



Final Chapters: How Famous Authors Died

Jim Bernhard

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“Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case.”

–William Saroyan, Pulitzer Prize–winning author

Famous authors, like everybody else, know that one day they will die. *Final Chapters* tells the fascinating stories of more than one hundred writers’ encounters with death—and their attitudes toward the Grim Reaper: fear, uncertainty, or acceptance.

Francis Bacon wrote, “It is as natural to die as to be born,” while Socrates told the judges who condemned him, “And now we go our ways, I to die and you to live. Which is better is known to God alone.”

Death often came in startling ways for these well-known writers. The playwright Aeschylus was conked by a turtle falling from the sky. Christopher Marlowe was stabbed in a barroom brawl. Molière collapsed while playing the role of a hypochondriac in one of his plays.

Edgar Allan Poe was found semicomatose in someone else’s clothes shortly before he died. Sherwood Anderson was felled by a toothpick in a martini. Did Dylan Thomas really die of eighteen straight whiskeys? And was it a bottle cap or murder that did in Tennessee Williams?

If these authors have lessons for us, the best may be that of Marcus Aurelius: “Death smiles at us all; all we can do is smile back.”

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