

CEMETERY PICNICS

for The Midnight Society



presented by

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INTRODUCTION

Being in the market of writing dark fiction, it follows that much of my time is spent mired in the shadowy stuff. What you have in front of you is the results of my efforts researching, documenting, and dallying in everything from the arcane to the supernatural.

I've been writing fiction for several years, and have acted as a contributor for a number of online publications in the same timespan. Where possible, articles have been researched and referenced with citations.

You're holding a sampling of the the fun stuff that fuels my practice that other institutions, organizations, communities, and blogs were kind enough to publish.

If you'd like to work with me, make a suggestion for future articles, or alert me that the world is ending and I ought to backup my hard drive, feel free to send a note.

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CEMETERY PICNICS

for The Midnight Society

The Victorians had a very peculiar tradition of picnicking in cemeteries. After the death of Queen Victoria's hubby in 1861, the entire country donned their mourning attire. For forty years. (To be fair, Victoria only asked her court for three years of goth gear. Moved by her dedication to Prince Albert, they persisted in continuing the tradition until the queen's death, at which point the custom was put to rest, and so began the Edwardian period in Britain.)

I'd like to say the tendency to accessorize all in black, cover the household mirrors with black crepe, commemorate their loved ones with trinkets of their hair wrapped delicately in locket, or photographing their remains in very lifelike poses with the remaining members of the family surrounding the body is the subject of this post — in due time, I hope to touch on at least some of this stuff — but today I want you and I to indulge in a time-honoured tradition that I've gladly resurrected in my own life:

Picnicking in cemeteries.

So grab a sandwich, and let's have a little chat about what it was like to die in Victorian London.

A LITTLE BIT OF BACKSTORY

While doing research for the book I've been working on, I came across a couple of interesting tidbits: London was a foggy, congested, dirty city in the 1800's. Post-and-during the industrial revolution, thick fogs regularly rolled through due to the mixture of soot and sulfur dioxide from residential chimneys and factories mixing with mist rolling off the Thames. It



created the perfect cover for the Jack the Ripper murders, and of course, the climate coupled with a lack of proper sanitation bred pestilence: scarlet fever, cholera, typhus, measles, influenza, diphtheria — you name it, you could die from it.

One in three infants didn't make it to their first birthday. In a population of 2.3 billion where folks were often buried in churchyards, it's not hard to imagine that burial grounds got overcrowded pretty quick. Add to that the increasing number of bodies being snatched from their resting places, people occasionally being buried alive (whoops!), and bodies exposed and rotting because they weren't buried deep enough (two feet was the minimum — a big difference from today, where it ranges anywhere from six to twelve, and sometimes more.) Or worse — they were exhumed too quickly to make room for the fresh dead, and you had the circumstances that you had a case of serious social distress on your hands.

Frankly, cemeteries were thought to be a health hazard; nevermind places that bred nightmares.

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

In 1832, British Parliament set up seven private cemeteries that ringed the city that would be:

Beneficial to public morals, to the improvement of manners, but are likewise calculated to extend virtuous and generous feelings... A garden cemetery [modelled after Pere Lachaise in Paris] is the sworn foe to preternatural fear and superstition.

– *The Victorian Celebration of Death*

This is only ironic to me, because three of the Magnificent Seven are reportedly haunted.

Being buried in one of the Magnificent Seven's cemeteries was a costly affair that demonstrated social status as much as a willingness to commemorate their loved ones in the most ostentatious way possible. As the garden cemeteries appealed to the middle class, attention was paid to the flora, fauna, and even the monuments were (and still are) unprecedented in their elaborateness and elegance. As an art history nerd, 19th century sculpture sends me all a-twitter with excitement; add some verdurous foliage — ivy, creeper, lush hornbeam and yew, cypress, ferns, bluebells, holly — and you have your allocated plot for eternity nestled in a garden where butterflies, bees, foxes, even deer wander through. Victorians thought



this treatment “took away the gloom of the grave,” and given the precedent, the Magnificent Seven became veritable paradises on earth.

DINING WITH THE DEAD

With mourning tradition at its height as an involved and expensive demonstration of a beloved’s devotion to their departed, it seemed fitting that the pomp of funereally practices culminated in a willingness to spend time in these places, close to the dead, where they slumbered in a place of peace and beauty, separate from the hustle and filth of London town. Designed like public parks, with their Gothic revival mausoleums and Egyptian-inspired colonnades, the cemeteries became a place to spend a Sunday afternoon where families might spread a blanket in a patch of shade, and socialize with others who’d come to visit with their loved ones at rest.

Remember, mourning was *de rigeur* with such a high mortality rate. While this might seem odd by today’s standards, Victorians romanticized death, being so close to it. While we are removed from the process, given the majority of our exposure to death happens in hospitals, it was commonplace in Victorian England to surround a dying loved one on a deathbed watch in their home, in their bed, hoping to hear their profound final words in the hope to shed some light on the meaning of life before they passed. Mourning and its rituals provided a means of coping with the passage.

Now, I’m no historian by any means, and hell — I don’t even live in the UK. But believe me when I say that on a summer’s day, the best place in the city to read a book is under the shade of weeping willow at the cemetery on the hill with some goat cheese and crusty bread sitting in my icepack, and maybe a bottle of Pinot Gris if I’m feeling super indulgent.

There’s one thing I can assure you, if you’re observing the tradition of the cemetery picnic: the neighbours definitely don’t complain about the company.



ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The Midnight Society

“Victorian Valhallas: Cemetery Picnics” was written by Kira Butler, and appeared at
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<http://midnightsocietytales.com/2014/03/29/victorian-valhallas-cemetery-picnics/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Butler writes speculative fiction for adults, new adults, and young adult readers. She especially appreciates dark urban fantasy and low key horror, and likes to write about everything in between. She lives in Montreal, where she is working towards the completion of her first young adult horror novel.



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