

## Discussion Guide



### Summary

For two thousand years, cadavers - some willingly, some unwittingly - have been involved in science's boldest strides and weirdest undertakings. They've tested France's first guillotines, ridden the NASA Space Shuttle, been crucified in a Parisian laboratory to test the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin, and helped solve the mystery of TWA Flight 800. For every new surgical procedure, from heart transplants to gender confirmation surgery, cadavers have helped make history in their quiet way. *Stiff* investigates the strange lives of our bodies postmortem and answers the question: What should we do after we die?

### Questions

1. In her introduction to *Stiff*, Mary Roach remarks that “death makes us helplessly polite.” Why are we often compelled to use polite language when discussing death? Why are we often afraid to discuss it in the way Roach has done in her book?
2. Were you surprised to learn that cadavers are used in so many different areas and kinds of research? How do you feel about that? Which area of research surprised you the most?
3. Many research studies that make use of cadavers raise questions about maintaining the dignity of the deceased individuals. For example, a ballistics study might involve decapitating a cadaver or shooting one in the face—all for the sake of gathering data to ensure that innocent civilians who are hit in the face with nonlethal bullets will not suffer disfiguring fractures. Do you think that the humanitarian benefits of experimenting on cadavers can outweigh any potential breach of respect for the dead? Why or why not?
4. Roach describes a journey to an island in Sweden, where a biologist-entrepreneur has made a business of producing compost from cadavers. This business has major corporate backing and an international patent, and mortuary professionals in many countries, including the United States, are interested in representing the new technology. Do you think that the “human compost movement” could gain traction where you live?
5. Some chapters may have seemed more “icky” than others, in terms of subject matter. Did you skip any chapters, or browse only, because of the subject matter? Which ones?
6. Did you find Roach’s dry humor helpful or disturbing during your reading?
7. Roach concludes that “it makes little sense to try to control what happens to your remains when you are no longer around to reap the joys or benefits of that control.” Do you agree with her viewpoint?
8. At the end of the book, Roach discusses the process she has gone through to decide whether to donate her body. What did you think of her including this personal touch? Did reading this book affect your own ideas about organ donation?