BOOKS

Death is a hot topic among writers these days

Dying and end-of-life issues are the focus of several new books.

By Heller McAlpin

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"Life," Truman Capote quipped, "is a moderately good play with a badly written third act."

Judging from what's being published these days, writers have been tackling that disappointing last act a lot lately -- analyzing, deconstructing, fiddling with the lighting -- even when they know it's futile to try to change the ending. The result is a groaning shelf of books about aging, illness, dying, grief and ruminations on what it all means.

Is this proliferation a reflection of the bleakness of the times, mirroring the doom and gloom of war and the economy? Is it exacerbated by erosion of faith in an afterlife? Do we obsessively probe mortality because we're spoiled and can't quite believe -- or accept -- that science and medicine still haven't managed to conquer it? I suspect it's all of the above, plus demographics: the aging of a generation of post-World War II writers in tandem with baby boomers coping with parents who are living longer but not necessarily better. It all adds up to an epidemic in the literature of loss.

"Birth, and copulation, and death. That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks." So wrote T.S. Eliot in "Sweeney Agonistes." In fact, some of the best writing about death has come from poets. Dylan Thomas raged, raged against the dying of the light in "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," his famous villanelle about his dying father, and insisted defiantly in another poem that "death shall have no dominion" -- before dying at age 39 of alcoholism.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was more sanguine: "The young may die, but the old must!" he wrote in "Christus." The great 17th century French dramatist Pierre Corneille's attitude was darker: "Every moment in life is a step towards death." Shakespeare's characters occasionally railed, but like Richard II, they eventually bowed to fate: "The worst is death, and death will have his day."

There's nothing like milestone birthdays, the loss of one's parents or scary diagnoses to stir intimations of mortality. In his essay "Illness as More Than Metaphor," Susan Sontag's son, David Rieff, wrote: "There are those who can reconcile themselves to death and those who can't. Increasingly, I've come to think that it is one of the most important ways the world divides up."

Julian Barnes is one who can't. In "Nothing to Be Frightened Of," his lively meditation on the end-of-life oblivion that terrifies him more than the process of dying, Barnes writes, "For me, death is the one appalling fact which defines life; unless you are constantly aware of it, you cannot begin to understand what life is about." He traces his preoccupation with this "cheerless commissar reliably fulfilling a quota of 100 per cent" to his early teens, long before he had to confront it head-on with his parents' passings. The death last month of his wife, literary agent Pat Kavanagh, who in a cruel twist of fate was diagnosed with brain cancer not long after Barnes' book was published, cannot have assuaged his thanatophobia.

Although Barnes' book was written before Kavanagh's illness cast its shadow, literary spousal tributes have become a burgeoning mini-genre. Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking," about the derangement that followed the sudden death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, is the genre's apotheosis. Critic John Leonard, who died of lung cancer on Nov. 5, wrote in the New York Review of Books in 2005, "If Joan Didion went crazy, what are the chances for the rest of us? Not so good, except that we have her example to instruct us and sentences we can almost sing. . . . I can't imagine dying without this book."

Other deeply affecting spousal tributes include John Bayley's account of Iris Murdoch's struggle with Alzheimer's disease, "Elegy for Iris"; Calvin Trillin's lovely paean, "About Alice"; and Donald Hall's moving poems, "Without," and memoir "The Best Day the Worst Day," about poet Jane Kenyon.

In his latest memoir, "Unpacking the Boxes," written in "the thin air of antiquity's planet," 80-year-old Hall notes that "as a poet ages, subject to inevitable losses, it becomes appropriate to write out of grief -- appropriate, necessary, therapeutic." He adds that "making poetic lines about pain is a way of avoiding pain."

Reading poetic lines about pain can also mitigate sorrow -- or steel us for our own inevitable losses. We read, in part, for empathic engagement but also, as Leonard suggests, for instruction and information. The appeal of these books is more than just literary rubbernecking: Yes, they satisfy our ghoulish curiosity, but they also touch us emotionally and provide the wisdom of insight and the comfort of shared experience.
Recent additions to the literature of grief include Anne Roiphe's memoir, "Epilogue," about the disorientation of widowhood exacerbated by the push to find new companionship in the warped world of online dating. Elizabeth McCracken also sought solace -- and will no doubt bring solace to others who have lost a child -- by writing with her usual snap about her stillborn first son in "An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination." And, in a different vein, Francine Prose's latest novel, "Goldengrove," addresses the broader issue of the painful passing of innocence and youth in a story that involves grief over a dead sister.

Writing about death is often a way of trying to make sense of life itself. With the possible exception of Jim Crace's "Being Dead" (1999), a novel that unflinchingly tracks what happens to the bodies of two murdered, married zoologists decaying on a beach, few writers have dealt with death as directly as Leo Tolstoy in "The Death of Ivan Ilych." This excruciating story about a dying magistrate who agonizes over the senselessness of his life still unnerves and awes.

One of our most mortality-conscious writers is Philip Roth. He recently abandoned his post by the graveyard gates, taken up in "The Dying Animal" (2001), "Everyman" (2006) and "Exit Ghost" (2007), to write "Indignation," about a college student during the Korean War whose moral choices have grave consequences. Although this short novel is not about aging, his lifelong themes -- the power of eros and the fact of death -- both figure prominently.


Several characters die abruptly in Gardam's stories. In most fiction about middle-aged adults dealing with their aging parents, however, characters tend to linger painfully. Eileen Pollack's story collection "In the Mouth" is at once boldly physical and darkly comic. In "The Bris," a man on his deathbed begs his son to arrange for his circumcision. (Turns out he'd been merely passing as an Orthodox Jew for seven decades, afraid of the procedure.) In "Beached in Boca," a retired dentist whose girlfriend has AIDS rails at his daughter, "The truth about getting old is that every single person you've ever loved dies." ("I'm still here," his daughter reminds him.)

Writing -- and reading -- about dying parents is a way of figuring out where you came from and where you're going. Joan Wickersham's "The Suicide Index," a National Book Award finalist, is an extraordinary, magical mystery tour of a book about a daughter's struggles to understand why her father killed himself. Recognizing that answers don't necessarily surface chronologically, Wickersham cleverly structures her memoir in alphabetically arranged chapter headings such as, "Suicide: act of" or "Suicide: anger about."

In one way or another, all these books strive to come to terms with life's closing act. For my money, a writer who got it just right was E.B. White. He dared to tackle mortality in a children's book and showed a deep understanding of the natural life cycle and the balance between loss and regeneration, grief and endurance.

At the end of "Charlotte's Web," the miraculous spider dies and Wilbur the pig escapes the butcher to live out his days in peace and comfort. Wilbur comes to accept his friend Charlotte's death, but he is never blithe about it: "Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart."

McAlpin reviews books for a variety of publications, including Newsday and the Boston Globe.