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OUR GHOSTS WERE ONCE PEOPLE Stories on Death and Dying

EDITOR / COMPILER:

Bongani Kona.

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A review of: OUR GHOSTS WERE ONCE PEOPLE Stories on Death and Dying. Edited by Bongani Kona.

Information on the author

Editor/Compiler: Bongani Kona is a Zimbabwean born writer and editor. He works in the department of history at the University of the Western Cape and is a member of the curatorial team at the *Archive of Forgetfulness*. He has written for and been published in Chimurenga, a publication of arts, culture, and politics from and about Africa, The Baffler, a magazine of art and criticism and his work has been broadcasted on the BBC.

Contributing authors all have a connection with Africa and are writers, authors, artists, editors, poets, playwrights, historians, teachers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, clinical psychologists, and medical doctors. They are: Mary Watson, Karin Schimke, Sindiswa Busuku, Lucienne Bestall, Khadija Patel, Shrikant Peters, Sudirman Adi Makmur, Lidudumalingani, Paula Ihozo Akugizibwe, Stacy Hardy, Rofhiwa Maneta, Madeleine Fullard, Bongani, Kona, Musawenkosi Khanyile, Simon Haysom, Thata Monare, Malika Ndlovu, Angifi Dladla, Nick Mulgrew, Shubnum Khan, Caroline Boulle, Tatamkhulu Afrika, Dela Gwala, Ann Hartford, Dawn Garisch, Hedley Twidle, Toni Stuart, Sisonke Msimang, Gabeba Baderoon, Barry Christianson, Vonani Bila, Khanya Mtshali, and Robert Berold.

The Review

The book is an African anthology on death and dying and is not structured in chapters. Various short forms of writing and photos follow each other as contributing authors share lived experiences: personal, religious, cultural and fictional accounts of death, dying and those left behind. Writing from Cape Town during the COVID-19 pandemic, the editor gives the reason for the book in the Introduction: *This has been a time of unremitting grief. People have lost loved ones, homes, jobs, and suffered all kinds of setbacks, large and small. At a time like this, the promise literature holds out to us is that we are never alone.* Death is the ultimate equaliser. It exposes the fundamental humanness of us all, but the way it is experienced and coped with differs enormously. For me, this was the value of the book: It contextualises this universal inevitability for us as Africans, both within and across our cultural and religious diversities.

The pandemic has heightened the general awareness and experience of death and dying. Healthcare workers have always been more exposed to such than the general population. Less so for occupational therapists than for nurse and doctors, but for anyone working in a hospital setting it is not an unfamiliar reality¹ and there are occupational therapists who work specifically in palliative care². Although there are no specific references to ‘occupational therapy’ or ‘rehabilitation’ in the book, there are several mentions of *therapy* in a generic way. Several references are made to nurses and doctors, most of them in a positive tone. With one not so positive mention to healthcare in general: *I think about how you get lost to a healthcare system that only takes care of a financially privileged few (A Post box on the Corner of Eternity, pg. 175).*

The book offers armchair access to experiences of loss and hurting

which, experiences that, if gained at all, usually only come with many years of life experience and, in the case of healthcare workers, clinical practice. It is good reading for occupational therapist to gain insight into the way loss and grief are dealt with from African-centred phenomenology. Offering insight and opportunity for empathy, to significant life-changing events such as acquiring a disability or having to face the inevitable gradual loss of function and ability.

Khadija Patel (*A Death and Life Experience*, pg. 33 - 37) shares the account of becoming and being a toekamannies (as women who bathe and shroud the dead are known in the Malay communities). A doctor shares his anger and frustration of working in an overcrowded and under-resourced public healthcare facility (*This Nightmare of a Place: A Doctor's Story*, pg. 38 -47). In the *Ferryman* (pg48 - 51), Sudiman Adi Makmur, who works for a firm whose business is to transport those who died in other countries back to their families, shares an insight: *The deceased carry their own baggage: a complex set of morals, values, and relationships; various relations between different individuals and bodies, between disorderly bodies and disciplinary regimes, between communities, governments, and industries* (pg49). Truly thought-provoking is Simone Haysom's piece (Living as Ghosts Do, pg. 101- 109) on heroin addiction in South Africa. She accuses all South Africans for not paying enough attention to the problem: *What you measure matters, and when people don't matter, they aren't measured* (pg 101). She tells how street drugs such as *unga, whoonga, sugar or nyaope* are powered by heroin and used by *people tapping out of the world in ... the politest way they know how* (pg102) because there is no political will or plan to address the heroin issue in southern Africa and because our rehabilitation centres are scarce, under-resourced facilities with *revolving doors*. Families, - who can often least afford to - are therefore left with the burden of care. An author with the talent and skill to express himself, tells of suicide attempts, dissociation, and catatonia (*Story of a Name*, pg.146 - 152) making what occupational therapists often medicalise, distressingly more personal. As are accounts of various forms of loss. The relentless losing of a grandmother to Alzheimer's and old age (*Record Keeping*, pg.159- 170). Losing a father (*Ancestral Wealth*, pg. 226 - 243):

*If you were alive today, madala -
I'd buy you a suit and soft ostrich-skin shoes
I'd fly you to Durban or Cape Town
So you can walk on the beach*

A father who had worked as a porter and cleaner at Elim hospital (Limpopo) all his life and then when his time came, chose to die at home, because from his many years of working in a hospital, *he knows hospitals are restless places in which to die* (pg 237)

These are just a few of the stories that would be of interest to occupational therapists who are in the business of working with hurting and broken people. Some accounts make for grim reading (pg. 61 - 65) and others are heart-wrenchingly personal (pg. 209 - 210). All of them reflect authentic African

knowledge and understanding of death and its associated realities. It is recommended reading for all occupational therapists. Especially those working in palliative care, geriatrics, public healthcare and/or in acute rehabilitation settings

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2. Treggalles K, Lowrie D. An exploration of the lived experience of professional grief among occupational therapists working in palliative care settings. *Aust Occup Ther J* 2018; 65: 329-337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12477>