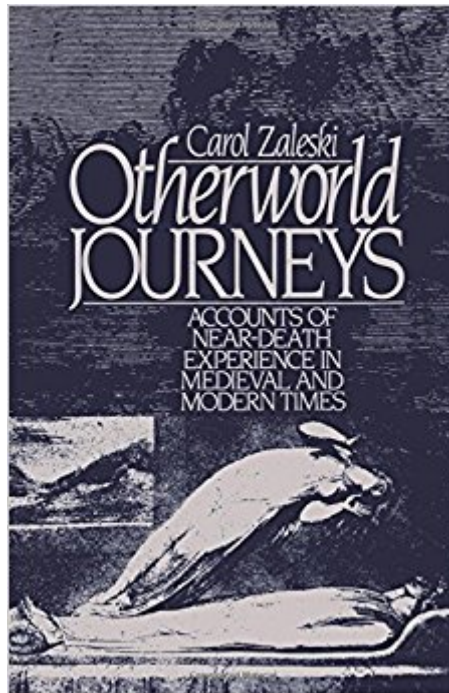




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Otherworld Journeys: Accounts Of Near-Death Experience In Medieval And Modern Times



Synopsis

Dozens of books, articles, television shows, and films relating "near-death" experiences have appeared in the past decade. People who have survived a close brush with death reveal their extraordinary visions and ecstatic feelings at the moment they died, describing journeys through a tunnel to a realm of light, visual reviews of their past deeds, encounters with a benevolent spirit, and permanent transformation after returning to life. Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys* offers the most comprehensive treatment to date of the evidence surrounding near-death experiences. The first to place researchers' findings, first-person accounts, and possible medical or psychological explanations in historical perspective, she discusses how these materials reflect the influence of contemporary culture. She demonstrates that modern near-death reports belong to a vast family of otherworld journey tales, with examples in nearly every religious heritage. She identifies universal as well as culturally specific features by comparing near-death narratives in two distinct periods of Western society: medieval Christendom and twentieth-century secular America. This comparison reveals profound similarities, such as the life-review and the transforming after-effects of the vision, as well as striking contrasts, such as the absence of hell or punishment scenes from modern accounts. Mediating between the "debunkers" and the near-death researchers, Zaleski considers current efforts to explain near-death experience scientifically. She concludes by emphasizing the importance of the otherworld vision for understanding imaginative and religious experience in general.

Book Information

Paperback: 275 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (November 3, 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195056655

ISBN-13: 978-0195056655

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 14 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #269,876 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #78 in [Books > Self-Help >](#)

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Customer Reviews

"Zaleski's command of the literature, her careful analysis of the narratives, and her recommendations for interpretation make this book a classic in the study of religious experience and popular religion."--The Journal of Religion

"Zaleski...has had the excellent idea of putting recent near-death narratives in perspective by comparing them with those of an earlier period....An extremely interesting piece of work, and one that offers many shrewd insights."--John Gross, The New York Times

"The most important book on the topic."--Virginia Quarterly Review

"The most thorough, scholarly, and convincing study thus far published concerning the cultural and religious implications of near-death experiences....The most important book on the topic."--Virginia Quarterly Review

"A sophisticated postmodern, hence nonphilosophical, book about that timeless philosophical problem. The problem is how to explain mental objects (for example, a vision of heaven or an encounter with a leprechaun)."--The New York Times Book Review

"The first historical perspective on the subject....A brilliant, historically rich, commonsensical book."--Jonathan Cott, Vogue

"An open-minded and scholarly study, impressive in its intelligence, fairness, humanity, and breadth."--Boston Phoenix

"A work at once scholarly and engrossingly readable....A rich and eminently successful work."--Robert Ellwood, Parabola

"Wide-ranging and profound, revealing the imaginative and symbolic content of such experiences as well as their relationship to particular cultural and religious beliefs."--Library Journal

"[Zaleski's] provocative book should be read by all people interested in near-death experiences."--The American Rationalist

Carol Zaleski is a Lecturer on the Study of Religion at Harvard University.

Carol Zaleski is Professor of World Religions at Smith College, and has also written books such as *Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope: The Albert Cardinal Meyer Lectures*. She wrote in the Introduction to this 1987 book, "The purpose of this study is to examine the return-from-death story in two widely-separated settings: medieval Christendom and modern 'secular' and pluralistic society. Comparative study ... will disclose some of the ways in which the otherworld journey narrative is shaped by the social and historical situation in which it occurs... it will provide a new perspective on the question of how we might interpret the literature of otherworld visions." (Pg. 6) After reviewing some early Christian eschatological literature, she notes, "medieval visions exhibit a similar profusion of barriers, obstacles, trials, and judgment scenes. My aim is not to systematize this material into a rational theology of judgment, but rather to examine prominent forms of expression, in order to appreciate the imaginative experience they convey." (Pg. 62) She suggests, "the reasons for the appeal of contemporary near-death literature [e.g., *Life*

After Life] are similar to those that swelled the ranks of the spiritualist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century and attracted public attention to the work of the early psychical researchers. Like spiritualism in its heyday, near-death studies give the impression of being nondogmatic, rational, empirical, even naturalistic... The purpose remains the same, however; experiential reports of life after death are popularly considered to be practical evidence which... will yield scientific confirmation of religious hopes. Moreover, near-death reports... are well suited to the peculiar blend of anxiety and optimism that characterizes the modern secular or liberal religious mentality." (Pg. 98-99) She observes, "[Kenneth Ring's] description suggests that he wishes to reconcile his findings with those of [Raymond] Moody. The sound, the tunnel, and feelings of loneliness are features that occur only rarely in the reports Ring collected; yet he includes them in his model narrative, buffeted with 'mays' and 'ors' as if they were options he is unwilling to rule out, if only out of loyalty to his predecessor." (Pg. 107) She points out, "The researchers agree that passage from darkness to light is a nearly universal sign of transition to a new phase of near-death experience; but they disagree on the timetable... This may surprise the reader who is trying to make the details fit a 'single, common path.' Such discrepancies occur not because of incoherence in individual reports, but because Moody, [Michael] Sabom, Ring, and others attempt to construct an overarching narrative by selecting typical features from a great number of differing accounts. In the interest of portraying near-death experience as in essence a unitary phenomenon, the researchers create a pattern out of the welter of various tunnels and paths, lights and presences, gardens and edifices." (Pg. 123) She argues, "If near-death reports cannot be explained by drugs alone, there is good reason to consider other toxic conditions that may have hallucinogenic effects... Ernst A. Rodin, a neurologist who scrutinizes his own near-death experience... calls his near-death vision under surgery 'one of the most intense and happiest moments of my life,' [but] he concludes in retrospect that it was a 'toxic psychosis' induced by an oxygen-starved brain." (Pg. 165-166) This is a fascinating, scholarly, critical examination of NDEs that is well worth the time of anyone studying such experiences.

Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times, published in 1987 by Oxford University Press, by religion scholar Carol Zaleski is a fascinating account of the near-death experience as found in literature from medieval and modern times. As the author notes the term "near-death experience" is defined as "the testimony of individuals who have revived from apparent death as well as those who have only come close to death" as explained by Raymond Moody. As the author notes definitions of such terms as death and deathbed visions, etc.

often become blurry, thus it is necessary to use terms such as "near-death experience" and "otherworld journey" interchangeably. This book provides an excellent examination of such experiences and journeys in the literature from the medieval period as well as comparing it to modern accounts of near-death experiences. The author offers some useful reflections on the ubiquity of this phenomena and what this might have to say for the survival hypothesis. The author also examines cultural factors that might be involved in the near-death experience and how such factors play such an important role in interpretation. As such this book remains an important one for the study of near-death experiences and otherworld journeys from ancient and especially medieval times to the modern day. In the "Introduction", the author lays out the role of near-death experiences and otherworld journeys in the literature of all cultures. For example, the author considers the role of the otherworld journey in accounts from those of the Prophet Mohammed, Zarathustra, Mani, William Blake, and others and shows that these individuals share many common features in their accounts. The author then considers various accounts from a wide scope of cultures and traces the origins of the notion of the near-death experience to Raymond Moody's 1970s classic *_Life After Life_*. The author then provides a discussion of the material that will appear in this book. Part I of this book is entitled "Orientation". The first chapter is entitled "A Wide-Angle View" and considers the disposal of the dead beginning with Peking man and the Cro Magnons in the Paleolithic era up until the arrival of homo sapiens sapiens and into the ancient world. The author considers otherworld journeys in the accounts of shamans, in the epic of Gilgamesh, from the ancient Egyptians, from the epics of Homer and in ancient Greece, among the Chinese, in the *_Republic_* of Plato, among the ancient Gnostics, among the earliest Christians, and the rise of the Kabbalah. The second chapter is entitled "Four Models of Christian Otherworld Journey Narration". This chapter considers otherworld journeys in medieval Christianity, making mention of for example such topics as: The Otherworld Journey as Apocalypse: The Vision of St. Paul, The Otherworld Journey as Miracle Story: The Dialogues of Gregory the Great, The Otherworld Journey as Conversion: The Vision of Drythelm, and The Otherworld Journey as Pilgrimage: St. Patrick's Purgatory. Many of the comments on purgatory and St. Patrick's Purgatory can also be found for example in such classics as the study on purgatory made by Jacques le Goff. Part II of this book is entitled "Medieval Christian Return-From-Death Stories: A Thematic Treatment". The third chapter is entitled "The Other World: Medieval Itineraries". Here, the author considers such topics as the exit from the body (mentioning the exit of the soul through the gateway of the mouth from the body, as well as death as a violation of the unity of the body and the soul), the guide (mentioning the role of the guide in the other world journey), and the journey itself (mentioning for example such classic accounts as those

of Dante in *The Divine Commentary* or those of the seer Emmanuel Swedenborg). The fourth chapter is entitled "Obstacles". Here, the author considers various obstacles faced by the individual in the otherworld journey including such things as fire, the test-bridge, and the encounter with deeds. The fifth chapter is entitled "Reentry" and considers the reentry of the individual into the world after passing through the otherworld journey. This chapter considers such topics as the visionary transformed, the visionary as messenger, the narrator as messenger, vision and revision, and the interpretation of visions. Part III of this book is entitled "The Modern Near-Death Narrative: A Thematic and Comparative Treatment". The sixth chapter is entitled "From Deathbed Visions to Life After Life". Here the author considers such topics as nineteenth and twentieth century precursors (mentioning such things as the work of individuals such as F. W. H. Myers and the Society for Psychical Research as well as other early researchers), the role of *Life after Life* as a "new phase" (mentioning the importance of Raymond Moody and his classic 1975 work which coined the term "near-death experience"), and the researchers (mentioning the importance of such individuals as Kenneth Ring, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and others and noting the conflict between new age type versions of near-death experiences and more fundamentalist Christian versions). The seventh chapter is entitled "The Other World: Modern Itineraries". This chapter considers such modern features of the near-death experience as attitudes towards death and dying, images of the soul, liminality, the journey, the light, judgment, "falling into heaven": mystical states and visions of the whole, otherworld topography, and otherworld demography. In particular it is interesting to note that modern versions involve less fear of judgment and a more pleasant experience of death than medieval versions may have. The eighth chapter is entitled "Back to Life" and examines such topics as approaching the point of no return, the visionary transformed, and the visionary and the interviewer. Part IV of this book is entitled "The Interpretation of Near-Death Visions". The ninth chapter is entitled "Ecstatics and Statistics" and considers such things as the credentials of ecstasies and the possibility of verification of near-death experiences. The tenth chapter is entitled "Explanations and Counterexplanations". Possibilities considered in this chapter include the question of whether the experiencers were really dead, models of death, natural causes of the near-death experience, and various counterarguments. The eleventh chapter is entitled "Evaluating Near-Death Testimony". This chapter considers such topics as experiential claims, double vision, corporeal imagery, the question of interpretation, another world to live in, and the orientation of this study. The author ends by relating near-death experience to imaginative experience and states that near-death experiences have as much to say about the world after death as they do about ourselves as imaginative beings. The book ends with an appendix entitled "Chronology of Medieval

Visions". This book offers an interesting study of the near-death experience and the otherworld journey in the literature from ancient times and especially the medieval period and compares this to the modern day. Such a study is highly useful for those who seek to understand about the possibility for survival of bodily death. In particular, it is interesting to note how many features of the otherworld journey have changed (but also how many remain the same) since the medieval period. As such, this book remains an interesting study and account for those who seek to better understand life and death and the possibility of life after death.

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