

INITIAL THOUGHTS & EXPECTATIONS

“Would you be interested in becoming a writer in residence for CPJ Field & Co (funeral directors)?”

An innocent enough sounding job offer, I thought. I’d been working with the Field family on a couple of in-house writing projects and it seemed a natural progression to continue this working relationship. I gratefully accepted. In the world of freelance writing, you are not going to turn work down, especially a ground-breaking role: I am now, officially, the first writer in residence to be appointed by a funeral directors.

However, I’ve been surprised at people’s reaction when I tell them my news. Usually, I get an ‘Oh’ with raised eyebrows, a nod of the head, then silence. I feel I need to explain myself, even defend my decision.

“What does it involve?” is usually the second, more measured, response.

Good question.

‘I’m going to spend some time each month, over the course of a year, visiting some of the 30 funeral homes owned by CPJ Field, meeting principle funeral directors, their staff and their customers.’

“Why?”

‘Why am I doing this?’

“Yes”. Everyone seems puzzled why I would want to spend time immersing myself in the world of death, funerals and grieving.

I take a deep breath... I’ve explained it so many times already; it’s now a spiel. But I think I need to explain here too.

Why I’m doing this: Apart from being paid, I love writing and researching. I have worked as a reporter on an agricultural magazine (the one with the yellow masthead you see in the supermarkets), have written freelance for many magazines and newspapers and have written three non-fiction books (about animal history; under my maiden name). I write three blogs, have two Twitter feeds and have written a diary for over three decades. I don’t think I could actually live without writing. I also now help others to write their memoirs and have a particular interest in social history. With CPJ Field’s 300 year archives, it will be interesting to see how their working practices, their standing in the community and their products have evolved – the history of this family funeral business will be a highlight for me.



I also love to explore a topic/subject which has little previous coverage. I'm possibly the eternal student; I get a kick out of researching and learning new stuff. And the world of funeral directing is a complete mystery to me.

I've spoken at the funerals of my grandmothers and great-aunt, and written a *Guardian* obituary for the latter, but I've never set foot in a funeral home; I've never needed to. Although I have been bereaved (sort of) - my brother went missing in Africa over 10 years ago. My other very tenuous link with death was through my brother when he studied Human Anatomy as part of his Biology/Zoology degree in Edinburgh. I remember him telling me this story and it still makes me wince. We had just lost our grandfather, who was S.E.J Wilson, known as John, and as Christian walked up to the first body in the mortuary, in his first every human anatomy class, the label tied round the big toe of the deceased read, 'John Wilson' - he said he nearly fainted.

So, without an actual death in the family (or a body in my case), I suspect I'm like the majority of the population and have had no inclination to just walk into a funeral home off the high street; it's not ideal for window-shopping, is it?

Only entering a funeral home at need is probably part of the reason why I'm getting a rather negative response from family and friends. If you only go into a funeral home when dealing with grief and (possibly) shock, why would there be any positive emotions associated with funeral directors? And, of course, they deal with the world of death which, in the UK, we find hard to face. Slow-moving black hearses, funeral wreaths and sombre black outfits give off a sadness, which you don't want to have to be involved with until absolutely necessary. We don't even want to talk about death, dying and funeral wishes with our elderly family members, or do we?

I've written so far from a relative's perspective, but as everyone will die at some time, I will also need to look at the industry as a prospective customer... I've just turned 40, and perhaps as I age I'll feel the need to pre-plan my funeral - do it my way, and make it easy for my family. Maybe I shouldn't wait too long, or is that just a morbid thought too far?

I'm actually quite excited at kicking off the year with a visit to my local CPJ Field branch in Uckfield. I'm looking forward to busting some myths, and perhaps making funeral homes and their staff seem more accessible to friends and family. Quite possibly, we are in the decade when death, dying and grief comes out of the shadows. For starters, I've been asked to write about my impressions of the workings of a 21-century funeral directors, which seems to be ground-breaking as far as I can see. Plus I've recently watched the beguiling Billy Connelly take a spirited gallivant through the eye-opening intricacies of the, mainly, US business of death (*Big Send Off*, ITV). Other recent fly-on-the-wall documentaries, *Grave Trade* (History Channel, 2013) and *Dead Good Job* (BBC, 2012), for example, followed particular funeral directors in their everyday work. These programmes have helped to move our perceptions of funeral directors a long way from coffin maker, Private James Frazer in *Dad's Army* and his dour warning, 'We're doomed!' But is there a real shift in perception around funeral directors? Are they becoming more human? I know they can tell good jokes: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01wq0g6> (insert)

Talking about death itself is also becoming less of a taboo; not least helped by the recent media and social media coverage of the supremely charismatic cancer victim Stephen Sutton. This young man inspired people with his bravery, courage and zest for life and his death hit



countless people. That Stephen was so young makes life seem more precious and death more real. There is also the new movement, imported from the US, called Death Café, where pop-up cafes serving tea and cake allow visitors to talk freely about death and dying.

Perhaps the world of death, dying and grief IS becoming less taboo? I intend to find out, and hopefully surprise and entertain readers along the way.

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