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This is the end: undertaking a journey to beat the fear of death

Music journalist Casey Jarman's book *Death: an Oral History* features interviews with denizens of 'death cafes', a 'psychedelic hospice' and death row wardens

About halfway into his introduction to *Death: an Oral History*, [Casey Jarman](#) lets the reader in on the impetus of the project: "I wrote this [book] in the hopes of beating death altogether."

It's an impossible objective - the reader knows it, the writer knows it - but not a disingenuous one, and Jarman's literary debut is a testament to the value of doggedly pursuing a goal that has never and can never be realized. We can't beat death, but maybe we can beat fear of it. The 18 interviews contained within *Death* are Jarman's investigation into the possibility.

For a writer responsible for a work so ambitious in scope and often devastating in content, Jarman is disarmingly humble and upbeat. When we speak on the phone, he immediately acknowledges his discomfort with being the interviewee and offers a precautionary apology should he come across as trying to steer the conversation. (He doesn't.) He pokes fun at himself for his desire - which he describes as being born of inherent laziness - to "get out of" dealing with death, and he speaks on the subject more with wonder than authority.



Let's talk about death: what does it mean to you?

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Perhaps this is because Jarman's background is not in philosophy, or science, or any death-specific discipline. He received his journalism degree from the University of Oregon, and has since focused primarily on music, holding positions as music editor for the Portland, Oregon-based alt-weekly [Willamette Week](#) and as managing editor at [the Believer](#). When his friend Adam Grano, art director at Zest Books, suggested he pitch an idea to Zest's editors, Jarman decided to pivot.

"I didn't want to spend a year thinking about albums or doing music criticism, which is kind of the most natural thing for me, and the one thing that's constantly on my mind is death," Jarman says. "When I do interviews, I always wind up talking to artists who tackle that subject. One day I'm not going to exist and none of the things

I'm doing now are going to matter - how do you come back from that? How does anybody make art or build houses or wash dishes? That's the thought I linger on every single day, and sometimes it's positive, and sometime it's negative, but it's just always been there."



📷 Mourners, wearing black clothing after the death of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, exit from the subway in Bangkok, Thailand. Photograph: Sakchai Lalit/AP

His was a simple pitch on a broad theme (“What if I talked about death with a bunch of people - people who work in death-related industries and people who’ve had close emotional experiences with death?”) but his limiting factors came in the form of convictions about what he didn’t want the book to be. It wouldn’t be “X celebrity’s thoughts on this or Y celebrity’s thoughts on that”, nor would it stray too far from the humanity of the stories. Jarman didn’t speak with funeral directors or undertakers about the physicality of death. He wasn’t necessarily interested in the gritty details; he wanted an inroad to the emotions surrounding it - emotions often silenced or self-censored by notions of propriety.

Perhaps most significantly, it wouldn’t be about Jarman himself, because Jarman hasn’t yet been affected by a profound loss.

“I tried to be upfront about this being a curiosity to me, and I did have a certain sense of feeling like an imposter,” he says. “I was so grateful to everyone that I spoke with for giving me such emotional access, but there were a lot of times when I’d be sitting in a room with someone and we both knew there was that bridge that neither of us could fully cross. Nobody could really explain loss to me in a way that I would fully understand, and I couldn’t quite ask the right questions. It was a lot of fumbling.”

The fumbling is one way in which the format mirrors the content - meandering stories about groping for a clear path through grief. Jarman largely steps out of the way of the narratives, removing his voice save for his introductions to the book and each interview. The result is an unhindered intimacy with each subject: the scientist whose sister’s death spurred her research in a “psychedelic hospice”, the former death row warden now working to repeal the death penalty, the Black Lives Matter activist trying to find solace in proactive grief, the social worker grappling with her mother’s recent death, to name just a few.

Still, Jarman’s presence is felt through the reader’s experience of yearning for a solution that simply doesn’t exist. His curation keeps the book agnostic, not only in the literal sense of presenting the possibilities of multiple belief systems, but also in its refusal to settle on any one ritual, coping mechanism, or method of grieving as the correct or optimal action in the face of death - whether one’s own, or of a loved one. The frustrating fact is there is no right way of handling it, but perhaps the most consistent theme throughout each interview is a collective impulse toward preparation, a desire to do work now that would ensure future resilience.



📷 Ivy and other plants grow over the gravestones at Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol, England. Photograph: Matt Cardy/Getty Images

Usually this prep work is in deliberate exposure. In one interview, Holly Pruet, a memorial officiant and organizer of [Death Cafes](#) in Portland, Oregon, says she became interested in social gatherings built around discussions of death because, “I thought at the time, maybe I could befriend the concept of death and just develop a greater capacity to handle it, be more prepared.” Undoubtedly this book is Jarman’s own exercise in preparation for the inevitability of death, though he now acknowledges its futility.

“The reality of the situation is that there are muscles you have that you don’t know exist until you’re grieving for someone,” he says. “From what I learned from everyone I talked to, if you try to prepare for the steps you’re going to have to take when something awful happens, 99% of the time you’re going to find yourself taking wholly unexpected steps when you actually confront the terrible thing. Grief isn’t something that you do, it’s something that happens to you. The best you can do is prepare to be moved how everything moves you.”

But all hope is not lost. The collection never falls into the gratuitously maudlin or morbid. Yes, it will make you cry in public, but those hoping for tragedy porn should look elsewhere. Jarman recalls being surprised often throughout the interviews, but most keenly when subjects - especially those who “had more than a professional relationship with death” - found their way to a discussion of the beautiful moments, or as Jarman calls it, the “art to death”.

“So many people talked about a kind of beauty that’s inherent in the process of being there as someone’s dying, or going through the grieving process. There’s a lot of garbage, of course, but there are also these beautiful moments, and especially in the outpouring of support and sympathy and love.”

And though Jarman isn’t cured of his fear of death, he at least has mitigated it - thanks, in large part, to his conscious attempt at breaking through the silence that usually surrounds it.

“Six months ago, I don’t know that I would’ve had this answer, but now I do feel a little more at peace with it,” he says. “If we have real conversations about what death means to us, and what our friends and family members have gone through around death, then suddenly it’s not such a crazy albatross to drag around any more. I left this process with a bigger toolkit, not even so much to deal with death but just to be a human being.

“You’re not going to solve this riddle,” he adds, laughing. “That used to frustrate the hell out of me. Now I’m kind of intrigued by it.”

● [Death: An Oral History](#) is available in the US from Zest Books.

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