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**Death Behind the Curtain - Contemporary
Death-acceptance Creative Nonfiction:
Carla Valentine and Sue Black**

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**Death Behind the Curtain - Contemporary Death-acceptance
Creative Nonfiction: Carla Valentine and Sue Black**

Cristina Botîlcă

*Many contemporary authors use creative nonfiction to transmit information to and discuss new or refurbished ideas with their readers. Such is the extent of the discursive variety, that niche subjects have begun to form clusters of essays and books written by professionals about their fields of work. One example is death acceptance and the movement it created at the beginning of our century: death positivity. Many professionals who work as forensic anthropologists or morticians are sharing their experiences working with the dead to engage in open and honest conversation about death. This paper will discuss Carla Valentine's *Past Mortems* (2017) and Sue Black's *All That Remains* (2018) and how the two authors use creative nonfiction to tackle the subject of death phobia and death acceptance in our modern Western society. The subject should interest a large segment (if not the entire) of the population, especially in the context of a strikingly deadly pandemic that forces us to consider death more than we ever had to in the previous decades.*

Keywords: *death acceptance, creative nonfiction, death positivity, Carla Valentine, Sue Black*

Introduction

Creative nonfiction was formally recognized as an independent genre in 1983. Ten years later, Lee Gutkind—one of its vocal representatives—successfully launches the “Creative Nonfiction” magazine, which publishes high-quality creative nonfiction essays and excerpts from larger pieces of writing. From the end of the twentieth century until now, creative nonfiction has gained tremendous popularity, especially in the form of memoirs, autobiographies, and clinical journals. Creativity is connected to the form of the prose, while the nonfiction element describes the truth value of the written content. This paper shows that creative nonfiction means presenting reality (whether yours or someone else’s) as accurately as possible in an artful and engaging way. There are no topics that cannot accommodate such a way of portrayal: from musicians to neuroscientists, from psychoanalysts to death industry workers, professionals from all domains have begun writing about the less visible parts of their jobs and lives for the general public, including information that is specific to their line of work in a creative manner, that is: using the tools of fiction (strong imagery, metaphors, orality), resorting to humour and informal language, and creating a certain rhythm that allows for the concomitant use of several styles, such as scientific, journalistic, or biographical.

In the death industry, literature has always aimed to answer questions that most people are afraid to ask: What happens behind the curtain—or the mortuary doors—in reality? How are the lives of the people working with the dead? How do they have the courage to look death in the eye and remain sane and socially functioning? Creative nonfiction allows us to look both into the private lives of these people and into their interesting work with all things death related. Thus, the aim of this paper is to discuss how Carla Valentine’s *Past Mortems* (2017) and Sue Black’s *All That Remains* (2018) tackle the topic of death acceptance and death phobia in the modern Western world. The three main ideas I will focus on are: (1) the way in which Sue Black links death to a form of closure, especially in forensic studies; (2) Carla Valentine’s raw description, which forces us to internalize uncomfortable death images with the purpose of acknowledging mortality; (3) Black’s way of coping with her job by splitting her cognitive self in two, and Valentine’s belief that she cannot possibly differentiate between her working self and her private self. These three sub-topics will help us understand how facts, personal confessions, and creative storytelling build a manifesto for death acceptance and against death phobia.

Creative Nonfiction

We cannot talk about creative nonfiction without mentioning its proverbial parent, American New Journalism, and how much it influenced the shaping of this new genre. New Journalism improved the American mainstream journalism—which was characterized by a fixed set of rules (Webb 1974)—by replacing the following discourse and philosophical assumptions that journalists were expected

to honour: rationality, which implies that the main characteristic of the man is to reason; externality, which states that reality is external and can only be understood if we use our five senses; uniformity, or the idea that humans are similar and, when journalists write about them, they should not focus too much on differences; statism, which highlights the idea that, irrespective of time and space, society is always the same; atomism, or the fact that reality has to be split into pieces if we seek to grasp the bigger picture. New Journalism goes all the way to the opposite end of the spectrum and replaces these five concepts with the following: emotion (rationality is not the key characteristic of the human being, but being able to feel, dissect, and acknowledge emotions is), internal reality (not only do people perceive the same experience differently, but their internal worlds are also diverse; by piecing various testimonies together, journalists end up with a multifaceted and complex story), diversity (the fact that multiple individuals are different matters because we can now understand why their perceptions of the same reality that everybody else experiences may sometimes clash), dynamism (society undergoes continuous, though unnoticeable, changes; it is a living organism that shifts and moves continuously, together with the individuals inside it), and wholism (reality does not have to be cut up into smaller pieces, but perceived from a distance; although individual experience is essential, the journalist must be able to see and present a multi-layered experience, so that reality can be seen as a whole).

Wolfe (1973) is the first to acknowledge the existence of four stylistic devices that New Journalism depends on: the third person point of view, which allows for numerous perspectives and scenes watched through the eyes of other subjects or characters; scene-by-scene construction (this will become important in creative nonfiction), which insists upon attention to detail regarding when and how we switch from one scene to another; extensive dialogue, or the presence of natural human speech, often grammatically imperfect, which gives the readers the impression that they are overhearing a conversation between two people who do not have the slightest idea they are listened to; status-life symbols, or recording all communication that happens between people, including gestures, habits, styles of eating, of walking, ways of behaving towards various people, poses, glances, and other symbolic elements that we can find within a scene. Being the lead engineer of New Journalism, Wolfe's opinion mattered and gave others the impulse and the courage to go even further in this narrative adventure.

The switch made by New Journalism allowed nonfiction writers to expand their portfolio by adding personal touches to their (until then, quite rigid) texts. In 1990, Barbara Lounsberry was one of the first writers to categorize Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and John McPhee (representatives of the journalistic genre) as creative nonfiction writers. "Our age has stopped subscribing to the belief that the novel is the highest form of literary imagination" (p. xi), she writes in *The Art of Fact*, admitting that creative or literary nonfiction allows authors to "have the best of both worlds. They can gain the reader credence novelists have forever sought by insisting that their fictions were true, and through the arts of literature, they can make their visions of the world memorable, influential or even immortal" (p. xviii). And thus, we arrive at what we now call creative nonfiction, which can be best defined by Lee Gutkind: "Ultimately, the

primary goal of the creative nonfiction writer is to communicate information, just like a reporter, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction” (2007, p. xi).

Lee Gutkind and Jack Hart are two of the twenty-first-century voices that militate for creative nonfiction. Its main ‘secret’, they say, is having a visual structure. Hart (2012) writes that a scene must have five parts: exposition, rising action, crisis, climax. Gutkind, on the other hand, needs a visual scheme, as “creative nonfiction is an amalgam of style, substance, information and story” (2012, p. 138) and one could easily get lost in the labyrinth of discourse. For him, this is a dance, whose objective is “to embed information inside the scene or story so that the movement between blocks is seamless” (p. 138). The main goal is not to bore the reader. The embedded information helps create a crack in the scene and allows the reader to take a break from the linear story and plunge into a different style. Again, diversity is exciting and engaging. Thus, creative nonfiction aims to capture the readers’ attention and entertain in an informative way.

The following three sections will discuss exactly how two creative nonfiction writers (as I call them myself, not knowing whether they see themselves as such) manage to embed information about the death industry within scenes from their personal and professional lives with humour, wit, and a touch of intimacy.

Sue Black’s *All That Remains* - Death and Forensic Studies

Professor Sue Black is one of the world’s most acclaimed forensic anthropologists and anatomists. Her expertise and her passion for the death industry made her the lead anthropologist on the British Forensics Team after the 1999 war crimes in Kosovo and after the Indian Ocean tsunami in Thailand in 2004. *All That Remains: A Life in Death* is an “unsentimental exploration” (Smith 2018) of what death looks like in forensic studies. Her account is a combination of testimonials related to her professional life and very few personal details that she sprinkles throughout the book.

The main word that comes to mind when you finish reading the book is “closure”. Black puts so much emphasis on finding closure after a loved one’s death, that she does her best to offer families intact bodies after war crimes, disappearances, or natural disasters. In chapter ten, she details her experience in Kosovo, in 1999. The Kosovo War, from 1998 to 1999, ended with the death of more than 13,000 civilians of numerous nationalities, among whom there were children and women. Besides the fact that Black loudly states her opinion (with which I could not agree more) that no war, no matter the cause, justifies the killing of innocent people, she successfully gives us a glimpse of what death looks like behind the curtain of war: unfair, unjustified, and traumatic for those who are left behind to witness it. In chapter eleven, she talks about natural disasters, more specifically the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, after which she helped the professionals in their mission to assign identities to the found bodies. When something like this happens, “differences and egos have to be put to one side and everyone must pull together for the common good” (2018, p. 259). This tells us that finding, identifying the dead, and giving them back to their families is above

any interpersonal relation or personal interest. In the same chapter, she tells us all about the importance of having a DVI (Disaster Victim Identification) program and team, so we can give the families the closure they need and obey the rituals that each family follows, no matter the cultural background. Ritualising grief is important for those who suffer from it, because the funeral is “a reassuring template for mourners to follow at a time of raw emotion” (p. 96), as Black states. This is why forensic studies allow for this framework to happen, whether that involves expressing the grief or hiding it in public settings.

Preserving the dignity of the dead is another thing that concerns Black in her work. She militates for dying at home, surrounded by familiar things and warm memories: “A hospital ward, devoid of warmth, love, character and memories, can be such a sterile environment for the dying and their loved ones to try to prepare themselves for the most personal, private and irreversible of moments” (p. 83). It seems that, in Western cultures, dying at the hospital is the response we have in the face of death. We tend to “hide it away when maybe what we need to do is to embrace it and celebrate it” (p. 85). And this acceptance involves treating the dead with the respect they deserve, especially in the death industry. We witness her behaviour toward her uncle’s body—an experience that never allows her to fear death again—and we read about her small gestures of respect and preparation. When her father asks her to check if her uncle’s body is ready for the burial, she feels “cataclysmic shock” and realises “the enormity” of what her father asks of her. She remembers: “There was no way of knowing just how prepared I was for this and how it might affect me. I approached the coffin, hearing my own heartbeat in my ears, and peered inside. But this wasn’t Uncle Willie. I took a sharp intake of breath” (p. 65). The body of her uncle looked different: no laughter lines, no ruddy complexion, a blue tinge on his lips. She remembers checking whether his corneas were in place, whether his organs had not been stolen, and the most bizarre thing of all, whether he still had a pulse (after being in the funeral home freezer for three days). But, as she herself admits, “death and grief do strange things to a mind” (p. 69). By letting us into her head, by showing us her thought process behind her reaction to her favourite uncle dying, we get a feeling of relief, a feeling that we might not be as alone as we thought on our death acceptance journey.

For Black, “consoling the bereaved” and “honouring the dead” (p. 98) are two extremely important parts of her job. We notice her passion for this in chapter eight, where she talks about an unidentified body (after she already details two solved disappearance cases in chapter seven), whose family has not been found so far. He is called “the man from Balmore” (p. 196). The undoubtable proof that Black still seeks closure and that we are dealing with nonfiction is the man’s description at the end of the book, where we find information such as details about the remains and his clothing. The information is also found on the website *Locate International CIO*, which offers information to the public about missing people and unidentified bodies. Sue Black appeals to her readers: “Somewhere there must be a family who is missing the man from Balmore. It is our fervent wish to be able to give him back to them” (p. 196). The case is still open to this day.

Solemnity, next to dignity, is crucial to Black. She is somewhat disappointed of the secularization of death. “Gone are the weeks of professional mourning of bygone years, the mourning jewellery worn from the Middle Ages until Victorian times, [...] the doffing of caps as a funeral cortege passes, the memento mori” (p. 97). It may be so, but there are some remnants of these “bygone” times that resurface in the form of modern outbursts of creativity (usually, as coping mechanisms for those who create them). One example is Ashley Zhang, a New York-based designer who sells antique jewellery and who recently added a mourning collection to her website (*Ashley Zhang Jewelry*) and confesses that, after losing her dear father, she stumbled upon a Victorian mourning piece which, instead of bringing her sadness, had the exact opposite effect on her, and this was the inspiration for her new creative endeavour. Another such example is Stacey Fay, a jeweller from Philadelphia who believes that “mourning jewellery offer a way to wear your story” (Fay 2019) and has a line of pieces that honour the death of a loved one. So, secularization might happen on an individual and cognitive level, that is: we refuse to believe in an afterlife or in anything else that might come after death. We treat it unkindly, we see it as a “hostile stranger” (Black 2019, p. 2), and with all our modern sophistication, “we still opt to take cover behind familiar, safe walls of conformity and denial, rather than opening up to the idea that maybe death is not the demon we fear” (p. 4). We do not trust it because we do not know it. And, in order to know it, we have to experience it. “There is only one way to discover the truth about dying, death and being dead, and that is to do it, which we will all get round to eventually” (p. 338), so why fear inevitability?

Black teaches us that forensic studies help us all: educationally, as well as emotionally. By studying the human body, we learn even more about the living. One such example that Black discusses in her book is the advancements brought about by Walter Thiel, whose goal was to find a way of preserving bodies in such a way as to ensure a healthy work environment for students. He came up with a solution made up of water, alcohol, potassium nitrate salts, ammonium, formalin, and ethylene glycol. After 39 years of trial-and-error experiments, he was happy with the formula. This is how Thiel submersion tanks appeared: to better preserve the bodies that anatomists and students will use to learn. At the end of chapter thirteen, Black admits that: “I quite fancy the idea, when my time comes, of floating peacefully in the Black Tank. How cool would that be?” (p. 325). She encourages donating the body for scientific purposes. About this, she remembers one man named Arthur, who wanted to donate his body to her students, and who asked to witness a dissection, so he can know what will happen to his body after death. Black was so nervous and emotional, that she tells us it was “an intense experience” that had “a wonderful impact on everyone involved” (p. 116): students, professors, and Arthur. Here is how forensic studies can help some individuals to accept their mortality and to make decisions accordingly.

In terms of creative nonfiction, the difference that I myself find surprising is that Black does not list her sources anywhere (and I do not mean sources of general knowledge, but specific sources from where she takes surveys or studies). For instance, she mentions the bereavement theory developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut at the very end of the twentieth century (p. 96), a “recent

European survey” that shows the Netherlands as the country in which doctors are trusted the most (p. 108), and the story of an apothecary who, in the seventeenth century, made jam from human blood as a cure for certain health conditions such as epilepsy and consumption (p. 123). Not only does she mention these pieces of information, but she also synthesises them for us. I expected to see a list of sources at the end of each chapter or at the end of the book, mentioning the chapter in which that source was used, for further research or just to quench our curiosity and our thirst for similar information. This is not a drawback, which means that the book is still, in my view, creative nonfiction; it just means that it did not meet all the expectations I had when I started reading it. More than that, the construction of the scenes is not as complex and multi-layered as we find in other creative nonfiction books. For instance, in chapter seven, Black talks about two disappearance cases without breaking the fourth wall or creating a pause in the narrative to introduce some other information. She details these two cases as much as possible. It all looks like an ongoing presentation that does not give us any break. The scene does not seem to change, and we do not get any window into the intimacy of the author’s mind. However, throughout the book, we find attempts at adding comic scenes, especially at the end of the chapters and in places where the author might have felt tension or fear building up. “Death and humour have always been close companions” (p. 217), Black admits. For instance, after the emotional chapter ten—the one which describes Black’s experience in Kosovo identifying the dead bodies of innocent people—the author remembers the time she thought she found a bomb in one of the scenes she was analysing together with her colleagues: “I learned a great deal about life, death, my profession and myself as a person. And one other vital lesson that will always stand me in good stead: never, ever cut the blue wire” (p. 252). This diffuses the weight of the information we have just received and is a common thing in Black’s discourse.

So, combining information from the field of anatomy, forensic studies, and anthropology with personal information and memories, *All That Remains* stands as proof that talking about death with dignity, solemnity, and a bit of humour can be done, and—because the book was a Sunday Times bestseller—that the readers expect more and more professionals to come forward and let us draw the curtain that ‘protects’ us from something that we should be embracing. The following chapter will show us another way that we can take this courageous step, and that is: raw description. As we are about to see, Carla Valentine does not hide behind words, not even if she risks making us uncomfortable, because her only goal is to create awareness.

Valentine’s *Post Mortems* - Death and Raw Description

Carla Valentine begins her narration *in media res*: we have the feeling that we are interrupting a scene that unfolds on a stage. The author is abrupt, determined, and sharp:

Anorexic. Dentist.

They were two words I'd never seen written together before but they were, in black smudged ink, on the 97A.

'Anorexic. Dentist'.

I took a sip of my coffee while perusing the rest of the paperwork. I enjoyed this part of the morning: the calm before the storm. The mortuary's senior technician, Jason, was happily hunched over the latest edition of the *News of the World* with a cup of tea. As a veteran technician, he had seen it all, and he appeared less interested in the information we received on the day's cases than in the plot of *EastEnders* or the latest football scores. (2018, p. 1)

The first two words "Anorexic. Dentist" tell us nothing. As if the author could read our minds, she herself admits: "They were two words I'd never seen written together before", so we get to discover together who this dentist is and why he is anorexic. Another new piece of information we get is "97A". What is it? We have to read on to find out (the explanation is two paragraphs below). This *in media res* beginning makes us want to go on reading; it does not give us the chance to get bored and close the book. Valentine drinks her coffee and tells us that what we are witnessing now is "the calm before the storm". Now we must stick around and find out what happens next. We also meet another character in the book, Jason, and it seems as though we are interfering in their private little moment at work: she is having her coffee, he is reading *News of the World* and sipping his tea. This little scene is the equivalent of a 'hush!' as a play or a concert begins. We pay attention not to miss something important. But the scene does not last, because the narrator creates a rip in the plot and explains to us what the 97A form is, what the role of a coroner in the UK is, what its etymology is, and what the criteria for a post-mortem examination in the UK are. Then, two pages later, we go back to the initial scene. This is what Hart calls "explanatory narrative" (2012, p. 186), or what Barthes and Duisit (1975) describe as *catalyses* (catalysers). In fiction, they represent constitutive events, but in nonfiction, they are pieces of information that help the story move forward. Just as raw description does.

Raw description is a first-hand, unfiltered, and unretouched account of something that the author witnesses in real life. Usually, it contains strong verbs and adjectives that involve movement and depict a physical scene that would usually be skipped, shortened, or sugar-coated because it makes the reader uncomfortable or might be considered gruesome. The word 'raw' entails the existence of a metaphorical open wound, painful and sore, that we are forced to look at while it heals. It could also express undisguised emotions and blunt, unembellished, and honest portrayals of reality. Besides offering us the opportunity to experience a form of cognitive behavioural therapy¹, raw description also satisfies our—slightly morbid—curiosity. One such example,

¹Cognitive behavioural therapy (or CBT) usually involves facing our fears, using role-play to prepare for meeting those fears, and interacting with what makes us fearful in the first place, so we can change our thinking patterns and dispose of certain phobias that keep us from living life to the fullest.

among many others, that we can find in Valentine's *Past Mortems*, is the description of an evisceration:

First, some exploration, as he [Jason] used his non-cutting hand to feel behind each lung [...] he tackled the bowel next, their slick, curled lengths removed in one long string [...]. Jason returned to the lungs, using the PM40 to detach them, again with another scooping motion [...] he loosened each kidney and its surrounding fat [...] used the blade to make a nifty slice across the top of the lungs which effectively severed the lower part of the windpipe and the food pipe [...] he pulled the heart and lungs down and away from the spine [...]. Soon, he was holding aloft a mass of dripping viscera which contained most of the organs from the body cavity [...]. (p. 12)

The entire page is one big paragraph of raw description. Its form makes you want to read it while holding your breath. The naturalness of Jason's movements paired with Valentine's vivid description make for a horrific scene in the mortuary. Jack Hart, one of the representatives of creative nonfiction, writes that "verbs signify action. And, if you're going to keep a story moving, you'll need lots of good ones" (2012, p. 111). Verbs such as 'to feel', 'to detach', 'to loosen', 'to sever', and 'to pull' create texture and make the narrative more 'muscular', pushing the action forward. Noun phrases containing adjectives such as "slick, curled lengths", "scooping motion", and "dripping viscera" are extremely visual. Their effect is to create an image in the readers' minds that they cannot shake off, forcing them to observe and acknowledge the possible uncomfortableness that might arise and find a way past it.

When she dedicates almost an entire chapter to the process of decay, she warns us: "If you're the kind of person who can't watch gruesome horror scenes in films, or jumps when a spider or rat appears, then you might want to skip this next section" (p. 88), which is a raw description of decay, split into five stages: fresh, bloat, active, advanced, and dry remains. In the fresh stage, she mentions *rigor mortis* (post-mortem rigidity), *livor mortis* (lividity or hypostasis), and *algor mortis* (the cooling of the corpse); in the bloating stage, she explains in detail how the body swells up and changes colour because of the microbes; in the stage of active decay, Valentine uses comic relief to allow us a break from the visuals that we create in our minds; in the stage of advanced decay, the maggot makes itself at home in the body and is "encased in a hard material inside which it will remain for ten to twenty days" (p. 102); and in the dry remains phase she leaves the narrative open by asking us why the skeleton is "more acceptable for general consumption² than the other" (p. 105). And, as I noticed myself when I was reading her book, I became less tensed when I reached the fifth part of the decay process. Probably because the skeleton is empty of human features, we do not assign any human-like characteristics to it. We see skeletons on display in museums, in controlled environments, but never do we see a collection of bodies which are in the third stage of decay that the public has easy access to. This is why raw description is so

²She means "consumption" in a visual form.

powerful: it creates restlessness in the reader, which leads to even more curiosity and possibly introspection about man's mortal state.

Raw description might also be linked to voyeurism. Even Valentine admits that “watching someone carry out an autopsy is, in many ways, like watching someone have sex. This is what struck me the very first time I saw one. Before you close the book in misplaced disgust—or, conversely, read on with expectant carnal glee—let me explain” (p. 107). She addressed the reader yet again, posting a disclaimer as to what we are about to witness, compares death to sex³ in terms of a transgressive element, and uses relief humour to eliminate some of the tension created by her statement: during the autopsy, “there is nudity (the cadaver; hopefully not the technician)” (p. 108). The resemblance between the two can be found at the level of taboo. The need we have to cross the line between what society considers as uncomfortable, distasteful, and even villainous, and what we are curious about—regardless of its nature—is one of the many arguments that support the use of raw description, especially in matters such as death, the dead body, and the processes it undergoes post-mortem.

Carla Valentine does not shy away from information that some might be bothered by but creates the opportunity to come face to face with a fear that has been haunting us since we first learnt about it, and she answers some of our most hidden questions: What happens when the mortuary doors are shut? What happens to the body after the coffin closes? What does the life of a mortician look like? These three questions create honest and open conversation about death. Their answers offer us information that might help us feel less unprepared and more knowledgeable about what expects us all, eventually (and hopefully) leading to death acceptance.

Death and I - Two Different Versions of the Same Relationship with Death

In *All That Remains*, Sue Black describes the death of her father seemingly quite full of detachment:

His breathing slowed, slowed further, deepened, and then stopped. I thought it was all over but then he took a few more shallow breaths. There was a short spell of agonal breathing—gasping, basically—before the sound of the death rattle, caused by mucus and fluid collecting in the back of the throat, where it can no longer be coughed away. Finally, the last gasp, nothing more than a brainstem reflex. Within a matter of seconds, when I saw the foam from his lungs appearing on his lips and nose, which meant there was no air left in them, I knew he was dead. It was as simple as that. No fuss, no distress, no pain, no hurry—a gradual giving out of power. (2019, p. 93)

By offering us this raw and quite cold, I might add, description, and ending it with “It was as simple as that”, the author does two things: (1) She offers us the opportunity to see death just as it is: the failure of all organs and the ceasing of an existence that we desperately try to hang on to; what is left behind is a mere

³Yet another topic that can produce many raw descriptions.

carcass that should mean nothing to us except in the context of ritual and tradition. As the author states earlier in her book, when she tells us about her favourite uncle's death, the body that is left behind is different from the memory of the person living in our mind and soul; and (2) She tells us that reactions can differ from person to person when we must face the death of someone dear to us: some might fall into a pit of despair and not be able to imagine life without them, others might see it as something irreversible, unavoidable, and completely natural. There being no explanation for the last gasp but "nothing more than a brainstem reflex", not at all the last try of man to hang onto dear life, the daughter of the former military man, raised in a family that she herself remembers not being used to showing their feelings or occasionally saying "I love you", has no other choice but to say "It was as simple as that". Here is Black's attitude towards death in her book: detachment.

While we might expect her to talk about her fear of death or dead bodies (accumulated over the years), she confesses that "I make it a rule never to get personally involved" (p. 286). She also answers a question most of us might have for her: How do you cope with what you see and do? "In response, I usually joke that it involves large amounts of alcohol and illegal substances, but the truth is I don't think I've ever taken an illegal substance in my life and, other than the odd Jack or two, even drinking doesn't do it for me these days. Do I wake up in the night sweating? Do I find it difficult to sleep? Do scenes from my work replay over and over in my mind? The answer to all of the above is a rather boring and mundane no" (pp. 287-288). She explains that the secret is to separate as perfectly as possible the professional life from the private life, just as she teaches us to separate the dead body from the memory of the dead person who lives on in our mind. Apparently, the secret to accepting death and to learn not to be touched by its apparently unexplainable exploits is to be a master of cognitive compartmentalization, which she also uses when her favourite uncle Willie dies. At the time, he existed for her on two planes: "in the present as the physical form in front of me in the coffin and in my memory as the living person. The two manifestations of him did not match and there was no reason for them to do so as they were not the same" (p. 67). There is a—perhaps healthy—rupture between the body-as-object and the body-as-person. Black is capable of differentiating between the memory of uncle Willie and what she saw in that coffin, indirectly teaching us that this is a valid and valuable method to accept death and to not be frightened by a dead body.

The cognitive compartmentalization I mentioned in the previous paragraph is explained later on by Black as "a detached, clinical box inside my head" (p. 294), which she never opens, not even when she is surrounded by close friends and family, because "if forensic experts allowed themselves to dwell on the immensity of human pain or on the gruesome spectacles we encounter, we would be ineffective scientists" (p. 294). She claims that she feels no need to address or talk about particular cases in her work, not even with a therapist. As I stated in the first section of this paper, Black feels that she must obey a certain solemnity and safeguard the vulnerability and the secrets of others, be them living or dead. She seems to have a lot of self-control, something that allows her to not access

memories that might haunt or cause her some sort of emotional and psychological pain. Her reasoning is that she protects the privacy of those she worked with and their dead, and that she protects herself from “a Pandora’s box-type meltdown” (p. 296). But I wonder whether this is the emotionally healthy choice when you carry such a burden...

When it comes to her own death, only at the end of the book does Black dabble into this subject. And because she feels that our relationship with death should be one of “comfortable camaraderie” (p. 328), she seeks that sort of attitude in herself, as well. Her father struggled with dementia and died in an asylum after forgetting how to walk and talk, refusing to eat or drink anything. So, Black confesses: “I want to be independent and mobile right up to my last hour on this earth and for that I would willingly sacrifice quantity for quality” (p. 332). She also says that she would take the assisted dying pill if that were available, that perhaps society would finally let us “plan our death rather than endure it” (p. 334). She refuses any kind of CPR, transplants, or drip-feeding, as she is somehow looking forward to finally experiencing death: “I would like to be properly alive to have my personal conversation with her unencumbered by pharmaceuticals” (p. 335). She does not feel any sort of fear or anguish, because “I know I won’t be alone. [...] she [death] will show me what to do” (p. 336). So, Black has complete faith in herself that she will not fall prey to the demons that she continuously fed in her work, but she will let herself fall into the arms of death when time is right. This attitude tells us what a rigorous and self-controlled person she is, knowing when to differentiate between the personal and the professional sphere, so as not to live a tormented life and get to enjoy what life—but mostly death—has to offer.

Carla Valentine, on the other hand, also because her job does not involve so many violent deaths and war crimes, chooses to see her work as part of herself. “Me the person and Me the caretaker of the dead are two entities that have become indivisible” (p. 32). As opposed to Black, who explains that she does her best to keep the two personas apart, or else she would suffer from breakdowns, Valentine made peace with the side of her that interacts with death. We encounter more comic attempts in her book than in Black’s, which proves a more playful and flexible attitude. For instance, she creates comic moments by separating the punchline from the rest of the paragraphs, so that the reader has to take a short break while reading to enhance the element of surprise:

I often needed to remove maggots from my clothing during autopsies, and once even from my bra.
It was unusual.
The maggots themselves weren’t unusual, just the fact that they had managed to access my bra. (p. 85)

And many such humorous breaks can be found throughout the book, together with popular culture references, such as: Starbucks, Rice Krispies, Muppets, and Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies”. This clearly shows us that Valentine does not take things too seriously—in a good way—and presents to us a different side of the Hollywoodian mortician (who usually resembles Lurch from *The Addams Family*). However, the book contains some points which break the informal and

playful rhythm of the discourse, when she tackles emotional moments that happened at work and in her personal life. For instance, our author has to take care of a little boy's funeral; in her eyes, he looked like a "cherubic child", like one of "Botticelli's angles" (p. 219). She starts sobbing and listens to the echoes of her voice in the empty fridge room. " 'I don't cry,' I thought. 'I have a job to do.' But even as I heard the words in my head I was scooping the cold, dead toddler out of the fridge and my tears were falling" (p. 219). It appears that her attempt at Black's cognitive compartmentalisation fails, but she herself admits that this is a rare moment: "When you work with the dead, you cannot weep for every single case you encounter—you'd be utterly useless. It's a defence mechanism that works perfectly well until something snaps" (p. 219). It makes us wonder whether Black, beyond all her trials and tribulations of keeping her so-called demons locked up in a box which she never opens, has such moments of defeat. However, while Black does imagine what her own death would look like, we never get such introspection from Valentine. Instead, she welcomes us inside her most personal and private thoughts about her love life and her miscarriage. She shares with us her deepest feelings and emotions and lets us fill in the blanks regarding how and when she would like to die. One thing is certain: that she, just like Black, is not afraid to experience it and does not dwell on the irrational death phobia that engulfs modern man.

The discourse of the two authors differs in terms of personality, tone, and attitude toward death. Their behaviour is always respectful for the dead (this is where the two converge), but when it comes to death itself, Valentine is always childishly curious, cheerfully talkative, and manifesting a knowledge of popular culture that would attract young readers from all over the world. Black is more reserved; her humour in the book is never toward death, but toward her life or something that happened to her outside work. These distinctions might be based on the age difference between the two, on life experience, on the everlasting generational gap, and on their two slightly different professions: Valentine is an anatomical pathology technologist⁴, and Black is a forensic anthropologist⁵. There is a higher possibility that the latter hears, sees, and learns more disturbing things than the former, so the psychological burden might be more significant, thus a more callous attitude is required and even encouraged. Moreover, Valentine uses the pronoun "he" (p. 45) to talk about Death (maybe because she also compares it to the Grim Reaper, who is usually considered to be male), while Black uses "she" (p. 336). In some cultures (i.e., English and German), Death is personified in male form, while in others (i.e., Romanian, Spanish), Death is female. Valentine and Black are both British: Valentine was born in Liverpool, and Black in Inverness.

⁴An APT assists pathologists who conduct post-mortem examinations, takes samples of fluids and tissue, reconstructs the body so that it can be viewed by loved ones. An ATP also has to process the paperwork, admit the deceased, and arranges visits for families who wish to see their dead.

⁵A forensic anthropologist assists at the identification of the dead whose remains are mutilated, burned, even unrecognizable as a result of violent deaths (such as genocides, war crimes, plane crashes, and so on).

Their cultural background should be quite similar, but apparently not only do they have different attitudes toward death, but they also personify it differently.

This shows us how large the spectrum is in terms of death acceptance. While some death industry workers need to self-regulate to avoid having breakdowns and overexposing themselves to tragedy, others choose to adopt a more light-hearted attitude in their work, to keep themselves sane. As much as these outward behaviours differ, the inward feeling toward the dead and their families is still the same, characterised by respect and solemnity. Death, on the other hand, is a companion for both Valentine and Black, a co-worker who sometimes shows up late, who is often noisy and loud, and whose job is permanent.

Conclusions

Death-acceptance creative nonfiction is a powerful environment for death industry workers to talk about their job and their attitude toward death without feeling any restraint whatsoever. Readers are looking for honesty and a certain element of shock and surprise, which Sue Black and Carla Valentine offer plentifully. In *All That Remains* and *Past Mortems*, they show us what life looks like behind mortuary doors, what happens to the human body after death (violent or natural), and what tragedy looks like for the people who must be the link between families and their dead. Black paints a solemn picture of her life as a forensic anthropologist, allowing us to peek behind the curtain of war, natural disaster, and murder. Valentine takes us on a rollercoaster filled with witty humour, riveting information, and moments of sentimental confession. They both help us come closer to the idea of mortality by offering us choices and inspiration.

In the twenty-first century, such books are meant to change the way in which we see death: as an enemy that must be avoided at all costs and as a criminal that always takes but never gives back. And yet we forget that she (Death) is a companion that stays with us since birth and, the more we know about her, the closer a relationship we could have. I am well aware that the era of technology and virtual reality tempts us to consider immortality as something achievable (not only in Silicon Valley), but death has been here long before us and will be here long before we are gone, no matter how much we artificially and desperately postpone it. The only things that can help us manage its approaching are information, honesty, and sharing what we know and feel with others, so they can find inspiration and comfort in the thought that they are not alone on their death-acceptance journey.

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