

3. In addition to the central analogy of "a sea voyage and a coming to new land," Elbow uses other figures of speech in his essay. For instance, he sustains the analogy through such words as "immersion" (10) and "wave" (21), and he says you "bring to birth" and "nurture" a piece of writing (1). Locate other examples of figurative language in the essay. Do you find such language helpful or distracting? Why? (If necessary, consult the Glossary for a discussion of *figures of speech*.)

Writing Topics

1. Do what Elbow suggests in this essay: start writing with whatever is in your head right now, and, performing the open-ended writing process, see what you end up with. When you have a draft, you may want to ask your instructor or a fellow student to help you shape it into a finished piece of writing.
2. You may have a particular method of writing or studying that works or doesn't work for you. Make a list of the steps in this process, or keep a record of the steps the next time you engage in the process. Then write a how-to or how-not-to guide for your fellow students.
3. Pursue Elbow's ideas further in *Writing Without Teachers* or *Writing with Power* (both are likely to be in your school library). In either book, read what Elbow has to say about one other writing process. Then write a comparison of that process and the open-ended writing process. Consider whom and what each process is suited for, what the stages are as a consequence, and what the results are. If appropriate, explain why you find one process more useful than the other. (Consult Chapter 6 on comparison and contrast if you need help with that method.)

Jessica Mitford

Tough-minded, commonsensical, and witty, Jessica Mitford has been described by Time as the "Queen of Muckrakers." She was born in England in 1917, the sixth of Lord and Lady Redesdale's seven children, and was educated entirely at home. Her highly eccentric family is the subject of novels by her sister Nancy Mitford and of her own autobiographical Daughters and Rebels (1960). In 1939, a few years after she left home, Mitford took up permanent residence in the United States, becoming a naturalized American citizen in 1944. Shortly afterward, moved by her longstanding antifascism and the promise of equality in a socialist society, she joined the American Communist Party; her years as a "Red Menace" are recounted in A Fine Old Conflict (1977). In the late 1950s she turned to investigative journalism, and in the years since she has researched and exposed numerous instances of deception, greed, and foolishness in American society. Her articles have appeared in The Nation, Esquire, The Atlantic Monthly, and other magazines, and many of them are collected in Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking (1979). Her book-length exposés include The Trial of Dr. Spock (1969), on the prosecution of the famous baby doctor for aiding draft resisters during the Vietnam War, and Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business (1973), on the American penal system. Her latest book, is Faces of Philip (1984), a memoir of writer and editor Philip Toynbee.

Embalming Mr. Jones

In 1963 Mitford published The American Way of Death, a daring, devastating, and influential look at the standard practices of the American funeral industry. Mitford pegs the modern American funeral as "the most irrational and weirdest" custom of our affluent society, in which "the trappings of Gracious Living are transformed, as in a nightmare, into the trappings of Gracious Dying." This excerpt from the book, an analysis of the process of embalming a corpse and restoring it for viewing, demonstrates Mitford's sharp eye for detail, commanding style, and caustic wit.

The drama begins to unfold with the arrival of the corpse at the 1
mortuary.

Alas, poor Yorick!¹ How surprised he would be to see how his 2

¹A line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, spoken by Hamlet in a graveyard as he contemplates the skull of the former jester in his father's court. [Editors's note.]

counterpart of today is whisked off to a funeral parlor and is in short order sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged, and neatly dressed—transformed from a common corpse into a Beautiful Memory Picture. This process is known in the trade as embalming and restorative art, and is so universally employed in the United States and Canada that the funeral director does it routinely, without consulting corpse or kin. He regards as eccentric those few who are hardy enough to suggest that it might be dispensed with. Yet no law requires embalming, no religious doctrine commends it, nor is it dictated by considerations of health, sanitation, or even of personal daintiness. In no part of the world but in Northern America is it widely used. The purpose of embalming is to make the corpse presentable for viewing in a suitably costly container; and here too the funeral director routinely, without first consulting the family, prepares the body for public display.

Is all this legal? The processes to which a dead body may be subjected are after all to some extent circumscribed by law. In most states, for instance, the signature of next of kin must be obtained before an autopsy may be performed, before the deceased may be cremated, before the body may be turned over to a medical school for research purposes; or such provision must be made in the decedent's will. In the case of embalming, no such permission is required nor is it ever sought.² A textbook, *The Principles and Practices of Embalming*, comments on this: "There is some question regarding the legality of much that is done within the preparation room." The author points out that it would be most unusual for a responsible member of a bereaved family to instruct the mortician, in so many words, to "embalm" the body of a deceased relative. The very term "embalming" is so seldom used that the mortician must rely upon custom in the matter. The author concludes that unless the family specifies otherwise, the act of entrusting the body to the care of a funeral establishment carries with it an implied permission to go ahead and embalm.

Embalming is indeed a most extraordinary procedure, and one must wonder at the docility of Americans who each year pay hundreds of millions of dollars for its perpetuation, blissfully ignorant of what

² In 1984, the Federal Trade Commission began enforcing comprehensive regulations on the funeral industry, including the requirement that funeral providers prepare an itemized price list for their goods and services. The list must include a notice that embalming is not required by law, along with an indication of the charge for embalming and an explanation of the alternatives. Consumers must give permission for embalming before they may be charged for it. [Editor's note.]

it is all about, what is done, how it is done. Not one in ten thousand has any idea of what actually takes place. Books on the subject are extremely hard to come by. They are not to be found in most libraries or bookshops.

In an era when huge television audiences watch surgical operations in the comfort of their living rooms, when, thanks to the animated cartoon, the geography of the digestive system has become familiar territory even to the nursery school set, in a land where the satisfaction of curiosity about almost all matters is a national pastime, the secrecy surrounding embalming can, surely, hardly be attributed to the inherent gruesomeness of the subject. Custom in this regard has within this century suffered a complete reversal. In the early days of American embalming, when it was performed in the home of the deceased, it was almost mandatory for some relative to stay by the embalmer's side and witness the procedure. Today, family members who might wish to be in attendance would certainly be dissuaded by the funeral director. All others, except apprentices, are excluded by law from the preparation room.

A close look at what does actually take place may explain in large measure the undertaker's intractable reticence concerning a procedure that has become his major *raison d'être*.³ Is it possible he fears the public information about embalming might lead patrons to wonder if they really want this service? If the funeral men are loath to discuss the subject outside the trade, the reader may, understandably, be equally loath to go on reading at this point. For those who have the stomach for it, let us part the formaldehyde curtain. . . .

The body is first laid out in the undertaker's morgue—or rather, Mr. Jones is reposing in the preparation room—to be readied to bid the world farewell.

The preparation room in any of the better funeral establishments has the tiled and sterile look of a surgery, and indeed the embalmer—restorative artist who does his chores there is beginning to adopt the term "dermasurgeon" (appropriately corrupted by some mortician-writers as "demisurgeon") to describe his calling. His equipment, consisting of scalpels, scissors, augurs, forceps, clamps, needles, pumps, tubes, bowls and basins, is crudely imitative of the surgeon's, as is his technique, acquired in a nine- or twelve-month post-high-school course in an embalming school. He is supplied by an advanced chemical industry with a bewildering array of fluids, sprays, pastes,

³ French meaning "reason for being." [Editor's note.]

oils, powders, creams, to fix or soften tissue, shrink or distend it as needed, dry it here, restore the moisture there. There are cosmetics, waxes and paints to fill and cover features, even plaster of Paris to replace entire limbs. There are ingenious aids to prop and stabilize the cadaver: a Vari-Pose Head Rest, the Edwards Arm and Hand Positioner, the Repose Block (to support the shoulders during the embalming), and the Throop Foot Positioner, which resembles an old-fashioned stocks.

Mr. John H. Eckels, president of the Eckels College of Mortuary Science, thus describes the first part of the embalming procedure: "In the hands of a skilled practitioner, this work may be done in a comparatively short time and without mutilating the body other than by slight incision—so slight that it scarcely would cause serious inconvenience if made upon a living person. It is necessary to remove the blood, and doing this not only helps in the disinfecting, but removes the principal cause of disfigurements due to discoloration."

Another textbook discusses the all-important time element: "The earlier this is done, the better, for every hour that elapses between death and embalming will add to the problems and complications encountered. . . ." Just how soon should one get going on the embalming? The author tells us, "On the basis of such scanty information made available to this profession through its rudimentary and haphazard system of technical research, we must conclude that the best results are to be obtained if the subject is embalmed before life is completely extinct—that is, before cellular death has occurred. In the average case, this would mean within an hour after somatic death." For those who feel that there is something a little rudimentary, not to say haphazard, about this advice, a comforting thought is offered by another writer. Speaking of fears entertained in early days of premature burial, he points out, "One of the effects of embalming by chemical injection, however, has been to dispel fears of live burial." How true; once the blood is removed, chances of live burial are indeed remote.

To return to Mr. Jones, the blood is drained out through the veins and replaced by embalming fluid pumped in through the arteries. As noted in *The Principles and Practices of Embalming*, "every operator has a favorite injection and drainage point—a fact which becomes a handicap only if he fails or refuses to forsake his favorites when conditions demand it." Typical favorites are the carotid artery, femoral artery, jugular vein, subclavian vein. There are various choices of embalming fluid. If Flexitone is used, it will produce a "mild, flexible

rigidity. The skin retains a velvety softness, the tissues are rubbery and pliable. Ideal for women and children." It may be blended with B. and G. Products Company's Lyf-Lyk tint, which is guaranteed to reproduce "nature's own skin texture . . . the velvety appearance of living tissue." Suntone comes in three separate tints: Suntan; Special Cosmetic Tint, a pink shade "especially indicated for young female subjects"; and Regular Cosmetic Tint, moderately pink.

About three to six gallons of a dyed and perfumed solution of formaldehyde, glycerin, borax, phenol, alcohol, and water is soon circulating through Mr. Jones, whose mouth has been sewn together with a "needle directed upward between the upper lip and gum and brought out through the left nostril," with the corners raised slightly "for a more pleasant expression." If he should be bucktoothed, his teeth are cleaned with Bon Ami and coated with colorless nail polish. His eyes, meanwhile, are closed with flesh-tinted eye caps and eye cement.

The next step is to have at Mr. Jones with a thing called a trocar. This is a long, hollow needle attached to a tube. It is jabbed into the abdomen, poked around the entrails and chest cavity, the contents of which are pumped out and replaced with "cavity fluid." This done, and the hole in the abdomen sewn up, Mr. Jones's face is heavily creamed (to protect the skin from burns which may be caused by leakage of the chemicals), and he is covered with a sheet and left unmolested for a while. But not for long—there is more, much more, in store for him. He has been embalmed, but not yet restored, and the best time to start the restorative work is eight to ten hours after embalming, when the tissues have become firm and dry.

The object of all this attention to the corpse, it must be remembered, is to make it presentable for viewing in an attitude of healthy repose. "Our customs require the presentation of our dead in the semblance of normality . . . unmarred by the ravages of illness, disease or mutilation," says Mr. J. Sheridan Mayer in his *Restorative Art*. This is rather a large order since few people die in the full bloom of health, unravaged by illness and unmarked by some disfigurement. The funeral industry is equal to the challenge: "In some cases the gruesome appearance of a mutilated or disease-ridden subject may be quite discouraging. The task of restoration may seem impossible and shake the confidence of the embalmer. This is the time for intestinal fortitude and determination. Once the formative work is begun and affected tissues are cleaned or removed, all doubts of success vanish. It is

surprising and gratifying to discover the results which may be obtained."

The embalmer, having allowed an appropriate interval to elapse, returns to the attack, but now he brings into play the skill and equipment of sculptor and cosmetician. Is a hand missing? Casting one in plaster of Paris is a simple matter. "For replacement purposes, only a cast of the back of the hand is necessary; this is within the ability of the average operator and is quite adequate." If a lip or two, a nose or an ear should be missing, the embalmer has at hand a variety of restorative waxes with which to model replacements. Pores and skin texture are simulated by stippling with a little brush, and over this cosmetics are laid on. Head off? Decapitation cases are rather routinely handled. Ragged edges are trimmed, and head joined to torso with a series of splints, wires and sutures. It is a good idea to have a little something at the neck—a scarf or high collar—when time for viewing comes. Swollen mouth? Cut out tissue as needed from inside the lips. If too much is removed, the surface contour can easily be restored by padding with cotton. Swollen necks and cheeks are reduced by removing tissue through vertical incisions made down each side of the neck. "When the deceased is casketed, the pillow will hide the suture incisions . . . as an extra precaution against leakage, the suture may be painted with liquid sealer."

The opposite condition is more likely to present itself—that of emaciation. His hypodermic syringe now loaded with massage cream, the embalmer seeks out and fills the hollowed and sunken areas by injection. In this procedure the backs of the hands and fingers and the under-chin area should not be neglected.

Positioning the lips is a problem that recurrently challenges the ingenuity of the embalmer. Closed too tightly they tend to give a stern, even disapproving expression. Ideally, embalmers feel, the lips should give the impression of being ever so slightly parted, the upper lip protruding slightly for a more youthful appearance. This takes some engineering, however, as the lips tend to drift apart. Lip drift can sometimes be remedied by pushing one or two straight pins through the inner margin of the lower lip and then inserting them between the two front upper teeth. If Mr. Jones happens to have no teeth, the pins can just as easily be anchored in his Armstrong Face Former and Denture Replacer. Another method to maintain lip closure is to dislocate the lower jaw, which is then held in its new position by a wire run through holes which have been drilled through the upper and

lower jaws at the midline. As the French are fond of saying, *il faut souffrir pour être belle*.⁴

If Mr. Jones has died of jaundice, the embalming fluid will very likely turn him green. Does this deter the embalmer? Not if he has intestinal fortitude. Masking pastes and cosmetics are heavily laid on, burial garments and casket interiors are color-correlated with particular care, and Jones is displayed beneath rose-colored lights. Friends will say, "How *well* he looks." Death by carbon monoxide, on the other hand, can be rather a good thing from the embalmer's viewpoint: "One advantage is the fact that this type of discoloration is an exaggerated form of a natural pink coloration." This is nice because the healthy glow is already present and needs but little attention.

The patching and filling completed, Mr. Jones is now shaved, washed and dressed. Cream-based cosmetic, available in pink, flesh, suntan, brunette, and blond, is applied to his hands and face, his hair is shampooed and combed (and, in the case of Mrs. Jones, set), his hands manicured. For the horny-handed son of toil special care must be taken; cream should be applied to remove ingrained grime, and the nails cleaned. "If he were not in the habit of having them manicured in life, trimming and shaping is advised for better appearance—never questioned by kin."

Jones is now ready for casketing (this is the present participle of the verb "to casket"). In this operation his right shoulder should be depressed slightly "to turn the body a bit to the right and soften the appearance of lying flat on the back." Positioning the hands is a matter of importance, and special rubber positioning blocks may be used. The hands should be cupped slightly for a more lifelike, relaxed appearance. Proper placement of the body requires a delicate sense of balance. It should lie as high as possible in the casket, yet not so high that the lid, when lowered, will hit the nose. On the other hand, we are cautioned, placing the body too low "creates the impression that the body is in a box."

Jones is next wheeled into the appointed slumber room where a few last touches may be added—his favorite pipe placed in his hand or, if he was a great reader, a book propped into position. (In the case of little Master Jones a Teddy bear may be clutched.) Here he will hold open house for a few days, visiting hours 10 A.M. to 9 P.M.

⁴ French meaning "It is necessary to suffer in order to be beautiful." [Editor's note.]

Meaning

1. According to Mitford, what is the purpose of embalming and restoration (see paragraphs 2, 6, and 14)? If they are not required by law or religion or “considerations of health, sanitation, or even of personal daintiness,” why are they routinely performed?
2. Why do Americans know so little about embalming (paragraphs 3–6)? Does Mitford blame Americans themselves, the funeral industry, or both?
3. If you do not know the meanings of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: mortuary (paragraph 1); counterpart (2); circumscribed, decedent, bereaved (3); docility, perpetuation (4); inherent, mandatory, apprentices (5); intractable reticence, loath, formaldehyde (6); augurs, distend, cadaver (8); rudimentary, haphazard, somatic (10); pliable (11); semblance (14); jaundice (18).

Purpose and Audience

1. What does Mitford reveal about her purpose when she questions whether the undertaker “fears the public information about embalming might lead patrons to wonder if they really want this service” (paragraph 6)? To discover how different the essay would be if Mitford had wanted only to explain the process, reread the essay from the point of view of an undertaker. What comments and details would the undertaker object to or find embarrassing?
2. Mitford’s chief assumption about her readers is evident in paragraph 4. What is it?
3. Most readers find Mitford’s essay humorous. Assuming you did, too, which details or comments struck you as especially amusing? How does Mitford use humor to achieve her purpose?

Method and Structure

1. Despite the fact that her purpose goes beyond mere explanation, does Mitford explain the process of embalming and restoration clearly enough for you to understand how it’s done and what the reasons for each step are? Starting at paragraph 7, what are the main steps in the process?
2. Mitford interrupts the sequence of steps in the process several times. What information does she provide in paragraphs 8, 10, and 14, respectively, to make the interruptions worthwhile?
3. **Other Methods** Mitford occasionally uses other methods to develop her process analysis—for instance, in paragraph 8 she combines description (Chapter 1) and classification (Chapter 5) to present the embalmer’s

preparation room and tools; and in paragraph 5 she uses contrast (Chapter 6) to note changes in the family’s knowledge of embalming. What does this contrast suggest about our current attitudes toward death and the dead?

Language

1. How would you characterize Mitford’s tone? Support your answer with specific details, sentence structures, and words in the essay. (If necessary, consult the Glossary for an explanation of *tone*.)
2. Mitford is more than a little ironic—that is, she often says one thing when she means another or deliberately understates her meaning. Two examples from paragraph 10: “the all-important time element” in the embalming of a corpse; “How true; once the blood is removed, chances of live burial are indeed remote.” What additional examples do you find? What does this persistent irony contribute to Mitford’s tone? (For a fuller explanation of *irony*, consult the Glossary.)
3. Mitford’s style in this essay is often informal, even conversational, as in “The next step is to have at Mr. Jones with a thing called a trocar” (paragraph 13). But equally often she seems to imitate the technical, impersonal style of the embalming textbooks she quotes so extensively, as in “Another method to maintain lip closure is to dislocate the lower jaw” (17). What other examples of each style do you find? What does each style contribute to Mitford’s purpose? Is the contrast effective, or would a consistent style, one way or the other, be more effective? Why?

Writing Topics

1. Think of a modern custom or practice that you find ridiculous, barbaric, tedious, or otherwise objectionable. Write an essay in which you analyze the process by which the custom or practice unfolds. Following Mitford’s model, explain the process clearly while also conveying your attitude toward it.
2. Elsewhere in her book *The American Way of Death*, Mitford notes that the open casket at funerals, which creates the need for embalming and restoration, is “a custom unknown in other parts of the world. Foreigners are astonished by it.” Write an essay in which you explore the possible reasons for the custom in the United States. Or, if you have strong feelings about closed or open caskets at funerals—derived from religious beliefs, family tradition, or some other source—write an essay agreeing or disagreeing with Mitford’s treatment of embalming and restoration.

3. Read about funeral customs in another country. (The library's card catalog or a periodical guide such as the *Social Sciences Index* can direct you to appropriate books or articles.) Write an essay in which you analyze the process covered in your source and use it as the basis for agreeing or disagreeing with Mitford's opinion of embalming and restoration.

David Quammen

Born in 1948 in Cincinnati, Ohio, David Quammen is a novelist and essayist. He holds bachelor's degrees from Yale University (1970) and Oxford University (1973) and has published two novels, To Walk the Line (1970) and The Zolta Configuration (1983). Though not trained as a scientist, Quammen has a strong interest in natural history and writes often about scientific questions and curiosities. His essays are distinguished by their intelligence, sensitivity, clever wit, and considerable delight with the natural world. They have appeared in numerous periodicals and in a regular column for Outside magazine titled "Natural Acts." Quammen lives in Missoula, Montana.

Sympathy for the Devil

Quammen examines two interrelated processes in this essay: the feeding behavior of an insect and the insect's role as "one of the great ecological heroes of the planet Earth." Subtitled "A More Generous View of the World's Most Despised Animal," the piece appeared in a collection of Quammen's essays, Natural Acts: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature (1985)

Undeniably they have a lot to answer for: malaria, yellow fever, dengue, encephalitis, filariasis, and the ominous tiny whine that begins homing around your ear just after you've gotten comfortable in the sleeping bag. All these griefs and others are the handiwork of that perfidious family of biting flies known as Culicidae, the mosquitoes. They assist in the murder of millions of humans each year, carry ghastly illness to millions more, and drive not a few of the rest of us temporarily insane. They are out for blood. 1

Mosquitoes have been around for 50 million years, which has given them time to figure all the angles. Judged either by sheer numbers, or by the scope of their worldwide distribution, or by their resistance to enemies and natural catastrophe, they are one of the great success stories on the planet. They come in 2,700 different species. They inhabit almost every land surface, from Arctic tundra to downtown London to equatorial Brazil, from the Sahara to the Himalaya, though best of all they like tropical rainforests, where three-quarters of their species lurk. Mosquitoes and rainforests, in fact, go together like gigolos and bridge tournaments, insurance 2