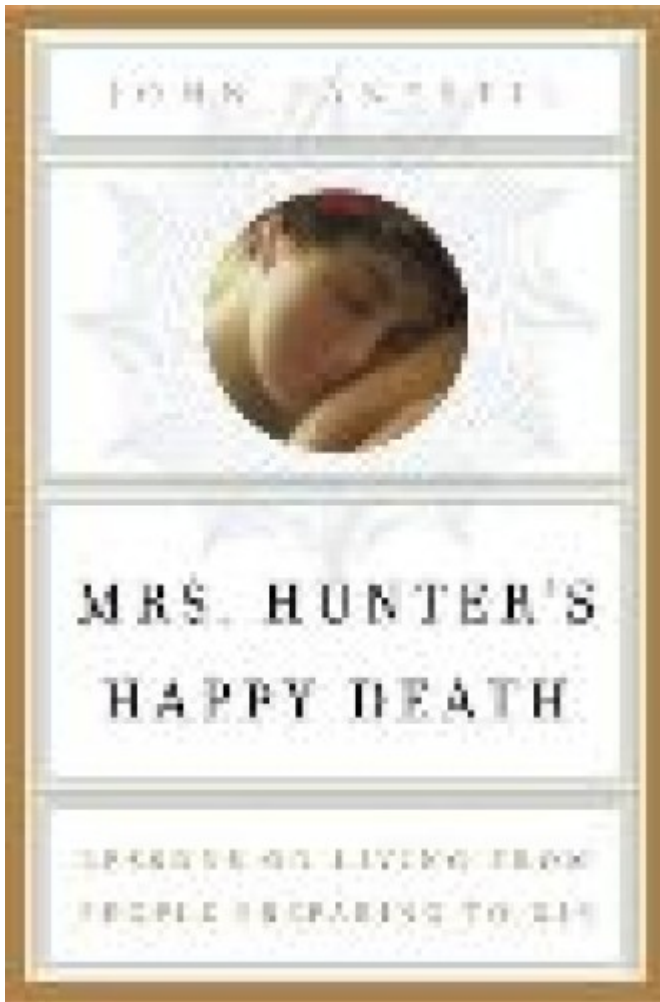


Lessons before dying

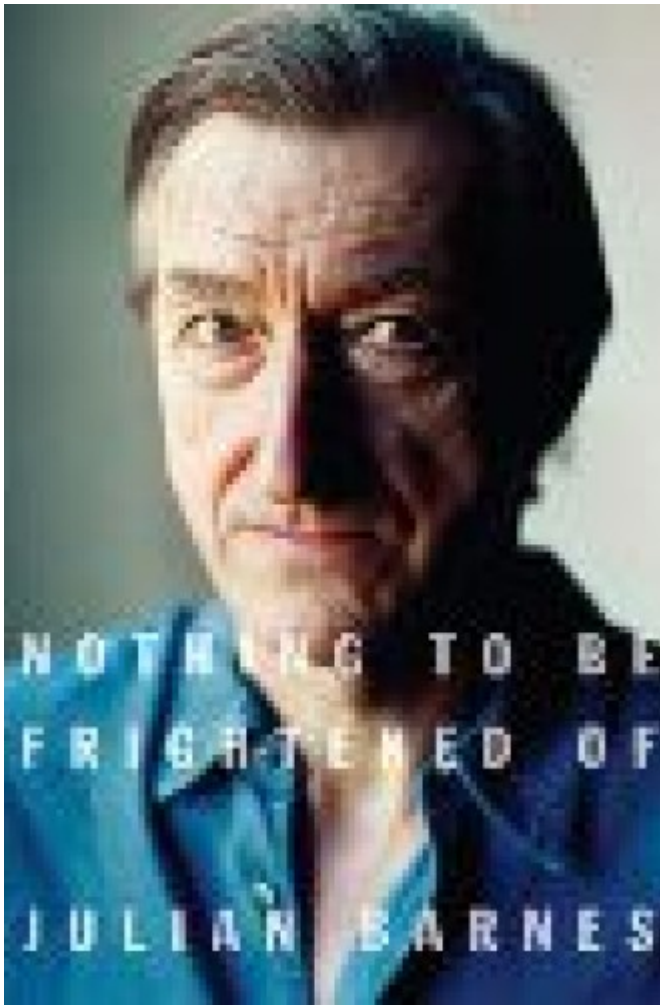
By [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Mrs. Hunter's Happy Death: Lessons on Living From People Preparing to Die

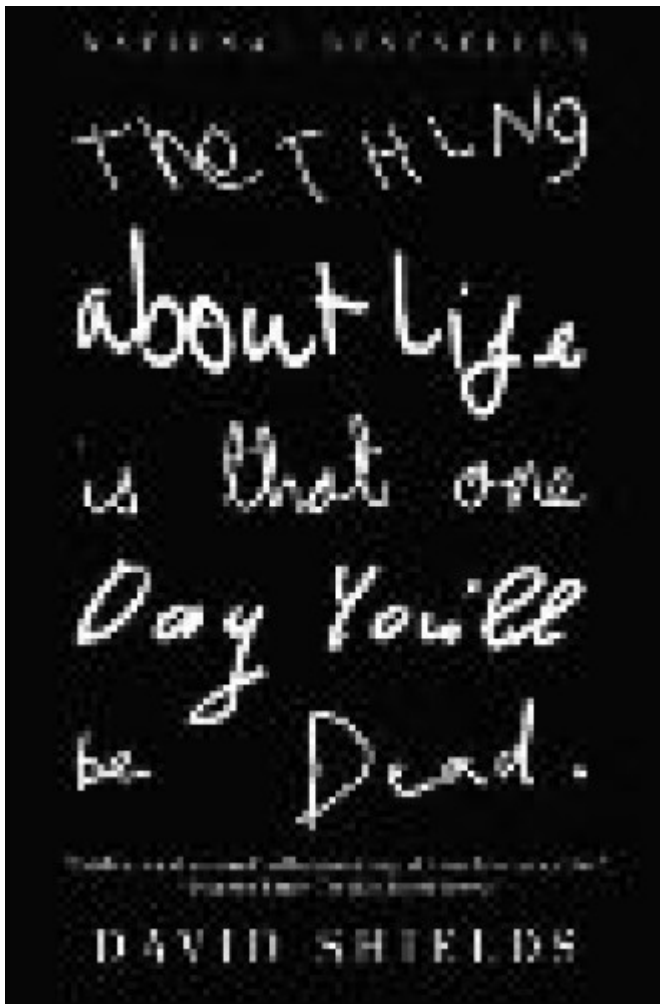
John Fanestil
Doubleday



Nothing to Be Frightened Of

Julian Barnes

Knopf



The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead

David Shields
Knopf

Whatever our religious convictions or lack of them, we seek to learn from those who are near death, as if proximity to death confers a secret wisdom hidden from those who are still healthy. Perhaps *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom's account of his conversations with a dying professor, would have engaged readers even if Morrie Schwartz had not been dying, but it is hard to imagine that it would have been such a huge best seller. The premise of the book is that Schwartz's observations were particularly worth listening to because he was near death. Likewise, almost 9 million people have watched Carnegie Mellon professor Randy Pausch's "Last Lecture" on YouTube, not only because it offers a winsome word of encouragement, but also because the viewer is aware that these are the words of a man who knows that he is dying.

We watch and listen to the dying for clues about how to live. In one of Montaigne's essays he writes:

There is nothing I desire more to be informed of than of the death of men: that is to say, what words, what countenance, and what face they show at their death. . . . Were I a composer of books, I would keep a commented register of the diverse deaths, which in teaching men to die, should after teach them to live.

We also watch and listen to the dying for clues to what death itself is like. Raymond Moody's worldwide best seller of the 1970s, *Life After Life*, based on interviews with hundreds of people who had near-death experiences, purports to give a glimpse of what it is like to be dead. There are many common themes and images in what his interviewees report: a reunion with family, a "being of light," a sense of beatitude. Moody's findings were comforting to millions of readers. What was lost on many of those readers, however, is that the people he had interviewed may have experienced something like dying, but they did not experience death. It is a crucial distinction. Dying is the way, whereas death is the destination. And none of those interviewed had reached that destination called death.

Moody is far from being the only one who has drawn conclusions about what death is like from the experiences of the dying. I have found that when someone experiences a loved one's last moments as peaceful, that person is more likely to feel assured that death itself is a peaceful state. And if a loved one dies in a state of agitation or fear, death can seem more frightening to those who remain.

Julian Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* is hard to classify. It is part memoir, part random musings on life and art, part extended reflection on death and the fear of death. He begins with the words, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." In many respects, that first sentence is the theme of the book. Barnes is a wistful atheist. He did not grow up in any faith tradition and so "had no faith to lose." He cannot even bring himself to say that he wants to believe, because that would entail wanting to believe something that is not and cannot be. He would almost certainly not grant that his yearning derives from the God-shaped hole in his heart that Pascal contended every person has. God is a major character in this book, however, and in some respects dominates it by his very absence.

Although Barnes does not believe in any god, he is quite specific about the god he misses. It is the God of the New Testament, and Barnes can be downright lyrical in his tribute to the absent God: "I miss the God that inspired Italian painting and French stained glass, German music and English chapter houses, and those tumbledown heaps of stone on Celtic headlands which were once symbolic beacons in the darkness and the storm."

Barnes reflects at some length on the deaths of his parents. Although he held his mother in disdain, he couldn't help admiring the way she died "efficiently and speedily." He admired his laconic father and felt an affinity with him, but his father seemed not to know how to die. His was a death by inches through a series of strokes. It seems a nettlesome irony for Barnes that, in his view, his mother knew nothing about how to live but somehow knew how to die, and that the opposite was true for his father.

Barnes turns to the deaths of literary figures and artists, as if in search of alternative models of how to die. He relays something of the deaths, and attitudes toward death, of a wide range of figures, including Shostakovich, Freud, Flaubert, Montaigne, Jules Renard and Bertrand Russell. None of them expresses belief in God, and all see death as oblivion. If Barnes misses God, the pain does not lead him to invite anyone who believes in God into his narrative.

Barnes confesses that he sometimes views life as "an overrated way of passing the time," which does make the reader question why he would then cling to life so fiercely. His musings on his own life are not always dark, however, particularly as he recounts the joys of art and friendship, but the narrative always swoops back to the subject of death. Perhaps he is hoping that this time, when he reflects on death, it will be different, that the fear will be gone, that he will finally find Renard's words to be true: "As soon as you look it properly in the face, death is gentle to understand." Barnes never finds comfort in his reflections on death, but that does not keep him from repeatedly turning to it, like a man unable to refrain from touching a sore tooth with his tongue.

For Barnes, death is, to borrow Shakespeare's phrase, "mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." The title of the book is a play on words, for it is clear that, for Barnes, death is something to be frightened of, and it is the very nothingness of death that makes it so frightening. "People say of death, 'There's nothing to be frightened of.' They say it quickly, casually. Now let's say it again,

slowly, with reemphasis. ‘There’s nothing to be frightened of.’”

Barnes, in his early sixties, says that he thinks about death every day and that occasionally he finds himself sitting bolt upright in bed in the middle of the night screaming, “No, no, no!” In the daylight, when presumably his pulse is no longer racing, he muses, “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.”

Barnes seeks some solace from his art. In one amusing passage—and there is much wry humor in this book—Barnes imagines with gratitude his last reader. He ponders offering thanks for “the ultimate pair of eyes,” the last ones to read his books. “But then logic kicks in: your last reader is, by definition, someone who doesn’t recommend your books to anyone else. You bastard! Not good enough, eh?” Almost certainly, however, Barnes would agree with Woody Allen, another artist who is obsessed with death: “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.”

Barnes is a companionable author who, for all his broodings, somehow manages to remain delightful company. He is the kind of curmudgeon you would want to sit next to at a dinner party so that you can be sure to catch all of his pointed asides. He is so likable, in fact, that midway through the book I found myself wanting to spare him the agony of having to write about death anymore. I imagined myself saying, “Please, Julian, for your sake, don’t go there—you’ll only upset yourself again.” His impulse goes in the opposite direction, however: he seems unable to end the book, almost as if he is afraid that when he puts the last period on the page, his own life will end. First, he imagines what it would be like to die mid-sentence, then he goes on to try to conclude his book several times before finally succeeding, with two words—in all caps but a font not too large, he wants the reader to understand: the end.

David Shields’s reflections on mortality arise from a different circumstance entirely: his father seems to refuse to die. At 97, Milton Shields will not, to use Dylan Thomas’s phrase, “go gentle into that good night.” Milton remains, in his son’s view, “cussedly, maddeningly alive and interesting.” Even at an advanced age, his father remains physically active—unrelentingly, chirpily so—and boastful of his sexual prowess. Shields at 51 looks back on his days as an athlete and star point guard as a memory made distant by a series of debilitating injuries. And that is largely why Shields finds his father so annoying: Milton’s life is well into overtime, but he still has

the stamina to run the fast break. Shields summarizes the conflict between himself and his father this way: “Accept death, I always seem to be saying. Accept life, is his entirely understandable reply.”

Shields complains of feeling trapped between the generations, between his virile braggart of a father and his “annoyingly vital 14-year-old daughter,” who seems to have inherited her father’s athletic genes and has yet to experience any physical limitations. It is as if he has concluded that—in his family, at least—the clearest view of death is from the middle seat.

Shields’s reflections on death are relentlessly corporeal. He is fascinated by the human body—as a source of wonder, to be sure (“Nobody knows what causes puberty to begin”), but also as a source of dread (“Every decade after 50, your brain loses 2 percent of its weight”). The book is filled with such short declarations of scientific fact pointing mercilessly in the direction of decline (“After you turn 7, your risk of dying doubles every eight years”). It is as if, for Shields, our bodies are walking—or limping—reminders of encroaching death.

Shields is not the literary stylist that Barnes is. Reading his staccato style feels a bit like driving on a cobblestone street—eventually one longs for a smoother ride. And the book seems deluged with facts, pithy quotes about life and death, and last words (a whole chapter is dedicated to them). I don’t know where he got all of those nuggets, but his book might have been helped if he had canceled his subscription to *Scientific American* and someone had absconded with his copy of *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations*.

Where Barnes is reflective and anguished, Shields is not afraid to go on a first-class rant. He does not hesitate to follow Dylan Thomas’s advice to “rage, rage against the dying of the light” (except in contemplating his father’s death; in that instance he rages at the light not dying). Both authors see the fear of death defining their lives; neither one takes any comfort from those they know who are dying. They both view the experience of those who are near death as confirmation of their conviction that death is something to be dreaded and feared.

Enter John Fanestil, a Methodist pastor who is comforted and even inspired by encounters with the dying. The author of *Mrs. Hunter’s Happy Death* is convinced that from the dying we can learn how to live and learn that death is nothing to be feared. He begins with his discovery of an 1801 edition of *The Arminian* magazine

that he found in a seminary library. There he encountered numerous accounts of the deaths of faithful men and women, a genre popular in periodicals of that period. Typically, such accounts pay tribute to a devout person and then chronicle that person's peaceful passing, a death befitting a person of faith.

One such story Fanestil found particularly arresting, "An Account of Mrs. Hunter's Holy Life and Happy Death," tells of a pious woman who dies at the age of 26 with beatitude and even ecstatic joy. On the day she died she described a vision to those gathered around her deathbed: "O how clear the way is! I shall soon be there. Glory! Glory! Glory! O what great grace! Angels are come for me! Cannot you see them? Bless the Lord!" And then, turning her face to the pillow, she said, "O how easy! How easy!" just before she "took her happy flight to the joys of the Lord."

Fanestil never notes the formulaic nature of these accounts of happy deaths, never comments on their melodramatic tone, and never suggests that they might be embellished for the sake of the reader. Instead, he finds in them reflections of his own experiences with people who have died with inspiring grace: "Adjectives like 'peaceful' and 'good' do not adequately describe the deaths of these rare individuals. These people die with their hearts full of love and with their spirits soaring. And in their dying they inspire others to a greater appreciation of all that is good in life." They are "still practicing this historic and uplifting way of death." The book is filled with numerous tributes to people who have died in ways that affirm both that life is good and that death is nothing to fear.

Fanestil grants that these instances of happy deaths are not the norm. Largely he blames medical science, which we have allowed to preside over our deaths, for turning dying into a physical process rather than a spiritual one. But he also contends that we have simply forgotten how to die. So he advocates that we reclaim what he calls the ritual of a happy death. He also repeatedly refers to happy death as a tradition and a practice, as if it is simply there, ripe for the taking if we but choose to learn to recover it.

If it really were a choice, given the alternatives most people I know would say, "I will take the happy death, please. Bring on the ritual! Teach me the practice." In the second half of the book, Fanestil does attempt to describe "the religious practices, or disciplines, that prepare people to die this way." He describes ten practices (of course, ten) with a chapter devoted to each, as if to confirm that one can choose to have a death as neat as freshly starched sheets. The practices include praying,

reading the Bible, praising God and other common Christian disciplines. The reader cannot escape the implication that if one simply leads a good Christian life, then one will be prepared to have a happy death.

As a pastor myself, I too have had frequent occasion to be with individuals at the moment of death, many of whom have died with grace and peace. I too can attest that the way a person dies can be inspiring and prompt awe. When you are with someone who is dying, it can feel as if you are in the presence of someone in labor, as if the one who is dying is struggling to give birth to new life. I have also seen what a relative of mine, a hospital chaplain, calls the “light behind the eyes” that can come when someone is near death. But death is not a gentleman and does not always play by the rules. I have seen good and faithful people die wretched deaths, and I’ve seen wretched people die with equanimity. I wish a happy death were a ritual I could teach or that Christian practices prepared one to die with joy. Alas, it is not that simple.

All three authors, in varying degrees, seek to learn from those who are dying. One would think that those who are dying have enough to occupy them without needing to edify us, but these authors are hardly alone in seeking to learn from those near death. In the end, however, when they look at the dying they see a reflection of what they already believe. For Barnes and Shields, encounters with the dying seem to confirm that death itself is frightening, and for Fanestil such encounters provide confirmation of the gospel promises.

Ultimately, however, the Christian affirmation of an afterlife is not based on what we have witnessed in those who are dying. God may have vanquished death in the resurrection of Jesus, but death is still an enemy—and a pretty formidable one at that. Rather, our convictions about God help us affirm that dying, whether peaceful or horrible, is not the last word.

Barnes writes that in the 1920s the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius used to join the “lemon table” at the Kamp restaurant in Helsinki, at which “he and his fellow diners were not just permitted, but required to talk about death” (the lemon being the Chinese symbol of death). These days one might want to establish such a table for conversation in the church. In many churches there is as little talk about death as there is in the rest of our death-denying culture. At some churches, even the focus of funerals has shifted—the service becomes a “celebration” of the life of the person who died, and death is spoken of only in euphemisms. Church needs to be a place where we are not only permitted but required to talk about death. These three

books, each very different from the others, are a good way to get that conversation started.