

Out of Hours Books

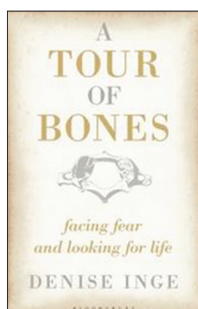
THE COURAGE TO CONFRONT DEATH

A Tour of Bones:

Facing Fear and Looking for Life

Denise Inge

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, HB, 224pp,
£15.29, 978-1472913074



This remarkable book addresses our fears of confronting our mortality. Denise Inge moved to a house adjacent to Worcester cathedral which had a medieval charnel house in the cellar. At first frightened of the bones beneath her feet, she embarked on a tour of four charnel houses in Europe to confront these fears. This book was near completion when Inge discovered she had developed advanced cancer. She died on

Easter Day, 2014.

Inge was a leading authority on the poet Thomas Traherne. She acknowledged that 'no one likes to talk about death, even doctors may be remarkably detached from mortal considerations'. These charnel houses reminded her of the brevity of life. We fear that:

'We may not have truly lived and may never live before our time runs out.'

In Czerma, Poland, the bones of victims and perpetrators, victors and vanquished, lie side by side, sharing a common humanity. The piles of bones testify that the ordinary matters: a human life is worthy of respect. In contrast, the ossuary at Sedlec (Czech Republic), started by The Cistercians, has a bone chandelier and skull pyramids. In the Middle Ages, bones were considered essential for the miracle of resurrection. In Hallstat (Austria), the skulls are named and decorated, making the visitor aware that these were once real individuals. Inge pondered on how she would be remembered.

In Naters (Switzerland), she read the inscription:

*'What you are we were/
What we are you shall be.'*

Here the bones are a mirror; she is finally looking into herself. Naters presents an invitation to humility, once described by Iris Murdoch as the central virtue. Inge concludes that humility is not about being pious but being grounded in the truth. Humility is an elusive concept because, as she observed, 'the minute you sense it within you, it is gone'.

Inge's wise reflections on her 'tour of bones' will be an inspiration to others facing a life-threatening illness and to the many who are involved in their care. Her contemplation of mortality is not simply about preparing to die, but much more about preparing to live. It is a simply brilliant book.

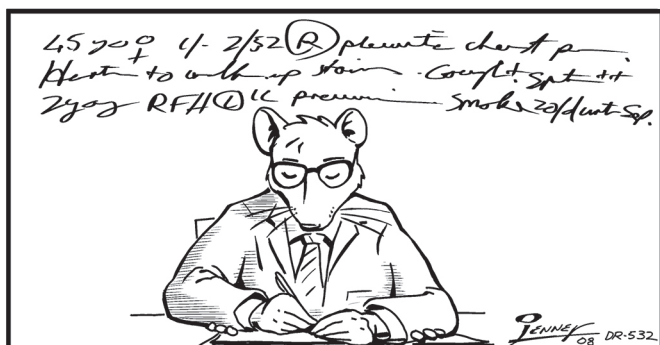
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