

'The Harlem Book of the Dead' by James Van Der Zee | Book Review

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October 24, 2025

The dead don't care about their appearance, but James Van Der Zee presented them as beautiful. Commissioned to take photographs by grieving loved ones, Van Der Zee (1886-1983) would compose images of the deceased in the funeral home. His postmortem portraits, nearly 30 of which are reproduced in "The Harlem Book of the Dead," are artistic assemblages that honor the dead and the community's funerary traditions.

"You're here today and gone sometimes today," Van Der Zee told the sculptor Camille Billops, who gathered the photographs into a collection and edited this book before it was first published in 1978. A transcript of a candid conversation, held when Van Der Zee was 91 years old, is one of two texts that complement the funeral portraiture; the other is writing by the poet Owen Dodson. His lines haunt the book like incantations. "Done crossed every river, / Done reached this one; / Now I know my crossin's done," begins one poem beside a photograph of a woman dressed in silk, laid down in her coffin. "Hallelujah, Lord, your rest feel good."