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How to Write Well About Death

We must write well about death to be writers at all.

- Kate Gale

Introduction

I had been invited to explore my interest in a Master of Fine Art in Writing program with the chair in a sit-down conversation in a quiet spot near the backdoor of a university cafeteria. He reminded me of someone's great uncle and looked wholesome, like he might be good at gardening. He had a gentle smile. He asked what stories I wanted to write. I told him I had promised my daughter I would write her story to help give meaning to her life. She died hours before I delivered her; a stillbirth they call it.

When I finished with my presentation, he stared at me while leaning his head on his fist. Shifting to a softened yet stern tone he said, "Our program isn't for those kinds of stories. Tell me about the other ideas you have." I swallowed hard. My brain began to work on two tracks: the first focused on saving the opportunity and recovering from his rejection. I scrambled and told him about wild adventures my family had in a junky green Dodge van, and how I learned to cry quietly in first grade so the Catholic nun schoolteacher wouldn't hear me and put me in the coat room again. He liked the van story. The second track of my thinking was struggling to analyze how the death of a baby isn't worthy of becoming a story,

and what the process looked like for him, an author who teaches writing, to arrive at such an unmovable conclusion so quickly?

Maybe he fears dying, or he doesn't find value in exploring complicated emotions? Perhaps I lack an understanding on how to select writing themes? Then I used the *mysteries-of-creative-nonfiction* lens: Death isn't artsy enough? Death is cliché? Death is too predictable and too universal? Death has been fully covered and there is nothing new to discover? But considering this episode through an academic lens helped me see the learning opportunities from his dismissal: Perhaps there could be varying views in the CNF world about what is and is not permissible, and his opinion is just one? Maybe he doesn't know how to teach how to write well about death? Or, flipping the focus, maybe my presentation style repelled him and that conversation all those years ago was as much about me (writer) as it was about him (reader)?

Questions like these proved helpful when years later I began a path of study in the MFA in Writing program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where I found my way to brilliant writers who made me feel at home, through effective storytelling, while they relived and shared details of the deaths that have occurred in their lives. They introduced me to authors like Edwidge Danticat, in *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, who takes us to the doctor's office where her mother learns about a late-stage cancer diagnosis; Michelle Zauner, in *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*, who sits on the floor of her mother's death bed narrating the scene; and Terry Tempest Williams, in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, who weaves connections of her mother's impending death to the fate of the Great Salt Lake. These authors, who all focus on the deaths of their mothers, exhibit exemplary writing about their personal encounters with death. What proved the best example for me is Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir*. Although widely celebrated as a courageous and candid account of Yuknavitch surviving multiple fronts of painful experiences, the true power of Yuknavitch's memoir is in that it is a book about death. Yuknavitch, a master in badassery, easily refutes the dismissive MFA program director's anti-death writing pedagogy beliefs:

Was it possible I had something to give? Out of the nothingness that was my life? Really, what the fuck did I have to give? Woman with too many holes in her. And yet there was something. Words. ... I wrote stories, I wrote books, but the more I wrote the more I saw a door opening behind me, and I saw that if I jammed my motherfucking foot in it, more of us could get through. And that we could make things. Together. What we could make, was art. How that mattered. (199-200)

How does Yuknavitch write of the death of her infant daughter amid her spiraling addictions and lingering influences from significant childhood trauma? Yuknavitch empowers authors to find the courage to write raw and to risk exposing ourselves – our faults, failures, mistakes, miscalculations, addictions, insecurities, losses – to be free from societal filters that prevent us from telling imperfect stories. Yuknavitch teaches that the implications of one brave story helps readers to see that their damaged parts have lots of company, and they could decide to pick up a pen, too, and contribute stories to seek connections. Julie Christine Johnson, a reviewer in *Chalk the Sun*, writes of *The Chronology of Water*: “Something about this story — the goddamn gorgeous language, the raw power of its brutality — gave me so much comfort and solace. In Yukavitch’s word embrace, I felt the magic of self-acceptance and self-love, and the crazy-wonderful beauty of life.” This paradoxical framework is very important to death writing and analysis because there are fears people can’t handle death stories, particularly gruesome or hard endings. And here Johnson turns that thinking upside down by claiming the “raw power of its brutality” brought her comfort.

Human nature celebrates good things with attention, like awards, news articles, journal articles, in-depth conversations, social media posts. The converse is true as well: We don’t typically like to talk about the bad things, the sad parts of life. We know from the Chapman University’s Fear Survey that Americans are very scared of dying and illness. We learn from Yuknavich’s writing that leaning into difficult topics – especially when they are universal – can be healing and comforting. This essay explores the craft of writing well about death; introduces the CPR Method; identifies disrupters to writing well about death; defines the

death ecosystem, death factors, and the survivor's pathway spectrum that will influence how you approach writing; the missing thematic analysis of *The Chronology of Water*; and craft analysis of *The Chronology of Water's* using the CPR Method. The goal of this discussion is to encourage better definition of how to write well about death and to expand writing and analysis to broaden acceptance of death writing in creative nonfiction to help push the doors behind us open even further.

The CPR Method

The CPR Method serves as a metaphor as well as method. This metaphor has two main purposes: symbolically connecting the techniques of writing about death to a medical procedure that saves lives, and as a way for an author to use “tools” to keep their writing alive with strong, vigorous, and vibrant writing. The CPR Method of writing, then, about difficult subjects is divided into three areas designed to:

connect – the overlay between a writer's ideas and a reader's interests;

persevere – to retain readers despite difficult subject matter; and

resuscitate – to create a pathway between an author and a reader to share humanness to spark and foster healing.

Disrupters to Writing Well About Death

Western culture prefers to ignore what the Latin phrase *memento mori* teaches: *remember that you will die*. It's a haunting promise. According to Chapman University's annual “Survey of American Fears,” anxiety surrounding illness and death is in the top five. The goal of the survey is to collect data on fears and provide an in-depth examination into the concerns of average Americans, tracking annual trends. In the last two surveys, in 2022 and 2021/2020, the second greatest fear of Americans is “*people I love dying*” and the fourth fear on the list is “*People I love becoming seriously ill*” (Chapman University.) Both fears appeared in the top ten even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Bottom line from the survey's authors: Americans are

becoming more afraid. So, it's no surprise widespread discomfort exists when talking about or reading about death. Managing Editor of Red Hen Press Kate Gale underscores the difficulty: "Writing about death in a culture that pretends it happens off scene is awkward. If we can't speak, read, or write about it, then we can't process it. We must write well about death to be writers at all" (Gale). The seriousness of end-of-life issues places a heavy responsibility on the writer. To be successful, we must be willing to sit with the dying, and when death comes, to stay in the room.

In Brandy Schillace's book *Death's Summer Coat: What the History of Death and Dying Teaches Us About Life and Living*, she writes that there is a contrarian culture in the United States: "We find ourselves today in a culture of opposites: bent on living forever but committed to the disposable nature of absolutely everything else" (5). We believe we should be able to hold off the aging process, and we are unprepared when death occurs instead. We are mortal, and we don't like it. So, we ignore the discomfort of facing the realities of death. These cultural attitudes make the task of writing about death more difficult and more important. It is in this cultural context that writing about death well is not only an essential goal for great literature but also helps contribute to society's understanding of death and advances acceptance of the reality of dying.

Authors, nonfiction or otherwise, do not all enter the writing arena with the same skills processing and translating sensitive events. Dr. Karen Wyatt, a hospice physician and the author of *What Really Matters: 7 Lessons for Living from the Stories of the Dying*, was asked how writers can approach the difficult subject of death. She said, "If writers would like to write about death, they need to spend a little time journaling first and doing their own inner work to prepare for it" (Penn). Wyatt also said that writers need to look at their own history with death. In her experiences in hospice, she sees a wide range of reactions to death, some people are comfortable being with a family member or friend as they die, others show great discomfort (Penn). Wyatt suggests exploring unresolved grief that could prevent opening to the subject of death. Writers need to seek out and find genuine grief to tap into when writing because personal pain

from grief is valuable in authentic storytelling. However, the craft of writing grief with this level of authenticity is thin. Certainly, reviews of memoirs and other creative nonfiction genres include the topic of death, quoting passages where death is imminent or occurs. What I am suggesting is there are fewer examples of craft analysis with the specific intent of uncovering and identifying how to write well about death.

An exceptional, and rare, example of craft exploration of death writing is Danticat's *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, a part of Graywolf Press's "The Art of" series. Graywolf describes the series this way:

Each book investigates an aspect of the craft of fiction, creative nonfiction, or poetry by discussing works by authors past and present. The books in The Art Of series are not strictly manuals but serve readers and writers by illuminating aspects of the craft of writing that people think they already know but don't really know.

This description is relevant to this discussion in at least two ways: First, one of the nation's leading nonprofit publishers selected death for a series they created to explore craft in areas "people think they already know but don't really know." Second, the series description aptly describes Danticat's approach to teaching about the craft of writing about death through her mini-memoir narrative style instead of a technical craft analysis book. Meaning, *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story* is an excellent example of death writing but without a defined method to analyze and dissect Danticat's book or other writings on death.

There are academic articles discussing the desire or historical reasons to teach about death, like Todd May's "Teaching Death" in *Creative Nonfiction* where he shares his discovery about the dearth of philosophical writings on the fact of death. When he sought to address this absence in class offerings, he cobbled together a curriculum. Curiously he turned to fiction writing, and not creative nonfiction writing, to find stories that could facilitate conversations with students about death. But May's plan ran into trouble

when his course was not approved by the curriculum committee in his department because “it wasn’t philosophical enough. Too much literature.” He was in a pickle. He identified a topic area that was lacking in content and when he turned to other fields of study, he had stepped too far outside of his own field. As it turned out, by default, he was allowed to teach the class, and he claims it was one of the best, and hardest, courses he is likely to teach.

Another philosopher, Herbert Fingarette who taught for four decades at the University of California at Santa Barbara, wrote the book *Death: Philosophical Soundings* in 1999 about positively reframing the meaning of death, and he reasoned that “fearing one’s own demise was irrational” (Buder). He believed his position until he faced his own mortality. Death scared him, and he wasn’t sure what to do about it. His grandson, Andrew Hasse, interviewed him and turned the recordings into a documentary called *Being 97*. Weeks before Fingarette’s death in 2018, Hasse showed his grandfather the final documentary. “I think it helped give him perspective on what he was going through,” Hasse said. “He loved talking about what a mysterious process it had been to film all these little moments of his life and then weave them together into a work that expressed something essential about him.” It was storytelling and analysis of those stories that helped offer Fingarette some sense of his meaning at his end.

Anita Hannig’s essay “Talking About Death in America: An Anthropologist’s View” in *Undark* (Hanning), highlights her pioneering work in death studies and underscores the discomfort people have of speaking of death. She teaches that “American attitudes toward death won’t change until we give young people the tools to explore their own relationship to it.” Increased writing about death along with an expanded readership to is one way to build a culture of exploration about death to seek cultural comfort or harmony about our shared universal future.

The May, Fingarette, and Hanning examples help underscore continued cultural hesitation to teach and learn about death, even in the very place intellectual exploration is most valued: academia. Is it possible that death writing is the most under studied and analyzed part of a universal circumstance? It is

important for writers about death, in all genres, to be keenly aware of the additional weight the topic carries to the reader and the importance of craft analysis to encourage a continuous cycle of expanding death writing, analysis, and increased understanding. When one writes about death they are writing about the literal passing of a person. One moment a heart beats; the next moment the heart rests. Between the last beat and the start of stillness is death. I suggest it is impossible to write about a literal death and not in some way touch upon some aspect of loss that come either before or after death. To better understand the layers of themes that interact with death writing I introduce the death ecosystem which is comprised of three phases:

- **Pre-death**, could include a) aging; b) diagnosis; c) illness; d) dying; e) sudden death; f) unexpected tragedy
- **Death**, the literal death of a person
- **Post-death**, could include a) mourning; b) grief; c) survivor's pathway spectrum: deterioration, LIMBO, healing

The death ecosystem phases can be experienced with ease, exacerbation, or a combination depending on the death factors that influence the circumstances surrounding the death. Death factors can include: age of the dying, length of time before death, cause of death, preventable or inevitable, complications (addiction, multiple illnesses), mental health status, pain levels, financial circumstances, needs of family, stability of key relationships, access to the dying, access to health care, clarity on wishes of the dying, single or multiple deaths, acceptance, and many more. Death factors are illustrated through these biographies:

- A man lives to be 86, upon his expected death he has financial resources, positive relationships with his family and friends, access to health care after the initial diagnosis, and had time to get his life organized and to say proper goodbyes.

- A young man is 20 years old, he is physically healthy, with small hints of mental health challenges. He is away at college and suddenly kills himself surprising everyone who knows and loves him.

The death factors at play in these separate biographies could affect the healing processes for the survivors. Even though these phases and factors represent occurrences that take place separately, or in some cases concurrently, they are interconnected. Further complicating writing about death is that mortality itself encapsulates many complex existential questions – for the dying as well as the dying person’s loved ones. A key aspect of the post-death phase is how the survivor is coping. This progress or regression can be charted on the survivor’s pathway spectrum ranging from deterioration, limbo, to healing. Keeping this range of suffering or healing journey in mind helps contextualize possible motivation of a survivor to seek out and find a book with death writing.

Aspects of pre-death, death, and post-death phases interact in some way in every loss. An author’s recognition of the phases and occurrences in the death ecosystem, as well as the death factors and survivor’s healing process, can help build clarity in writing along with what aspect of the death the story will be emphasized, deemphasize, or excluded.

Establishing an understanding of the cultural hesitation toward death, acknowledging research into how to write well about death is deficient, sharpening the focus on what aspects of the death ecosystem and death factors will be emphasized in a story, along with adopting the CPR Method will give an author a suite of advantages as they write a story about death and seek to create strong connections with readers that aide in persevering through difficult subject matter to establish active understanding and influence a survivor toward healing.

The Missing Analysis of *The Chronology of Water*:

Death and mortality are central themes in Lidia Yuknavitch's writing in *The Chronology of Water* and go largely unexplored from a craft perspective, and the themes are also excluded from the book's blurb and the summative commentary and reviews. The themes in the book jacket blurb include: swimming, father's rage, suicidal mother, bisexual sex, pain, and survival through writing, teaching, and love for her husband and son. The most recent printing of *The Chronology of Water* highlights 40 excerpts of reviews of the book in the "Praise for Lidia Yuknavitch" section from some of the most eminent writers, journals, and publications in the field of writing. Each review highlights a hot take on Yuknavitch's memoir's contributions to societal discussions including issues of gender, sexuality, art, rage, abuse, love, truth, addiction, marriage, family, resiliency and more. But death? It goes unnamed.

If we consider possible death euphuisms a few reviewers write about "tragedy," "catharsis," "tough parts," and "heart breaking." But all these descriptions are not specific only to death and could be applied to the themes highlighted above. Childbirth is mentioned, once, but without a specific connection to the loss of Yuknavitch's baby, rather the word is included in a list of "experiences of being a woman." Death is left out even after Yuknavitch tells us repeatedly, right from the start, *The Chronology of Water* is a story about mortality. Consider the very first sentence in the book:

The day my daughter was stillborn, after I held the future pink and rose-lipped in my shivering arms, lifeless tender, covering her face in tears and kisses, after they handed my dead girl to my sister who kissed her, then to my first husband who kissed her, then to my mother who could not bear to hold her, then out of the hospital room door, tiny lifeless swaddled thing, the nurse gave me tranquilizers and a soap and sponge. (35)

Like the wrap-around jacket placed over the cover art of *The Chronology of Water* to hide the woman's breast from view from shoppers in airports and bookstores, death is also there in the memoir waiting to be uncovered and studied. Just like it's not hard to peel back the cover jacket to see what imagery the publisher is seeking to protect you from, if you are cognizant of death writing, it's not hard to

see the priority Yuknavitch places on the inclusion of death in her memoir and to find her most important contributions to the field of creative nonfiction: writing about the death in her life and the consequences that occur as she finds her way as a survivor and resuscitates her life.

Beyond her opening with the scene where her daughter is dead, Yuknavitch tells us:

I thought about starting this book with my childhood, the beginning of my life. But that's not how I remember it. ... All the events of my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams.... Language is a metaphor for experience. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory -- but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear. (38)

Yuknavitch considers a chronological beginning, with her childhood, but she bucks a traditional and linear style to show the possibility of fluidity in memoir, and this is the place in her life that is most painful. The part of her story where she needs to find the words to fight her fear. She is fearful because of what she witnessed in her childhood, and what she learned about the connection between herself and her mother. She knows her story is complicated with many elements of trauma. But she knows what this memoir is and what it isn't. This is so important to clarify that she titles the chapter, "What It's Not." She writes:

This is not another story about addiction. ... No matter how marketable the addiction story has become, this is not that story. My life is more ordinary. More like... more like everyone's. Addiction, she is in me, sure enough. But I want to describe something else to you. Smaller. A smaller word, a smaller thing. So small it could travel a bloodstream. (81)

Yuknavitch learns her mother's obstetrician who delivered her had a belief that he could teach his patients how to communicate telepathically with their unborn children (39). Yuknavitch watched her mother's depressive desolation lead to suicide attempts. She fears her mother's great sadness is what she telepathically shared with Yuknavitch in utero:

I didn't know yet how wanting to die could be a bloodsong in your body that lives with you your whole life. I didn't know then how deeply my mother's song had swum into my sister and into me.

I didn't know that something like wanting to die could take form in one daughter as the ability to quietly surrender, and in the other as the ability to drive into death head-on. I didn't know we were our mother's daughters after all. (82)

Yuknavitch tells us she inherited a death wish from her mother, and it is in her, and she is fighting like hell to either welcome her ending or find a reason not to die, not to live a life like her mother. Yuknavitch opens the book with death, and we wonder if she believes she passed the death bloodsong to her baby from her mother. She doesn't address this directly at first, only to tell us her first thoughts after her dead baby is gone: "When they finally took her away from me, the last cogent thought I had, a thoughtlessness that would last months: So this is death. Then a death life is what I choose (36). This excerpt shows Yuknavitch's recognition that death was given to her *in utero* by her mother and now, after a devastating loss, she is also consciously choosing death as a central focus of her day-to-day life. Yuknavitch invents a phrase, "a death life," to capture what she means: she is intent on accepting her fate and living a life that is always on the edge of death. This is her family inheritance. But even Yuknavitch needed the benefit of hindsight to see she was writing a memoir about death:

Up until the place in my life where I crashed into a pregnant woman head-on and met the Mingo, I thought the whole story was about me. A me drama. All these things that have happened to the Lidia.

But what happens to you when you swim back through your own past is that you find an endwall. The endwall for me is my mother and my dead baby girl. I learned it at the surface of my skin where it is written now through rituals of pain and pleasure. (301)

The endwall, the shorter ends of a pool where swimmers push off and swim toward to finish a race, is both a starting and ending point. An endwall helps define the shape and structure of the pool. Here,

Yuknavitch uses the metaphor to tell us the shape of her life began with her mother and ended with the death of her daughter. And Yuknavitch, somehow, resuscitates her life. How?

Though I admit my resurrection and transformation have been a little strange, I can say it in a sentence now: my mother did not protect me. As a girl, I died. So when my child died in the womb of me, it was as if I'd done the same thing. I'd killed a girl I meant to love.... It took me 10 years to emerge from the grief of a dead daughter. You have to forgive women like me.... I was the kind of woman whose relationships were grenades and whose life became a series of car wrecks -- anything to keep the girl I was and the girl I had -- tiny daughter dolls -- safe from this world. (302)

But Yuknavitch also points out that beautiful, graceful, and hopeful things can appear in dark places. She finds these things that keep her human, and she writes about them for herself and for you. Death is the thematic Christmas tree of *The Chronology of Water*, and everything else is tinsel and balls. But the presents underneath this tree are survival gifts.

CPR Method: Craft analysis of *The Chronology of Water*

The CPR techniques are divided into three areas to help a writer craft a story to encourage readers to: *connect* – the overlay between a writer's ideas and a reader's interests; *persevere* – to retain readers despite difficult subject matter; and *resuscitate* – to create a pathway between an author and a reader to share humanness to spark and foster healing. This discussion highlights some techniques and applies them to Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water* to illustrate how she writes well about death.

CONNECT: *the overlay between a writer's ideas and a reader's interests*

We come to books about death for various reasons, to try and find cures to our broken parts, to find out if anyone understands, to find a map that leads to normal. It helps to learn from someone who has suffered in a similar way or from someone who is further along the road of healing to discover something that

could help put a life on track. In the same way we want to fight off death, we want to fight off the effects of death. Readers don't want a riddle; they want advice, answers, or evidence that someone has an idea of how awful death can make you feel. An author doesn't know the particulars of what may bring the reader to their book but has an ability — if successful — at considering a death in their life, documenting what happened, and passing along a story to a reader with some knowledge, perhaps a form of assessment or enlightenment. Here are two techniques to consider that are geared toward establishing common ground and building credibility:

- Identify a specific audience
- Forthrightness: “Facing the Dragon”

Anne Janzer, in her book *Writing to be Understood: What Works and Why*, focuses on where the writer's ideas and the readers' interests overlap. Different audiences could need different things, so who are you writing for? “It may be counterintuitive, but if you want to reach a larger audience, consider concentrating more closely on a specific segment of it. To broaden your impact, tighten your focus on the reader,” Janzer writes (17). She presents a paradox: writing for a specific audience can encourage focused writing that ultimately can have universal appeal. When writing about sensitive or challenging subjects, like death, Janzer reminds writers that the reader may be the most important part of the story. “People who feel they share something in common with you are more likely to be open to your ideas,” Janzer writes (18).

Establishing a connection is critical.

Yuknavitch identifies her audience and relays her choices to the reader, leaning right into an authentic approach in the very first sentence of her acknowledgements at the beginning of *The Chronology of Water*: “If you have ever fucked up in your life, or if the great river of sadness that runs through us all has touched you, then this book is for you” (xvii). In just one sentence, Yuknavitch prioritizes several key messages with the explicit intent *to connect* to her reader by telling us exactly who the book is for. In the first sentence, most beautifully, she lifts and singles out one audience. Not the religious, not the perfect, not the

sheltered, not the happy, not the responsible...but the fuck ups. She lays down clear intent to welcome *all readers* by highlighting a group often pushed to the periphery of society, often living unseen. Through Janzer's lens, Yucknavitch's focus on the "fuck ups" allows her to declare with authority who she is writing for, and her focus will bring clarity that will invite everyone else.

Yuknavitch also establishes 1) there is a great river of sadness and whether you know it or not it runs through us all and 2) some of us have touched the water of sadness and some have not. This distinction allows Yuknavitch to further define her audience: if you fall into the camp that knows the feeling of great sadness, Yuknavitch makes you feel welcome and special because, like her, you know something that many hide and ignore, but here, in this book, great sadness will be acknowledged and explored. Which means you, the sad one, will be included at the heart of this story from the very beginning. She will not be someone who will say to you, "You're still sad from death? It's time to move on." With her opening greeting she is telling us she not only knows great sadness, but she has a lot more to share. She is building connection, quickly.

The death ecosystem can help a writer see all the various possibilities of targeting a certain audience within the death ecosystem and determine where the writer's focus will be – pre-death, death, post-death or write to include the entire spectrum. Intentional choices can help an author determine their writing goals and more effectively craft a piece that will connect with and attract readers. Yuknavitch's memoir covers the entire death ecosystem taking the reader through pre-death (*her childhood, college, marriages, suicide attempts*), death (*stillbirth, death of her parents*), and post-death (*writing, teaching, marriage, son*).

Additionally, readers will determine their level of trust in an author, in part, through their assessment of how frank and transparent stories are written but also on how credible the stories seem. It's something that authors Sandra Perl and Mimi Schwartz refer to as "facing the dragon" in their craft book *Writing True* (116-118). The term "facing the dragon," Perl and Schwartz write, refers to the need to write toward the tensions of the subject, not away from them. This technique applies to any difficult subject,

particularly death writing. “The more emotionally loaded the subject, the greater the difficulty in facing the dragons. But even less personal forms ... have dragons lurking in them – sensitive topics that make writers back away from the fire, fearing self-revelation or reader disapproval, of both,” they write (81). When writing about death, it is imperative that a writer can work through the discomfort and find a way to access experiences, without censoring, even when they point to despair. “There are tensions in every piece, it’s often these tensions that draw us, usually unconsciously, to our subject,” Perl and Schwartz write (116).

Flip to almost any page in *The Chronology of Water* and readers will find additional examples of Yuknavitch facing the dragon in her writing:

It’s just that I have a sister who walked around for nearly two years when she was 17 with razor blades in her purse seeing if she could outlive the long wait waiting to get out of family. Her first round.

It’s just that I had a mother who ate a whole bottle of sleeping pills at middle age with only her daughter the swimmer at home to witness the will of it. Her first round.

I know that will well now. It's the will of certain mothers and daughters. It comes from living in bodies that can carry life or kill it. It’s the will to end. (84)

In this excerpt Yuknavitch leans into a family with generational trauma and she is candidly sharing with readers she lives in a family where killing oneself is a daily consideration. A writer must be willing to go to the places in their memory, like Yuknavitch, to find memories about people in the death ecosystem and translate what they see, smell, hear, and feel for both the benefit of the author, the story, and the reader. Direct writing that “faces the dragon” allows a reader to experience writing from an author that is serious about sharing honest stories about death.

PERSEVERE: *to retain readers despite difficult subject matter*

After an author succeeds in connecting with a reader, the work has just begun. Authors need readers to persevere through their piece, especially when the content is heavy. Writers need to make a difficult subject matter about death approachable, so readers are incentivized to persevere further into the story. Here are techniques to consider to encourage a reader to persevere through difficult content when writing about death:

- Tone Selection
- Figures of Speech
- Understatement
- Hyperbole to Elicit Humor

A writer's objective is to find the best version of their written voice for the selected audience and situation, particularly when the content provokes readers to feel deeply and be exposed to uncomfortable stories, like in death writing. There are infinite approaches to tone, and finding the tone for a written piece is a critical decision for an author. When writing about loss some tone selections could include reflective, candid, alarmed, stoic, etc.

Yuknavich walks us through one way she developed her tone and voice: "Sometimes I think my voice arrived on paper. I had a journal I hid under my bed. I didn't know what a journal was. It was just a red notebook that I wrote pictures and true things and lies in. Interchangeably. It made me feel -- like someone else. ...My voice, she was coming" (47). Her tone reads as "blunt and courageous best friend who will always shoot you straight, particularly after a few drinks." The approachable tone she uses allows her to play with her words in a way that fits the personality, and a reader almost expects there to be unanticipated developments. For example, Yuknavitch frequently speaks directly to the reader, like we saw at the beginning in her acknowledgements when she addressed the "fuck ups." On page 72, she writes, "That's a great line, isn't it." She doesn't ask it as a question; it's a statement. Her use of grammar, like using a period instead of a question mark, underscores her confidence and purpose: she is in a hurry to tell

you something very important and matters like grammar don't take up space in her mind. Because her tone is so effective, we want her to keep going, keep writing, keep telling us where her world is going next. Our connection to her is now commitment.

A hallmark of the tone in Yuknavitch's writing is the absence of anger, which is an accomplishment since she often shares that she is full of rage from the experiences in her life. Consider this excerpt:

I swung my suitcase back, and he drew up his full height of father and pulled his arm back and fisted up his hand until it white knuckled and his face went red and he clenched his teeth and those eyes, those rage filled father eyes... so I did what I was born to do. I leaned in as close to his face as I could and said do it. Suitcase ready. It was his voice I used. (61)

We are in this tense moment with her. It's a bit of a surprise that she admits she uses her father's tone, because we believe she has the courage to stand her ground with what she possesses. She is strong enough for this moment. Yuknavitch's tone allows the reader the ability to fill their emotions in to her story. Writers who can communicate emotional complication through tone, without oversharing, let the reader be the angry or sad one. Tone can put an arm around a reader and say, "Stick with me."

Understatement limits the use of sentimental, overly dramatic, over the top, sensational, and ornamental language choices. Claire Bradshaw suggests avoiding shock value in scenes: "It can be tempting to ramp up the emotion and drama, draw out the moment and essentially milk it for all it's worth. However, when this is overdone, it doesn't tend to go down too well with readers. It's essentially telling them how they should feel about the death, rather than allowing them to feel it themselves" (Bradshaw). Understatement ensures a writer doesn't start to grate on the nerves and emotions of a reader by interrupting a story by leaning too heavily on pain and emotion. Jim Peterson teaches that understatement is a critical strategy "to hold the reader in the right spot" and Perl and Schwartz agree that understatement should be considered for use in topics like death, "Remembering that the hotter the subject, the cooler the

language. ... Highly emotional subjects need understated language” (122). Yuknavitch successfully utilizes understatement frequently: “Dead infants don’t get urns unless you pay for them -- and then they stuff crap in besides just ashes to cover the smallness. ... My daughter’s ashes were in a small pink box -- pink for girls -- a box the size of a hacky sack ball that fits in the palm of your hand” (101). Yuknavitch’s “cool language” maintains a level of intensity instead of releasing the emotions too strongly too often, thereby draining the reservoir, and helps the reader persevere through experiencing a difficult scene like deciding you won’t buy the urn.

Another tool in the figures of speech family that helps facilitate ease through death writing is hyperbole, a strategy that can be cleverly utilized to elicit humor, even in heavy and emotional stories. In fact, it may be more necessary in tender passages to offer a break to the reader. Humor has many roles, it can help authors show their personality, create memorable scenes, and lighten the mood, especially when stories are serious. Hyperbole offers variety and provides small moments of levity so readers can persevere through the content. In this scene, we join Yuknavitch and her first husband in the waters of Heceta Head, where they decide to place the ashes of their daughter:

So while Phillip and I stood there watching the little box float nearly out of eyesight, we also stood and watched it... come the fuck back. Pretty much to our very feet. Knocking itself against his shoe. ... I looked at Phillip. Then I said, try kicking it out. No, I don't know why I said that. So he, um, kicked it. This time it didn't go very far at all, it simply launched soggily into the air and plunked back down and circled back to us, just slower this time. (102)

Yuknavitch’s use of humor in this scene makes it unforgettable. By including this moment of humanity – where unfortunate events happen even during a burial – she gives the reader, and herself, a chance for a release in a very emotional passage. Yuknavitch utilizes the technique of humor consistently. She narrates two more burials in *The Chronology of Water*. Both also include effective humorous scenes. Perl and Schwartz support the use of humor in writing: “A few lines of comic relief are often welcome in serious

works. ... Such comic relief helps both writer and reader work through the pain – and affirms that life, no matter how difficult, has its light side that we must look for and embrace” (132-133). Also note that Yuknavitch talks directly to the reader in the excerpt when she proactively answers an anticipated question from the reader, “*No, I don't know why I said that.*” She is layering techniques together and establishing a trust with the reader that her sad stories will come with pressure breaks.

But Edwidge Danticat, in *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, has a warning when writing and including figure of speech tools: “Empathy is not guaranteed, and hyperbole does not ensure it,” she writes (42). The author will need to see what the scene needs to be successful in connecting with and retaining the reader. Humor is an important tool to experiment with, but Danticat’s caution is wise not to rely on only one strategy to give a reader a break while constructing heavy scenes in death writing.

RESUSCITATE: *to spark active understanding and influence a survivor toward healing*

The powerful question for a writer to address about the post-death phase is: what comes after the death? What is the meaning of the life lost? If unknown, what are some of the processes that lead to an answer? What do the living do next? How long will one mourn, if at all? How quickly will grief dissipate, if ever? Successful death writing offers perspectives on how to successfully manage death and to translate the meaning of loss into wisdom. In my original thinking, I had the “R” in the CPR Method as “relate.” I have evolved from relate to resuscitate for two reasons: First, in “Wisdom and Wisdom Teeth: Against Relatability,” by Karen Babine, she argues that the word relatability doesn’t work hard enough to make writing relevant so writing resonates with readers. She challenges writers to “wield our tools with a little more precision.” Second, Yuknavitch’s fourth chapter in *The Chronology of Water* is titled “Resuscitations,” which seems appropriate under these craft circumstances. Rising to Babine’s challenge and honoring Yuknavitch’s excellence in death writing, I dedicate the “R” in the CPR Method to them and their efforts as writers to help resuscitate the lives of readers with their words.

Here are two techniques to consider that are geared toward a human-to-human knowledge transfer and laying groundwork for healing:

- Share Tacit Knowledge
- Illustrate Healing Through Art

Successful death writing should – in some way – share tacit knowledge by identifying beneficial experiential information from one or more stages of the death ecosystem. This type of knowledge, information that is challenging to deduce and document in a specific or tangible form, gets to the heart of the value of death writing. When an author seeks to write a story about death, it requires difficult work: to translate personal death experiences into observations that a reader can understand. A reader can reflect on the author’s findings and consider how the guidance could facilitate their grief journey. Author Marya Hornbacher underscores this point with a caveat: “Your task as an author is not to teach the reader anything but to find within that story the questions, the tensions, the humanity that it contains, and to get those down on the page” (Hornbacher).

A death story writer’s ability to define an aspect of an experience, often mysterious, unnamed, or undescribed, along the death ecosystem and help introduce information for consideration to a reader is how art can resuscitate. If a reader finds value in the author’s observation and acts upon that finding, the establishment of explicit knowledge is possible, and writing can help move individuals to clearer understanding of the pathways to healing. This technique takes any story about death and elevates the writer’s contribution from passive to active to share pathways to resuscitate a life of a survivor. Yuknavitch offers her best work in this stage.

After Yuknavitch masterfully establishes a *connection* with the reader and helps them *persevere* through her challenging story, she offers a payoff. Yuknavitch’s memoir is both a story with excellent death writing but with intentional sharing to welcome, to inspire, and to resuscitate. The crux of her message comes early in the book, characteristically and fluidly out of chronological order: “After a

death, you can be reborn into a new one” (63). We get to learn how she resuscitated her life, and we can consider if there are strands of learning that we can pull on to apply to our own situation.

Her most important message comes from a theme deeply embedded in *The Chronology of Water*: Yuknavitch’s disregard for societal norms. In some cases, her challenges of proper behavior are a result of her trauma and addictions, and her actions appear incidental. But she is intentionally flipping the traditional script to encourage counter-thinking to reverse adherence to polite behavioral teachings that can create fear of action due to fear of judgement. I call this the “Yuknavitch Paradox”: To get healthy, reset social norms. Meaning, Yuknavitch deconstructs stereotypes that trap us in faux perfection. Throughout the memoir, we see her engaging in counterculture action, like public intoxication, experimental drug use, picking fights, and over time these behaviors lead her to practices that continue to challenge norms but in healthier ways, liking attending college writing classes when she isn’t enrolled. She shows us evidence of her progression by describing herself as two Lidias: “A daughter, tormented and damaged girl. And a woman, a mother, a writer whose life had just been born (289).” She invents a trick that helps her make the transition from broken girl to empowered writer, and she teaches the reader through an example of couples fighting:

We want our coupledoms to look ... sanitized and pretty and worthy of admiration. And anger blasts are ugly. But I think that is a crock. There is a kind of fighting that isn’t ugly. There is a way for anger to come out as an energy you let loose and away. The trick is to give it a form, and not a human target. The trick is to transform rage. (269)

She doesn’t establish a death writing model per se, but she’s writing in that direction by speaking directly to the reader and sharing relatable experiences that can function as an adaptable equation. This trick can also be applied to other challenging human conditions, including death, mourning, and grieving. Reread her quote with an exchange of “coupledoms” for deaths and “anger” and “fighting” for grieving:

We want our *deaths* to look ... sanitized and pretty and worthy of admiration. And *grief* blasts are ugly. But I think that is a crock. There is a kind of *grief* that isn't ugly. There is a way for *grief* to come out as an energy you let loose and away. The trick is to give it a form, and not a human target. The trick is to transform rage. (269)

To use a Yuknavitchism: "Boy howdy." Yuknavitch is defining her pathway for facing the ills of life by simply accepting that unpleasant feelings exist and must be faced, especially when it's ugly. But more importantly, she offers an action plan to the reader: "The trick is to give it a form, and not a human target. The trick is to transform rage." This advice guides a helpless or suffering person toward self-empowerment by 1) acknowledging rage exists, 2) accepting rage as normal, and 3) sharing a specific action plan to transform rage so it can "come out as an energy you let loose and away."

Yuknavitch shares that her husband's approach to loosening up his rage is through punching a bag or practicing mixed martial arts, and she has her process: "Like my junk comes out in art (269)." For those who allow anger and rage to fester, Yuknavitch is concerned: "But I gotta tell you. People who never get angry frighten me (270)." Yuknavitch flips the polite society script by normalizing the understandable reality of complex emotions, like anger and rage, and worries for those who remain stoic and refined and do not present normal reactions to difficult life circumstances. Beyond coping with the death of someone you love, the Yuknavitch Paradox could have many applications, including as a strategy to address the ever-increasing occurrences of angry Americans seeking guns to inflict violence.

Secondly, the craft of resuscitation and illustrating healing through art is also on display here. As Yuknavitch learns to balance her emotions through art, she includes her readers on the dual-path journey of artistic exploration and healing. Because her art is writing, the important findings she discovers through working her process of storytelling are accessible to readers. Yuknavitch's second sentence in her opening acknowledgement reads, "So thank you for the collective energy it takes to write in the face of culture. I can feel you (xvii)." Yuknavitch zeroes in on and acknowledges one of the main disrupters to writers about

death: “the collective energy it takes to write in the face of culture.” She is calling out the realities of a Western culture that avoids the imperfect and the hard aspects of being human and tells the reader they are the inspiration for pushing forward. She ends her acknowledgement with a hug, “I can feel you.” Her writing process needs the readers’ support to feed her motivation to discover information the reader needs. Yuknavitch’s well written death stories are nothing short of acts of recovery, which she acknowledges: “Writing to bring the delicate dream to the tips of words, to kiss them, to rest your cheeks on them, to open your mouth and breathe body to body to resuscitate a self” (302).

Yuknavitch encourages readers to participate in imaginative art that isn’t necessarily in the form of writing: “The key is to make up shit. Make up stories until you find one you can live with. I learned it through writing. Writing can be that” (302). This is another key observation from Yuknavitch that can help a reader understand that how you think will direct your life. She explains that if your marriage is broken, leave. If your family isn’t supportive, make a new family from trusting friends. There is also an equation here that is powerful to grieving people: if your loved one died To finish that sentence, Yuknavitch encourages the reader to find a hint of hope somehow, someway, and to absolutely make up a positive next step. She empowers us to defy any outcome that ensures we stay trapped in unhappiness. Art, imagination, friendship, community can be that. This is how Yuknavitch went from a broken girl to a writing mother. She mastered how to process the hard challenges in life, made up some stuff, practiced writing, and now she swims back for the drowning:

Listen I can see you. If you are like me. You do not deserve most of what has happened or will. But there is something I can offer you. Whoever you are. Out there. As lonely as it gets, you are not alone. There is another kind of love. It's the love of art. Because I believe in art the way other people believe in God. In art I've met an army of people - a tribe that gives good company and courage and hope. In books and painting and music and film. This book? It's for you. (303)

We see in this excerpt all the CPR Method components working in harmony: Connect – “I can see you.” And “This Book? It’s for you.” Even at the end of her memoir she continues to directly speak to the reader to ensure we know who she is really writing this story for. To persevere – “You are not alone.” And “there is something I can offer you.” She brings us along, let’s us get invested in her story with a promise of a payoff. And resuscitate – “a tribe that gives good company and courage and hope. In books and painting and music and film.” She underscores that there is a community of people – artists – that can handle the truth and know how to process uncomfortable emotions and turn them into something healthy, and she wants you to know, as a reader, you are in the community, too.

Conclusion

For a reader, well written stories about death can help someone feel less alone, translate life into meaning, say goodbye, or reclaim normalcy. If there is a societal focus on welcoming and understanding death and grieving, it’s possible to shift cultural norms to foster healthier approaches to living. “We write about the dead to make sense of our losses, to become less haunted, to turn ghosts into words, to transform an absence into language. ... Someone’s calm and dignified death is meant to be a model not just for the way we might eventually want to die, but also for the way we might want to live,” Danticat writes (21). Writers can succeed in sharing stories with readers with difficult subject matter surrounding dying, death, and mourning by using techniques in the CPR Method to connect with readers, persevere through difficult content, to resuscitate through sharing experiences.

In a “writer’s creed” on Yuknavitch’s website she suggests that “narrative is quantum.” She believes the act of writing literally creates energy that leaves her fingertips and travels into printed words and from there into the being of a reader. When you apply her theory to death writing, narratives convey story, yes, but so much more. Narratives connect other humans to each other spiritually, philosophically, and as Yuknavitch suggests, physically. Our stories, made up of our words, ensure we are not alone as we journey

through the death ecosystem. That's how powerful writing and reading is. In fact, if you believe her theory that narrative is quantum, Yuknavitch suggests we never leave our loved ones: *"Energy never dies. It just changes forms. My beloved friends and mentors Ken Kesey and Kathy Acker are in the space dust and DNA and words."*

(Acknowledgments)

If the writer can face death; we should be determined to find those who have done so successfully, diagnose why, and share the findings. Perhaps the best way to think about how to handle the deaths in our lives comes from Yuknavitch, "When pulled under, kick."

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