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Stéphanie Sauget, *Le cercueil de verre du Père-Lachaise*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2023. 336 pp. Bibliography and appendices. \$41.34 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-2271139504.

Review by Mattie Fitch, Marymount University.

Stéphanie Sauget specializes in the study of social imaginaries, especially in relation to death and the dead. Her work, *Le cercueil de verre du Père-Lachaise*, deepens our understanding of the “devenir du cadavre dans les sociétés contemporaines” and the “imaginaire occidental contemporain de la ‘dernière demeure’” (p. 10). The study of death has been approached in past decades from many angles, such as through the morgue and the notion of display in the work of Vanessa Schwartz<sup>[1]</sup> and, more recently, Bruno Bertherat,<sup>[2]</sup> and in terms of mourning practices after the First World War in the work of Jay Winter and Annette Becker.<sup>[3]</sup> Sauget contributes to conversations begun by Alain Corbin, Michelle Perrot, Anne Carol (to whom she attributes a renewal of the history of death), and Dominique Kalifa, to whom she dedicates her book.<sup>[4]</sup> Kalifa died in 2020 and was well loved and respected as a mentor and scholar of Western imaginaries and myths, including *les bas-fonds* and the Belle Époque. In addition to investigating turn-of-the-century beliefs about “ce qui se passe après la mort” (p. 143), *Le cercueil de verre du Père-Lachaise* also has much to say about the press, and Sauget references the work of Marie-Eve Thérenty.<sup>[5]</sup>

Sauget’s research began with the discovery of an intriguing story in the archives, which both absorbs the reader and provides the focus of an investigation of what the coffin symbolized at the turn of the century. Between the years 1893 and 1937, the custodians of Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris received letters from individuals all over the world presenting themselves as candidates for a job that did not exist but about which they had read in the papers. They offered, in exchange for payment of a considerable sum, to guard a glass coffin containing the body of a Russian princess for a year, as requested in her final testament. Sauget pursues a mystery: why did so many people believe this story enough to write these letters and consider enclosing themselves in a mausoleum with a corpse for a year? As she writes, borrowing from Roger Chartier, “cet énoncé entrainé en résonance avec un imaginaire social le rendant possible et pensable” (p. 80). In this extensively researched book, Sauget follows the multiple threads woven together in this social imaginary.

Harkening to studies of folklore, rumor, and the *fait divers*, Sauget prefers the term “légende contemporaine,” defining it as an anonymous story that circulates internationally, is brief and surprising, and is presented as true without any proof. This term, more than urban legend, allows her to investigate the international dimension of the story’s circulation, one of the main points in

her book. She places herself within the field of microhistory and calls this the study of a microevent, citing Arlette Farge, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Carlo Ginzburg.[6] The globalization of the phenomenon she investigates sets her work apart from other microhistories. Indeed, this is not solely a work of French history, even though Père-Lachaise itself is located in France. More relevant is the mental world of North Americans, who wrote the majority of the letters. Sauget ably uses a cultural history methodology pioneered by such scholars as Robert Darnton.[7] The story of the dead Russian princess is linked to “un fond commun d’autres histoires familiales qui lui donnent sens” (p. 81). To discover that meaning, Sauget chases down those other stories as well as their visual representations. She explains that the nineteenth century was particularly important for the creation of myths, especially about unsettling places. In addition to tracing cultural beliefs, Sauget also grounds her investigation of the imaginary in the concrete, discussing for example the production of real glass coffins, and real dead bodies under observation.

Sauget uses the legend of the Russian princess as a lens to investigate the global circulation of information through the commercial press; the symbolism of the coffin; the image of the dead; beliefs about the tomb; and the meaning of space, time, and money in the legend.

The legend reveals first and foremost the power of the press, in that it convinced letter-writers to present themselves as candidates for this unconventional post on the strength of what they read in the newspaper. Sauget refers to the newspaper reader as *homo mediaticus*, that is, individuals at the turn of the century who ordered their lives to a rhythm influenced by the press and who saw the world through the information presented to them by the press. Her chapter on the global network of the press and the diffusion of information is excellent, explaining how the legend circulated and, as much as possible, how it was created and received. Relying on a transnational telegraph network, editors and their collaborators fabricated news from information their correspondents collected, then papers throughout the world borrowed and reprinted stories, especially from American sources. Insightfully, she shows how the legend was determined by the form of media in which it appeared, a mass commercial press looking for a sensational story to sell papers. She describes an international community of readers constituted by newspaper consumption, amply demonstrating her point that the production of news was transnational as was the community constituted by this media. Less convincing is her claim about the homogenization of this community. Despite reading versions of the same story in Tasmania and London, surely it was interpreted differently in these local contexts, even if the readers themselves may have believed they belonged to a homogenous community.

It is no accident that Sauget uses the term “viral” to describe the legend; our society has produced a new digital version of *homo mediaticus*. One of the strengths of Sauget’s book is her use of digital sources and especially digital search tools. In addition to the letters themselves, examples of which she includes in the book’s appendices, Sauget has tracked down articles in newspapers throughout the world, information about the letter writers, a corpus of images of Snow White, and YouTube videos about mausoleums in Père-Lachaise, among other material from online repositories. I would have liked to know more about her methodology with such sources, and how they can be a resource for other historians, especially in a time when funding and pandemics can limit travel to physical archives. Online sources also raise potential issues. Sauget makes use of a Wiki, a collaborative site collecting images of Snow White. Such a site could go out of service at any time, meaning that the citation becomes obsolete with the internet link. Attributions are not always present on such sites in any case, and when they are, it is not always possible to verify

them. The Snow White Wiki did provide authors and years for the images, but not citations, so the trustworthiness of such information is not certain. Did Sauget have a process for verifying them? Did she only use images she verified?

Sauget's central point is revealed in two chapters investigating the meaning of the coffin, in which she explores an ambiguity in the relationship to death at the turn of the century. Mourners desired closeness and incorruptibility for the dead, yet for reasons of public hygiene or superstition, contemporaries also desired distance from the dead. A glass coffin was supposed to preserve a body intact while at the same time establishing a barrier between the dead and the living. According to Sauget, the glass coffin was linked to desire and death through the "*mise en scène de la mort féminine*," (p. 89), which she describes as a nineteenth-century obsession. Interweaving discussions of Snow White, the morgue, anatomical collections, and relics, she discusses ways the dead were literally viewed by mass publics and figuratively viewed as incorruptible, beautiful, and even miraculous. In an extended meditation on the meaning of glass at the time, Sauget explains that glass was a marker of modernity connected with utopian visions of control, hygiene, and scientific observation but also retained older associations with magic and in particular alchemy and necromancy. Embalming a body within a coffin protected the living from the decomposition of a cadaver, while also representing "*le meilleur espoir d'immortalité*" (p. 136) or at least survival beyond death, blurring "*les limites entre le monde des morts et celui des vivants*" (p. 141).

A subsequent chapter elaborates on how coffins became the site of a theatrical *mise-en-scène* of the dead, in which coffins became personalized and gravesites individualized. Providing a brief history of the use of the coffin and a more extended analysis of the way Napoleon's coffin became metonymic of the emperor's body, Sauget argues that the nineteenth century saw "*l'avènement d'un véritable culte fétichiste du cercueil*" (p. 260) that invested the final resting place with ritualistic importance involving seeing the dead one last time and touching the coffin. Like many others, she questions the conclusions of Philippe Ariès about the occultation of the dead after the Middle Ages. [8] At the same time, the coffin was the stronghold of the vampire, and through a discussion of vampire literature, Sauget illuminates a tension revealed by the coffin: with a coffin, the living could "*se débarrasser du corps pour se protéger de ses retours, de ses effets, de son pouvoir et le conserver pour ne pas perdre la trace d'une vie qui fut vécue et pour ne pas réduire le corps à un déchet*" (p. 288). This chapter is particularly effective, inviting readers to think about their own relationships to the bodies of loved ones, even after death.

The remaining chapters analyze other key elements of the legend. Sauget explores the image of Père-Lachaise and the ways it became iconic internationally, particularly through its exceptional tombs. The cemetery's Demidoff-Stroganoff mausoleum is the closest real tomb to the one in the legend, and she explains how Russians, and Russian women in particular, were associated with wealth, eccentricity, the exotic, and even the occult. One book published at the time that replicated the story of the Russian princess cast her as a vampire, luring guards/victims to her tomb/residence. In an extended discussion of fears of the tomb, Sauget describes the nineteenth century as "*le temps d'une révolution nocturne*" due to urban lighting, but "*poches ombreuses*" remained (p. 192). The book also investigates the legend's relationship to space and time through a close textual analysis of the letters and newspaper articles carrying the story. The princess's guard would inhabit a space that wasn't designed to support human life for a year, a unit of time harkening to the fairytale elements of the story. One of the most interesting discussions of the book is the section on inheritance law. Sauget demonstrates that "*le récit de la légende de la*

Princesse russe correspond davantage au fonctionnement juridique anglo-saxon qu'à celui en vigueur en France" (p. 218). It also reveals an Anglo-Saxon perception of money in which taking a risk to become wealthy was viewed positively, helping to explain why North Americans were the most numerous among the letter writers.

Despite providing fascinating information about seemingly obscure topics, such as the rate of decomposition in cemetery soils, the broader historical context is often a little thin. As Sauget states, the period in which the legend circulated was one in which death and the consideration of cadavers occupied a central place, but she doesn't discuss why this was the case. The international outlook of newspaper stories about the legend, she explains, makes less relevant the political and social elements of national contexts. She mentions the Civil War and the First World War briefly but does not engage in any extended discussion of the impact of these conflicts, despite the unprecedented number of cadavers they produced. Given that Sauget investigates death and dead bodies in industrial society, and that her date range encompasses the First World War, Sauget could have engaged more fully with the extensive scholarship on this topic, such as that of Winter, Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Bruno Cabanes, and many others.[9] The First World War overturned expectations of what death and mourning would be, leaving societies and families to determine how to mourn their loved ones in the face of tremendous obstacles to carrying out traditional practices. Sauget mentions that the legend circulated "à la fois en période de paix (1893-1894) et en période de guerre (1914-1915)" (p. 78) but does not comment on any shift occurring between these two periods.

Sauget explains that she chose to "privilégier les formes narratives et les motifs qui ont retenu l'attention des lecteurs et des éditeurs de journaux, quel que soit le pays et l'époque" (p. 82) and attributes her observations to Western culture and societies in general. This sometimes leads her to make ahistorical arguments in which the connections are tenuous. For example, she argues that the fear of ghosts goes back to the Bible, silence and death have been associated since Antiquity, and that number symbolism can be traced to the Greek Gnostic tradition. One wonders if these are really the best explanations for the contemporary cultural phenomena she explores. One of her key points centers on the international circulation of the story, but her tendency to draw examples from any place in any year within her four-decade range adds to the over-general quality of her conclusions about cultural belief. She quotes anyone and everyone in any given section, from celebrated republican poet Victor Hugo to rural Australians, to an anonymous religious inhabitant of Nancy, without making distinctions. Assuming a homogenous Western culture, the book contains sweeping statements, such as "le silence est perçu comme une absence de vie ou comme une présence du monde de la mort. C'est ce silence qui peut alors sembler insupportable" (p. 195). Sauget's conclusions are most convincing when she can offer evidence from the letters, such as potential candidates asking if they can bring an instrument to play during their year in seclusion to keep the silence at bay.

In this work, Sauget isn't necessarily looking for definitive answers, which likely do not even exist for the types of questions she asks. The book inhabits a place in which contrary explanations coexist, which feels true to the culture she describes: a coffin keeping the dead close but also providing a barrier to protect the living, glass as modern and also magic, the city as lit, policed, and rational but also shadowy and dangerous. The challenge offered by the princess to her potential guards, Sauget remarks, was "assister à une décomposition et ne pas se décomposer" (p. 208). Given the subject and goals of the book, some of Sauget's conclusions must remain at the level of supposition. Sauget is not deterred by "l'absence de lien exprimé," because "les

contemporains ont pu y penser sans le faire savoir” (p. 300). But how does this leave an archival trace? How could such a phenomenon be uncovered by historical analysis? Though only one newspaper refers explicitly to Snow White, she writes that “il est tout à fait possible que de nombreux lecteurs qui ont découvert la légende du Père-Lachaise aient songé à Blanche-Neige” (p. 98). This is convincing given her demonstration of the wide interest in the story of Snow White during the period but cannot be treated as definitive. Sauget acknowledges the limitations of this type of analysis. She writes, for example, “le rapport complexe au verre qui peut être soit transparent, soit opaque, soit simple et accessible à toutes les bourses, soit extrêmement sophistiqué et cher, rend les interprétations incertaines” (p. 135).

She ends the book with the tension between closeness and distance in her work. Contemporaries were radically different from the eccentric princess of the story but had also been brought close by new “réseaux de transport et de communication [qui ont] changé le rapport des contemporains à ce qui est distant géographiquement, socialement ou culturellement” (p. 298). This parallels the perennial question for researchers who feel obliged to maintain an objective distance from their subjects but also compelled to “dénoncer l’illusion de l’étrange pour essayer de retrouver la familier” (p. 300). Perhaps I would not have offered to live for a year with a dead Russian princess in her tomb, but I certainly identified with the central paradox confronted by contemporaries who encountered the legend, and I enjoyed reading an investigation of it: are the dead familiar or frightening?

#### NOTES

[1] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[2] Bruno Bertherat, "Visiter les morts. La Morgue (Paris, XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)", *Hypothèses* 19, 1 (2016), p. 377-390.

[3] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Annette Becker, *La guerre et la foi: de la mort à la mémoire: 1914-1930* (Paris: A. Colin, 1994).

[4] Alain Corbin, *Le Village des "cannibales"* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); Michelle Perrot, *Histoire des chambres* (Paris: Seuil, 2009); Anne Carol, *L'embaumement, une passion romantique: France XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Ceyzérieu, Champ Vallon, 2015); Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds: histoire d'un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013) and *La véritable histoire de la "Belle Époque"* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

[5] Marie-Eve Thérénty, *La littérature au quotidien: poétiques journalistiques au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

[6] Arlette Farge, "Histoire, événement, parole," *Socio-anthropologie* 2 (1997); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London: Routledge, 1980).

[7] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

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[8] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the last One Thousand Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

[9] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18, les combattants des tranchées: à travers leurs journaux* (Paris, A. Colin, 1986); Bruno Cabanes, *La victoire endeuillée : la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

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