

Being Dead, by Jim Crace

reviewed by [Ann-Janine Morey](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

On a beautiful Tuesday afternoon, Joseph and Celice, both middle-aged professors of zoology, revisit the remote beach that was the landscape of their courtship and first passion. Joseph is hoping for an amorous encounter, and Celice heads into the dunes looking for a mattress of grass to cushion their adventure. Partially undressed and sharing a sandwich, they are listening for the bay's famous wind song, and never see the thief who comes from behind and kills them with a chunk of granite. They begin to die at 3:50 p.m., although Joseph dies for 30 minutes longer than Celice.

Jim Crace's *Being Dead* opens with the compromised bodies of Celice and Joseph and then circles back to review the fatal blows, so that by page 15 the murder is complete. Subsequent chapters review the hours just prior to the murder, while keeping track of the physical processes that begin to integrate the bodies back into the anonymity of nature. This naturalistic narrative of death is interwoven with other chapters that tell of Joseph and Celice's courtship and marriage, so that the fatal hours prior to the murder and the murder itself become embedded in their 30-year history together. This structure reminds us how much our sense of self or soul is commanded by the physical body, which gives us no choice about whether we will die.

The narrator, who speaks in first-person plural, thereby incorporating us into his perspective, is deliberate and eloquent in his microscopic contemplation of these deaths, but he is also disturbingly cool and smug in his omniscient perspective on human frailty. He enjoys pointing out that Joseph the zoologist, once so scornful of botanists, is now closer to botany than he has ever been. "His body was a vegetable. . . . The maggots would dismantle him." Celice's putrefying body could have been a "fine display to illustrate the annual fieldwork lecture that she gave" to introduce students to the meaning of *senescence* and *thanatology*.

Will there be angels, or ghosts or at least trumpets at the moment of expiration, asks the narrator? Nope. "They were, we are, all flesh, and then we are all meat." The piteously exposed couple is robbed even of the one dignified moment constructed into the death. As he dies, Joseph extends his arm until he can clasp

Celice's ankle, so that anyone can see that "something of their love had survived the death of cells." As long as this gesture remains unbroken, they are dead but not departed. Then the narrator intones "our only prayer for them. May no one come to lift his hand from her leg," and this prayer is echoed by their daughter when she arrives to identify the bodies.

But surely the narrator is making fun of prayer. What it asks for cannot prevail. The bodies are moved, Joseph's hand falls away from Celice's ankle, and they are now utterly dead. It is day six of their death, and their creator is ready to rest. He has exposed their prejudices, weaknesses and pretensions. He has stripped them, murdered them and left them for dead, their legacy a "rectangle of faded grass." Despite the originality of the concept and the beauty of the prose, *Being Dead* is more cruel than profound, more a display of narrative power than a thoughtful contemplation of the significance of human life.