



## Final Chapters: How Famous Authors Died

*Jim Bernhard*

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**A fascinating look at how writers through the ages have approached death—in both the literary and literal senses.**

“Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.” –William Saroyan, Pulitzer Prize–winning author

Dying has always been a topic for great novelists, poets, and playwrights to wrestle with—but how did they themselves shuffle off this mortal coil? As this compendium of true stories reveals, they did not always bow out gracefully—but often, they did depart in memorable ways.

Aeschylus was conked on the head by a turtle falling from the sky. Molière collapsed while playing the role of a hypochondriac in one of his plays. Edgar Allan Poe was found semi-comatose in someone else’s clothes before taking his last breath. Sherwood Anderson was felled by a toothpick in a martini. Sir Francis Bacon was poisoned by a raw chicken. And rumor has it that Dylan Thomas expired after eighteen straight whiskeys in a row.

Even after death, some unfortunates still met with indignity: Thomas Hardy’s expunged heart, meant to be interred next to his beloved wife, was eaten by his cat.

Whether they be sad, ironic, ignoble, ghastly, or shocking (literally, in the case of Thomas Merton), here are the stories of more than one hundred writers’ encounters with death, spanning nearly 2,500 years—and what each had to say on the subject, revealing varying degrees of fear, uncertainty, denial, acceptance, and humor. In *Final Chapters*, “Jim Bernhard gives a respectful nod to the understandable fascination most of us have with death...an often morbid but sometimes merry reminder that all flesh is grass, no matter how talented or rich or famous the bones it cloaks” (*Star Tribune*)

## Final Chapters: How Famous Authors Died Details

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## From Reader Review Final Chapters: How Famous Authors Died for online ebook

### Pamela says

I was so excited to read this book, and to be truthful, at first I was a bit disappointed. It might have just been me but I had a hard time getting into it; it just seemed dry and boring. However, I stuck with it, and ended up enjoying it. I have it 4 stars because of the number of authors they covered—great scope. Brief info about the writer's life, a bit about the spiritual or religious beliefs (or lack thereof) how this person died, what funeral services were and the site of burial are all present. There are times when the author cites passages of each writer's work that go on and on and on; that was a turn off for me. Citing a few lines of a well-known work would have been sufficient. In one "chapter" I found myself skipping whole pages because I didn't really want to read the writer's poem again.

Overall I did enjoy, and if you're interested in this topic, by all means read this book. Just realize that you may find yourself yawning or skimming in parts.

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### Oliver Hodson says

This book was more of a compendium than a commentary and although hard work, at times, to read because of that, the overall effect was a meditation on death through a western and creative lens. The poems and bon mots on death were the best part of it and Bernhard's own witticisms shine through, when he feels appropriate to make this a tome one can feel great affection for. Now i'm off to drink gin and fail college.

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### Nikki says

Fun trivia book showcasing writers' views on death and how they died. A bit morbid, but came with many fun facts I didn't previously know. Did you know that Jane Austen's books have never been out of print since the day they were published?

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### Judy says

This was an interesting book, telling of many authors and how, when, where they died.

Starts with the classic authors, Scorates, Plato and goes through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance period, the Enlightenment era, Romantic, Victorian and Modern eras.

I enjoyed this, and it may help on a Jeopardy question some day.

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### Jonas Saul says

This is a fabulous book for anyone interested in learning more about their favorite authors. I had no idea that Mark Twain was a pseudonym and that his real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Nor did I know that Agatha Christie was born, Agatha Mary Clarissa Millar, and she not only took on the name Agatha Christie

for her 66 murder mysteries, she used the pen name, Mary Westmacott to write romance.

Or how about F. Scott Fitzgerald being related to the writer of The Star Spangled Banner. I had no idea that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle killed Sherlock off in the story titled, The Final Problem. But after great protest from readers, and even a call from his mother, he resurrected Holmes in The Hound of the Baskervilles.

How about Robert Louis Stevenson being born from a long line of lighthouse engineers. Or the name Allan in Edgar Allan Poe is the foster name of the family that raised him after he was orphaned at the age of two.

This and so much more is discovered in this fabulous, well-researched, book!

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### **Michelle Graf says**

It was alright, gave a brief overview of the author's life, works, and death, and how that factored into their writings. Though it got into religion heavily, which kind of makes sense. The idea, or lack thereof, of an afterlife deals with both spirituality and death. But it felt like it was more about their religious beliefs than their idea on the afterlife, which wasn't what I expected when I read the summary. Overall, it was a good read, and covered writers from all sorts of media, including books, poems, theater, and reviews. I'd recommend it if you have the time.

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### **Anne says**

This is not just about the deaths and death-related philosophies of famous authors. It's a whirlwind tour of influential authors (including novelists, philosophers, playwrights, and poets) from Ancient Greece until now. Each author is introduced with a brief biography, a glimpse of their writings on the subject of death and the afterlife, and a description of the circumstances surrounding their deaths. I particularly enjoyed the occasional random laugh-out-loud witticisms of the author.

Mostly, though, these are the thoughts that were left with me as I finished the book:

Didn't do well in college? Didn't go to college? Dropped out of college? Flunked out of college? Expelled from college? Never fear, there is a lucrative career just waiting for you: be a writer!

You live a life of dissipation, flitting from one addiction to another? You spend your days in an opium or liquor induced haze? No worries, that's no impediment to your career of choice. If you're a writer.

You have no knowledge of successful human relationships because you've never actually had one? You can still write about them.

Morality is not your thing? You think fidelity is for the birds? Go ahead, write a love story! It'll be a best seller!

You have no clearly defined beliefs or philosophies about life, death, humanity, and God? That's ok, just make stuff up and write about it. Or just write within the context of the prevailing moral and religious philosophy of the day, and no one will be the wiser.

Seriously, it's kind of scary that these are the people who have been informing the public mind for many centuries.

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### **Virginia Bernhard says**

Witty, erudite, sometimes macabre, sometimes merry! A romp through literary history from Aeschylus to Ebert.

A fun read! Keep it on the night table for regular doses.

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### **Melissa says**

I was drawn to this book the moment I saw the cover. I already know how many authors died but to have a book on the subject was a must read. Each author has a few pages that contain a brief biography on them including notable works. The main focus was their beliefs and if they believed in an afterlife or not. Each biography also detailed the authors final moments, how they died if known or the most popular theories, funerals, and finally where they are buried. An interesting and enjoyable book.

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### **Karl Pence says**

#### **Is that all there is?**

Informative and mildly entertaining but somewhat smarmy dismissive, esp. of alcoholism. I didn't expect much ... and it delivered. Time filler, only.

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### **Betty says**

Most early writers died of TB. Seems like there were some left out.

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### **Cherie' says**

Interesting stuff. Great pictures.

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### **Sarah Jackson says**

"Final Chapters: How Famous Author's Died", by Jim Bernhard is an engaging and entertaining read. Bernhard covers authors from the classical age to the modern era. For each he provides a brief biography, with a description of their views on death and the afterlife, and - of course - how they died. Causes of death include the expected drug and alcohol induced health issues, lung conditions, heart attacks, cancers, suicides, accidents, murder, and my favourite, being hit on the head by a turtle shell. It is interesting to note the

advances in medical knowledge, with the causes of death for modern authors being definitive, and those for earlier writers being based on historical descriptions. A very interesting read.

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## **Kris says**

Of course I was going to buy this book. Who isn't fascinated by death and the often dreary ends authors had as the final chapter. It was very interesting to read because the book is organized by time periods starting in Ancient Greece and Rome.

There were definitely similarities in what many died of that coincided with the period in which they lived and wrote. Men (and women) of wealth often succumbed to diseases associated with a life of excess.

Writers had mental health afflictions with depression occupying a prominent place in that list. The author was able to show in some cases that family genetic pre-dispositions played a role in those mental and physical health issues.

Of course there was drinking and drugs which is one of those artistic clichés but almost as many died from diseases and pandemics of their era. Influenza, TB and common ailments which are more easily treated now, such as diabetes, were all on the list.

Each author has a few pages (3-4, some less) devoted to their life and background. The biographical bits are great because they give you just enough to pique your interest if you want to pursue reading a more in depth biography about them or the time period in which they lived.

What I found most curious was the fact that several died from unknown stomach problems. I am going through something similar myself and it was disheartening to know that even autopsies failed to divulge an answer. There was a lot of dying from unknown causes. And a lot from colds gone to pneumonia.

It was also interesting to note that many died with little or no fame and achieved their greatest heights posthumously. Lesson for writers? Keep writing. Today's trash is tomorrow's "Great Gatsby". Poverty as a writer is a-ok. Write for the love of the word and for the soul satisfaction. Write for friends, write for fun, write for yourself. Enjoy it but don't seek fame. Most of the NYT Best Seller List is not going to stand the test of time as great literature.

Sometimes, the most surprising stories that we spend years deconstructing, were just great stories. There never was a hidden layer of secret complexity that any writer consciously saw in their writing. Sometimes, the sky was blue and clear, means just that – a nice day. Great book!

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## **Jeanette says**

This gives a succinct review (either 2, 3, or 4 pages) of each author's life starting from ancient times until more modern times (the last entry is Nora Ephron). And then gives a more thorough detailing of their death and/or last words.

Few females.

But lots of Tuberculosis, Pneumonia, Heart Attacks, Infections (contagious and otherwise), and Suicides.

The ages and tales all told seem highly indicative of their times, but IMHO, the depression factor is outlier.

What surprised me is the amount of authors that, forgive me reader, sounded like ultimate bores in their life style or pattern.

Seems to me, absolutely true that you only wrote if you had someone else- washing, cleaning, caring your water, cooking etc. And it also seems to me- that those who avoided doctors fared MORE favorably, not less.

Old age is in general definition and in mobility aspects- it seems about 55 to 60. Ancient is anything over 70. Travel seemed infinitely more troublesome to longevity in any case, IMHO. And many of these most superior writers also had infirmity or considerable sickness from infancy onwards.

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