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Book Review: Allan Kellehear A Social History of Dying Cambridge:
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impressive that the author manages to address so many issues in one book and to characterize the phenomenon from different perspectives. However, such an approach does not allow a more detailed analysis. The overall conclusion of the book is that the most important motivating factor for mail-order brides is love and that:

... viewing the mail-order bride phenomenon solely through the lens of migration, transnationalism, and geopolitics misses what is perhaps the strongest force behind these women's attempts to find a husband in the West, namely, that they are trying to find a *husband*. (p. 157)

An evaluation of the narrative style of the book depends on the research tradition and is a matter of taste. According to some theorists, there are certain advantages in communicating facts via fiction, as the reader can better remember the complex concepts. For others, this style can seem a bit oversimplified. However, such an approach makes the book enjoyable for both scientists and a broader audience.

Allan Kellehear

A Social History of Dying

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, £15.99
(ISBN: 978-0521-69429-2), x+297 pp.

■ **Reviewed by Raf Vanderstraeten, Ghent University**

In recent scientific literature, one finds an increasing interest in evolutionary forms of reasoning. This interest is a trans-disciplinary reality. It provides new or rediscovered input to many different disciplines – in the life sciences as well as in the social sciences. Evolutionary economics constitutes a prime example, but some sociologists now also (re)turn to evolutionary forms of reasoning. They draw attention to the origins and the evolution of the human species; they analyse human life in comparison with other forms of organic life; they discuss continuities and discontinuities in the experiences and interactions of humans over extremely extended periods of time. It is against this background that one can understand Allan Kellehear's monograph on the sociological history of dying. According to Kellehear, the dying behaviours we know today have been built up over thousands of years.

Kellehear divides his monograph into four parts, four evolutionary stages. Each part focuses on dominant forms of human life in a particular period and the ensuing challenges with regard to human dying. The first part presents an overview of the life and death worlds in the Stone Age. Death here mostly came suddenly: a fatal hunting or foraging accident, an attack from animals or other human beings, death at birth of mother and/or child, the sudden outcome of a long period of malnutrition, etc. Dying probably only began after biological death. It referred to the passage

from this world to the next, from one social role (e.g. mother, infant) to another one (e.g. protector, ghost) which might benefit or harm the group. The second part is devoted to a discussion of the settlement cultures that arrived some 12,000 years ago. Early farmers and city dwellers were able to live longer and were more likely than their hunter-gatherer peers to see death coming. They were able to anticipate death and to prepare themselves for it; they could settle affairs with kin and kith. The descriptive/prescriptive notion of the 'good death' emerged – that is, a death well prepared by the dying person in this world.

In the third part, Kellehear focuses on the rise and spread of urbanism, on living and dying in cities. In the middle classes in particular, dying people began to manage their dying affairs by involving professionals, especially physicians and lawyers. The ideal of the good death was reshaped into the well-managed death. Professional 'others' claimed to be able to manage 'our' dying through various services: medical investigations, estate management and will-making, psychological and spiritual interventions, etc. The book's fourth part, finally, focuses on the present Cosmopolitan Age. The globalizing mixture of wealth and poverty, of long and short life expectancies, seems to overturn our past understandings about risk. Phenomena such as the slow deterioration of ageing or the slow dimming of consciousness now blur the distinction between living and dying. They raise new questions about dying as living; they put forward the challenge of timing death, of dying at the 'right' time.

Throughout his book, Kellehear thus seeks to clarify how different social arrangements influence the experience of dying, the way death moves people. He distinguishes between different challenges and stages; he assesses each stage in terms of how well people were or are able to live up to its main challenge. It is an approach which leads to some value-laden, ideal-typical generalizations (especially in the book's last part, in which current 'shameful' as well as 'tragic and antisocial' forms of dying are discussed and criticized). It also suggests too much homogeneity within each phase. But Kellehear of course had to solve a number of problems related to the presentation of his research material. Choices had to be made, especially because his aim was to present an evolutionary, almost two-million-year journey in one book. All in all, this is a thoughtful book with many perceptive comments.

Perhaps one could have wished for more systematic reflections on the perceived boundaries of human society. It can be argued that the distinction between this world (society) and the other world has become more outspoken in the course of history. We now conceive of society as the system of communications between human beings. We normally no longer accept other partners (than human beings) as communication partners: ghosts, ancestors, totems, trees, etc. Thomas Luckmann has spoken of the gradual humanization of society. Against that background, one could ask whether the more recent advances in medical care have changed our perceptions of the boundaries of human life and human society – for example, in the case of elderly dementia or in situations of brain death. Which patients do we still consider to be communication partners, when are they 'too far gone' to communicate with? Ideas about the 'right' time of dying also depend on existing expectations regarding 'legitimate' forms of communication between 'legitimate' communication partners.