Passed On: African American Mourning Stories by Karla FC Holloway
(Duke University Press 2003)

*Passed On* examines the dying process, funeral homes (including embalming rituals and undertakers) and the funeral of 20th century African-Americans. Using historical research and interviews with ministers, morticians, civil rights activists and friends and relatives of the bereaved, she chronicles the discrimination, racial injustice, violence and medical neglect against African-Americans to portray their current identity.

She recounts a painful history through both photographs and documentaries of lynchings, riots, medical neglect, neighborhood violence and executions to capture the essence of African-American living and dying in the early to mid-twentieth century in America. This portrait was humorous, educating, engaging and at times heartbreaking.

She interweaves her historical accounts of prominent African-Americans with examples of death and grief in literature and music, and displays the unique process of death prevalent in African-American society. This realistic portrayal sheds light on the distinctive ceremonies and traditions practiced by African-Americans today.

Reading *Passed On* gave me the opportunity to reflect on my upbringing. I can easily relate to the questions she asked such as “who has the body?” and “what happened to them?” as if it was believed that something mysterious had caused the death. African-Americans were socially, economically and religiously separated from Caucasians almost as if there was a line drawn between the two groups. I can remember when schools, churches, movie theaters, restaurants, and even funeral homes and graveyards were segregated. But *Passed On* also was a reflection on how much things have changed for the better.

Karla Holloway displays anger in her writing about the history of African-Americans in the mid-twentieth century and understandably so because it was not a positive experience. But through her anger all races will have a better understanding of the differences in life’s views and perspectives between the African-American and Caucasian races.

As volunteers, reading this book will help us understand why some African-Americans based on their (or a family member’s) past history have a distrust for doctors and the health care system in general. And most importantly it will give all of us a better understanding of the differences in the death and dying process between the two races.

--- Regina Mitchell

*Passed On* is available in the Volunteer Services Library.