

The Unclaimed: Abandonment and Hope in the City of Angels, by Pamela Prickett and Stefan Timmermans, New York, Crown, 2024, 311 pp., Hardcover: \$30.00; ISBN 9780593239056

This book investigates the rising number of ‘unclaimed’ dead in America - deceased people whose bodies and subsequent cremains are never collected or disposed of by family, friends, or community representatives. This is a population of up to 150,000 per year. In this compelling work of ‘narrative nonfiction’, Prickett and Timmermans follow the journeys of four individuals who died between 2012 and 2019 ‘as they wend their way through L.A. County’s death bureaucracy’ (p.13). The book is eminently readable, telling a series of fascinating, fine grain, and deeply personal stories about the lives of the unclaimed in a style that often all but disguises the profoundly structural analysis at the heart of the study. In essence, this is a book about both social isolation and social solidarity. How and why do some people go unclaimed, and who are some of the moral entrepreneurs resisting this sad trend?

Readers will surely reflect on their own lives and deaths. Who might be at our funeral? *Would* anyone be there? Why do we care? We’ll be dead and gone from this world, whether viewed through secular or religious sensibilities. For sociologists Prickett and Timmermans, this underreported phenomenon holds an important mirror up to society, asking difficult existential questions concerning the worth of our lives: ‘If you die and no one mourns you, did your life have meaning?’ (p.13) One important theme is that traditional, biological configurations of family have failed to survive the jarring and disorganising role of contemporary capitalism, yet state apparatuses responsible for adjudicating deathcare arrangements, legal entitlements, estates, etc, remain wedded to these established categories of kinship. An estimated 40% of US families experience estrangement (p.108), yet for the purposes of decedent investigations by medical examiners and their notifying investigators ‘[t]he nuclear family is privileged and the quality of the relationship is irrelevant’ (p.105) Thus, the law vis-à-vis mortality fixes ideas of biological family firmly in place, often ignoring other intimate social relationships.

The Unclaimed is a scintillating development of Klinenberg’s (2002) ‘social autopsy’, something the authors have elsewhere usefully fleshed out through a Durkheimian-Du Boisian synthesis with cognate theories of structural violence (Timmermans and Prickett, 2021). No supplementary reading is necessary to enjoy this compelling work, nor will we easily emulate such beautifully written ethnography, though some further sources may be of interest to *Mortality*

readers. A close methodological reading of *The Unclaimed* for any researchers inspired by this fascinating approach, as I certainly am, would be enhanced by reading Prickett's (2021) urban ethnography, Timmermans and Prickett's (2021) aforementioned social-autopsy-as-method article, and Tavory and Timmermans' (2014) earlier abductive analysis work. Among the many methods used, 231 interviews contribute to the rich picture painted of the unclaimed – Midge, Bobby, David, and Lena (fittingly, their real names are used to prevent 'double erasure') – as well as many medical examiners, county officials, friends, family, and community groups working to resist this growing trend. In trying to pin down inequalities of death and dying, the interview method may seem restrictive in its scope, but Prickett and Timmermans use it to investigate, rather than regurgitate, ongoing discoveries. The interview, ethnographic, and investigate research methods used here are compelling because they are trained on a set of clear and coherent aims. They are always working towards trying to answer a question which will continue to exist *a priori* of future studies in this same field – 'what puts people most at risk for going unclaimed at the current historical moment (p.256)? How does this happen?

Most of the 'explicit sociology' (a silly term for a book as wonderfully multimodal) gets delivered in the Prologue and Epilogue. Sandwiched between are three parts, poignantly titled *Alive, Forgotten, Remembered*. There is a helpful methodological appendix chapter to clearly ground how the research took practical shape over its eight-year lifespan, and a moving Afterword. The writing throughout the book prioritises the narrative nonfiction form, only rarely interrupting this descriptive story with formal analytical commentary (descriptive selection betraying, of course, considerable decision-making and analytical labour on the part of the authors). Despite some early context about LA society as a historical product of capitalist modernity, and a closing discussion of increasing family estrangement, individualisation, and precarity today, Prickett and Timmermans perhaps miss a well-earned opportunity to connect their meticulous fieldwork with a more barbed critique of capitalism (they do at least identify preneed funeral planning with conservative agendas of self-sufficiency and poverty resilience (p.232)). Despite this, their work reveals much about funeral poverty, corporate greed, military industrial abandonment, the violence of private property relations, and the fraught sociolegal construction of nuclear families.

Everyone should read this book. After reading it, you should plough everything you have into nurturing your social relationships, making new ones, and telling your loved ones, family, and friends how much you love them. As the Creedence Clearwater Revival lyric goes, 'Someday Never Comes'.

William McGowan, Liverpool, March 2024