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'Who Owns the Dead?': The emotions and science of 9/11

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"Who Owns the Dead?" by Jay Aronson: Detail from the book cover.

Who Owns the Dead?

The Science and Politics of Death at Ground Zero

By Jay D. Aronson
Harvard University.

314 pp. $29.95

Reviewed by

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‘We are their families,” Rosaleen Tallon, sister of firefighter Sean Tallon, who perished on Sept. 11, 2001, often emphasizes. The remains of the victims, she insists, “belong to us. Not a museum, not the city!”

In *Who Owns the Dead?* Jay Aronson, a professor of science, technology, and society at Carnegie Mellon University, explains the scientific and logical challenges involved in the massive recovery efforts. He sorts through the disputes over the identification and disposition of the remains (often scattered in bits and pieces throughout the area) of the 2,753 people who died at ground zero and the difficulty of satisfying the many post-9/11 constituencies, each of whom laid claim to a pivotal role in planning a 9/11 memorial and museum and the commercial development of the World Trade Center site.

Thoroughly researched, eminently judicious, powerful, and poignant, *Who Owns the Dead?* demonstrates that DNA technology has “irrevocably altered the way we memorialize the dead and raises profound questions about how we can - and should - respond to mass death.”

Aronson asks tough questions. The promise of Charles Hirsch, New
York City’s chief medical examiner, that every human part larger than a thumbnail would be identified and returned to the victims’ families, Aronson suggests, might well mean that forensic investigations will continue in perpetuity, with as-yet unidentified remains placed in a storage facility, not a final resting place. Is it therapeutic (and worth the $80 million price tag), Aronson asks, for a family to receive a bone fragment five years after a loved one has died? On the other hand, does the commitment underscore “the strong ethical and moral compass of the American nation”?

Aronson reads into the record the “raw emotions” that surfaced in response to proposals about how victims would be remembered. Should they be listed randomly in a memorial? Should each family choose two people to be listed next to their loved ones? Should age at death, company affiliation (of, for example, the 715 Cantor Fitzgerald employees), and the unit and rank of firefighters be noted?

Aronson also recounts exchanges over the content of the 9/11 memorial. Should it deal exclusively with the victims, and not try to explain the actions of terrorists, which many family members found “senseless and ultimately inexplicable”? Could the memorial look to the future and promote tolerance, as Mayor Michael Bloomberg (who told families he had little interest in corporeal remains and had visited his father’s grave only once) hoped?

Most important, perhaps, Aronson emphasizes throughout his fine book that Americans must find ways to understand, respect, and respond to the immense burdens bereaved families carry, as well as the cultural, economic, and political implications of public commemorations of mass deaths.

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