

Ordinary Deaths: Stories From Memory

Michael Layne, MD^{a,b}

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS:

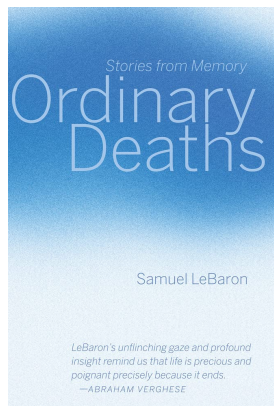
^a Family and Community Medicine,
Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk,
VA

^b Ghent Family Medicine, Norfolk, VA

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Book Title: Ordinary Deaths: Stories From Memory

Author: Samuel LeBaron

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In *Ordinary Deaths*, Samuel LeBaron, MD, chronicles intimate experiences with mortality from his personal and professional life. From the recounting of his experiences as a child in rural Alberta to those as a clinical psychologist and then finally family physician, LeBaron's storytelling serves as a reminder of the beauty and mystery of the human life cycle while challenging us to bring humanism and connection to even the most desperate of circumstances.

LeBaron begins *Ordinary Deaths* reflecting on his time as a graduate student in clinical psychology. As he retells the story of a pediatric cancer patient requiring repeat bone marrow biopsies, he challenges us to consider how we should balance necessary and often aggressive treatments with the need to provide comfort. Through powerful narrative and delicate prose, *Ordinary Deaths* asks the reader to consider the degree to which pain and suffering are acceptable when diminishing returns on therapeutics become apparent. In the end, connection and comfort are the best he has to give his young patient.

Moving back in time, LeBaron then takes us on a journey to his family's farm in rural Alberta. Even as a child, LeBaron seemed to regard death as something not to be fled from but instead explored and ultimately confronted. From bisecting a worm to his discovery of a decomposing horse, LeBaron seems to strive to normalize death while preserving its profundity. Throughout the book, the reader sees this seemingly innate preoccupation with mortality, though often bittersweet, serve LeBaron well as a healer and comforter of those passing away.

One of the more profound messages from *Ordinary Deaths* is the simple but often overlooked reality that we cannot make assumptions about the inner world of our patients. In the chapter "Día de Muertos" (Day of the Dead), LeBaron tells us of a 7-year-old boy with terminal leukemia who had stopped eating and had become increasingly withdrawn. As one can imagine, the working diagnosis is that the boy has become withdrawn out of fear of dying. Connecting through song and quiet patience, LeBaron uncovers that "Danny" is actually not fearful of death at all but instead preoccupied with his parents' grief and concerned about how his family and friends will respond to his passing. With fresh insight into Danny's perspective, LeBaron draws the boy from his shell, and a path forward toward healing is revealed.

Time and time again, LeBaron's often achingly personal narrative showcases vulnerability as a superpower—something capable of soothing and bringing forth even the most cloistered of spirits. Whether counseling a young couple in premature labor or bringing some desperately needed honesty to a conversation with his colleague suffering from gastric cancer, the earnest openness that LeBaron brings to his clinical work should serve as a north star for learners and practitioners of family medicine alike.

Through first-person narrative rich with detail and tenderness, LeBaron illuminates the challenges faced by the dying and their caregivers. Although the text is by no means didactic, LeBaron's storytelling offers profound lessons for students of family medicine. Perhaps LeBaron's greatest gift to learners facing the headwinds of a byzantine health care system and a culture that often rails against the inevitabilities of aging and dying

is the reassurance that healing can take place even in the face of unconquerable disease. This lesson, taken to heart, will serve the next generation of family physicians well as they work through the complexities of treating our aging population. Though those interested in palliative medicine and hospice medicine will need to supplement their library beyond *Ordinary Deaths*, the book's poignancy and depth place it shoulder to shoulder with other similar great works such as Frank Ostaseski's *The Five Invitations*¹ and Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*.² The book is highly recommended for learners, practitioners, and anyone else seeking insight and resilience navigating the process of death and dying.

REFERENCES

1. Ostaseski F. *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*. Flatiron Books; 2019.
2. Gawande A. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Metropolitan Books; 2017.