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How We Die

Reflections on Life's Final Chapter

SHERWIN B. NULAND

Extraordinary advance praise for

HOW WE DIE

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE'S FINAL CHAPTER

by Sherwin B. Nuland

PUBLISHED BY KNOPF FEBRUARY 3, 1994

"As powerful and sensitive, and unsparing and unsentimental, as anything I have ever read." —OLIVER SACKS

"A remarkable feat of alchemy. Dr. Nuland has taken some technical and potentially depressing material and transformed it into a moving, readable and truly important book. Every doctor and every patient should read it." —RABBI HAROLD KUSHNER

"A wealth of wisdom and experience presented in a wise and kindly voice. These stories echo in the mind long after reading. They are beautifully told." —RICHARD SELZER

"Unforgettable....a sobering look at the clinical reality of death." —Kirkus Reviews

"Enthralling....Dr. Nuland makes fascinating what is most terrifying and therefore entirely distracts us from the 'I don't know, I don't want to think about it' attitude. Curiously, as we read, we do want to know, and instead of being shocked we become more and more interested." —RUTH RENDELL

"This is a rare book. I do not recall ever reading a description of the final chapter of life that so eloquently describes the various ways in which death approaches. Dr. Nuland offers important and insightful vignettes that are both moving and hopeful. It is a book that all physicians and medical students should have in their library."

—JAMES P. NOLAN, M.D., President, Association of Professors of Medicine

"A shattering book: filled with pain, yet brimming with humanity.

It's impossible to read *How We Die* without realizing how earnestly we have avoided this most unavoidable of subjects—how we have protected ourselves by building a cultural wall of myths and lies. I don't know of any writer or scientist who has shown us the face of death as clearly, honestly and compassionately as Sherwin Nuland does here." —JAMES GLEICK

"Intriguing....imbued with wisdom rooted in a belief that the dignity we seek in dying must be found in the art of living life to the fullest." —Publishers Weekly

"Thought-provoking and humane." —Booklist

"A remarkable mix of clinical accuracy, epidemiologic fact and a clear call for us to be informed. Dr. Nuland's candor forces us to examine the realities of the process of dying, but his compassion leavens and softens the message he brings us." —JEREMIAH BARONDESS, M.D., President, New York Academy of Medicine

"He has done us a service by being so clear, so honest, and so unsentimental."

—DORIS LESSING



"EVERYONE WANTS TO KNOW the details of dying, though few are willing to say so. Whether to anticipate the events of our own final illness or better to comprehend what is happening to a mortally stricken loved one—or more likely out of that id-borne fascination with death we all share—we are lured by thoughts of life's ending. To most people, death remains a hidden secret, as eroticized as it is feared. We are irresistibly attracted by the very anxieties we find most terrifying; we are drawn to them by a primitive excitement that arises from flirtation with danger. Moths and flames, mankind and death—there is little difference.

"There is a vast literature on death and dying. Virtually all of it is intended to help people cope with the emotional trauma involved in the process and its aftermath; the details of physical deterioration have for the most part not been much stressed. Only within the pages of professional journals are to be found descriptions of the actual processes by which various diseases drain us of vitality and take away our lives.

"I have chosen to focus on six of the most common disease categories of our time, not only because they include the mortal illnesses that will take the great majority of us but for another reason as well: The six have characteristics that are representative of certain universal processes that we will all experience as we are dying. A familiarity with them will explain how we die of illnesses not specifically described in this book. Those I have chosen are not only our most common avenues to death, they are also the ones whose paving stones are trod by everyone, no matter the rarity of the final disease.

"I have written this book to demythologize the process of dying. My intention is not to depict it as a horror-filled sequence of painful and disgusting degradations, but to present it in its biological and clinical reality, as seen by those who are witness to it and felt by those who experience it. Only by a frank discussion of the very details of dying can we best deal with those aspects that frighten us the most. It is by knowing the truth and being prepared for it that we rid ourselves of that fear of the terra incognita of death that leads to self-deception and disillusion."

—SHERWIN B. NULAND, from his *Introduction*

"Sherwin Nuland is an exceedingly wise and experienced physician who draws in a lifetime's clinical experience; a scholar and historian who draws on all of Western literature; and a deeply sensitive (and, one feels, vulnerable) human being, who draws on many personal experiences of observing the dying of families and friends, and the sense of their loss. These three voices—the clinical, the historical, and the personal—all blend to produce a narrative, a series of portraits of analyses of dying, as powerful and sensitive, and unsparing and unsentimental, as anything I have ever read." —OLIVER SACKS



SHERWIN B. NULAND is the author of *Doctors: The Biography of Medicine*. He teaches surgery and the history of medicine at Yale University, and is Literary Editor of *Connecticut Medicine* and Chairman of the Board of Managers of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*. His book *The Origins of Anesthesia* is a volume in the Classics of Medicine Library.

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