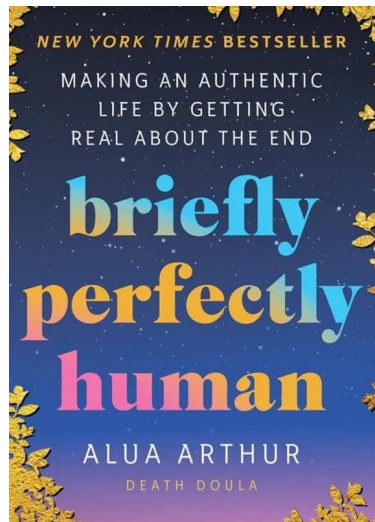


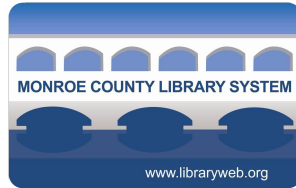
# Books Sandwiched In

*Briefly Perfectly Human* by Alua Arthur

reviewed by Emily Hessney Lynch



# About Me



# How I got interested in death

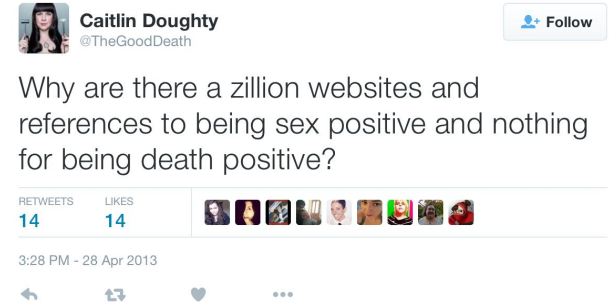


# What does it mean to be death positive?

---

- Includes beliefs like:
  - It's okay to be interested in death
  - It's important to talk about death rather than make it taboo
  - Dead bodies are not dangerous
  - People's end-of-life wishes should be honored
  - We need more eco-friendly death practices
- NOT you love death, are happy someone has died, etc.

Source: [Order of the Good Death](#)





# What is a death doula?

---

- Someone who assists a dying person & their loved ones before, during, and after death
- Offer emotional & physical support, education about the dying process, companionship, guidance, comfort, resources, etc.
- *Not* licensed medical professionals; work in sync with hospice & other healthcare providers
- Services can include: discussing advance directives, developing a plan for the environment, creating rituals, explaining signs/symptoms of dying process, sitting vigil, helping with obituary & funeral planning, and more

Sources: [Cleveland Clinic](#) & [INELDA](#)



# Content warnings for *Briefly Perfectly Human*

---

- Death
- Cancer
- Depression
- Suicide
- Racism
- Drug use (psychedelics)



# What this book is and isn't

---

<b>This book is...</b>	<b>It's not...</b>
A memoir	A how-to guide
A story of how Arthur came to this career & her relationship with death	A story of every client she's ever worked with
Nonlinear, meandering	Chronological, straightforward
Personal, philosophical, & vulnerable	Academic, cold, clinical



# Who is this book for?



<b>It's for anyone...</b>	<b>It's less appealing to those...</b>
interested in death & dying... or scared of it	avoidant of death & dying
who values authenticity	fine with wearing a mask or living a life that's expected of them
passionate about mental health and/or has struggled with it	who can't relate to mental health struggles
who has ever felt lost, restless, or purposeless	who have never deviated from their planned path
on the fringes	'normies'
who cares about intersectionality	who think intersectionality is woke
who doesn't mind swearing	offended by swearing



# The beginning

---

- Visits Cuba to escape misery of her lawyer job
- Has a near-death experience
- Meets a German girl named Jessica on a bus ride & has a long talk about death
  - Turns out, she was in the car that almost hit Arthur



*"The only thing in our control is **how we choose to engage with our mortality** once we become aware of it" (15).*



# Childhood

---

- Born in Accra, Ghana in 1978
- Earliest memory: fleeing their home at age 3 as the government is being overthrown in a coup
- Bounced around as missionaries & political refugees
  - Lived in California, Nairobi, Ghana again, & more
- Moved to the U.S. at age 11



*“Home has always been a fleeting concept for me, and I’ve had to learn to cultivate it in my body” (33).*



# Loss & catalyst: death of her brother-in-law

---

- Ends up doulaing for Peter and her sister; fuels her & finds purpose
- Angry that no one would say that he's actively dying
- Frustration with cruel, uncaring systems

*"What the fuck kind of society understands the universality of a painful experience but **does next to nothing about it?**"*

*I came to death work because I wanted to help 'fix' the system I saw... I couldn't take their pain away, [but] I could let them know that someone cared that it was hard. **I could be their witness**" (59-61).*



# Skills that make a good death doula

---

## **Knowledge of**

- practicalities of preparing for death
- bureaucracy and legalities surrounding dead bodies
- resources

## **Awareness of**

- biases & privileges
- own relationship with mortality

## **Ability to**

- create rituals for people
- hold multiple truths at once
- be emotionally present
- be compassionate
- take care of own needs



# Theme: Living authentically

---

- Hated her job as a lawyer at Legal Aid
- Trying to conform to societal expectations
- Used travel, relationships, and shopping to distract herself & run away from hard truths
- Client story: Ken



*"I was slowly killing myself. Shrinking my joy, murdering my own light" (140).*



# Theme: Finding purpose

---

- Struggles to find her purpose & path
  - Graduates college in 2000; works in HIV/AIDS education in Thailand that summer to procrastinate starting law school
  - 9 years as a lawyer at Legal Aid; lots of travel & relationships
  - Goes to Burning Man & is reinvigorated; refuses to go back to 'dungeon' at Legal Aid
  - Meets up with Pascha in Portland, then stays with friend in Colorado
  - Then Cuba & near-death experience
- Lost, in denial about severity of her depression





# Theme: Finding purpose

---

Found death doulaing, but it is **not** her sole purpose.

*"I've come to believe my life does not have a singular purpose. Maybe yours doesn't either. The search for purpose itself—the worship of some glamorized future where everything suddenly makes sense—can be blinding... **While we are obsessed with trying to make meaning and purpose out of life, we can miss the experience of being here...** If it brings you joy, make meaning out of the mundane" (158).*

# Theme: Feeling every emotion

---

- Numbing or hiding our emotions doesn't work—they just build up & get stronger
- Emotions are a spectrum and the 'good ones' aren't better than the 'bad ones'
  - Language like 'cancer warrior' and 'battle' and 'fight' can make people feel like they can't express their fear, anger, or sadness (Client story: Summer)
- All emotions are valid
- Shaming people for having negative emotions makes it harder to ask for help; becomes isolating & you suffer alone



# Theme: Feeling every emotion

---

*"We celebrate wellness and leave no space for sorrow, brokenness, grief, or anything other than 'I'm fine,' when the truth is that life is complicated, painful, and difficult. **Whole humans feel a range of emotions, but we applaud only half of them,** driving our negatively perceived emotions deep into hiding for fear of judgment. There, they are safe to fester and grow stronger, which in turn drives us to hide them more" (170).*



# Insights I loved: Show up & shut up

---

- Don't need to fix other people's feelings
- Sitting in discomfort & witnessing others' pain is valuable & helpful
- Let them talk about whatever they want (the weather, their pain, their memories, etc.)
  - Don't make it about yourself (unless they ask about your experience)

*"We must get comfortable with the part of ourselves that feels helpless in the face of another person's pain... Just be in the trenches with them and give them the incredible gift of bearing witness" (70).*



# Insights I loved: Compassion versus empathy

---

- Might seem good to be 'empathetic,' but it can come across as patronizing or paternalistic
- You can't truly understand their experience if you haven't lived it; even if you have, your wants & needs may be different
- Aim for compassion

*"Empathy says: 'I know what you are going through.'  
Compassion says: 'I might not understand exactly what you are going through, but I am curious about your experience, understand that it is tough, and **I am right here with you**' (71).*



# Insights I loved: Death is NOT the great equalizer

---

- Death does not equalize us
- Cultural/systemic issues still affect us in death
  - Ex: trans folks who want their gender identity honored in death

*“Death and dying are **culturally constructed** processes that reflect **social power dynamics**—they are unequal. How we die is wrapped up largely in the intersections of our identities” (95).*





# Insights I loved: Complicated grief

---

- Grief isn't always straightforward
- Need to honor difficult relationships & full spectrum of human emotion
- Normalize it; don't make assumptions or project your own feelings

*"We are not to speak ill of the dead. When we can't say something nice, we are taught to say nothing at all. This suppresses the very human need to grieve difficult relationships... **Not everyone is sad when someone dies. Some are relieved...** We need to make room for other responses to death, not just sadness and despair, to honor the lushness of human experience" (172, 177).*



# Insights I loved: Legacy is always a work in progress

---

- Legacy isn't just donating money and having a building named after you, inventing something earth-shattering, publishing a book, or even your children.
- You're creating your legacy every day

*"We leave a legacy with every word, every smile, every action, every inaction. It's not optional. Our legacies can be big or small. What matters is that we will all touch someone. How we do it is up to us." (172).*



# The end: Arthur's good death

---

- Outside at sunset with sunflowers and peonies nearby
- Family & friends around
- Lips & skin moisturized; no bra
- Hot pink and orange silk shroud; green burial
- Guests can take home jewelry hanging on trees
- Overwhelming feeling of love



# You've got homework!

---

*"Our collective death denial inspires us to behave like we can live forever. But **we don't have forever** to create the life we want" (243).*

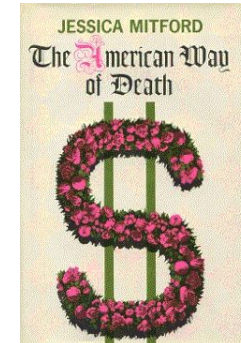
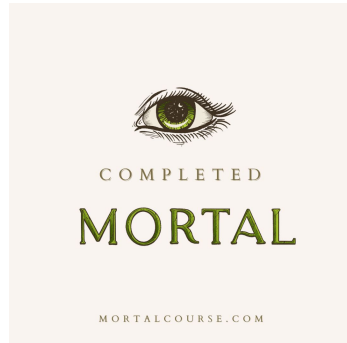
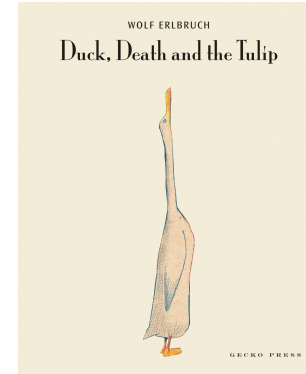
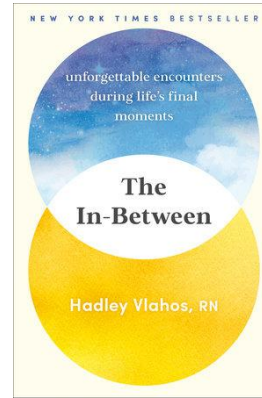
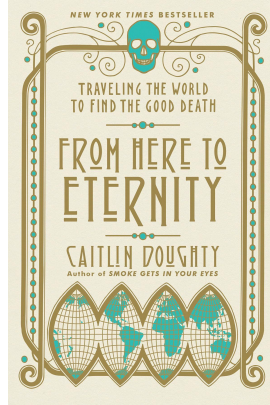
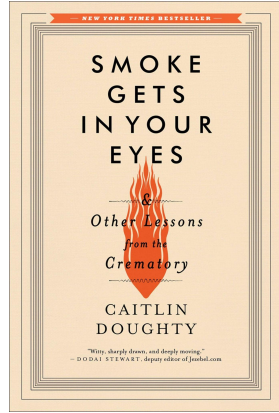
1. What does it look like to create a life you feel comfortable dying from? Think about it. Start making small changes.
2. Talk to someone about death. Let's normalize having these conversations. Complicated feelings are welcome!



# Further reading & resources



*Death Cafe*





**Questions?**

***Thank you!***  
***Stay in touch.***

Instagram: [@servemethesky](https://www.instagram.com/servemethesky)

Substack:

[servemethesky.substack.com/subscribe](https://servemethesky.substack.com/subscribe)

Website: [servemethesky.com](https://servemethesky.com)

Coming soon:

***It's a Lot*** podcast

