



Illustrating Death in Caitlin Doughty’s Creative Nonfiction: From *Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*

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The purpose of illustrations is to enhance the reading experience, improve the text, and add another layer of representation. In death-acceptance literature, such as Caitlin Doughty’s creative nonfiction books, *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, illustrations portray the highly sensitive topic of death. Landis Blair and Dianné Ruz, the illustrators whose works complete the two books, create a multimodal text with the help of literal and conceptual illustrations. This article aims at analysing the use and structure of these illustrations in the context of multimodality and death acceptance. In addition, the paper also contains two interviews that are meant to offer the perspective of the two illustrators on their own work and on illustrating death in nonfiction.

Keywords: literal illustration, conceptual illustration, multimodality, death acceptance, creative nonfiction.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the written text is not enough to keep the reader engaged. In a time when social media (with the instant gratification they provide) and multimodality are two of the most used techniques to send and receive information, the plain text does not make for an appealing medium of telling stories. This is why, creative nonfiction – the genre that combines the artfulness of storytelling with reality and facts – and illustrations is a pair which becomes more and more captivating, especially in the context of death-acceptance literature. The aim of this paper is to present the way in which illustrations are used in Caitlin Doughty’s books *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* from two points of view: (1) the multimodal direction that the written text takes when we add illustrations; (2) the difference between literal and conceptual illustrations and what effects they have on readers.

First, visual culture is a contemporary post-modern trait that we can notice both as part of screen culture (Rarot) and as part of what has nowadays become the golden age of illustrated nonfiction (Brechtner). When it comes to death-acceptance literature – one of whose representatives is Caitlin Doughty – death and death-related imagery is a sensitive topic, so illustrations become a type of filtered photographs “created as reminders and celebrators of life” (Pantelić). While there are many subjects that photographers shy away from, such as the dead body (this includes: human remains, crime scene photography, post-mortem photography) or the aftermath of natural disasters or war crimes, illustrators have the possibility of deliberate censorship and visual control over their work. This enables the use of illustrations

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even about the most sensitive of topics such as death and dying. Even if, when referring to contemporary illustration, “there are few boundaries and more friction” (Federico), since illustrators draw inspiration from other visual arts, such as fashion, graffiti, and animation, as you will see in this paper, the two illustrators of the two books, Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair, are inspired by two very different styles, and yet the essence of their illustrations converge in one single point: death acceptance and the reality of being mortal.

Second of all, illustrations “expand, explain, interpret, or decorate a written text” (Bodmer 72). They act as explanatory addendums or as creative interpretations. In the case of children’s books – one of the many examples – illustrations provide “mental scaffolds” (Fang 138) for the young reader, but the same thing may be said for any readership. In Doughty’s books, illustrations are checkpoints that help the readers update their initial feeling about the author’s style, discourse, and content. While it is possible to get lost in the written text or to stray from the main focal point (here: death phobia and death acceptance), the illustration will always bring you back. It will act as an anchor that the readers can use whether they want to re-read a part of the book, or to remember what a chapter is about, or simply to relive a feeling.

In the following sections, I will briefly talk about the importance of illustrations in creative nonfiction, and analyse the role and the effect of the visual elements in Caitlin Doughty’s *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, illustrated by Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair. More than that, I will also add two short interviews with the illustrators that might help us grasp the complexity of this process and the meaning behind some elements in their illustrations.

Illustrations in (Creative) Nonfiction

In nonfiction, illustration is “pragmatically necessary” and there must be a “tight” and “indissoluble melding of text and image to clarify or explain accurately the facts presented” (Thomas 25). At the centre of the illustration as a companion to the written text, there is a relationship between word and image, between what is said and what is seen, or between what we tell and what we show. Sometimes, the two halves are not alike, but they do complete each other. For instance, we can use illustrations to tell a part of the story which is not revealed in the written text, or we can add details and elements that might be missing from it. The readers pick up on this addition and put the information together in their minds—similar to a puzzle—and create a complex picture that allows them to experience the information exchange more profoundly.

The visual language that is our eyesight has also been the subject of neurological studies (such as Oliver Sacks’ *Hallucinations* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*) that confirmed the complexity of seeing as a cognitive technique: involving conscious intellectual activities such as reasoning or remembering to gain cognitive development. In “Word and Image”, Mitchell writes: “The domains of word and image are like two countries that speak different languages but that have a long history of mutual migration, cultural exchange and other forms of intercourse” (53). And since creative nonfiction¹ is built around the idea of truth and reality (Hart 240; Gutkind 6), the word and the image must also comply to the same norm – or rather their relationship must do so – and strive to express the same meaning and to have the same purpose: to attract, to inform, and to keep the readers engaged by exposing them to reality in a visual way.

In an article for *ShelfTalker*, Brechner argues that this decade is the beginning of a golden age in nonfiction picture books. So, it should come as no surprise that authors such as Caitlin Doughty, whose target readership is not technically made up of children, choose to illustrate their books. Death is naturally perceived as a sensitive subject, and the style of the illustration could soften that proverbial blow or just have a greater impact upon the imagination of the reader than the written text alone.

However, illustrations are not a characteristic of the modern and post-modern era alone. This may have very well begun in the prehistoric era, and once the printing press brought a massive shift in the

¹ Creative nonfiction is the use of artful storytelling to present true facts. One might also find it under the name of literary nonfiction.

distribution of information, illustration allowed ideas to be communicated to a larger mass of readers (Barnes). In the last two centuries, it became a tool for people taking a social stand, from the suffragettes to Women's March and the Black Lives Matter Movement. We can agree that illustration became a form of resistance to the norm, and we might just as well argue that it has done the same for the death-positivity movement (Booth), which spread like wildfire with the use of social media – the queen of instant visual gratification – with the help of death industry workers, scholars, and artists who choose to accept mortality and to also help others on their personal journeys. Death positivity militates for open conversation about death and for accepting and taking inspiration from cultural and personal differences regarding rituals, grief, and beliefs. Photography and illustration are a great help in this process: Paul Koudounaris's *Memento Mori* and *Death, a Graveside Companion*, a collection of one thousand macabre photos and illustrations, are wonderful examples of such endeavours.

Some more traditional and classical representations of death include vanitas paintings, which were common in the medieval art and included symbols such as skulls, hourglasses, watches, and decaying flowers, as carriers of an allegorical meaning. In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the elaborate illustrations accompany spells whose purpose is to help the dead pass to the other side. It is a guidebook to the afterlife, the essence of the Egyptian culture itself. In the twentieth century, the avant-garde experimentation changed the way we represented death in art: we no longer needed the typical symbols of skulls and hourglasses, but we had the freedom to encompass the idea of death into a landscape with crows, similar to Vincent van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*. In more abstract paintings, colours carried death via black and blue pigments, and contemporary art added to that a literal representation of death, such as Andy Warhol's *Car Crash* (Pantelić). In the twenty-first century, we are witnessing a culture-oriented rebirth of death representation in illustration, as we will see in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*.

The Multimodal Dimension

The multimodal novel “makes it possible for the reader to look at and study artifacts from the fictional world and thus share the cultural code and experiences of the textual world and its agents” (Hallet 149). Since creative nonfiction involves a certain sense of fictionality, a novel-like use of language and décor, we can extend this definition given by Hallet to what is called fictional or creative narratology (e.g., the use of illustrations in novels such as *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*). Besides the fact that the illustrator is mentioned on the title page, which gives the readers the clue that what they are about to see in the book has a certain importance to the overall message of the author, the illustrations are perhaps the milder versions of real-life photographs, whose presentation would have proven to be quite difficult for the readership of memoirs, travel journals, and journalistic-type books.

In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, every chapter is accompanied by an illustration (see Figure 1) made by Dianné Ruz that encompasses the topic of the question answered by the author. For instance, in the chapter “Can I keep my parents' skulls after they die?” (12–17), the illustration covers the whole page and shows us a young woman watering a plant whose pot is a skull. We infer that the answer to the question is positive, and we see the result of the girl acting upon her wish to keep the skull of her parents after they have died. Thus, there appears an invisible link between the written text, the illustration, and our own power of interpretation. This second illustrated world, parallel to – and yet converging with – the written text, enhances our reading experience and does so with the certainty that we are capable of seeing more than what is shown to us.



Figure 1. “Can I keep my parents’ skulls after they die?”, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*; illustrated by Dianné Ruz.

One very important aspect about the illustrations in this book is that the main personage that appears in every illustration resembles the author herself, known for her statement black hair and curtain fringe². The illustrator portrays Death in a similar fashion: it has the same almond-shaped eyes and arched smile as the other illustrated characters. On page 4, for instance, we see Death and the body of an astronaut as the illustration for the chapter “What would happen to an astronaut body in space?” (5–11). Death sits on a satellite, holding a scythe and pulling towards her an astronaut whose oxygen cord has been cut off. The difference between the two is only in the clothes they are wearing. Had we not seen them dressed like this, Death and the dead body would have looked the same. Supposing this similarity was planned, it brings even more meaning to the book, whose purpose is to bring us closer to a creative conversation about death, based on curiosity and rapprochement. Because the dead character in all illustrations has the same physical traits as Death, we immediately tell ourselves that She is closer than we think. Does this create some sort of uncomfortableness by tackling the modern man’s death phobia? Yes, it does, but it also holds space for introspection and meditation. When we look away, the image does not melt, nor does it dim out; it becomes part of our attitude towards death and dying.

Whilst the illustrations in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* seem to be designed for younger generations³ – such as the book itself, even if it became clear that adults prefer it as well, perhaps even more than children or teenagers – one of Doughty’s other books, *From Here to Eternity*, uses illustrations that are more like photographs. For instance, on pages 88 and 89, Doughty describes a collection of mummies (see Figure 2) from Guanajuato, and Landis Blair, the illustrator, draws two mummies, one on each of the two pages, mouths wide open, dark gaps instead of eyes, shrivelled skin, and facial expressions that make those bodies look like they are screaming in horror. Should the reader not create a realistic picture in their mind – due to Doughty’s raw description: “many of them have gaping mouths and twisted arms and necks”, with “all of the muscles in the body relax, dropping jaws open, loosening tension in the eyelids, and affording the joints extreme flexibility” (Doughty 89) – the illustrations will certainly

² As the interview will show, this choice was intentional.

³ In an interview, Caitlin Doughty confesses that, after a live event in Australia, a little boy came up to her and asked her whether his cat would eat his eyeballs when he died. She tells us: “Immediately, a light bulb just went off in my head. I thought: ‘It’s such a brilliant way to ask that’” (Chicago Humanities Festival). The book is made up of children’s questions and their answers are both for children and adults.

fill that imagination gap. Here, they are less threatening than photographs because the readers know they are not looking at a direct representation of reality. However, this can be called “a second-hand representation”⁴, as it is not as close to what the human eye perceives as real and palpable, and yet it stays close enough to make some of us flinch or want to look away. If the author had chosen to use unretouched photographs of the mummies, she might have had to add a trigger warning at the beginning of the book or before each such visual element.



Figure 2. A mummy from Guanajuato, in *From Here to Eternity*; illustration by Landis Blair.



Figure 3. Torajan family with the mummified and disinterred body of a family member, in *From Here to Eternity*; illustration by Landis Blair.

⁴ I do not mean “second-hand” as an insult. But the closest representation of reality (other than our very own eyes) is unedited and unretouched photography. Naturally, the representation that comes next on the realness scale is illustration based on reality or on photography.

Other examples of illustrations that are used to complement the written text are found on pages 69, 71, and 75. They depict mummified bodies during the Festival of the Dead (see Figure 3), when the Torajan people disinter their family members, change their clothes, wrap them in blankets and interact with them during organized picnics in the cemetery. The illustrations are meant to show what the reader might possibly not believe: that somewhere, there is a cultural practice which involves touching, kissing, talking to, and interacting with a body that has been dead and mummified for a long time. Naturally, their purpose is to make themselves as comfortable as possible with the thought of dying by interacting with the body and not shying away from direct contact with the dead. Again, these illustrations create an extension of the written word; they build a visual space that interacts with the text, and the reader gets to dwell on different—and, some might say, unusual—rituals from all over the world, without actually seeing first-hand representations, but realistic depictions that could act as introspection material.

All throughout the book, the illustrations are placed right after the written text that they are meant to enhance or improve in a multimodal way. The code of the textual world is not only in the text. Here, in our case, it goes around the world and returns to the reader. So, perhaps because the textual world is the same as the real world, and its agents are real people who experienced everything in real-life, this multimodal element is perceived even stronger. Readers are aware of the fact that they do not deal with fiction, but with reality, and that the illustrations are the next best thing to photos depicting reality, which can only be seen through what Ruz and Blair decide to show us.

Also, the multimodal novel “equips its characters and narrators with a wide range of signifying and cultural abilities so that they appear as fully capable human beings sharing the cultural practices of their textual world” (Hallet 149). Yet again, Hallet’s characterization of the multimodal novel applies to creative nonfiction as well. By extension – and by association – creative nonfiction connects the non-fictional part of reality to a presentation that resembles fiction and all its elements, from metaphors and comparisons to imagery and poetic descriptions, which can all be found in Doughty’s novels. In the case of illustrations in her two books mentioned above, the characters and the narrator are real. For instance, Doughty mentions meeting Paul Koudounaris and receiving his help and guidance during her visit in Bolivia to gather data about the skulls called *ñatitas* in the context of a festival that inspired Koudounaris to write *Memento Mori*. Doughty tells us details about all the people she meets, people who revolutionized the death industry, from Cheryl Johnston running The Forensic Osteology Research Institute in Cullowhee, North Carolina, to villagers and taxi drivers who occasionally give Doughty valuable information about local death practices. The illustrations help us observe the entire death landscape through their eyes, and because the reader is aware of the reality behind the illustrations, the impact is even more striking. Perhaps some might get curious and research further on their own. For those who do not, imagination does the rest of the work.

Literal and Conceptual Illustrations

According to Alan Male, we can split imagery in two categories. The first one is “literal illustrations”, which “tend to represent pictorial truths” (50), meaning they depict pure and raw reality, without any metaphorical nuance. These illustrations create a credible scene for the reader, who usually relies on these images to strengthen the already existing information gathered from the written text. The second category is conceptual illustrations (Male 51), and here we might have “metaphorical applications to the subject or visual depictions of ideas or theories” (51), so the illustration might be built upon elements taken from reality, but the final visual product is different from the initial realistic impulse. Male also talks about “extreme characters” (154) in illustrations, that is: what can be allowed on the page, depending on the readership. In Doughty’s books, what Male calls “extreme characters” range from dead bodies to Death herself. But, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*, Death and dead bodies are portrayed in a similar fashion, perhaps with the purpose of not creating a huge gap of representation between man and mortality. They are the conceptual illustrations that Male writes about. And, in *From Here to Eternity*, the illustrations are closer to reality when it comes to depicting a dead body, a mummy, or a skull; these are the literal illustrations. Here, Death is not one of the characters, even though she lingers behind the

illustrations that Landis Blair draws, like a second layer of meaning, like the cause of – and, paradoxically, the reason for – everything.

Also, facial expressions should convey more about the characters portrayed in the illustrations. In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* we have a more typical character style than in *From Here to Eternity*. In the latter, we meet with the cultural aspect of the book: rituals, objects, and scenes that the author sees but the reader is sometimes incapable of fully picturing in his or her mind, so then we need a helping hand from the illustrator, who sees everything through the author's eyes. In the former, we do have characters, but they are not the essence of the illustration, so they do not have to convey any extreme expression: their eyes are closed or open, their mouths are usually in a V-shape, and they are surprised, frowning, or casually smiling, whether it is Death or some other character, dead or alive, skeletonized or “fleshy”, male or female, or even animal, which shows us that the character in itself is not the essential focal point of the illustration, but rather the global image: what they are doing, what objects we see in the background, and how everything comes together to express a possible answer to a question.



Figure 4. “What would happen if you died on a plane?”, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*; illustration by Dianné Ruz.

Whether to fill that blank slate that comes before each chapter or to ease the reader into the different death-related themes that are discussed by Doughty, these illustrations created by Ruz have a magical and a mysterious feeling to them; they stir curiosity and interest. They show real situations with a twist. For instance, the illustration on page 97 (see Figure 4), before the chapter “What would happen if you died on a plane?” (97–101) shows a flight attendant pushing a food cart along the aisle, with a dead body surrounded by ice and drinks, while a surprised woman places her hand on to her open mouth, glass in her hand—showing us that the flight attendant served her a drink from the cart where the body is preserved in ice. That is not the protocol (hopefully), but an exaggeration of the said situation, a striking answer to a “what if...” question.

Another similar example is on page 77 (see Figure 5), before the chapter “What would happen if you swallowed a bag of popcorn before you died and were cremated?” (77–82). The illustration shows a

dead body half into the cremation machine, surrounded by popcorn that has already popped. A skeleton is under the table, holding a bag of popcorn similar to those bought at the cinema, filled to the brim. Another person, perhaps the cremation machine operator, stands next to the corpse and protects her face from the popcorn that is still popping. Again, we have another portrayal that is at the threshold of reality and absurdity or exaggeration. In an absurd world, this illustration could suffice as an answer to the question, and the written text would not be necessary. However, the image shows us the possibility of an answer, an absurd and exaggerated one, and yet it shocks the reader with its possibility.

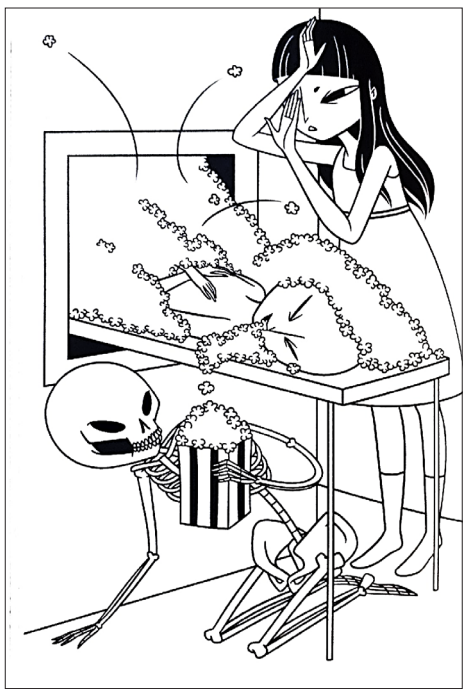


Figure 5. “What would happen if you swallowed a bag of popcorn before you died and were cremated?”, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*; illustrated by Dianné Ruz.



Figure 6. “Can you describe the smell of a dead body?”, in *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*; illustrated by Dianné Ruz.

Moreover, “visual communication relies on semiotics. This is where the audience interprets and translates signs and symbols, often by association, and the deciphering of these meanings can be subconscious” (Male 19). Let us take, for example, the illustration (see Figure 6) that accompanies the chapter called “Can you describe the smell of a dead body?” (161–164). The character—one of the few that show the slightest facial expression—holds in her hand a perfume bottle shaped like a skull, which gives off a smell portrayed as a black cloud turning into a skull at the bottom of which we can see two long bones criss-crossing. The character is pinching her nose, slightly frowning. In this chapter, Doughty calls the smell of a dead body by its scientific name, *odor mortis* (162), but to match the illustration, she also calls it “*eau de decomp*” (163). She uses the same name in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*: “*eau de decomposition*” (158), which has no illustrations, so it is rather expected that she keeps the same humorous lane, while also adding the visuals that were missing in her memoir. The name “*eau de...*” reminds the reader of perfumes. It instantly triggers the image of a receptacle, so the illustrator connects Doughty’s phrase to the combined symbols of a skull and a bottle of perfume.

“Great illustration should have a balance—a reduction to the essence, as well as visual interest and a seductive charm” (Cobb), and this is exactly what Ruz’s conceptual illustration does: it charms readers because it looks mysterious, it creates a second world, parallel to what the text offers us, and yet it intersects with it through symbols. Blair’s literal illustration enhances what the text already presents, and it does so with grace, without bothering the flow of the discourse. If we look at the illustrations in the section discussing the multimodal dimension (and as the following interview will show), we see that Blair’s wish is to stay as close as possible to reality. With only few exceptions, his illustrations obey to the rules of realistic and literal illustration: they do not contain exaggerations, symbols, and they do not expect the reader to make connections or understand some hidden layers of meaning. But they are enough to stir curiosity and introspection.

Next, the following section will show two interviews with the two illustrators. They will hopefully answer any questions I did not manage to and help us gain more knowledge about their personal process of illustrating nonfiction.

Interviews with the Illustrators

01. Interview with Dianné Ruz

Cristina Botîlcă: How would you describe your illustrations’ style in Caitlin Doughty’s *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs*?

Dianné Ruz: I would describe the drawing style as clean and minimalistic, as I tried to use the minimum essential elements to communicate each idea. I think what I make can be described as dark humor because humans in general are very afraid of death, as it comes natural to us, but as I come from a culture where we don’t see death as a taboo subject and address it even with a certain sense of humor, our relationship with death as a subject is less traumatic.

C.B.: What was the process of illustrating the book? Did you receive the whole manuscript and do the illustrations especially for it, or did you use some of your previous work?

D.R.: I received Caitlin’s manuscript and after careful reading it, I made sketches and from there I started making the final illustrations from scratch, taking elements from her text.

C.B.: How did you and the author communicate when it came to illustrations? Were you always on the same page with the style, the ideas, the design?

D.R.: Caitlin gave me all the artistic freedom to make the illustrations. Her text was amazing, so a lot of artistic ideas came to me when I read it. I think both of us were on the same page because I have read all of Caitlin’s previous books, watched her YouTube videos and my project *Muertos* is in the same universe – so to speak – and in this regard very related to that kind of topics.

C.B.: I noticed that all your work is consistent. The characters in your illustrations look alike, they all have almond shaped eyes and a V-shaped mouth. What or who was the inspiration for them?

D.R.: Having Maya heritage myself, I study ancient Maya art as hobby and I really like that the ancient Maya artists use a lot of rhetoric figures in their language and their art, so I feel very connected those

symbols of our art. I started to use that eye shape when I went to the museum and looked closely to a group of the oldest, pre-classic Maya figurines, and as all of them have those almond shaped eyes, I use them because I feel that it represents a gaze between open eyes (living) and closed eyes (dying). The closed mouth theme comes from someone who is listening, not talking, because we can only learn when we listen.

C.B.: There is a character in the book that has Caitlin Doughty's signature curtain fringe. Is that a portrayal of the author? Has she ever asked you to be a part of the illustrations, to see herself in them?

D.R.: She never asked me to be part of the illustrations, but I used her signature bangs as an homage to her. Besides, she is very cool, and I love her aesthetics.

C.B.: From all the illustrations in the book, what was the most challenging one for you to create and why?

D.R.: The very first one I made was the hardest. It was challenging because I made a lot of sketches before I sent the first one. I admire Caitlyn so much that I was afraid to make something not good enough! Of course, that fear was only in my mind because Caitlin was a sweetheart and liked everything very much since the very beginning.

C.B.: The fact that Death looks so much like all the other characters, is that on purpose?

D.R.: Yes! My characters in *Muertos* are the same person, even if I use more than one human figure. I made that project as the very personal experience of mine and I think that each human can play a lot of roles, even when we live or decay.

C.B.: Do you find it more difficult to illustrate for nonfiction than for fiction?

D.R.: Sometimes illustrating nonfiction is more difficult, especially if I don't know or feel that I am not an expert on that topic. For this project, I tried to study all the material available, so I could be very respectful and reflect an educated view on it. As a side note, sometimes fiction is funnier, but I think it is easy in both cases as long as I have a complete briefing from the author.

C.B.: Overall, how was the whole experience illustrating *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?*

D.R.: It was a pleasure! The communication was very fluid. Caitlin always listened to my ideas, and she gave me total creative freedom from the very beginning. Since the text was wonderful, it was very easy to imagine the graphics for her and she seemed very pleased, so it was amazing!

02. Interview with Landis Blair

Cristina Botîlcă: How would you describe your illustrations' style in Caitlin Doughty's *From Here to Eternity*?

Landis Blair: Technically speaking, I would describe them as ink washes layered over with intensive crosshatching.

C.B.: What was the process of illustrating the book? Did you receive the whole manuscript and do the illustrations especially for it, or did you use some of your previous work?

L.B.: All of the illustrations were created specifically for the book. I saw the manuscript in sections and so was able to work on batches of illustrations over the course of approximately eight months.

C.B.: How did you and the author communicate when it came to illustrations? Were you always on the same page with the style, the ideas, the design?

L.B.: At the start, Caitlin and I decided upon a rough number of illustrations we wanted to include inside the book. After we had that number, we then could make decisions about how many illustrations to include per chapter in order to disperse them roughly equally. For most of the book, Caitlin sent me a couple chapters of the text along with a list of things she thought could potentially be illustrated. I would then read the chapters and Caitlin and I would discuss and decide which of the potential illustrations we thought were most crucial. In general, we were on the same page regarding the style and design, but there were a few instances where I had to modify or redo the illustration since they didn't quite convey what Caitlin was wanting to emphasize.

C.B.: The author did the travelling, and you did the illustrations. How did this process go? Did she show you photos she took or tell you stories about what she saw, and then you had to re-imagine that element and illustrate it?

For a couple of the locations in the book I was lucky enough to be able to visit them alongside Caitlin, which definitely helped in my visualization of what needed to be illustrated. For the rest of the book, though, Caitlin shared other source material with me, whether it be her own photos or other imagery so I could see what she was describing in the text. I then took that material and did a number of sketches interpreting them in the way that I thought would visually work best.

C.B.: From all the illustrations in the book, what was the most challenging one for you to create and why?

L.B.: The most challenging illustration was the first image in the book opposite the title page. It shows the silhouette of a monk sitting and within that silhouette you see a dead body moving through the stages of decay. This illustration was particularly difficult in that it was a much more complicated and abstract concept that Caitlin was wanting conveyed compared to most of the other illustrations in the book. I actually did an entire first version of the monk illustration which I ended up discarding because it just wasn't working right. After I scrapped it, I went and did a page of about 15–20 thumbnail drawings of new ideas to rethink the illustration. Oddly enough, the final thumbnail – which I only did because I wanted to fill out the entire page and not leave a blank space at the bottom – was the one I ended up using. It is rewarding to me to see how by far this image has come to represent the entire book to people more than any of the other 40 + illustrations. I have received more requests from people asking to use that one image for various things than any other drawing I have ever done. Which is a bit amusing to me, given that the image shows a dead human body decomposing.

C.B.: You are an active member of The Order of the Good Death, and I am certain you are familiar with the imagery of death, but how did you make sure that the illustrations would be well received by the public? Some people fear talking about death, let alone see a photo or an illustration of a realistic dead body.

L.B.: This was definitely a challenge, and I confess that when Caitlin asked me to do these kinds of illustrations, I didn't think it would really work. Initially we had talked about collaborating on a different book, but Caitlin ended up writing this one first and still wanted me to illustrate it. I remember having conversations with her and expressing my concern and confusion in how my illustration style would help the book rather than becoming a distraction or sideshow from the text. In retrospect, it ended up working quite well with the text, and that credit and vision all goes to Caitlin. I think the illustrations made her text just real enough for people to understand it better, but not as gruesome and off-putting as if they were photos.

C.B.: Do you find it more difficult to illustrate for nonfiction than for fiction?

L.B.: There are unique difficulties to illustrating both nonfiction and fiction. The advantage of nonfiction illustration is that you can in general find some sort of reference material from which to sketch and base the illustrations. However, the difficulty comes with the added pressure of knowing you have to represent something accurately that actually existed or exists out in the real world. Conversely, with illustrating for fiction there are no boundaries or rules to what you can create but at the same time you are required to exert a different kind of mental energy in imagining something completely into existence.

C.B.: In your opinion, what do you think is the difference between a photograph and an illustration in a nonfiction book that talks about death and dying?

L.B.: I think the primary difference is that an illustration about death will be slightly more accessible than a photograph. This is all the more emphasized with my illustrations since they are in black and white which further distances a viewer from reality. I suppose this is a bit ironic given the manifesto of The Order of the Good Death with trying to combat the hiding of death in modern society. This being said, death has been and is currently being hidden in society and thus if illustrations provide some sort of bridge to the Good Death where photographs would cause someone to shut down, I think using the illustrations are justified. Additionally, I feel as though the illustrations provide a timelessness that would be absent with modern photography. Whenever I flip through an older nonfiction book with photographs in it, I feel the distance of time from when the book was written far more than when I see illustrations. All art is a form of abstraction, and it is this abstraction itself that makes it continually accessible to viewers over the course of history.

C.B.: Overall, how was the whole experience illustrating *From Here to Eternity*?

L.B.: It was a wonderful experience and one that I really hope to be able to do again some time.

Conclusions

As the paper and the interviews show, illustrations in creative nonfiction enhance and offer the written text a second layer. Both Dianné Ruz and Landis Blair worked in conjunction with Doughty's discourse to present elements of death and mortality in a way that would stir curiosity in, offer ease to, and create conversation (whether inner or outer) among the readers.

The multimodal text has become a welcomed medium that contemporary authors use to send information about subjects that might otherwise be risky (i.e., boring, sensitive, taboo) and one such subject is death and mortality. Whether they choose literal or conceptual illustrations, authors can create a multimodal text that can be engaging and educational. And despite the well-known death phobia that the modern man suffers from, works such as *From Here to Eternity* and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* prove that authors and illustrators can come together for the sake of open conversation about the one inevitability that we cannot come to terms with.

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