This is a book about the living: about bodies human and politic. Stow argues that the response of the living to the dead—whether citizens, soldiers, or enemies—is an important means to diagnose the depth of our commitment to democracy. Thus, while the dead are always present (in politics and this book), the real question is what do we, the living, do with those bodies? What stories do we and should we mobilize in their names? Considering and critiquing the American response to the losses of September 11, the funeral of Coretta Scott King, the assassination of Osama bin Laden, as well as returning American war dead and veterans, Stow turns to theorists of agonistic democracy and the Greeks to offer a series of categorizations of mourning as well as prescriptions for how we might mourn more tragically, and thus potentially more honestly and democratically.

Through a series of engagements with events in the years since September 11, Stow categorizes and critiques American responses to loss. Defining public mourning as “the attempt to employ grief for political ends” (5), Stow begins by considering the reading of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address at Ground Zero on the first anniversary of the attacks. Following a brilliant reading of Plato’s Menexenus and Pericles’ orations in Thucydides’ History, Stow argues that Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg drew on both Pericles’s funeral oration—full of high praise for the dead and the city itself—and Pericles’s plague oration—describing how the citizens of Athens, when confronted by a crisis, lost their bearings and became lawless (38). As a result, Lincoln’s words illuminated the “possibility of a tragic and critical mourning . . . in which the celebration makes the criticism palatable, and the criticism tempers the celebration” (39); in short, Lincoln mourns the dead while also demanding better from the nation. Pataki’s recitation of the same words at Ground Zero...
a century and a half later was empty of this tension, and thus “embody[ing] the partial perspective of tragedy’s protagonists” (39) while leaving out the partial perspective of tragedy’s audience. The result, Stow argues, is an uncritical, vengeful nationalism rather than a tragic approach to the complicated series of events that led to September 11.

Stow then turns to the public response to words offered at the funeral of civil rights matriarch Coretta Scott King. Two leaders—Reverend Lowery and President Carter—offered celebrations of American ideals while also delivering critiques of American failures regarding racial justice. Their words were roundly condemned as “politicizing” an event that, according to propriety, ought to have remained purely celebratory. Stow calls this response a romantic one: an “aestheticized, maudlin, and deeply sentimental understanding of mortality that evinced a commitment to unity over conflict”; the problem with this response to death is that it “understands democracy as consensus” (60) and seeks “a telos of reconciliation and agreement that eschews politics” (61). By prioritizing unity over critique, romantic responses often silence minority voices. Linking Lowery’s and Carter’s choices to a tradition of black funerals that conjoined celebration and critique, Stow instead urges us to embrace a “Tragic public mourning—understood as a response not as a condition—predicated on a worldview that is pluralistic in outlook, critical, and self-consciously political” (61), such that “tragedy as response seeks to generate ambivalence in its audience as a productive response to tragedy as condition” (62). Stow then reads Du Bois’s account of his son’s death and burial in *Souls* and Douglass’s oration at the dedication of the Freeman’s Memorial to Lincoln in 1876 to trace compelling examples of tragic mourning; where “tragedy as response seeks to generate ambivalence in its audience as a productive response to tragedy as condition” (62).

In the third chapter, Stow boldly critiques the celebratory American response to Osama bin Laden’s assassination. Through a careful but critical reading of Honig’s categories of mourning—the Homeric, focused on the “family losses of specific individuals,” and the democratic, which aligns with the nationalist mode of mourning from the first chapter (108)—Stow argues instead for a recuperation of politics grounded in “mortalist humanism—the view that in facing death, human beings achieve a form of equality as moral agents” (105). In doing so, Stow seeks to differentiate himself from the critique Bonnie Honig makes of Judith Butler in *Antigone, Interrupted*. Honig reads Butler’s turn to universal fragility as a turn away from politics. Stow meets this challenge head on by arguing that the turn to politics in the face of universal loss is a political achievement rather than an inevitable outcome. Arguing that an achieved (rather than presumed) mortalist humanism is a necessary precursor to democratic politics, Stow reads Aeschylus’s *The
Persians as instructing its Greek audience about the costs of their victory by humanizing and equalizing their foes in ways that made politics possible. Thus, following Aeschylus, Stow argues that Americans should mourn the death of bin Laden even while recognizing its necessity. Otherwise, “the grief-wrath cultivated by American’s mourning” in the years since September 11 has the potential of “destroying the possibility of politics at home and/or abroad by dehumanizing the enemy” (114). The death of democracy lurks in the background of the entire book; however, this connection between the grossly celebratory response of many Americans to bin Laden’s death and the current rise of worldwide authoritarian parties and leaders within liberal democracies is most chilling. The gleeful and ignorant dehumanization of an enemy abroad contributes to the dehumanizing of our fellow citizens with whom we disagree about domestic policy, thus illustrating the central claim of the book: our collective response to death is a measure of our commitment to our openness and to democracy.

In chapter 4, Stow critiques the nostalgic mode of mourning illustrated by the American response to returning American veterans and war dead. The goal of nostalgic mourning is “the restoration of an imagined past untouched by the casualties of the conflicts that necessitated its rituals of loss” (150). Contrasting this effort to restore a past and static polity with a more democratic effort to reconstitute a polity committed to listening to and learning from its returning citizen-soldiers about the costs of war, Stow argues that “nostalgic mourning . . . leads the polity to mourn its living returnees by recognizing them with the same narratives of heroism, service, and sacrifice with which it recognizes its military dead”; thus, these veterans are consigned to a type of “social and political death” (151). Nostalgic mourning, which seeks unity and consensus, relies on recognition as its “mode of democratic interpolation” (154). Against this, Stow (following Markell) argues for acknowledgment as the more agonistic, less static conceptualization of identity, because it is “predicated on an understanding of political identity as an always incomplete and ongoing process” (157). After reviewing a series of recent soldier homecomings—of those alive and dead—Stow offers The Oresteia as a potential example of reconstitution rather than restoration, of acknowledgment rather than recognition. He concludes “contra Kateb and Johnston, that patriotism, sacred space, and public mourning are not in themselves problematic but rather how we love our country, what we do in her scared [sic] space, and how we mourn her losses; that far from sapping the polity of its democratic energies, these activities can be and historically have been democratically productive” (191).

After laying out the multiple ways that Americans mourn irresponsibly and dangerously, Stow’s final chapter calls for us to embrace a sense of tragic
resilience as the more honest and human response to the conditions of death and democracy. After a review of contemporary works arguing for and against resilience as an orientation toward politics, Stow returns to Thucydides as an example of a work that “might offer a democratic pedagogy capable of cultivating an ethos... conducive to political agency and resilience in the face of loss. That it does so by addressing its readers both as individuals and as members of a collective further suggests the ways in which Thucydides offers his readers a model of democratically productive tragic mourning...” (215) by cultivating “questioning in its style, structure, and effect” (217). Stow turns to Thucydides, who scholars often use to argue for rationality and against emotionality, to recover a brave sense of hope. But it is not a Christian optimism that assures us that our desires (such as Christ’s return) will be achieved; it is instead a more pagan, tragic ontology that relies on “no expectation that the thing desired will necessarily come into being or that if it does occur, that the agent will be around to bear witness. In this, such hope embodies an understanding of tragedy as condition, a world in which good intentions are necessarily thwarted, distorted, or worse” (220). Rather than the promised control of authoritarianism, then, we must continue to seek democracy—filled with agon, assured of failure, never controllable or certain—and to do so, we must both realize our tragic condition and embrace a tragic, resilient, hopeful response.

Stow’s primary interlocutors are a variety of contemporary democratic theorists, including William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, Steven Johnston, and Patchen Markell, among others. Stow also deftly draws on resources within American political thought, such as Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois. At the heart of the work, however, is Stow’s commitment to mine the veins of democratic birth, folly, and death found in the Greeks: from Aeschylus to Thucydides to Plato to Sophocles. Stow’s careful and brilliant use of the Greeks leads him to nuanced readings that variously support, challenge, and move beyond the work of Peter Euben, Roxanne Euben, Simon Goldhill, Bonnie Honig, and Nicole Loraux. Stow asserts, then follows through on, his commitment to the distinction made by Bonnie Honig between classicism and classicization, where classicism is “a method predicated on the assumption that the classical captures the universal and is thus applicable to diverse audiences across space and time” (7) and classicization is “an engagement with the present that turns to previous circumstances, texts, and images for ‘analogies that might illuminate our condition or even mirror our circumstances’” (8, quoting Honig, Antigone Interrupted, 32). The Greeks appear not as universal and timeless paragons to be mindlessly aped (given the differing contexts, that would be impossible), but as citizens seeking a shared way of life that required listening, empathy, reason,
and deliberation. In short, the Greeks offer us examples of democratic words and deeds that we can judge and learn from in our context.

The first four chapters, in summary, capture a variety of ways in which we Americans have mourned our losses by generating falsely unifying, shallow, and partial political responses rather than tragic, humanistic, and agnostically democratic ones. Nationalist, romantic, anti-humanist, and nostalgic modes of mourning all enable orientations toward politics that undercut the agonistic and hortatory hopes for democracy that undergirds Stow’s work. The final chapter offers a sketch of how we might mourn more humanly; how mortality and the existential condition of being limited might temper our hubris. In short, Stow has produced a masterful work that takes the generative power of political deaths as seriously as it does democracy.

It also takes words and texts seriously, while always tying them back to events. As political theorists, the currencies of our realm are texts, words, and ideas. But as students of politics, the question is how those ideas shape citizen cognition, condition our default responses, and affect bodies (living and dead). Stow deftly uses Greek texts (particularly Thucydides) to show how we Americans might do better: how we—as citizens—might respond to losses in ways that enable rather than enervate agonistic democracy. Impressively, he does this without relying on psychoanalytic interpretations (noteworthy in a book about mourning). However, I do worry that Stow undertheorizes the connection between ideas and institutions, between words and deeds. Understanding that we have divided the labor in our discipline in strange ways, I wanted to see more about how particular words and ideas shaped actual responses, policies, and actions rather than more generalized orientations toward events. I hope those using Stow’s tremendous insights in future research will attend to this nexus more directly.

Stow’s work is timely, necessary, and at times hard to read in the context of a 2016 Inaugural Address wherein the president uttered the words “American carnage.” Stow’s work demonstrates how easy it is to slide into simplifying the world into us and them—exemplified by President Bush’s “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” in the days after September 11—and how this thoughtlessness harms us internationally (when it obscures our responsibility in creating the political, not existential, conditions that led to the rise of groups like al Qaeda and ISIS) as well as domestically (when it generates responses to policy differences read as existential rather than political). The book offers a serious warning about the toll enacted on democracy when we use grief for simplified or unjust political ends and, with brave hope, calls us to respond tragically and resiliently to the endless challenge of democracy.