

Death Becomes Her: Creative Nonfiction and the Rhetoric of Death Acceptance

Exploring Mortality through the Works of
Caitlin Doughty



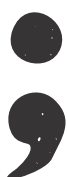
Cristina-Mihaela Botîlcă

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Preface

Originally submitted as a doctoral thesis at the University of Bucharest, Romania, 2023, under the title: "Contemporary Death-Acceptance Literature. Caitlin Doughty's Creative Nonfiction."

The genesis of this book is rooted in my profound desire to overcome the pervasive fear of death that pervades my every step. However, my quest for answers eventually led me to ponder the question of "How?" in a tireless search that took me deep into the heart of the death positivity movement. Along the way, I encountered some of the most prominent figures in this field, including Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Caitlin Doughty, Carla Valentine, Sue Black, and Paul Koudounaris, among many others. Through their books, public lectures, and their unwavering commitment to the community, they have illuminated the areas where we are deficient and provided us with the insights needed to improve our relationship with the Grim Reaper. Yet, the story goes far beyond this.

Currently, as I write this introduction in 2023, fear seems to surround us. A global pandemic that was deadly left its mark on all of us, forcing us to reconsider the importance of death. This pandemic opened two paths for us: either to develop a fear of death or to accept it. Some of us have become even more anxious about mortality, while others have started embracing the inevitable with a unique perspective. It's no surprise that for those who have embraced death positivity, but for those who are afraid of death, it's a tough pill to swallow. This uncomfortable journey cannot be avoided unless we choose to spend the rest of our lives fighting what cannot be resisted.

Death acceptance is by no means a new idea, but there is an unexplored territory to which I am honored to contribute: Caitlin Doughty's contemporary death-acceptance creative nonfiction. So, this thesis falls at the crossroad between literature and culture, more precisely between text analysis and cultural context. The new twenty-first-century genre, creative (or literary) nonfiction, acts as a transportation receptacle for death professionals wishing to open up about their work and what they learnt from continually intersecting with death and dying. Caitlin Doughty is one such powerful voice in the industry; leading a funeral home in California, is the author of three creative nonfiction books (published in 2015, 2017, and 2019), and is the owner of a very successful YouTube channel with almost two million subscribers, she answers all of our questions about death without sugar-coating any uncomfortable piece of information. Her purpose is always to stir up introspection, open and honest conversation about death, and to

shatter the taboo around this subject in a century obsessed with being and remaining young.

Creative nonfiction, a literary genre born in the twentieth-century era of New Journalism, offers writers the unique opportunity to convey factual information through the artful practice of storytelling. This mode of writing enables authors to present harsh truths about mortality in a way that is palatable to readers. In my thesis, I delve into the origins of creative nonfiction and explore its defining characteristics, analyzing how these elements are employed by Caitlin Doughty in her work. Specifically, I examine how Doughty employs creative nonfiction techniques to help readers confront their fear of death—a phenomenon known as thanatophobia. My thought is that, in the profoundly digital century we live in, fiction is not enough to educate the highly technologically literate individual who wishes to deepen their connection with reality. And nonfiction, with its academese and journalese styles, is simply too “cold” for the modern man who is always surrounded by images and seeks to learn through entertainment and visuality. And when it comes to death, what better way to educate ourselves about the mortality of our bodies than creative nonfiction? My approach is based on the educational characteristic of this genre: it helps us all come to terms (or at least attempt to) with our disintegration or physical disappearance.

Creative nonfiction, in its unique capacity, emerges as a potent tool for individuals grappling with an innate fear of mortality. It provides a multifaceted avenue for these individuals to confront and navigate their apprehensions in a profound and purposeful manner. Beyond this, creative nonfiction serves as a beacon of solace in a world where emotional disconnect often prevails, cultivating a distinct form of intimacy between readers and writers. In this literary realm, authors assume the roles of trusted companions, offering assurance that the words they pen reflect genuine truths. In the contemporary landscape, characterized by an increasingly pervasive sense of isolation, creative nonfiction emerges as a potential antidote to the prevailing loneliness that afflicts us. Although it is essential to recognize that the apprehension surrounding death stems from a complex web of factors, it is undeniable that a pervasive sense of solitude, paradoxically more pronounced among younger generations, plays a significant role. Through the medium of creative nonfiction, individuals establish connections with others who share their fears and anxieties, thereby dispelling the illusion of solitary suffering. In this shared vulnerability, we find solace, discover that our struggles are not unique, and may even unearth profound meaning in our lives, and by extension, in our inevitable deaths. In the following chapters, I will provide a detailed overview of each component of this approach.

The first chapter of my book is divided into two sections, both of which are crucial in understanding the evolution of modern nonfiction writing. The initial section delves into the origins of New Journalism, exploring its defining qualities and how it

paved the way for the emergence of creative nonfiction. By examining the impact of its predecessor, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the literary world's growth and the factors that led to the emergence of a new genre in the twenty-first century. The second section of the chapter focuses more specifically on creative nonfiction, detailing its unique characteristics and discussing the contributions of its most prominent representatives, Lee Gutkind and Jack Hart, to the genre's development. By exploring the nuances of this genre and its key players, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the vital role that creative nonfiction plays in the literary landscape.

Chapter Two of this thesis is divided into two key parts, each of which delves into distinct aspects of the death positivity movement. The first section concentrates on the topic of death phobia, acceptance, and the role played by the death positivity movement in the twenty-first century. In this part, the reader is introduced to the influential work of Caitlin Doughty and her significant contribution to the campaign. The section also explores the current cultural context in the Western World, and more specifically in the United States of America and Western Europe, to gain an understanding of the prevailing attitude towards death and dying. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of open conversation around death and the need for individuals to engage in this discourse. It contains two interviews with professionals who have the necessary death-related savvy to explain to us how the attitude around death is currently changing. The second part of Chapter Two delves into the memoirs of two other influential voices within the death positivity movement, Carla Valentine and Sue Black. This section offers a Western European perspective on the movement and is an important addition to the thesis, as it showcases other types of death-positive attitudes. By examining the storytelling techniques utilized by these industry professionals, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the wide variety of narratives that exist within the death positivity movement. Although the majority of this thesis is centered around Doughty and her work, it is crucial to consider other perspectives to ensure that we have a holistic understanding of this movement.

Chapter Three comprises four sections, each detailing Caitlin Doughty's writings based on four creative nonfiction characteristics. In each section, you will also read excerpts from the books used as examples to explain each part. In Section One, I discuss scene-by-scene constructions in Doughty's three books: *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* (2015), *From Here to Eternity* (2017), and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* (2019). In creative nonfiction, scenes are essential because they build the storyworld and take us through the maze that is the narrator's discourse. With the help of scenes, the narrator can also go back and forth in time, tear the narrative apart and build it together to stir up interest and curiosity in the readers. Section Two is about raw description and its importance as a therapy tool by exposure in fighting death phobia. In short, this section looks at some possibly uncomfortable descriptions in Doughty's creative nonfiction to

show us the real faces of death and the process of dying, the purpose being a form of desensitisation and acceptance. In Section Three, I tackle macabre or dark humor in the three books, focusing on three types of humor: humor related to the body-corpse, humor of relatability, and situational humor. It is crucial to specify from the introduction that Doughty never mocks the dead, only the situations she gets herself in, the physiological process of decay and its numerous unusual faces, and her trying to be relatable to young readers using popular culture references and humor of relief. Section Four contains information about the effects of breaking the fourth wall and addressing the reader directly in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*. This is important to analyze because a relationship based on trust and rapport between the author and the reader is part of the foundations of creative nonfiction. Not only will I talk about the written text, but I will also make a parallel between this and Doughty's audio-visual content on YouTube. The purpose is to create a bridge going outside the written story into a multimodal world, leading us to the first section of the following chapter.

Chapter Four contains information about cases of multimodality in Caitlin Doughty's work and how they connect to the impact of the death positivity movement on people. Again, I am going off the page and into the digital world; in Section One, I dissect multimodality and how Doughty uses it to create a reflection of her written content in the digital space she created using numerous social media platforms. In Section Two, I tackle another face of multimodality, returning to the page: illustrations (an essential part of creative nonfiction). Here, I talk about two of the three books of Caitlin Doughty—the only ones with illustrations—*From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, and about literal and conceptual illustrations in them. I am also adding two short interviews with the illustrators Landis Blair and Dianné Ruz, which could shed light on some other questions that might arise from this section.

Chapter Five is also made of two sections about the cultural aspects of creative nonfiction and the current death positivity movement worldwide. Section One tackles cosmopolitanism in *From Here to Eternity*, where it is more prominent than in the other two books, and discusses the cultural essence of Doughty's discourse in the book. Section Two was written with the help of almost five thousand people who agreed to complete my questionnaire about death attitudes in the twenty-first century and answered some uncomfortable questions to offer us insight into their cultural practices and experiences with death and dying. They prove that the death positivity movement is impactful due to the rise of creative nonfiction (among many other factors). I categorized the results based on several factors and selected longer answers representing the thousands I received.

Based on my extensive research, I have arrived at the conclusion that the death positivity movement is not merely a passing fad but rather a viable option that should be seriously considered by more of us. Through the assistance of death professionals who

have become part of the vast community of creative nonfiction writers, the process of comprehending and assimilating complex information pertaining to our greatest fear is made more accessible. Caitlin Doughty's work serves as a prime example of an alternative approach to navigating the subject of mortality by incorporating factual data, information, and even humor.

I am confident that the research I conducted provides concrete evidence that creative nonfiction is a powerful and effective tool for advancing the death-positivity movement. By fostering open and honest dialogue about death, a topic that is often considered taboo, we can confront and overcome the fear and anxiety that so many of us experience. My work aims to contribute to a larger cultural shift towards embracing death as a natural part of life, rather than something to be feared or avoided.

Cristina-Mihaela Botîlcă

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