Discussion & Comprehension Questions

**Introduction (pg. 9)**
(1.) How is being dead similar to being on a cruise ship?
(2.) What are some notable achievements that human cadavers have been used for?
(3.) How is this book not about death as in dying?
(4.) Describe Roach’s first experience with a cadaver.
(5.) Roach states that, “death makes us hopelessly polite” (13). Why do you think we use polite language to discuss death? How does it feel to hear death discussed in the humorous way that Roach approaches the subject?
(6.) Roach make a clear distinction between cadavers and dead bodies and a living person. Do you agree with her separation of the two? How is a dead body morally different from a live body?

**Ch. 1 A HEAD IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE: Practicing surgery on the dead (pg. 19)**
(1.) Roach states that, “the human head is the approximate same size and shape” as what?
(2.) In detail, describe the room with the heads. Why is a purple tablecloth used? What effect might another, much darker shade of the cloth had?
(3.) What are some of the ways in which Roach, Theresa, or other individuals distract themselves from the idea that the heads being practiced on are in fact real human heads?
(4.) What is Ronn Wade’s role in the seminar with the heads?
(5.) Roach remarks that, “students learn surgery the way they have always learned: by watching experienced surgeons at work” (27). How do you feel about this? Would you want to be the first patient a surgeon practiced all of the steps of a surgery on? It is fair for surgeons to subject an individual to being their first patient, without the individual knowing this?
(6.) Roach references the *New England Journal of Medicine*’s study on asking permission to use the recently affirmed dead, noting that “73 percent of parents of newly dead children, when asked, gave consent to use their child’s body for teaching intubation practices” (32). Would you join this 73 percent if you were, hypothetically, asked for your child, sibling, or family member’s body to be used for intubation practices? Would your decision change if the body were to be used otherwise (i.e. for some kind of invasive operation)?
(7.) What difference does it make to state “May she rest in peace,” rather than “May she rest in pieces” (33)? What effect does this change have on the situation, as a whole?
(8.) What is objectification and what is the value of it?

**Ch. 2 CRIMES OF ANATOMY: Body snatching and other sordid tales from the dawn of human dissection (pg. 37)**
(1.) What is happening at the beginning of this chapter in the first few paragraphs?
(2.) Roach recalls someone stating the following to a cadaver about her pink nail polish: “Did you choose the color?...Did you think that I would see it?...I wanted to tell you about the inside of your hands...I want you to know you are always there when I see patients. When I palpate an abdomen, yours are the organs I imagine. When I listen to a heart, I recall holding your heart” (38). How would you respond if you were the cadaver? What about if you were the living person of this cadaver? How is this treatment of the cadaver, today, different from the treatment of cadavers in the past?
(3.) What effect does giving a cadaver a name have on both the operator of the cadaver, as well as the cadaver itself?
(4.) Who is Herophilus?
(5.) What does it mean to say, “Enthusiasm got the better of compassion and common sense” (40)?
(6.) Due to the shortage of bodies for dissection in previous centuries, what were some alternatives (anatomists and students training to be anatomists) to attaining cadavers?
(7.) What is the footnote on page 45 implying?
(8.) Why wouldn’t you want to take Sir Astley’s “ill will for you to your grave” (46)?
(9.) What do you believe is the intention of dedicating multiple pages to telling us readers the story of Burke and hair? Why is it an important story to know and what effect would be had were Roach not to include it?
(10.) How would you answer the question, “is human dissection necessary?” (52)
(11.) “But gross anatomy lab is not just about learning anatomy. It is about confronting death” (55). What does this quote mean? What does it mean to “confront death”?
(12.) Based on the last two sentences of this chapter, make predictions for what’s to come later in the book.

Ch. 3 LIFE AFTER DEATH: On human decay and what can be done about it (pg. 61)
(1.) Make predictions about the picture preceding the chapter. Using your knowledge of the previous two chapters and coinciding pictures, why might Roach have chosen a scene from the well-known film The Wizard of Oz?
(2.) What is Roach describing in this chapter? Why is it important to study the decay of human bodies?
(3.) Arpad makes the comparison between feeding insects and rice krispies. How are the two things comparable?
(4.) When Roach shares her knowledge of a passage in the Buddhist Sutra on Mindfulness with Ron and Arpad, why might the two just stare at the cadaver and ignore her anecdote?
(5.) What are eye caps? What is the purpose of an eyecap? Why are they used?
(6.) In response to seeing Theo shave the cadaver, Roach states the following: “I wonder whether the man, in his dying days, ever stood before a mirror, razor in hand, wondering if it might be his last shave, unaware of the actual last shave that fate had arranged for him” (76). What does the act of shaving fuse together? Why might Roach think of this cadaver both as a dead body and as a living person (or at least what he was like when he was a living person)?
(7.) “According to Mack, [a funeral] serves several purposes, aside from providing what undertakers call ‘the memory picture.’ It reassures the family that, one, their loved one is unequivocally dead and not about to be buried alive, and, two, that the body in the casket is indeed their loved one, and not the stiff from the container beside his” (76). Do you agree with the reasoning given for holding funerals to remember loved ones? What would you add or change about what Roach mentions?
(8.) Why is it ironic that Thomas Holmes requested for his body not to be embalmed after his death?
(9.) What does Mack say reverses the chemical reactions of embalming?
(10.) Roach states that, “In between [birth and death] we do what we can to forget [we are biology]” (84). Do you agree with this statement? What do you believe the purpose of life is?

Ch. 4 DEAD MAN DRIVING: Human crash test dummies and the ghastly, necessary science of impact tolerance (pg. 87)
(1.) Why are cadavers used to test automobile crashes? What benefits are there to using a cadaver instead of a crash dummy?
(2.) What effect does naming the cadaver UM 006 have? What is different about the treatment of this cadaver from Roach’s treatment and discussions of other cadavers?
(3.) Why did Moss get agitated? Despite the 8,500 lives that cadavers have saved, what upset Moss about the use of cadavers to test vehicle crashes?
(4.) How have live animals been used in automobile crashes in the past? How are they used today?
(5.) Why aren’t the cadavers of children used vehicle crash testing? What are your thoughts on using children cadavers for automobile testing or other miscellaneous medical/safety projects?
(6.) What does Ruhan, the man who diapers and dresses cadavers, compare his job to? Why?
(7.) Roach states, “I find the dead easier to be around than the dying. They are not in pain, not afraid of death. There are no awkward silences and conversations that dance around the obvious. They aren’t scary” (98). Even though you likely have no experience with cadavers and perhaps, no experience with people who were dying, do you feel inclined to agree or disagree with Roach here? Why or why not?
(8.) How are cadavers like superheroes, according to Roach?
(9.) What do we learn about the rib cage? How does this new information inform the way you treat your body (or why doesn’t it impact your thoughts if that’s the case)?
(10.) Who is Mike Walsh and what does he say to families of cadavers that have been donated to research?

Ch. 5 BEYOND THE BLACK BOX: When the bodies of the passengers must tell the story of a crash (pg. 113)
(1.) Who is Dennis Shanahan, and what is his job?
(2.) Shanahan states, “Gore you get used to. Shattered lives you don’t” to explain why he prefers to see the bodies in pieces rather than as a whole (116). How might this tactic Shanahan uses help to dehumanize the cadavers?
(3.) Why was it so challenging for Shanahan to investigate TWA Flight 800? Do you think you would have similar issues to Shanahan? Why or why not?
(4.) “Bombs launch shards of themselves and of nearby objects into people seated close by” (117). According to what we learned from Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, these pieces of a bomb are called what?
(5.) What are thermal burns?
(6.) According to Shanahan’s theory, what caused seventy-three percent of Flight 800’s passengers to have serious aorta tears?
(7.) “80 to 85 percent of plane crashes are potentially survivable” (125). Based on what Shanahan says, why is it that the actual number of survivors of plane crashes is much lower than the potential? What causes people to die during a plane crash, and what factor most influences a person’s survival?
(8.) Why is it that airlines do not install features that would make flying safer for passengers? What are your thoughts on this?
(9.) What would World War II pilots do (to their life vests) just before a crash to increase their chance of survival? What does this strategy have a similar function to?
(10.) According to Shanahan, where are the ideal places to be seated on a plane?

Ch. 6 THE CADAVER WHO JOIN THE ARMY: The sticky ethics of bullets and bombs (pg. 131)
(1.) What is Captain Louis La Garde’s mission in Frankford Arsenal, Pennsylvania?
(2.) What is the goal of warfare, according to Kocher?
(3.) What is the difference between humans and animals being shot?
(4.) According to Duncan MacPherson, a respected ballistics expert and consultant, why do humans collapse (or not) when they are shot at? What does this reaction depend on?
(5.) Why do people use large caliber bullets?
(6.) What is used in stopping power tests, and why?
(7.) What is said to be the “most firmly entrenched taboo of the cadaveric research world” (148)? Considering all you know about cadavers and all that we have learned thus far, why do you think this is?
(8.) What kind of shoes are said to be the safest footwear for land mine clearance and since when has this been said?
(9.) On what continent is ballistics and blast testing on human cadavers not allowed?
(10.) What literary term does the last couple sentences exemplify? How do you know?
(11.) What does Mary Roach find an unacceptable use for a cadaver? What do we learn about her feelings for what she wants to do with her body after she dies?

Ch. 7 HOLY CADAVER: The crucifixion experiments (pg. 157)
(1.) What effect does starting the chapter in a story-like manner have on the content of the chapter?
(2.) Who is Dr. Pierre Barbet and what is he famous for?
(3.) Who is Frederick Zugibe and what kind of experiments is he known for? How did he obtain human beings or live persons (not cadavers) to participate in his experiments?
(4.) What is Destot’s space?
(5.) According to Mary Roach, what is the highest office of Zugibe’s work?
(6.) After reading this chapter, do you agree with Roach that using cadavers for crucifixion is unacceptable?

Ch. 8 HOW TO KNOW IF YOU’RE DEAD: Beating-heart cadavers, live burial and the scientific search for the soul (pg. 167)
(1.) What is unique about cadaver H? What kind of cadaver is she and why?
(2.) What does Roach compare the opening of cadaver H, or beating heart cadavers to? How do you feel about this comparison and does it change your mind about being an organ donor (either if you are or are not one)?
(3.) What are the ways that death has been defined? Which do you personally agree with?
(4.) How have bodies been checked to ensure that they are in fact dead (strategies to avoid burials)?
(5.) Roach says, "On a rational level, most people are comfortable with the concept of brain death and organ donation. But on an emotional level, they may have a harder time accepting it." How does this quote view the human body in relation to the soul?
(6.) What do we learn about male and female hearts, and how transplant patients can be impacted by the gender of the heart?

(7.) If H is considered to be a cadaver when her heart is still beating with the respirator, then why don’t the surgeons and nurses call this person or body by “this” before the organs are removed?

(8.) What do you make of the last two paragraphs of the chapter? Why does Roach call patients or people like H “heroes”? Do you believe that she and others like H are in fact, heroes?

(9.) What does Roach tell us about the soul?

Ch. 9 JUST A HEAD: Decapitation, reanimation, and the human head transplant (pg. 199)

(1.) What experiments are being done on heads in this chapter, and why?
(2.) What experiment does White perform with monkeys? Explain; include how this experiment is relevant to human beings/what the scientific value of it is.
(3.) Why is anastomosis?
(4.) Why hasn’t White performed this experiment (the one that he did with monkeys) on human beings?

Ch. 10 EAT ME: Medicinal cannibalism and the case of the human dumpling (pg. 221)

(1.) What is mellification, and around what time period was it popular? What are mellified men used for?
(2.) What parts of bodies were used for minor and major medical issues? Note the kinds of issues that these body parts were used on.
(3.) Why do people cut off parts of their body for the ill? What is the point of this?
(4.) How have fetuses been used in China?
(5.) Describe Mary Roach’s trip to Haikou. Why does Roach take this trip (i.e. what does she hope to find) and what results does Roach actually find?
(6.) Garn states that, “Lots of cultures eat their dead,” and he specifies that eat infants both to control population and due to food scarcity (245). What else does he say in relation to this idea of cannibalism and the consumption of infants? What are your personal thoughts on this idea? Can you see the value in such an act? Why or why not?
(7.) What is “the rendering situation”?
(8.) Of all the reasons Roach gives for the existence of cannibalism, do you believe that any of them are justifiable? Why or why not?

Ch. 11 OUT OF THE FIRE, INTO THE COMPOST BIN: And other new ways to end up (pg. 251)

(1.) What is this chapter specifically focusing on? How do you know this and what are your initial thoughts on the matter?
(2.) What is the “water reduction machine”? How and what is it used for?
(3.) What are some of the ways, as pointed out by Prothero, that people have taken it “too far” in terms of what has been done with the remains of dead bodies?
(4.) Susanne Wiigh-Masak believes that (in the words of Mary Roach) “We are all nature, all made up of the same basic materials, with the same basic needs. We are no different, on a very basic level, from the ducks and the mussels and last week’s coleslaw. Thus we should respect Nature, and when we die, we should give ourselves back to the earth” (263). Do you agree with Wiigh-Masak that we are like ducks and mussels and that our bodies should be composted after death? Why or why not?
(5.) In relation to funerals, Tim Evans states, “You shouldn’t have to pay exorbitant amounts of money to die” (266). Why do you believe funerals are such an expense and do you find them a necessary event to host after a person’s death? Explain.
(6.) What can be said about the lifestyle of Sweden? Why is it an ideal place to Wiigh-Masak’s machinery for human composting? Do you find it preferable to that of our lifestyle—the American lifestyle? Why or why not?
(7.) One man states, “Composting [human bodies takes] away the specialness of being human” (269). Why might he think this? Consider the fact that this process takes place once humans are deceased.
(8.) In relation to Wiigh-Masak’s conversation with a male resisting her machinery composting process, what does it mean when Mary Roach responds to the conversation by saying, “If I didn’t have an interpreter, I’d think they were discussing the pastries”? (pg. 269) What do we know, from this phrase/comparison, about the conversation Roach overhears?
(9.) Why must the water be removed from the cadaver before the body can be composted? (Pg. 273)
(10.) Why, according to Wiigh-Masak, can’t “the human compost process” first be tested and used on dead animals? Where do you stand on this same question and why?
(11.) Why does Roach address the reader on pg. 275 at the end of the paragraph discussing Monsignor Strykowski’s thoughts on the human compost process and the understandable/reasonable ways to deal with remains? What effect does this have?
(12.) In reference to what do with cadavers, Roach states, “When you get right down to it, there is no dignified way to go, be it decomposition, incineration, dissection, tissue digestion, or composting. They’re all, bottom line, a little disagreeable” (275). What is Roach doing here, and do you agree with her conclusion? Why or why not?
(13.) What is learned about Dungeness crabs?
(14.) How is the ending of the chapter meaningful and perhaps, symbolic?
(15.) What effect does it have to mention the rhododendron bush multiple times throughout the chapter?
(16.) “I’m all for choices, in death as in life” (277). What does this quote mean to you? What choices can one make in death?

Ch. 12 REMAINS OF THE AUTHOR: Will she or won’t she? (pg. 281)

1.) What does Hugh Patterson say about donating his body to science?
2.) Make predictions about the final chapter. Use the picture preceding the chapter to inform your predictions.
3.) Name a couple of allusions that Roach mentions in this chapter.
4.) 80 percent of bodies left to science are used for, what? What are your overall thoughts on this statistic and how, if at all, does it affect your personal feelings towards donating your body to science?
5.) What are the processes named that the human skeleton is extracted from the rest of the body?
6.) How and why did Roach’s thoughts on becoming a brain donor after death change?
7.) What is plastination? How long does the process take? How did German anatomist Gunther von Hagens use plastination?
8.) As told by Dean Meuller, a funeral director, how much does plastination cost and how long does the plastinated body last for? (Pg. 289)
9.) What are the author’s wishes for her body after she dies? What will actually happen to Mary Roach’s cadaver?
10.) Who do you believe has the right to decide what is done with one’s body after he or she dies? Why?
11.) “It makes little sense to try to control what happens to your remains when you are no longer around to reap the joys or benefits of that control” (290). To what extent is this statement true to you?
12.) Are you satisfied with the ending of the book? Are you satisfied with the book overall? Please explain.