Williams, Wills-Eve and Osborne’s edited volume The Public Archaeology of Death originated in a conference in Chester, UK, organised and populated by Howard Williams’s students. This was one of a series of events run by Howard Williams and his students. Both the conference and this resulting publication were intended not only to explore areas fo the archaeology of death, but also to give students experience of organising and presenting academic research, and to provide a showcase fo the best academic work carried out by the students. The Publica Archaeology of Death does not only contain student work, however. Selected senior academics and professionals were also invited, and Williams himself was heavily involved. He is sole author of two of the eleven chapters, and co-author of two more.

Both Jodies Lewis in the Foreword and Karina Croucher in her concluding remarks to the volume note the value of such initiatives. Not only do the students get their names on presented and published academic work, with the career-boosting advantages that stem from that, they also gain insights into the whole process by which academic research is produced, from conception to publication. The process of organising an event and editing its proceedings enhances personal networks and develops relationships with important figures in their fields.

The pedagogical advantages of such an approach relate to a developing interest in archaeology in research ‘co-creation’. Normally such co-creation is located between archaeological professionals and local, descendant or other non-professional publics and communities. But Croucher also points to recent examples of archaeological publications in which students, even at very junior levels, have been involved and namded in the production and dissemination of original research.

The benefits for the students are clear. Is there also a benefit for the consumers of archaeological publications? I took up this book with warm feelings about the initiative, and wanting to enjoy it, but also with something of what the parent attending a school play feels: appreciative of the students’ endeavour, but with different, and lower, expectations than one would have of a professional production.

So, does this book offer something to readers who are not, metaphorically speaking, indulgent parents?

The issues around public archaeology have been extensively explored for several decades now. Where this book differs from other work on the subject is in the treatment of the archaeology of death for a popular audience. These interpretations take place not only in traditional for a of archaeological public engagement such as museums and open days – though papers in the volume discuss both of these – but also acknowledges that vastly larger audiences encounter archaeologically-informed presentations of death and burial practice in film, television and computer games.

Why should researching and practising archaeologists be concerned with public engagement? Traditionally, the answers to that question have focused round a necessity to educate and inform, part of the implied contract of receiving funding and cultural support for our work. More critically, archaeologists have explored how the pasts we tell can sustain or challenge narratives associated with particular political and social positions. Noting that any story we might tell, no matter how conscientiously factual, can be spun to different political ends, we have been urged to keep control over our own public archaeology. In practice, as this volume shows, this is easier in some circumstances than others. To take a couple of examples, Shiner, Hemer and Comeau’s discussion of managing the experience of visitors to an archaeological excavation at a well-known seaside location in Pembrokeshire reviewed a situation in which the excavators had a great deal of authority over how and when visitors could access the site, and were also able to control the interpretation offered. By contrast, archaeology on the television has to manage conflicting priorities of researchers, who worry about accuracy and concern themselves with the possible political implications of how research is shown, and what interpretations are promulgated, and the television producers who are more focused on the public appeal of the product. This is not to suggest that these two agendas are necessarily in conflict (sometimes the appeal of a television programme lies at least partly in maintaining a reputation for historical accuracy), nor that television producers are a bunch of amoral chancers who operate with no concern for the possible political and social impact of their work. However, as a number of papers in this volume confirm (egs), academic researchers have a limited voice in how their work is presented. More than this, some depictions of death, disposal and commemoration in popular media are not even intended to be representations of particular situated practices, located in specific cultural contexts, but are the creation of a fantasy world, inspired by, but not even attempting to represent, archaeologically-known phenomena. The disposal of the dead in film and television, including in Game of Thrones, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, The Hunger Games and numerous Disney films is discussed with reference to the ubiquity of the supine, extended body position is discussed by Sian Mui, and Howard Williams gives an extensive and detailed analysis of mortuary ritual in the television series Vikings which, while historically set in a late iron age/early medieval north European context, is not based on any specific archaeological or historical set of events, people or places. Even less tied to any actual archaeological research is the depiction of death and commemoration in computer games, explored here by Rachael Nicholson. Apart from the common gaming convention that death is not final, but simply a setback before being regenerated or ‘spawned’ anew, the markers of a gaming death owe more to literary and filmic Gothic traditions than to any historically recognisable ritual.

In those circumstances, the question for any archaeological professional reading this volume is what, if anything, is required of us. Should we modify our practices in any way because we are aware of the public archaeology of death, or do we simply note as a matter of cultural interest the way that archaeological knowledge informs, albeit in a transformed way, other kinds of cultural production. Do we indeed have the capacity to make an intervention in the depiction of death and burial to the public? Where is our power? Will anyone listen? These questions are not answered in this volume. It seems the more ‘public’ – or actually, popular - the interpretation, the more it is removed from the hands of archaeologists themselves.

A couple of interesting papers in the volume deal with the decisions and strategies employed by artists and illustrators in making recreation drawings or paintings of mortuary ritual. It is not clear how much of this is necessarily ‘public’. Some of the illustrations described in Madeline Walsh and Howard Williams’s chapter on the sand burials of Sutton Hoo, and many of those described in Leszek Gardeła’s thoughtful chapter on artistic recreations of mortuary scenes were publicly displayed. However, the work discussed in Howard Williams and Aaron Watson’s exploration of their own reconstruction drawings was not produced for a wider public, but for publication in particular scholarly venues. Williams and Watson’s images are excellent examples of what inventive and challenging interpretations of mortuary archaeology might look like. While several contributors point out that depictions of funerary ritual normally focus on the same moments – the body laid out, supine, awaiting burial or cremation, onlookers nearby, a ritual specialist present, grave goods clearly present, Watson’s images encourage us to think beyond this stereotyped moment. By including earlier and later stages of the process – the laying out of the body, in this case, and the collection of bone, ash and material remains from the cremation site, we are confronted with the practical and bodily aspects of disposing of a corpse. We are further prompted to consider the sensory, experiential and corporeal aspects of carrying out a cremation by the inclusion of the agent’s hands in the foreground. The viewer’s perspective is explicitly that of an individual involved in making the ritual happen, a perspective that is lost when the reconstruction drawing takes an aerial view or one from some distance. Interestingly, such depersonalised and schematic represetations are more common in the specialist archaeological literature, with its tradition of maps, plans and sections, and of artefacts illustrated as context-free drawings or photographed against plain backgrounds, accompanied by a scale, than in popular interpretation.