

The Book of the Dead



Trey Strecker

REQUIEM

Curtis White

Dalkey Archive Press
ISU Campus Box 4241, Normal, IL 61790-4241
344 pages; paper, \$13.95

A bittersweet dirge for humanity, Curtis White's *Requiem* offers a comic meditation on death, beauty, and decay in contemporary American life. Borrowing its design from the Mass for the Dead, White's *Requiem* alternates scenes of damnation and redemption as the novel shuttles between retold Biblical stories (the prehuman), the lives of classical composers (the invention of the human), and banal tales of bestiality and cyberpornography (the posthuman). One of White's primary concerns, as he explains in a recent interview with Chad Post, is the way "[o]ur humanity has always been mediated, whether by the Bible, the Enlightenment working through Chopin's fingers, or by digital life. The question is always: what is mediating our humanity?"

A tour-de-force Rabelaisian novel inspired by the heteroglossic soul of M.M. Bakhtin, *Requiem* bravely explores "the fragility of human action and human time" through an entangled assemblage of strict Biblical prohibitions, passionate Enlightenment individualism, and gaudy Baudrillardian commercialism. Our tour guide through White's underworld is Chris, the Modern Prophet, a naïve post-postmodern Miss Lonelyhearts, unable to mete out wrath or forgiveness to the damaged souls who seek his comfort and understanding.

Within the requiem's loose structure, White's novel unfolds through the accumulation of various cultural fragments, including the confession of a drowned man who must beg forgiveness from his dogs (rolling out the old God-Dog joke), a series of inane letters-to-the-editor, interviews with an unrepentant murderer and a madman, a detective story, an e-mail exchange between an English prof and *teenslut.com*, a *Fresh Air* radio program, and legal correspondence regarding Terry Gross's secret pornographic Web site. Near the end of the novel,

the Modern Prophet compares the entropic decay of contemporary culture to the "decay of a musical tone":

That's where the oscillations, the frequency of the note's sound waves falls apart audibly until it is no more. It's a lovely thing to listen to in itself. And full of truth. In fact, one way of thinking about music, which is note after note, is that it is an anxious response to this decay. The decay gets covered over by the next note, as if we hadn't the courage just to listen to one note and understand it deeply, right into the ground.

"[W]ho remembers how to listen," the narrator asks; "it's as lost as seeing!"

This is social satire at its best.

While White's *Requiem* does not celebrate any Edenic vision of an "authentic" humanity, it does assert a moral imperative to resurrect our humanity in our experience of art and music. Consider "what it means to be human *then* and what it means to be human *now*, that you could gather all the cold children of these United States together and play Mozart's short eight bar *Lacrimosa* and every eye would be dry. Uncomprehending. Dead, in a certain way." The target of White's often hilariously misanthropic cultural criticism is this living death. He imagines a heaven where we relive "our happiest experiences of beauty"; consequently, he fears television and digital life will pollute it for us and "for God who has to *live* up there"—"It's the *Exxon Valdez* on a cosmic scale." Therefore, his artistic mission demands that we emerge from our cultural catatonia and actively experience the challenges of art's beauty and ambiguity in order to remember our own humanity.

While White might be preaching to the choir, the intellectual and emotional sincerity he brings to *Requiem* and to his at-times uncertain faith in humanity and in art transcends any specific moment in the book. This is social satire at its best—scathingly funny, heart-wrenchingly sad, and profoundly moral.

Trey Strecker is Assistant Professor of English at Ball State University.