



# Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography

*Douglas Keister*

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## **Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography** Douglas Keister

Stories in Stone provides history along with images of a wide variety of common and not-so-common cemetery symbols, and offers an in-depth examination of stone relics and the personal and intimate details they display-flora and fauna, religious icons, society symbols, and final impressions of how the deceased wished to be remembered. Douglas Keister has created a practical field guide that is compact and portable, perfect for those interested in family histories and genealogical research, and is the only book of its kind that unlocks the language of symbols in a comprehensive and easy-to-understand manner.

Douglas Keister has photographed fourteen award-winning, critically acclaimed books (including Red Tile Style: America's Spanish Revival Architecture, The Bungalow: America's Arts & Crafts Home, and Storybook Style: America's Whimsical Homes of the Twenties) earning him the title "America's most noted photographer of historic architecture." He also writes and illustrates magazine articles and contributes photographs and essays to other books, calendars, posters, and greeting cards. Doug lives in Chico, California, and travels frequently to photograph and lecture on historic architecture and photography.

## **Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography Details**

Date : Published September 28th 2008 by Gibbs M. Smith Inc (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9781586853211

Author : Douglas Keister

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Reference, Death, Art



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# From Reader Review Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography for online ebook

## Anne says

I am the lonely one-star reviewer on this book. It's a nicely produced little hardback that could fit into your pocket on the way to a cemetery trip; unfortunately, it has very limited usefulness for actually understanding the significance of the symbols you're seeing on cemetery markers.

The material culture of cemetery markers - at least during the period before markers became almost entirely mass-produced, generic catalog items - is a hugely complex topic. Books upon books have been published just to deal with local symbolism used in one area during one particular time period, not to mention ethnic and racial differences, but Keister claims to be taking on the whole subject of symbolism in all cemetery markers, ever, worldwide.

Some of his facts he gets more or less correct; but there are no endnotes or sources given for the information in this book, and the 'explanations' for some of the symbolism described just seems to have been pulled out of thin air, or possibly based on a quick Google search or some other source not specific to cemeteries. (For instance, many of his explanations of the symbolism of certain flowers seem to have been lifted from some kind of "Language of Flowers" book, bearing no necessary relation to the ways in which flower images might have been used on grave markers specifically.)

There are a lot of pictures and excessive discussion of the more astounding sculptural cemeteries of Europe, like the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan and Pére-Lachaise in Paris, which certainly make for good photo ops, but aren't really suited to a "field guide" that an American cemetery enthusiast might want to have with them when visiting a typical American cemetery.

I wish I had a better book to recommend for general readers on this topic, but if I find one, I'll update this review.

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## Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

First, this is a great size to take traveling. And the color photos are also lovely, especially when so many other books are stuck in black and white. This book is especially good if you're looking up symbols on tombs and finding out what they mean - from animals to Greek letters to societies (there's a multiple page listing of acronyms and what they mean).

This isn't the first book I'd recommend for scholarship - but I have spent many hours on airplanes reading or just looking at the photos.

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## Loren says

I snatched this book off the shelf as soon as my eye landed on it. It has long surprised me that there was no comprehensive dictionary of the symbols found on gravestones. I know the topic is a complicated one, in that

the same symbol can mean different things — or even at the same time in different locations. Richard E. Meyer's introduction acknowledges these difficulties, while casting headstones themselves as a cipher for the person buried beneath. It's a wonderful image with which to open the book.

Douglas Keister, author of *Going Out in Style: The Architecture of Eternity* has become the leading American photographer of gravestones. His work appeared in *American Cemetery* magazine's "Tomb of the Month" feature, documenting the resting places of the famous and infamous. Photos included in this book have been recycled from other publications, but it's nice to have them gathered together in one place.

"A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography" is the truer part of the title. The book's format (tall and skinny) encourages the reader to take it along to the graveyard, the way you'd take a birding book to the park. However, while the color plates make for lovely viewing, they add to the weight you'll be toting. In addition, the unfortunate page design doesn't lend itself to identifying the symbol engraved on the stone before you. Too often, photographs appear at the fold of the page, so you really have to crack the book open to examine them. It makes it difficult to tell a sunflower from a daisy.

Still, there are an immense number of photographs in this book, often three to a page, so there is much on which to feast your eyes. There's food for thought as well. In the opening section I learned about the significance of tumulus graves and their link to ancient warriors. I wished for a specific citation I could have followed up on, but maybe that's just me.

The errors in the book — and of course there must be some in a volume of this breadth — are worth mentioning. The caption beside the photo of John Keats' headstone in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome says simply "Poet." That much is obvious, since the clearly visible epitaph reads, "This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet...Here lies one whose name was writ in water." I'm nervous that Keister didn't realize he was recording Keats' grave as he snapped the photo, printed it, chose it for the book. If he missed something so widely known, can he be trusted on the finer points?

As I followed up on that train of thought, I discovered an unraveling string. The lyre adorning Keats' gravestone isn't listed in the index, but the entries mentioned are interesting. The main listing differentiates a lyre from a harp as "more playfully designed." After some beautiful Chinese folktales, the lyre in Western mythology is summarized as "one of Apollo's attributes." No mention is made that the lyre is chosen to adorn poets' graves in specific reference to the Greek god who invented poetry. Often lyres on headstones exhibit one or more broken strings, as in the case of Keats' stone, to signify that the poet's voice has been silenced. Seems to me those might be things the casual graveyard wanderer would like to know.

All that aside, this is a lovely little book, stuffed with photos and intriguing tidbits. Consult it to add whimsy to your wanderings, but it's not the final word.

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### Jays says

I bought this book for my mom who is an amateur genealogist and spends a lot of her free time in cemeteries taking pictures of graves. (And people wonder how I got the way I did...) I ended up getting a copy for myself because I liked the information so much. Having spent a lot of time in graveyards, I actually find them comforting and peaceful.

Obviously, there's a lot of variance in the kinds of headstones that people will buy for themselves (or families will buy for a deceased love one) and the reasons why any particular stone looks the way it does are probably more likely in the modern day to do with price and personalization than anything else, but if you're interested in seeing the sometimes clandestine coding that goes into headstones from earlier times, this is a great tool. As such, this is a good book for history buffs as well as those who just like to hang out with death every now and again. Getting a better idea of why specifically different cultures in different eras made the choices to remember their dead with particular symbols (especially the Victorians who were symbol-crazy) provides some great insight into how those societies operated for the majority of people living in them.

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### **Meghan McCullers says**

This may not be everyone's idea of vacation reading, but I liked it. It makes me want to go explore some cemeteries. Remains to be seen whether I'll remember any of this,

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### **Mitch says**

This book is a pretty comprehensive look at what the panoply of symbols on tombstones actually mean....with lots of decent illustrative photos. If you're interested in this topic, this is a solid resource.

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### **Carole Tyrrell says**

A beautiful book with great photos and good research. It's light enough to take with you on cemetery expeditions.

It's organised into sections; Funerary Architecture, Flora, Fauna, The Human Condition, Mortality Symbols, Religious Devotion, Secret Societies and Final Impressions. There is also a very useful section on Further Reading towards the end.

I had been looking for a book with good information on angels and this had a very good section on these. Strange that angels, in the Bible, are definitely male but in Victorian cemeteries they are pensive young women.

The accompanying full colour photos are what really make this book a labour of love and so useful.

My only caveat is that, perhaps A bit too geared towards USA symbols as I come from UK but a very useful guide.

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### **Sally says**

This is a field guide to things found in cemeteries, including architectural styles and elements, types of grave markers, and symbols and inscriptions.

It's a very beautifully made book, but alas, not as useful as an actual guide in the field as I was hoping. I really enjoyed the sections on architecture and on fraternal societies, but much of the rest of the book mostly felt like filler. There were unhelpful entries like "Squirrel: A small arboreal mammal that appears on graves only rarely" which tell one nothing they didn't already know, entries that talk about things like the symbolism

of certain saints without giving you enough information on how to recognize an image of said saint, and entire pages wasted on 19th century poems related to a symbol but not, particularly, to graves. (At least the poems could be fun to read to grave-strolling companions, I guess.)

The pictures were almost all from cemetaries either in California or Europe, with almost no material from 17th-to-mid-19th-century America, which is what is most useful in my area, and there was almost no information on dating a gravestone based on style, material or content.

So overall, a lovely glossy little volume with some good information but not nearly as much content as it promises.

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### **Brendan says**

I thought this book would be a bit more all encompassing considering its title, but the intro makes it clear it only covers the 19th-20th century USA with any major detail. Some of the claims are extremely limited or outright false as well, for example the entry on bears claims they are a Christian symbol (??) without any mention that the early Church saw them as an incarnation of the devil and the links that bears have with European paganism and Native American spirituality. The whole book is full of problems like that, and it doesn't cite any sources.

That being said, I did learn a lot about grave architecture and terminology, so it it wasn't a total waste of time. The list of secret society/fraternal brotherhood symbols and acronyms is also very useful in a USA context (with some limited application in Canada and the UK).

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### **Kazooofifi says**

Essential guide for cemetery historians.

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### **Justinian says**

2008-08 - Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography. Douglas Keister. 256 pages. 2004.

I picked up this book at the gift shop at Laurel Hill Cemetery. The book is set up in sections and with in sections in an A-Z format. This makes for easy use when you are standing there in front of a grave marker and are trying to decode the meaning of the symbols.

This book does a good job of providing the history of tombs and grave markers through time. Tracing the evolution of the skull as a grave decoration is very interesting. The book provides excellent color photographs to support the text and for easy recognition while in the field.

I was actually surprised at just how meaning was, and in some cases still is, ascribed to various ornamentations. The book is exhaustive on the various types of flora and fauna and what they mean. 85% or more of the material deals with Christian burials and the bulk of the takes place in the United States of

America. I wish that there had been more on other religions and cultures especially as expressed here in the United States.

This book is a good resource if you wish to understand what you are looking at when you visit burying grounds. This is especially true if you are visiting burial sites from 1900 and earlier when there was more formality and structure the burial and death process.

I did not realize just how many fraternal organizations in the USA there actually were or are. Since many of these organizations were founded for insurance and burial purposes there is a good chunk of history relating to these groups and some of their symbols and methods.

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### **Juli Anna says**

This is a very interesting little book. If I still lived a couple of blocks from Woodlawn Cemetery, I would definitely invest in this. There is much lore and cultural history to be gleaned here.

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### **Ryan says**

This field guide on cemetery symbolism does what it claims to do. I finally learned what it means when you find a 17th century or older gravestone that has a skull. Apparently, at the time, only the "elect" went to Heaven. Everyone else just died -- no immortal soul for them. Over time, belief in the elect eroded, as did the use of the skull, which gave way to a skull with wings, and then other signs about souls rising.

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### **Peter Derk says**

Just like the Tattoo Dictionary I read earlier this year, this book was a big letdown. For the same reason!

I picked this up to hear about Cemetery symbolism. Which I thought was a reasonable thing to do because, you know, the title. Mostly because of the title.

What I didn't need was an explanation of symbols as they exist outside the cemetery.

Do I need an exhaustive history of the cross? No. A history of angels? No. I want to know what this shit means in a graveyard, damn it! And if it means the exact same thing in a graveyard that it does in not a graveyard, feel free to skip it or just say "Cross: [see the rest of the world]."

Also, the layout was bad. This dude is talking about something, but I don't know which picture, if any, goes along with what he's talking about. This was especially bad in the section about architecture, which I can sum up for you like this: Cemetery architecture is reflective of the architectural trends of the area during the time of the person's death. The end. It's cool that a cemetery is a place where all these different architectural styles come together, but that's about it.

There were a few other cool things. They are as follows:

1. Torpedo Coffins. Look these up. They were designed to fucking blow someone the fuck apart if they messed with your corpse after it was buried. That's awesome.
2. There was some really weird stuff about animals. Old beliefs. For example, that bears are born these weird, unformed mounds of flesh, and the mother bear has to mold them into bear shape. How fucked up is that?!
3. "Sarcophagus" translates to "flesh eater." Lots of early Sarcophagi were made of limestone, so they consumed the flesh of the folks stuffed inside of them.

Now, I know that the above three things sound awesome, but take my word for it, that's about it. That's by far the best stuff, and it's the majority of the best stuff.

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### **SparksofEmber says**

If you enjoy cemeteries and learning about the symbols and iconography then you will love this books. Lots of neat pictures and fascinating stories about famous tombs.

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