

The Death of James Dean

By Warren N. Beath

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Just before sunset on September 20, 1955, James Byron Dean's Porsche 550 Spyder collided with Donald Gene Turnupseed's Ford Tudor on California Highway 46. At age twenty-four, America's newest screen idol was dead. What really happened? Drawing on the inquest manuscript and other previously unpublished material, Warren Beath cuts through the welter of conflicting reports and rumors to provide a taut reconstruciton of Dean's final hours. In addition, Beath has explored every nook and cranny of the Dean legend, and his book is studded with fascinating asides: Elvis Presley's worship of Dean, Dean's strange friendship with Maila Nurmi; TV's Vampyra and star of the gloriously execrable Plan 9 From Outer Space; Hitchcock's use of Highway 46 in the famous crop-dusting scene in North by Northwest; death threats against Giant director George Stevens if he dared excise so much as a single frame of Deans' performance. Beath's definitive account of James Dean's death concludes with a memorable portrait of the James Dean cult, a strangely moving record of his posthumous life in the hearts of his adoring fans.

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The Death of James Dean By Warren N. Beath Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1309041 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Grove Press
- Published on: 1994-02-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.21" h x .47" w x 6.14" l, .72 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 240 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Dean, a handsome young actor, seemed headed for Hollywood idoldom when he died in an auto accident in California on September 30, 1955. Almost immediately thereafter he became a cult figure, and that situation has continued, shows the author. Since Dean made only three films, the focus of the cultists has been as much, perhaps more, on his death than on his life. The first half of this book, relating the accident, the inquest, the anniversary gatherings at Dean's burial site and similar topics, will strike the general reader as inconsequential. But in the second half, Beath profiles some of the odd, obsessed fans who keep the Dean legend alive; this section is brilliant, recalling Nathanael West. There is one disquieting note, however: Beath himself is a collector of Dean memorabilia. Photos not seen by PW. 10,000 first printing; author tour.
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From Library Journal
Thirty-one years after James Dean's death, the hysteria continues. The thesis behind this book is that there may have been a cover-up in the investigation of the car crash that killed Dean. Furthermore, Beath believes the driver of the other car involved should have been charged in the accident. Offered in testimony are excerpts from the official inquest, an independent investigation of the day, and a few interviews. Rounding out the work are communications between Dean cultists, the starry-eyed idolatry of actress Vampira (Maila Nurmia friend of Dean), and ruminations on Dean's spiritual impact on America. Much ado about very little, but still a fascinating glimpse into the insular world of the cultist. Christopher Schemering, formerly with Arlington Cty. P.L., Va.
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