

Chapter 7.5

THE DEATH POSITIVE LIBRARY

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on a body of work (2018 - 2021) that explores public libraries' role in engaging topics of death and dying with their communities. The Death Positive Library is an action research project and cross-country UK collaboration between Redbridge, Kirklees and Newcastle Libraries and academics at Northumbria University. Design and humanities research is at the heart of this partnership. By using polyvocal and multiple methods of engagement our aim is to create impact by opening outwards the question of personal legacy. COVID-19 shifted the nature of this research as it mapped onto the broader public demand for events exploring death, as people attempted to understand and navigate the new global picture. Live methods and public testing were core to this exploration, including public installations, physical and digital death cafes, festivals, online book club/ film club with author Q&As alongside the development of a curated booklist and online/ library-based website for navigating creative, cultural, and future options for the end of life – giving the public creative spaces for contemplating mortality.

Keywords:

Death Positive, Speculative Design, English Literature, Fiction, Libraries, COVID-19, Mortality, Legacy

Designing Death Positive Futures with Libraries

“Without our stories we are incomplete.”

— Neil Gaiman, *Stardust*

The Death Positive Library grew out of a series of collaborations. It initially began in Redbridge Central Library in Ilford, United Kingdom, with a project called “The Final Party” (2018), which included collaborations with funeral directors, creatives, and academics along with death cafés and a Day of the Dead Festival. One of the installations commissioned was “Love After Death” (www.loveafterdeath.co.uk) created by Dr. Pitsillides, originally for Nesta’s FutureFest16¹. It brought forth key questions about the role of design, death and speculation within libraries. By using a fictional Last Will and Testament as a mediating object within a live performance, the public were invited to book a time slot when they could

¹ Love After Death was initially commissioned for Nesta’s FutureFest16 as part of the Future Love strand, curated by Ghislaine Boddington. FutureFest aims to vision and creatively explore 10-30 years in the future and commissions installations based on each year’s core themes. This commission included a performative installation, an exhibition of speculative design objects and a panel on FutureFest’s Social Stage. The festival attracted over 4,000 international visitors (17th-18th Sept 2016).

enter a cocooning pod structure and have a guided consultation with a death expert about their future “Creative Bereavement” or “Dead Body.”

The “Love After Death” installation aimed to introduce people to planning end of life wishes and ideas of digital legacy, along with exploring technologies currently in research. One example of this is digital tattoos, which are being investigated by companies like Philips and Microsoft.² The installation reimagined these as digital memorial tattoos to consider how they may be used in future ritual practices:

Digital Memorial Tattoo – A Digital Memorial Tattoo uses the merger of electronics and biology to create wearable electronics under the skin, which can be directly printed onto or used as a screen. This may include sensors in the environment and geolocation that activate the tattoo in important places for the bereaved.³

In this way future and current (but largely unknown) rituals were used and imagined as playful diegetic prototypes, a term developed by David Kirby in 2010.⁴ Diegetic prototypes are grounded in scientific possibility but expanded into new settings or services that normalise their use in public/ future environments. Within this installation end of life rituals are narrativized and sequenced through the Last Will and Testament, in order to allow the public to explore a range of alternative choices that transform our data and bodies into new materialities after we die. Although Kirby focuses on filmic portrayals of technology, the installation uses written description and performance, where the public take on the role of first-person experience. This direct interaction also opens up these technologies to normalisation, conversation and debate by positioning potential futures as options to be chosen.

Theoretically, the project explores DiSalvo’s line of enquiry “how are publics made with things?”⁵ through the creation of an enclosed but semi-permeable 3D space (see **FIG 1.1**), using warm, white and natural tones, along with a set of pages that, when bound and signed, constitute a fictional future Last Will and Testament. DiSalvo’s exploration of the design tactic tracing, particularly within socially-engaged practices, “is characterised by the use of designerly forms to creatively express the histories, discourses, and techniques that constitute an issue; in ways that foster knowledge”⁶ and it is this kind of engagement we aimed to foster through the layers of social and designed interaction. To take this slightly further, Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* encourages the reader to see the world as full of active, animate things – material and human-nonhuman assemblages – rather than passive objects, including the internal agents within the human body.⁷

This installation uses the context of vibrant matter as it asks people to examine themselves post death through modes of *decomposition*, such as 3D printing with cremated ashes, as a

² Microsoft Research Labs, “Smart Tattoos.” August 22, 2018. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/project/smart-tattoos/>

³ This quote has been extracted from the Tickets for the Afterlife installation, Ticket No.32/50 Digital Memorial Tattoo. See <https://loveafterdeath.co.uk/tickets-for-the-afterlife> for full collection.

⁴ David Kirby, ‘The future is now: Diegetic prototypes and the role of popular films in generating real-world technological development.’ *Social Studies of Science*, 40:1 (2010), 41-70.

⁵ Carl DiSalvo, “Design and the Construction of Publics,” *Design Issues*, 25:1 (2009), 48-63, 49.

⁶ Carl DiSalvo, “Design and the Construction of Publics,” *Design Issues*, 25:1 (2009), 48-63, 56.

⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

merger with environments through blending your DNA with a tree, or as an *assemblages with technologies* by downloading your brain into a robotic body or using the energy produced from your body to power cities. These speculative materialities impact the way that people creatively see both themselves and their loved ones after death, inspiring new kinds of conversations.

The use of speculative design (or design fictions where designed things are used to tell stories about the future) are “a method of research, or means of asking questions and generating new connections’ that present alternative social, cultural and ritual realities.”⁸ This opens a space to use audience thoughts and views as a starting point for design thinking and iterative design cycles, with feedback and responses from a diverse public. The diversity of reactions can be seen by examining three responses to this initial 2018 installation in Redbridge Central Library.⁹

- Firstly, Gita sees the installation through a lens of personal belief and the transformation of the body as a form of legacy, stating “because I am Hindu... after crematorium ashes can [go] to the concrete ball for corals marine, so at least someone can survive even from ashes.”
- Fred responds to the experience and uses the performance of a legal document to voice his concerns about privacy and consent, the installation is “very calming, just the right atmosphere to discuss this kind of thing but what I didn’t like was the legal arrangement, the way it’s presented I think that’s a bit presumptive... to set it out as a legal arrangement is a bit unusual and that part needs to be rethought.”
- Alistair, as a funeral director uses the proposed fictions to think about his own professional practice stating that recycling “the energy from your cremation and [giving] it to a social cause ... [is a] really good idea ... you can donate any metals that’s left... so why couldn’t there be another box saying would you like to recycle the energy from cremation.”

Suchman claims that technical artefacts are embodied with human subjectivity as we are performing with them.¹⁰ When we combine technological concepts with speculative design, this allows language and narrative to be made tangible as fluid possibilities giving people a space to voice their own values, beliefs and concerns. The response to the initial installation raised a series of questions including [1] whether the performance was the right mode of discovery for a library where browsing and personal exploration is the norm [2] whether the pods could be embedded with different signifiers that evoke spirituality e.g. light, shadows and transparency [3] to ensure the pods are lightweight and simple enough to be moved from site to site [4] to develop a deeper understanding of how books and literature can be used to shape future iterations.

⁸ Anne Galloway and Catherine Caudwell, “Speculative design as research method: From answers to questions and ‘staying with the trouble,’” In *Undesign: Critical Practices at the Intersection of Art and Design*, ed. Gretchen Coombs, Andrew McNamara and Gavin Sade (London: Routledge, 2018), 85-96, 95.

⁹ Various participants interviewed by Dr Stacey Pitsillides and edited into a short film: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/312733465>

¹⁰ Lucy Suchman, “Located accountabilities in technology production”, *Scandinavian journal of information systems*, 14:2 (2002), 91-105.



<FIGURE 7.5.1: Original Pods (top left and right), part of The Final Party, Redbridge Central Library. Geodesic Domes redesigned for use within Tickets for the Afterlife (bottom left and right).>

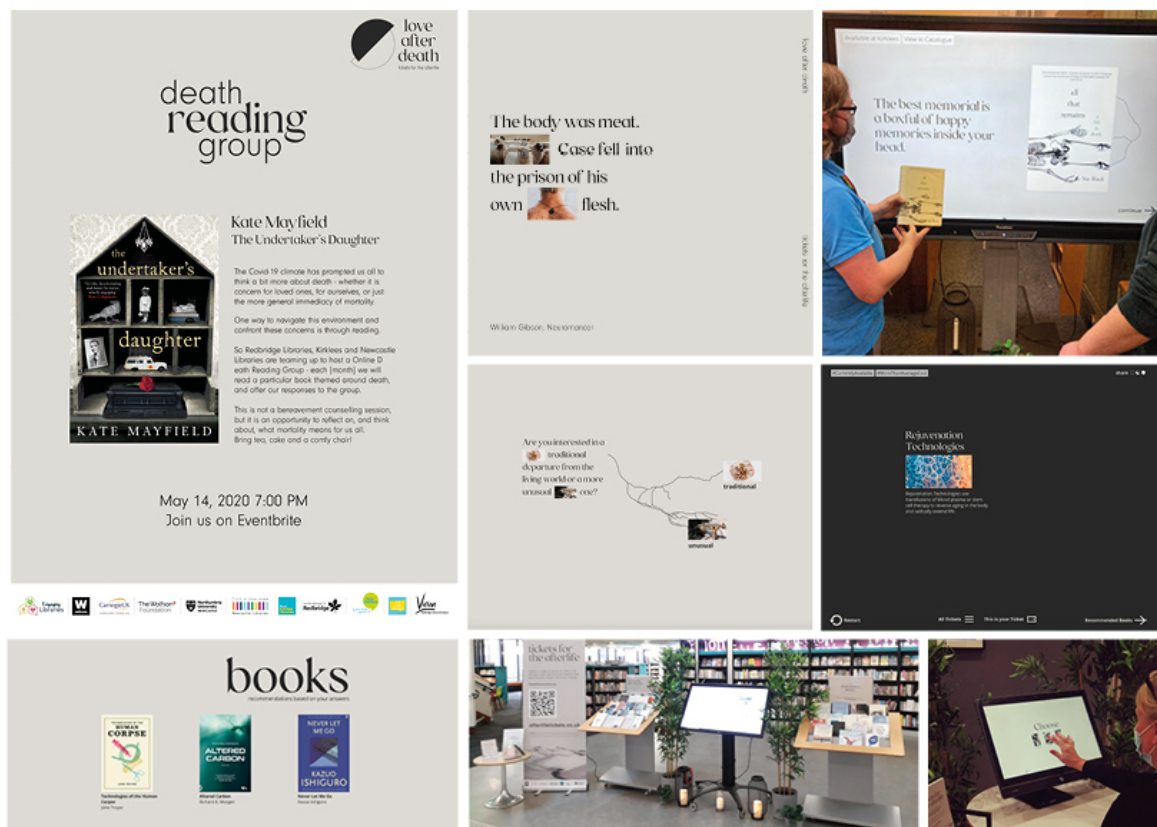
Subsequently a new range of pods were designed as geodesic domes, inspired by architect and futurist Buckminster Fuller who patented these self-supporting geodesic structures, excited by their occurrence in nature and mathematics.¹¹ These domes were able to be assembled by a team of three, in under three hours using a drill and simple hand tools on-site in the libraries and could remain in the libraries for a longer duration with minimal invigilation. The cladding of the structure included cut out patterns inspired by *jali*, or pierced screens (which appear in both Hindu and Islamic architecture) using laser cut paper and CNC cut lightweight wood, allowing sunlight to project patterns onto the dome at different times of day, layers of Tulle enclose the entrance and vivid green plants stand out against the muted colour palette. This installation split the previous Last Will and Testament into a collection of 50 Tickets for the Afterlife which were arranged around the dome to be taken individually by visitors and divided more clearly into: past, present, future and distant future – resembling bookmarks in their form – and connecting to a handbound book with chapters:

1. **Life can be understood backwards** past,
2. **The present changes the past** present,
3. **The future is uncertain but the end is always near** future,
4. **The further future is hope** distant future,

¹¹ Hsiao-Yun Chu, “The Evolution of the Fuller Geodesic Dome: From Black Mountain to Drop City,” *Design and Culture*, 10:2 (2018), 121-137.

Within each chapter typographic references to books and quotes were used to further explore the themes.¹²

The exploration of how a diverse collection of books about death (past to future) can reframe public thinking is expanded in 2019-2021, where The Death Positive Libraries approach to death and dying as a health and societal issue is further explored through design and humanities research that frame the libraries collections of factual and fictional books as creative resources that push us to consider our own mortality.



<FIGURE 7.5.2: Screenshots of author Q&A poster, book quotes for social media and Tickets for the Afterlife digital experience online and installed in the libraries.>

During COVID-19 across 2020/2021 the plans for physical geodesic pods needed to be changed as everything shifted online and one of the first ways this was approached was by creating online spaces and event series like the Death Positive Library.¹³ The visual communication that underpins these connections with an online public was created in collaboration with graphic designer Elena Demireva. A brand identity was developed, based on the physical installations with a neutral 3 colour palette, cropped textural imagery and a focus on typography, negative space and simple illustrations of cracks or fractures inspired by *Kintsugi*, the Japanese art of repairing broken ceramics with gold that treats repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise – to acknowledge the uncertainty of this moment of time. The visual design aimed to support people’s need to go beyond the

¹² Link to online documentation of physical book that was exhibited as part of the Tickets for the Afterlife installation <https://loveafterdeath.co.uk/tickets-for-the-afterlife>).

¹³ The team utilised a range of digital platforms to communicate with audiences including Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/DeathPositiveLibrary>, Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/thedeathpositivelibrary/> and Twitter <https://twitter.com/deathpositive11>

public death count which dehumanises and flattens our relationship to death and dying and give breathing space to the fragments of story and imagery presented on social media.¹⁴

The team also set out to design a digital experience also called Tickets for the Afterlife¹⁵ which blends and extends the first two versions of the design, discussed previously but works directly with library staff to co-design the user experience using workshops run on Miro (an interactive virtual workspace) to develop the core design and interaction.¹⁶ We also worked very closely together on the technical testing, user feedback and book recommendations linked to their catalogues, including information about their availability in the library collections. By using a series of typographic questions and answers along with a bespoke soundscape that helps to guide people in choosing a Tickets for the Afterlife from our collection, the website begins:

This site will help you explore a range of choices. And discover what you can do with your body, memories and legacies. With rituals from the past, present and future of death and dying. You will be asked to decide what matters most to you, to find your own ticket for the afterlife.¹⁷

It also uses the library's collections of books as a way of giving people personalised recommendations for further inquiry. For each ticket the user chooses, they will be offered three book recommendations that link directly into each of the library's catalogues, whether they are in Redbridge, Newcastle upon Tyne or Kirklees. Each ticket will also be tagged with some meta-data informing the user if it is, for example, *currently available* and *less than average cost*. Similarly, to the previous versions library users can browse the whole collection and there is a space on the website for the public to submit their own tickets to be added to the collection. This digital experience was also installed on large scale tablets in each of the three libraries partners central sites, which included stands of the Death Positive library book recommendations for people to browse directly and was included in a virtual booth during the Lifting the Lid festival from 19th November – 21st November.

Books, Mortality, and the Development of the Death Positive Library

Books about death and dying are ubiquitous. There are books on how to cope with grief, how to write a will, how to run a death café, and how to navigate graveyards. In the early days of the Death Positive Library project, we focused on palliative care, hospices and grief, and a medical humanities approach to mortality. However, with the context of COVID-19 and the move online, we identified the importance of literature, and indeed libraries, in death education.¹⁸

The pandemic has demonstrated the appetite that people have for books in times of need. In “Libraries: An Essential part of local recovery” (2020), Libraries Connected (the national

¹⁴ Inioluwa Deborah Raji, “The discomfort of death counts: Mourning through the distorted lens of reported COVID-19 death data,” *Patterns* 1:4 (2020), DOI: [10.1016/j.patter.2020.100066](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2020.100066)

¹⁵ The digital experience can be accessed via: <https://afterlifetickets.co.uk/>

¹⁶ The Tickets for the Afterlife website was creatively directed by Stacey Pitsillides with graphic designer Elena Demireva, web developers Parvin Asadzadeh Birjandi and Tom Hegarty, and sound designer Emma Margetson. Content research and co-design with Claire Nally and the Death Positive Library team.

¹⁷ Introduction to Tickets for the Afterlife experience <https://afterlifetickets.co.uk/Introduction>

¹⁸ Daniel K. Jernigan, Walter Wadiak, and W. Michelle Wang, *Narrating Death: The Limit of Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

agency for library professionals) reported that “No other public body has the same reach into and across the UK’s diverse local communities, or the networks, economies of scale and flexibility to respond to local needs. This means that libraries occupy a unique and safe place in which to encourage reflections on what it means to be “death positive.”¹⁹ The value of certain genres, such as memoirs and self-help books, cannot be underestimated. Equally, we quickly identified how fiction has a central role to play as part of these conversations: “bibliotherapy has been recommended for centuries by librarians, teachers, and other socially involved professions to ease varying degrees of hardship. Two main types of literature have dominated the field of bibliotherapy: didactic literature (e.g. self-help books, manuals) and imaginative literature (primarily poems and fiction).”²⁰ Therefore, the narrowing focus of the project began to question representations of death cultures, and this is reflected in our booklist for the Death Positive Library: how have writers thought about death throughout history and across genres?

One of the key ways in which we can navigate the issue of death is through the arts and humanities: “Stories – myths, plays, pictures, novels, histories – are among humankind’s chief instruments for understanding ourselves and our world.”²¹ In thinking about humanity’s death cultures in the past and future, we have sought to provide an imaginative reflection on death which broadens out and reconsiders the idea of “death positivity.” Part of this activity relates to rethinking the canon of literary works which can be used to foster public reflection on death, and whether this should always be configured around medicine, or whether wider literatures such as genre fiction or contemporary novels can be useful as facilitatory prompts. Hence, we have explored how far it is possible to broaden the current focus on bereavement literature, and instead consider wider questions of what death has looked like in the past, and how it will appear in the future.

As an assertion of the value of literature and culture in times of crisis, and especially as our project was operating during COVID-19 lockdown measures in the UK (2020), it became imperative to represent different experiences of death and dying, including social inequalities and injustices. The importance of participation by diverse communities is something we still need to develop (as our attendees at author events tend to be white, and often women).²² However, the collaboration emphasised at all points in accordance with Giorgio Agamben’s argument (1998) that “life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts.”²³ As such, we curated a list which (however limited), attempted to capture diversity.

The urgency of this endeavour was emphasised by the irruption of the Black Lives Matter movement in mid-2020, responding to George Floyd’s murder on 25 May 2020 at the hands of police officers. Hence, books like Breasha Wade’s *Grieving While Black: An antiracist take on oppression and sorrow* (2021) and Karla FC Holloway’s *Passed On; African*

¹⁹ Libraries Connected, “Libraries: An Essential part of local recovery” (2020), <https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/resource/libraries-essential-part-local-recovery> [date accessed: 20 October 2021].

²⁰ Katarzyna A. Małecka & Jamison S. Bottomley, “Grief memoirs: The familiarity of helping professionals with the genre and its potential incorporation into grief therapy,” *Death Studies* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1705938, 1-9, 1.

²¹ Jonathan Bate (ed), “Introduction,” from *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 1. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662451.0006> [date accessed: 7 Dec 2021].

²² The total aggregate of responses to the Death Positive Libraries Exit Survey were as follows: 81.03% of attendees were White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British, and 89.44% identified as female.

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 164.

American Mourning Stories (2002) represent important cultural documents in confronting the difficulties of marginalised communities. We also sought to showcase these political agendas through novels like Salena Godden's *Mrs Death Misses Death* (2021) a fictional work which personifies Death as an ageing black woman on the streets of London. The book is a part fictional memoir, part historical journey into deaths throughout history, through the lens of Mrs Death, who stands in for the forgotten or marginalised of society. The book confronts the systemic inequalities of the modern world, such as those highlighted by Grenfell Fire in London (2017). Other personifications of Death, in Terry Pratchett's work such as *Mort* (1987), suggest a wryly humorous and sympathetic character who helps us on our final journey – and he likes cats.

Despite the value of new and non-canonical literatures, we also considered the relevance of more familiar and traditional texts which represent death in its historical and contextual richness. For instance, we featured the anonymous Old English *Beowulf* (famously translated by Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney in 1999) because it contains a poignant lament for the death of the titular hero. Indeed, the poem also opens with a ship burial, where Scyld Shefing's funeral ship is personified.²⁴ We have cremation, laments and other obsequies which act as a testament to the cultural specificity of early mediaeval communities, but also the universality of death as a human experience. Moving forward several centuries to the Victorian period, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam A H H*, is an elegiac series of poems about the death of the poet's friend, Arthur Hallam. In one verse, Tennyson poignantly recalls the discontinuity between grief and the continuation of everyday life:

He is not here, but far away
The noise of life begins again
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald streets breaks the blank day.²⁵

From within a similar cultural vantage point, Charlotte Brontë's lament on the death of her sister Anne, explains:

There's little joy in life for me,
And little terror in the grave
I've lived the parting hour to see
Of one I would have died to save.²⁶

So in many ways this leads us to the 'death denial' thesis²⁷, and relatedly, the popular idea that the Victorians were much closer to death than our contemporary selves. In this theory, post-industrial society has sanitised death, or held it at a distance through hospitals, mortuaries, funeral homes, and hospices. However, the books on our list confirm that the "death denial" thesis is strategic (answering the agendas of death positive campaigners) rather than being concretely verifiable. Death denial been very effectively critiqued by Lyn Lofland's in *The Craft of Dying* (1978): "the empirical evidence for all these assertions is something less than overwhelming."²⁸ Similarly, John Troyer perspicaciously comments in

²⁴ Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 23.

²⁵ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, edited Alan Day (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 135.

²⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *The Complete Poems of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Clement Shorter (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 210.

²⁷ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

²⁸ Lyn Lofland, *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death* (40th Anniversary Edition), ed John Troyer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 73.

his book *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (2021) that claims of a taboo about death are greatly exaggerated: “one of the most unhelpful and unnecessary death and dying arguments, an argument that dogmatically persists today... the death taboo is always about utility, not truth.”²⁹ Lyn Lofland notes that humanity’s approach to death is paradoxically both universal and specific: cultural beliefs, feelings and practices are variable, but the very fact of death is a universal. Hence, our work has provided a cautious account of modern attempts to talk about mortality, which need to engage emotionally and communally, not just intellectually. Davis and Breede identified that “Death and dying are such personal, confusing, mysterious, painful and mystical experiences, sometimes poetry and artwork, literature, and mediated stories are the only ways we can communicate about it.”³⁰ As such, the Death Positive Library asserts the therapeutic value of books and reading as part of a broader conversation about mortality.

A resistance to death denial is not intended to overlook the historical, temporal, religious and cultural specificity of different death practices. Hence the booklist we generated for the Death Positive Library addresses accounts of global death and dying, including the nuances which may be found in different countries. For instance, Caitlin Doughty’s travel memoir of death, *From Here to Eternity*, provides eyewitness accounts of death rituals across the world, including Indonesia, Mexico, Japan and the United States. This also points to a broader trend in non-fiction writing (also demonstrated by writers such as Sue Black, Erica Buist, and Kate Mayfield), where memoirs of death and dying do not directly relate to subjective grief (“grief memoirs”), but rather explore how societies and peoples experience mortality, through the lens of a death practitioner.³¹ Whilst we have represented this subtle shift in the contents of the booklist, this is of course a very different readership to those who need solace in the loss of a loved one, and we’ve tried to signpost this distinction – we have self-help books, memoirs of grief, of palliative care physicians, of funeral directors and those close to them. Kathryn Mannix’s *With the End in Mind* is one such example, as is Liz Rothschild’s edited collection of real-life accounts, *Outside the Box: Everyday Stories of Death, Bereavement and Life* (2020).

The Death Positive Library was also keen to evaluate different types of fiction (and wider culture). Davis and Breede acknowledge that perhaps one of the key things about death is how far it seems to be outside of our control, and how fiction (and film) – particularly sci-fi, gothic, horror or fantasy genres – might be able to help us – at a safe distance – to explore some of these questions about mortality. They say “in horror fiction... the undead - whether vampires, zombies, or ghosts – represent a third space in which the living and the dead come together, and provide a way to bring the viewer closer to death in order to develop an acceptance and familiarity with the idea of our own mortality.”³² Hence, our booklist also contains material that on the first encounter, might not seem that therapeutic. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818, is about the pain of existence, loss, and what it means to be human. The material in our booklist features stories like R. L. Stevenson’s novella, *The Body Snatchers* (1884), and that ubiquitous figure of the undead, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). There are contemporary and fictional interventions in historical cases – like Hilary Mantel’s *The Giant O’Brien*, a character drawn from Charles Byrne, whose body was used and exhibited after death, expressly without his consent, and he remains in the Hunterian

²⁹John Troyer, *Technologies of the Human Corpse* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 40-1.

³⁰ Davis and Breede (2019), 21.

³¹ For ‘grief memoirs’, see Katarzyna A. Małeczka & Jamison S. Bottomley (2020) ‘Grief memoirs: The familiarity of helping professionals with the genre and its potential incorporation into grief therapy’, *Death Studies* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1705938, 1-9.

³² Christine Davis and Deborah C. Breede, *Talking Through Death: Communicating about Death in Interpersonal, Mediated, and Cultural Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2019), 22-23.

Museum. So one big question these books ask is does it matter what happens to our bodies after death?

However, humanity's imagined journeys into death – and arguably death positivity - is not just therapeutic – it is dark and difficult and complex. It also does not need to be sensational. So whilst the spectacle of death is visible in some more sensational material, the ordinariness of our mortality, and its ubiquity, is a cornerstone of the project. Lofland's term "thanatological chic"³³ is therefore a useful way of navigating the more spectacular aspects of death studies debate. This is where ideas of celebrity and death cultures intersect with the material we have showcased to the public. Carla Valentine's *Past Mortems: Life and Death Behind Mortuary Doors* (2017), as well as her high-profile twitter presence reveal a number of intersections between a gothicised and noir sensibility, alongside frequently graphic, or otherwise humorous and irreverent accounts of autopsy and anatomy.

In some ways, we might link this strand of books to the theory and practice of dark tourism, which may take an educational or voyeuristic approach to tourist sites of death and disaster, depending on the framing of a particular site, and the way in which it is narrated.³⁴ We might ask ourselves as readers how far some publications are educational, and how far they are spectacularly lurid, and if the distinction between these two ideas is so unambiguous as it might first appear.

Studying death and producing any sort of material on the topic for the public also involves a conjecture of what may come next for society and its relationship with mortality. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) or *Altered Carbon* by Richard K. Morgan (2002) explore complex philosophical questions around Artificial Intelligence death, being fictional speculations of what might happen in an unknown future. Elaine Kasket's book, *All The Ghosts in the Machine* (2019) intellectually supports a consideration of these fictions, through a factual evaluation of digital death and dying. Additionally, our fiction choices target some incredibly emotive and affective topics, such as the return of a dead child in Andrew Michael Hurley's eerie novel *Starve Acre* (2019) or Sylvia Plath's part fictional, part autobiographical reflections on, and experience of suicide in *The Bell Jar* (1963). Each in very different ways, all our books provide an exploration of what death means across time, geographies, communities, and histories.

Conclusion

The Death Positive Libraries (2020-2021) presented an online programme consisting of seven book club Q&A's with authors, 2 film screenings with Q&A, 2 specialist panels on pet bereavement and how death has changed across time, a Book Room of Loss in collaboration with The Loss Project, a Death Café, a virtual gallery in collaboration with the Marie Curie Hospice, a Tickets for the Afterlife workshop in the Reimagine End of Life Festival which cumulatively have had 1,772 tickets booked on Eventbrite, with many of the Q&A events continuing to be available online. The project has also used social media as a way of engaging audiences between events, particularly through book quotes and book reels which recommend topics like "five books about death from Russian authors." Our engagement on Instagram, for example, over a brief period (11th August - 8th November, 90-day period) had

³³ Lyn Lofland, *The Craft of Dying: The Modern Face of Death* (40th Anniversary Edition), ed John Troyer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), 85.

³⁴ See Richard Sharpley and Phillip R. Stone (eds), *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* (Bristol: Channel View, 2009), and J. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Continuum, 2000). See also *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads*, ed. Kathryn N. McDaniel (London: Palgrave 2018) for the intersection of dark tourism as a theory with literary texts.

a reach of 17,400 (accounts who have seen content) with a similar breakdown to our events of 75.8% from the UK, 62.8% women, 35.7% between the age of 25-34.

As the events and project moved online during COVID-19 there has also been a strong response (492 surveyed) from members of the public commenting that the “sensitive topic of dying [was] explored delicately and honestly as part of Death Positive Library,” while others shared how the events helped them to consider their own bereavements “I ... was a little apprehensive of the subject but knowing it was online and I could leave at any point enabled me to join the event. I found it a positive and I would be more likely to attend other dying matters type events.” It also enabled people to act in ways that supported their friends and communities by contacting “2 friends who have both experienced the sudden death this week of their beloved dogs. The event made me realise how important people feel about having their experience of death acknowledged (even that of a pet) and it helps to validate the life of the deceased” while others comments that the online programme supported accessibility “as someone who is limited in their ability to attend events by physical condition (wheelchair user) it was liberating to be able to attend an event via zoom on same terms as everyone else.”³⁵

The project has used design to create three different versions of physical and digital installation (2018-2021) that together explore how libraries can use design and creativity to develop new approaches to death and dying that use different forms of literature as a starting point for public engagement. The digital experience called Tickets for the Afterlife has had a total of 1593 views, to date, with top tickets being recommended or selected: “Memento Mori Photography” followed by “Green Cremation”, “Cremation Energy” and “Human Composting.” This blending of design and humanities research with deep collaboration with library staff has created a range of different learnings and allowed for the playful experimentation with what it means to be a death positive library.

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³⁵ An independent evaluation was conducted by Marge Ainsley MA MMRS as part of the Engaging Library Award Phase 2. The evaluation occurred between 14/5/2020 - 23/11/2021 through a post-event survey and that aimed to measure the impact of attendance on the audiences and to pinpoint the core demographics.

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