's what really matters. There's also a doctor in this documentary who just comes across as this amazing person. His name is Dr. BJ Miller. He works at the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco. He's a palliative care physician and he...do you call it a paraplegic? He...both his legs were amputated below the knee, and one arm amputated below the elbow.

Rachel: I believe so, yes.

Melody: So, he was in an accident at 18 and lost both legs and one arm, and he's now this amazing doctor who's so compassionate with his patients, and he just wants to give them a graceful end of life situation. He's this fascinating person. He has a TED Talk which I would recommend. It's called "BJ Miller: What Really Matters at the End of Life," and he talks about how to create a dignified, graceful

end of life for patients, and he asks big questions about how we think about death and honor life. So, highly recommend. I would go check him out, read his TED Talk. He's, like, a very compassionate, caring individual. He just really made an impression on me.

Rachel: I really want to watch "End Game," now.

Melody: Yeah, I recommend it, and it's short. And while it's heavy it's still just beautiful. It's really beautiful. The other recommendation I have is also a Netflix Show called "Extremis." It's about...I think it's a little more harsh than "End Game," I would say. It's the difficulty of making end-of-life decisions in the ICU, and it follows one doctor there who has these discussions with patients and their family members. I would say it's a little bit heavier than "End Game," but it's similar. Yeah, so, heavy stuff for sure. The other things I kind of wanted to talk about...we were discussing this podcast episode with Sarah who's been on the podcast before, and she shared all of these resources about different options for...that are kind of alternative to the normal funeral home, being cremated and buried.

Rachel: Right—the two big ones we're familiar with.

Melody: Yes, so I just wanted to talk about a few of them, because I think some of them are fascinating, and I think it's just a good idea to open up your mind to other options that you might have after death, and some of them are just really fascinating. So, there's this thing called a Capsula Mundi project—I think I'm saying that right.

Rachel: Again, we studied English, not Latin.

Melody: Yes. (laughs) Where bodies or ashes—they call them 'cremains'—are placed in a biodegradable 'egg', quote-unquote, for burial, and a tree is planted above the egg, and body decomposition fertilizes the growth of the tree. So, I went to this website and... (laughs) ...just go to the webpage, and there's a picture of a person holding, like, hugging a tree, and the captions say 'I love you, grandma!' And then there's someone with their hand on the tree, and it says, 'How you've grown!'

Rachel: (laughs)

Melody: And one says 'Hi, dad!'

Rachel: You know, ah, this is interesting, because I believe Caitlin Doughty talks about this kind of thing in one of her Q & As, and I think it might actually be a bit of a scam, because ashes are what remain after every...all...the things that can't decompose have been burned away, so they're not actually fertilizing anything. Yeah.

Melody: Right. That's fascinating. You're probably right.

Rachel: Yeah, I mean, don't quote me on it. Do your research, folks. But I think...I'm pretty sure that's...yeah.

Melody: So, it's just the concept, maybe.

Rachel: Yeah, it's kind of a 'beautiful way to send off your family'. (laughs) 'By creating growth after death', and if you really wanted to create growth after death, consider natural burial.

Melody: Well, that's...there's another option where you can be part of this thing called an 'eternal reef', and it's again the ashes—cremains—used to make these things called 'reef balls', which are, like, these huge, concrete balls with holes in them, and they're placed in the ocean floor as coral grief...coral reef.

Rachel and Melody: 'Coral grief'. (laughs)

Melody: That's another story.

Rachel: Uh-huh. (laughs)

Melody: They promote coral reef growth. And, again, the ashes aren't actually fertilizing anything, but they're part of something that is promoting life.

Rachel: Right. It's the idea that matters.

Melody: Yes. What I read...this is not super cheap. It's about 4,000 or 7,000...were the ranges. But you can...family members can go scuba diving and visit the reef.

Rachel: Oh, wow. Yeah.

Melody: Yes, so that's another option. Another one that I liked—which, again, it's not...heh, I knew it was going to come up: it's not the circle of life. (laughs) "Lion King" reference.

Rachel: Uh-huh. Apropos.

Melody: Yes. It's not, you know, recontributing to growth after death, but there's another option called 'memorial fireworks' where your cremains can be put into fireworks, and then there can be a ceremony. Which, apparently, is really popular with veterans. So then, your family and loved ones can come and see you become a firework.

Rachel: In a celebratory way.

Melody: Yeah, with a beautiful ceremony, and there's music. So, that's an option, too. Moving onto something maybe a little bit more, uh...

Rachel: Icky? (laughs)

Melody: Well, yes, that too. But also, the little part of the circle of life is...there's a TED Talk called "My Mushroom Burial Suit" by Jae Rhim Lee—or Jai Rhim, I'm not sure how to say that. So, she designed this burial suit to cultivate edible mushroom growth, and it feeds off of toxins in human body. So, this is natural burial—no embalming or anything like that—and in her TED Talk she really tries to re-shift our view on death. So, moving from denial—because that's what a lot of people usually go to—to the idea of body preservation to acceptance to embracing our part as biological beings in the environment and promoting environmental growth. And she calls this a way to "commit our bodies to a cleaner, greener Earth after death," and I think that's a really fascinating option, too.

Rachel: Yeah, and...one of the things, again, Caitlin—I'll bring her up again because she's so big in the industry—she talks about how people are kind of really used to being flogged the idea of having your body embalmed after death and put into a 'sealed casket' to better preserve you. But in the end, the fluids used for embalming are horrible for the Earth, and very damaging, and it's not going to preserve you, guys. It...you're going to still rot. So, the idea of natural burial seems like a way better option.

Melody: And so, when I listened to this TED Talk and she specifically said ‘edible mushrooms’, I got a little creeped out.

Rachel: Yeah. (laughs) Uh-huh.

Melody: Just to be honest because, you know, you’re thinking about, well, my body’s feeding the mushroom which can feed a human being, but when I was listening to the book by Mary Roach—“Stiff”—she talked about, I think, a funeral home director who was listening to a talk about some kind of similar environmentally friendly burial option, and he argued that it felt ‘unclean’, I guess. I don’t remember the...all of the details, but the counterargument was, well...oh, so he was saying that if you bury them...something about the water in the body, not being able to share it with other people. I am not remembering the details at all. (laughs) But, I remember the counterargument was, well, if you think about it, water evaporates, and the water that’s in your body will eventually make it into mine. You know, we’re sharing everything. You know, humans’ skin cells are falling off all the time. I’m sure we’re eating them, probably.

Rachel: In the air right now. Omnomnom.

Melody: (laughs) So, while it’s gross to think about edible mushrooms feeding off a decomposing body, it is already kind of happening in some ways, you know? Maybe it’s better to be more honest about it and realistic.

Rachel: Yeah, interesting.

Melody: Yeah. So, a couple of other options—and these are not necessarily environmentally friendly—but these are more memorial-friendly. So, if you’ve lost someone that you really want to be as close to them as possible, there are things called memorial diamonds. So, cremains are used to make diamonds out of crystallized carbon, and you can get 0.3 carat or 2-carat diamonds depending on the amount of time you want it to...be used to make and how much money you want to spend. But you can get a diamond made out of a loved one, or even an animal.

Rachel: Sure, for pets.

Melody: Yeah, so that’s an interesting option, too. There’s also a company that I saw that makes ornaments out of the same kind of material, but the ashes are used to make 3D printing material, and then they make ornaments out of them. Which seems odd, you know. You put up your Christmas tree and there’s grandpa! (laughs) But it’s also odd, I think, to have an urn with ashes in it, too. You know, it’s similar, just something we’re not used to as a culture.

Rachel: Right, right.

Melody: And then the last thing I wanted to talk about—because we are in the Milwaukee area and this is a more realistic option for people who are here—is, at Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee, they offer a green burial option in their Prairie Rest, which is kind of like a prairie with wildflowers and trees and prairie grasses. You’re buried naturally, and then the deceased enrich the habitat growth. They’re affordable spaces. You can get single spaces, and then they have a...boulders in another area where you can put, like, a plaque to memorialize where you are. And they put you in biodegradable caskets, and they don’t use embalming fluids. It’s all very natural. So, that’s a very realistic option if you want to be part of that circle of life, as we’ve been talking about. If you’re near Madison, there’s also a place called

Natural Path Sanctuary which is quite similar. Yes, so there's lots of options if you're a little bit exhausted.

Rachel: We've covered a lot of ground today.

Melody: No pun intended? (laughs)

Rachel: Mm, no. Not this time. (laughs)

Melody: Okay, well, thank you so much for listening. This has been a bit of a heavy episode, I think, but eye-opening. I feel like I've...my perspective on death and decomposition has changed after reading these things.

Rachel: Absolutely, and for the better, I think.

Melody: Yeah. So, as always, please remember to like, comment, and subscribe to the podcast, and you can reach us using the #notyourmotherslibrary, and next month we are going to be talking about narrative nonfiction with a special guest who is actually our children's librarian at the Oak Creek Library.

Rachel: Look forward to that.

Melody: That's going to be really fun. All right, and also be sure to check the show notes. We'll have all of the links to everything we've talked about. So, if there is something specific you can't remember, just check the show notes—they'll be there.

Rachel: Yup!

Melody: So, happy reading! See you later.

Rachel and Melody: Bye!

(Brief outro music)