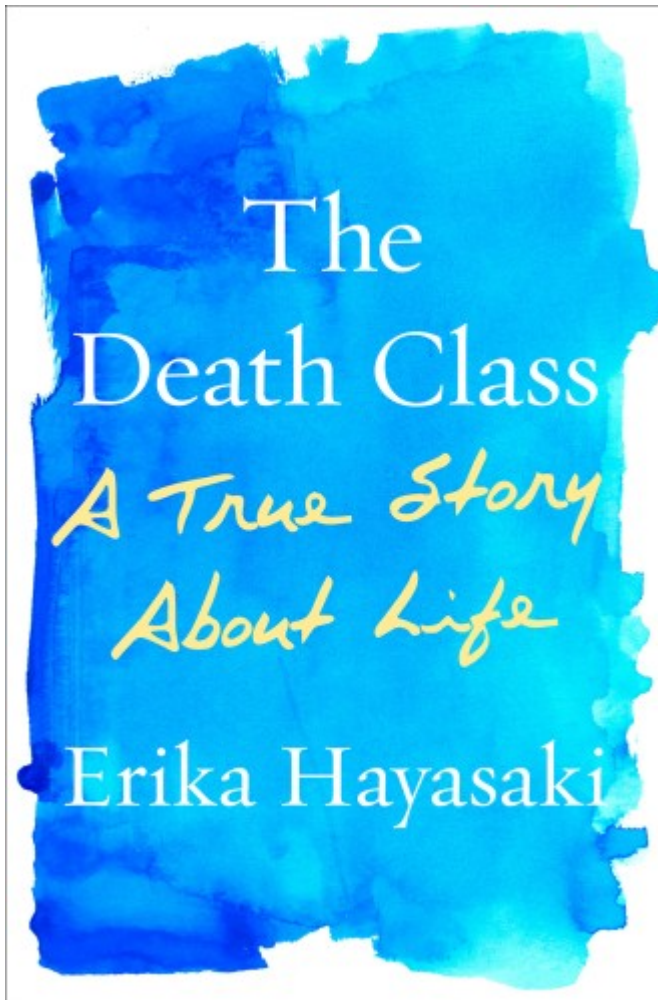


The Death Class, by Erika Hayasaki

reviewed by [Shirley Hershey Showalter](#) in the [June 25, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Death Class

By Erika Hayasaki
Simon & Schuster

What constitutes the perfect subject for literary nonfiction? Surely, there should be something newsworthy to report, combined with something timeless. The writer should use the tools of both journalism and fiction: analysis, imagination, sensory-

rich description, and abstract, metaphorical language. The perfect subject contains layers of meaning, moving between the concrete and the spiritual and leaving the reader in a state of wonder.

In the subject of death, and particularly the subject of death as taught in the classroom and beyond, former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Erika Hayasaki found the perfect subject for her first book.

The Death Class of the title is a popular course taught by Norma Bowe at Kean University in Union, New Jersey. This book was born when Hayasaki, having covered a succession of traumatic death events, including the Virginia Tech shootings, the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and the execution-style killing of three teenagers in a schoolyard, read about the class and decided to shadow the professor and take the course herself. What started out as a reporter satisfying her curiosity became something more and deeper—a healing event for the reporter, the professor, and many students.

In the spirit of participatory journalism, Hayasaki begins the narrative with a personal story, now almost 20 years old, about the murder of a high school friend in Lynnwood, Washington, on the same day of the Oklahoma City bombing. As a journalist for the school newspaper, Hayasaki tried to honor her friend, Sangeeta, by telling her story. But the world was focused on Oklahoma City, and the school wanted to return to normalcy as soon as possible. Hayasaki, however, never forgot the bone-searing screams of her friend's mother at the wake and the funeral.

Years later, at the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, Hayasaki again encountered distraught parents, and she covered the funeral of a courageous French teacher who died trying to protect her students. All of their stories begged for meaning, and none appeared. So when she learned about the Death Class and its three-year waiting list, Hayasaki wanted to meet the teacher.

It took five years—from the point Hayasaki began to shadow Bowe to the release of this book—for the author to plumb the depths of her own story and the story of the professor and her students. She faithfully followed the only stipulation Bowe imposed: she could follow Bowe, but she had to do all the work of the class.

One of the most brilliant decisions Hayasaki made in constructing this book was to begin each chapter with an assignment from the class completed by one of the characters in the book, including, sometimes, herself.

Like both Hayasaki and Bowe, I had a personal encounter with death—my baby sister’s—that marked me for life. I read both Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s *On Death and Dying* in the 1970s shortly after they first came out. The deaths of friends and my own intimations of mortality during the past two decades have led me to place preparation for death, and living in the moment, at the center of my personal mission.

Evidently many other people are also interested in “dragging death out of the darkness.” The recent *New York Times* best-seller list illustrates the point: books about heaven abound, and popular subjects include aging with dignity and hospice and palliative care. Hayasaki traces the development of what could be called a fledgling movement. The baby boom generation once again is reshaping a developmental stage.

Bowe’s favorite theorist appears to be Erik Erikson, whose eight stages of human development form the structure of the Death Class and heavily influence Hayasaki’s book. Her emphasis on Erikson’s seventh stage, generativity, leads Bowe to go far beyond the normal boundaries between studying subjects and getting involved in social action. The heart of the course is experiential education. Field trips to cemeteries, morgues, and funeral homes are just the beginning. Students in the course have bonded so deeply with each other and with the professor that they have formed an organization called Be the Change to help local residents with problems of health, housing, and food.

The book is best when the author is reporting. Hayasaki knows how to pick up one thread and tie it expertly to the next. She can describe the macro view of death, moving from denial to more openness, and also the micro view, taking us into the lives of at least five students in depth and of many others in broad strokes.

My only disappointment with the book came at the end. The author and professor take a trip together that helps Bowe heal some difficult memories. The last lines of the book are personal, and they are the professor’s words, not the author’s. As a vicarious member of the Death Class, I was hoping for a conclusion that would leave me in a state of wonder—not for an answer to the mystery of death, but at least a slight shiver from passing so closely beside it.