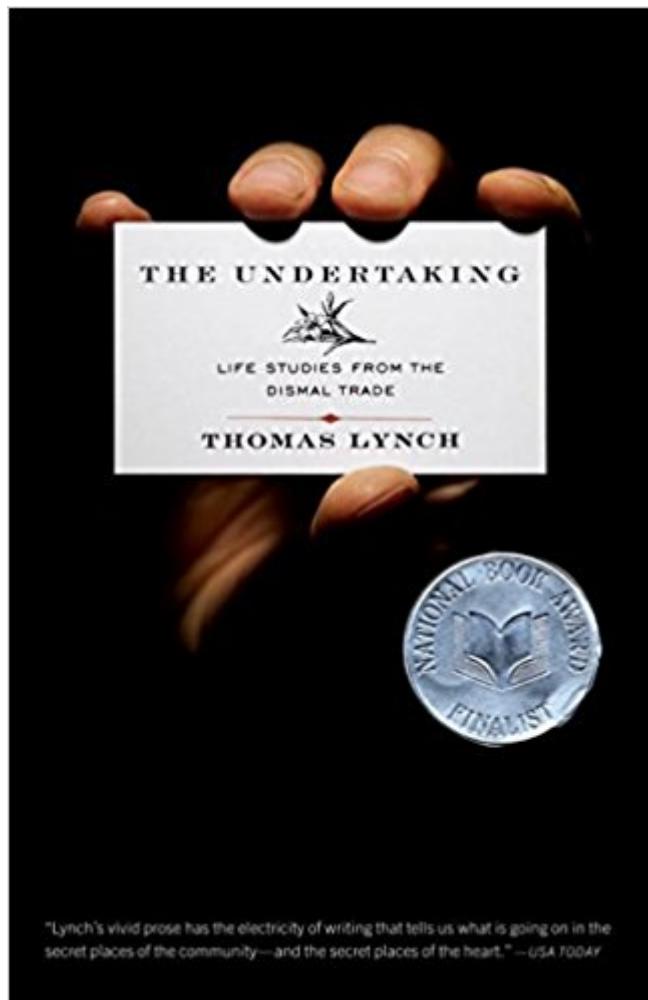


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# The Undertaking: Life Studies From The Dismal Trade



## Synopsis

A National Book Award Finalist: "One of the most life-affirming books I have read in a long time" — Tom Vanderbilt, *The Nation* "Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople." So opens this singular and wise testimony. Like all poets, inspired by death, Thomas Lynch is, unlike others, also hired to bury the dead or to cremate them and to tend to their families in a small Michigan town where he serves as the funeral director. In the conduct of these duties he has kept his eyes open, his ear tuned to the indispensable vernaculars of love and grief. In these twelve pieces his is the voice of both witness and functionary. Here, Lynch, poet to the dying, names the hurts and whispers the condolences and shapes the questions posed by this familiar mystery. So here is homage to parents who have died and to children who shouldn't have. Here are golfers tripping over grave markers, gourmands and hypochondriacs, lovers and suicides. These are the lessons for life our mortality teaches us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"...I had come to know that the undertaking that my father did had less to do with what was done to the dead and more to do with what the living did about the fact of life that people died," Thomas Lynch muses in his preface to *The Undertaking*. The same could be said for Lynch's book: ostensibly about death and its attendant rituals, *The Undertaking* is in the end about life. In each case, he writes, it is the one that gives meaning to the other. A funeral director in Milford, Michigan, Lynch is that strangest of hyphenates, a poet-undertaker, but according to Lynch, all poets share his

occupation, "looking for meaning and voices in life and love and death." Looking for meaning takes him to all sorts of unexpected places, both real and imagined. He embalms the body of his own father, celebrates the rebuilt bridge to his town's old cemetery, takes issue with the Jessica Mitfords of this world, and envisages a "golfatorium," a combination golf course and cemetery that could restore joy to the last rites. In "Crapper," Lynch even contemplates the subtleties of the modern flush toilet and its relationship to the messy business of dying: "Just about the time we were bringing the making of water and the movement of bowels into the house, we were pushing the birthing and marriage and sickness and dying out." Death and fatherhood, death and friendship, death and faith and love and poetry--these are the concerns that power Lynch's undertaking. Throughout, Lynch pleads the case for our dead--who are, after all, still living through us--with an eloquence marked by equal parts whimsy, wit, and compassion. In the last essay, "Tract," he envisions almost wistfully the funeral he'd choose for himself, and then relinquishes that, too. Funerals, after all, are for the living. The dead, he reminds us, don't care. --Mary Park --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Eloquent, meditative observations on the place of death in small-town life, from the only poet/funeral director in Milford, Mich. Poets like Lynch (*Grimalkin and Other Poems*) tend to be more respectful about death and the grave than novelists like Evelyn Waugh or journalists like Jessica Mitford. Lynch lives by the old- fashioned undertakers' motto, ``Serving the living by caring for the dead" (as opposed to more mundanely providing, as one seminar put it, ``What Folks Want in a Casket"). Taking up the family business, Lynch philosophically bears his responsibilities in Milford, which has its statistical share of accidents, suicides, murders, and grieving survivors. His essential respect for the living and the dead notwithstanding, his shop talk perforce has its morbid aspects, such as making ``pre-arrangements" with future clients, reminding families about uncollected cremation ashes, taking middle-of-the-night calls for collection, or, in a rare filial obligation, embalming his own father. But the author has a sense of the absurd possibilities of his business, even a whimsical scheme to run a combination golf course/burial ground. In one of the livelier essays, he reflects on the competition--both professional and philosophical--fellow Michiganite Dr. Jack Kevorkian, with his no-muss suicide machine, poses to Uncle Eddie's postmortem-clean-up business, Specialized Sanitation Services ("Why leave a mess? Call Triple SI"). In the high point of these dozen essays, he combines his profession and his vocation, delivering the dedicatory poem for the reopening of the restored bridge to Milford's old cemetery--"This bridge connects our daily lives to them,/and makes them, once our neighbors, neighbors once again." Already excerpted in Harper's and the

London Review of Books, this thoughtful volume is neither too sentimental nor too clinical about death's role (and the author's) in our lives. (illustrations, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Thomas Lynch always makes me think, feel, reflect, consider and wonder! When I read his work, including his work with Thomas long, I determine that "The Dismal Trade" is not dismal at all, but a ministry of love, consolation and compassion. Yes, he does poke fun at our denial of death and bizarre social mores, but I take it as a welcome rebuke. Great book for anyone interested in the soul of a funeral director.

One of my favorite books.....I read it ages ago and it really stuck with me....so I ordered this book to re-read. It's a subject matter that is rarely discussed (the author is a funeral director) but the book is beautifully and artfully written, is funny and quirky in parts, is sad in others, and to me is written in a way to connect folks to one another.....I think it's a book everyone should read-----but may not be one to read if you have just recently lost a loved one, as the topic may be too raw for people who are just beginning to go through the grieving process.

I got lost in some part on the book, but overall it was a good book. Very well written, funny an insightful an thoughtful.

not a book i would typically pick for myself but im glad i read it. it was different and well-written. interesting perspectives on death and also a nice reminder on life because sometimes we forget to live it.

What a cool book to read. The Lynch family are wonderful at their craft!. Very caring people. This book was enjoyable on a subject one may not thing to read about.

Lynch beautifully expresses a wisdom about events in our lives that we all have in common; from our messy births to our messy demises. Some reviews have accused him of being a little preachy. I found that his views reflected a deep understanding and compassion for the human condition in all of its contradictions. I appreciated his skillful use of language, crafting prose that is rich and full. I found myself not just reading but savoring this book. It's so worth anyone's time to read this

wonderful bit of literature. In a book about death you'll find yourself appreciating life all the more.

Read this book before you die. Most every person growing up in America has no real concept of dying. They need to understand the insights that Thomas Lynch shares in this book. Not a "feel good about the afterlife" or "how to die with dignity" book. This is my second copy, gave the first to a dying friend. He thanked me. I'm not going anywhere soon but this book helps me look at life from a practical point of view. Thomas Lynch the poet undertaker.

Waterstones at Notting Hill, London, provided me with this perfect vacation reading. About the final act of the living for the newly departed, it seems the ideal vacation book, for is not death, after all, the endless vacation? Thomas Lynch, middle-Westerner, Poet honored in England and sadly invisible in the States, writes movingly, wittily, fantastically, of the final rites of the living. These essays are by turn reflections on the deeply personal, as in burying one's father; send-ups of the American penchant for the bottom line (the essay on combining the green and grief of the cemetery with the practicality of the golfing mania); the daily fact of death and the professional's chosen role to deal with it honorably, gracefully, and thoughtfully. This is perhaps not a book about death so much as about life and the living; a book about others' final moments and our survival of them until the final moment is ours. By which such time, if we listen to the practiced language and balanced attitude of this Poet/Undertaker, we will perhaps be prepared for our own final and inevitable undertaking

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