It has long been said that death has been hidden from view in the modern West. Most people now die in hospitals or old age institutions rather than at home. Older rituals of grief and bereavement have grown marginal, making death less visible in our daily lives. Our media culture privileges youth and vigor rather than aging and death. Certain deaths, such as a child’s, are almost taboo because they contradict our prevailing beliefs about progress, happiness, the sanctity of childhood, and the elimination of risk.

And yet, in recent years, there has been a surge of books about death and grief, assisted dying and loss in its multiple forms. These include memoirs and novels, poems and essays by doctors, works of history, sociology, and anthropology. A number of them have attained critical and popular success. Our goal in this course will be to put these different works in conversation. Following some historical context, we will examine each week a different contemporary text, a different kind of public writing about death and dying and grief. First, the doctor and the patient; then, the mortician, the novelist and the historian, the executive; finally, the iconic artist (David Bowie) whose last work and death are inextricably tied.

By paying close attention to the language these authors use to depict death, by examining what can be said and what remains silenced, by analyzing frames and vocabulary, voice and authority, we will gain a deeper understanding of contemporary death talk in the U.S. Are we living through a significant transformation of our public discourse about death? Students’ research papers — whose drafts will be discussed during our end-of-semester workshops — will prolong our investigation into this central question about, not only death, but life itself.

Goals

1. Explore recent works on death and grief to cultivate our emotional intelligence and refine our understanding of the world in which we live.

2. Acquire or perfect scholarly skills: close readings for form and content; clear, well-organized analytical writing at the service of an argument; revision; providing and receiving feedback; and oral proficiency.
3. Create a scholarly, empathetic community.

Most class meeting will be divided between discussions of our readings and clinics devoted to the analytical skills above.

**COURSE EXPECTATIONS**

1. **This course rests on your commitment, i.e. curiosity, close readings, intellectual engagement, and willingness to test and share ideas.** This entails (a) *Preparation*: Please read our assigned texts carefully, annotating them, thinking of questions we might discuss in class. *Always* bring your readings to class — either books or article print-outs. You will need them during our discussions. If you do not bring your readings, you will be considered absent. (b) *Presence in class*: Unexcused absences will count against your participation grade. If you need to miss class due to an emergency, please email me *ahead of class*. (c) *Punctuality*: Please arrive on time; this matters. (d) *In-class participation*: Be ready to reflect on the readings, make considered arguments, and respond with respect to what others have to say [10% of course grade].

   - **Use of phones and computers is not permitted.** I will explain why in class. You may bring an iPad or similar device to read PDF’s. Should you require an exception, please speak to me.

2. **Weekly questions:** Prior to each class meeting, please email me two questions about the week’s reading(s). These questions should be analytical rather than factual: something you deem important, perplexing, worth discussing in class. You may also bring in readings from previous meetings. Please email me these questions (in the body of the email, not as an attachment) before 10AM each Wednesday [10%].

3. **Mini-essays:** On two occasions, write *only one* question and email it to me along with a short but thoughtful and well-organized answer. You may write these mini-essays at any time this semester, but must submit at least one by September 26. Length: between 700 and 800 words total. Email them before 10AM the day we meet [10%].

4. **Analytical paper** about one contemporary text (or other artistic/intellectual production) about death and grieving — from the U.S. or elsewhere. You will be expected to analyze the text closely, present a clear argument, support it with analysis, draw from at least three secondary sources, use footnotes, and format your essay using the Chicago Style. 3,300-3,700 words (neither more nor less, not including notes). Please:

   - **Discuss your paper ideas with me** during office hours by September 24.
   - **Email me a two-page proposal** that includes your paper’s topic (and why it is important), your main questions, and your sources. Explain what you have already accomplished, and what needs to be done and when you will do it. Include a bibliography of at least five sources. This is due on Friday October 11 (as a Word attachment).
• Submit a *complete draft by November 8, 5PM* (Word attachment). No extensions except for dire circumstances [20%]

• Submit the *revised*, final version of your paper, taking into account all the feedback you’ll have received, by December 16, 5PM (Word attachment) [30%]

5. **Participation in in-class workshops.** At the end of the semester, each student will (a) present a complete draft of his/her paper to the class; (b) read and comment upon the drafts of every other student (i.e. preparing questions and suggestions); and (c) write and deliver a constructive response to one other student’s draft, to be emailed to *that student alone* the evening before class by 7PM (800-1,000 words) and then presented orally in class the next day [20%].

**Academic integrity.** As an NYU student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise academic integrity include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the expectations spelled out on [http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity).

**SEPT. 5**  
**INTRODUCTION**

**SEPT. 12**  
**DEATH IN THE MODERN WEST: SOME KEY IDEAS**

**SEPT. 19**  
**THE DOCTOR**

**SEPT. 26**  
**THE PATIENT**
Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016), selection (ca. 80 pages)

**OCT. 2**  
**THE MORTICIAN**
Caitlyn Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Finding the Good Death* (2017), selection (ca. 80 pages)
Oct. 9  **The Memoirist**  
Jesmy Ward, *Men We Reaped* (2014), selection (ca. 100 pages)

Oct. 11  **Paper Proposal Due (5PM)**

Oct. 16  **The Novelist**  
Emmanuel Carrere, *Lives Other Than My Own* (2012), selection (ca. 100 pages)

Oct. 23  **The Historian**  
Drew Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), selection (ca. 90 pages)

Oct. 30  **The Executive**  

Nov. 6  **The Iconic Artist**  
“David Bowie: The Last Five years” (HBO, 2017), 90 minutes.

Nov. 8  **Preliminary Version of Paper Due (5PM)**

Nov. 13  Workshop 1

Nov. 20  Workshop 2

Nov. 27  No Class — Thanksgiving

Dec. 4  Workshop 3

Dec. 11  Making Sense of Death Talk

Dec. 16  **Final Version of Paper Due (5PM)**