

**Glenys Caswell.** *Dying Alone: Challenging Assumptions*. Cham: Palgrave, 2022. 293 pp. \$109.00, e-book, ISBN 978-3-030-92758-5.

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*Dying Alone: Challenging Assumptions* examines what it might mean to die alone (which is less obvious than some might expect). It considers how dying alone may be perceived and experienced, and the many questions dying alone raises. It is wonderful to see Caswell's work, ideas, and extensive knowledge of the topic collected here in a highly accessible monograph. On reading the introduction, one of my first thoughts was that this would be an excellent starting point for any seminar, book club, or death café, or for anyone wanting to think about death more broadly. Though there is certainly a place for highly theoretical work that is more likely to appeal to those with existing expertise in a field, it is always a pleasure to read work that is clear, straightforward, and accessible, while still being critical, rigorous, and engaged with a breadth of research. The book encourages critical thinking and questioning in a welcoming tone that is not patronizing, and it gives plenty of examples, evidence, and clear explanations throughout. It will be an excellent resource for scholars in death studies and beyond.

Already familiar with Caswell's work from discussions and references within the field of death studies, I first became engaged with Caswell's writing when reading her chapter in an edited collection entitled *Death in Contemporary Popular Culture* (2019). The chapter focused on

comparing two representations of dying—one accompanied and one unaccompanied—in the English television soap opera *EastEnders* (1985- ). It explored these deaths in terms of how they functioned to reflect and reproduce sociocultural meanings about the notion of a “good death,” and of what it might mean to die alone. When I began *Dying Alone*, I was delighted to see cultural representations again being used to draw the reader in. The first page references one of my favorite novels—*Stoner*, by John Williams (1965). Underappreciated on publication, it became a bestseller fifty years later. The novel charts the life of an academic and includes a literary representation of a man who makes a conscious choice to die alone. In Caswell's book, this opening reference serves to reiterate one of the key ideas she explores: that dying alone might be a choice, and that it is not necessarily “bad” to die alone. From the outset Caswell is clear that dying alone, contrary to popular opinion, might, “for some individuals, represent a good death” (p. 1). The book serves to interrogate the assumption that “to die alone is to die badly,” an assumption that is often “taken for granted to such an extent that it appears to need neither discussion nor justification” (p. 4).

Three empirical studies conducted by Caswell over her research career to date underpin the book. These are qualitative studies that employed

a range of methods including sociological autopsy, documentary analysis, interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. Bringing together Caswell's already recognized work on this topic, drawing together findings, conclusions, and ideas from work that previously stood alone, this book creates a persuasive and largely comprehensive discussion of dying alone. The book is from the outset clear about what kinds of dying alone it focuses on, as well as its geographical focus. *Dying Alone* is predominantly focused on dying in the UK, though there are some international references and examples throughout. The book will still have plenty of relevance to international scholars looking for comparative examples, context, discussion of ethics, theory, and more. The focus of the book is also on the dying of older people alone. The term "older" is engaged with critically, with acknowledgment of its complexity and relationality as well as its different meanings in different contexts. While there is certainly discussion relevant to those researching or interested in sudden or anticipated deaths at a younger age, there book is not misleading in its focus. For example, before reading it I thought there might be in-depth discussion of suicide, but after the introduction I understood this would not be a focus here (though there is mention of suicide where relevant).

What the book includes is as follows: a clear, comprehensive introduction which, as mentioned above, would make an excellent discussion starter perhaps for seminars, book groups, or death cafés. Second, a chapter on how to we might think and know about dying alone, outlining the three studies underpinning the work and reflecting on the ethics of the research, as well as outlining the book's theoretical framework, which is largely rooted in the sociological work of Bauman and Giddens and their work on "late modernity." Chapter 3 explores the context within which people die in the UK, exploring deaths in institutional settings and considering the notions of "good" and "bad" deaths. Chapter 4 focuses on the question of how it is that people know that dying

alone represents a "bad death" and is something to be avoided. It considers how people are socialized toward this view, what "social scripts" they encounter and how cultural representations might inform people's views and perceptions of a "good death." The chapter uses examples from novels, news media, documentaries and more. I was glad to see a section exploring some of the more nuanced representations people might encounter, as this demonstrates a recognition that in the breadth and diversity of cultural representations, there are always examples that go against the grain and that offer alternative understandings. Chapter 5 examines what it might mean to die alone, describing and discussing concepts such as public and private, social and biological death, lonely dying and timescapes as well as the notion of choosing to die alone. This chapter offers three ways of thinking about dying alone focused on being alone at the time of decease, dying alone and home and lone dying, and these form the basis of discussion in the next two chapters, which focus on dying alone in public spaces (chapter 6) and dying alone in private spaces (chapter 7). Finally, chapter 8 offers a thorough examining of the question: what is wrong with dying alone? This chapter functions as a conclusion (though each chapter also has a useful conclusion of its own).

The central argument of the book is simple, as Caswell rightly states, but also powerful: "for some people in certain circumstances to die alone is a choice and represents, for them, a good death." For others, it may be "an acceptable option, representing a good-enough death." She suggests that "the group for whom dying alone is least acceptable is those who are the survivors of any death; the family and friends of the dying who live on to mourn the loss of a person about whom they cared and who are troubled by the memory of the person's death alone" (p. 6). By thoroughly unpacking the idea of dying alone and its various meanings, the book has prompted me to reflect on

dying alone as a choice, and what factors might shape that decision.

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