

The Power of Death in Stories

There is no more emotionally compelling narrative dynamic than death.

[Scott Myers](#)



Many years ago the night before I began writing a script which featured a young woman with terminal cancer, I wrote my friend Kurt Brown. Kurt was a poet and in fact had turned me onto poetry some years previously.

I emailed him: "Kurt, can you recommend a really good poem about death."

He emailed me back: "Scott, *all* poems are about death."

That got me thinking not only about poems, but stories of

all kinds. Whether literal or metaphorical, aren't all stories — at some level of interpretation and meaning — about death?

I was reminded of my email exchange with Kurt when I read an article by Josh Spiegel: [‘The Lion King’, ‘Bambi’, and Why Disney Movies Shouldn’t Be Afraid About Death’](#). In it, Spiegel compares these two classic Disney movies and writes this about *The Lion King*:

When Mufasa dies in The Lion King, pushed off a cliff by his jealous brother Scar into a stampede of wildebeest, it’s a shocking moment not only for his son Simba, but for everyone in the audience. The film is clearly building to this heartbreak in even lighter moments, such as a brief image of Simba and Mufasa playfully wrestling in the grass one evening, scored to the lush, almost operatic score from Hans Zimmer. But when Mufasa dies, it’s still a major surprise because these things just don’t happen in Disney films. What’s more, the aftermath, where Simba tries to nuzzle underneath the paw of his now-dead father, almost trying to will him back to life, is a gut-punch moment in Disney animation, as plaintive and affecting as anything the studio has ever done. I’m not going to lie: watching my son during this scene, as he became aware of what was happening, and seeing him come close to crying was incredibly rough. Like I said: the emotion is compounded when you watch this as an adult.



'The Lion King'

Another animation company Pixar does not shy away from death as a narrative element:

- Finding Nemo: Death of wife/mother and siblings
- Up: Death of Ellie (wife)
- The Good Dinosaur: Death of Henry (father)

It might seem odd, even strange in fact that these two companies, known for producing family movies, should traffic in stories featuring death, but here's my take: Where else can we go to process our own finitude than stories? The fact is each of us is born with an expiration date. We learn this early on as children, yet even when we gain some sense of permanence — around the age of 5 or 6 — by that point, we have managed to acclimatize ourselves to the reality that we will not live forever. Indeed, one day — we know not when — death will come calling for us.

How best to prepare ourselves the death of loved ones,

friends, even ourselves than by vicariously experiencing those associated feelings — fear, grief, anger, sadness, regret, terror — in the safe environment of a movie, a TV show, a book... a story?

Here is the current list of the top 25 movies in the IMDb 250 most popular films of all time:

[The Shawshank Redemption](#)

[The Godfather](#)

[The Godfather: Part II](#)

[The Dark Knight](#)

[12 Angry Men](#)

[Schindler's List](#)

[Pulp Fiction](#)

[The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King](#)

[The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#)

[Fight Club](#)

[The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring](#)

[Forrest Gump](#)

[Star Wars: Episode V — The Empire Strikes Back](#)

[Inception](#)

[The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers](#)

[One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest](#)

[Goodfellas](#)

[The Matrix](#)

[Seven Samurai](#)

[Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope](#)

[City of God](#)

[Se7en](#)

[The Silence of the Lambs](#)

[It's a Wonderful Life](#)

[Life Is Beautiful](#)

Correct me if I'm wrong, but going from memory, I think every single one of these movies involves the physical death of at least one character, many of them featuring multiple characters who end up dying.

This top 25 list is infused with death. Why?

As Josh indicates in the story of watching *The Lion King* with his family, his young son's tearful reaction to Mufasa's death speaks to a universal truth: Death is a powerful, perhaps **THE** most powerful element in storytelling.

This doesn't include metaphorical death. Digging into Pixar movies again:

- Toy Story: Death of a friendship
- The Incredibles: Death of a career as superhero
- Wall-E: Death of a planet
- Inside Out: Death of innocence

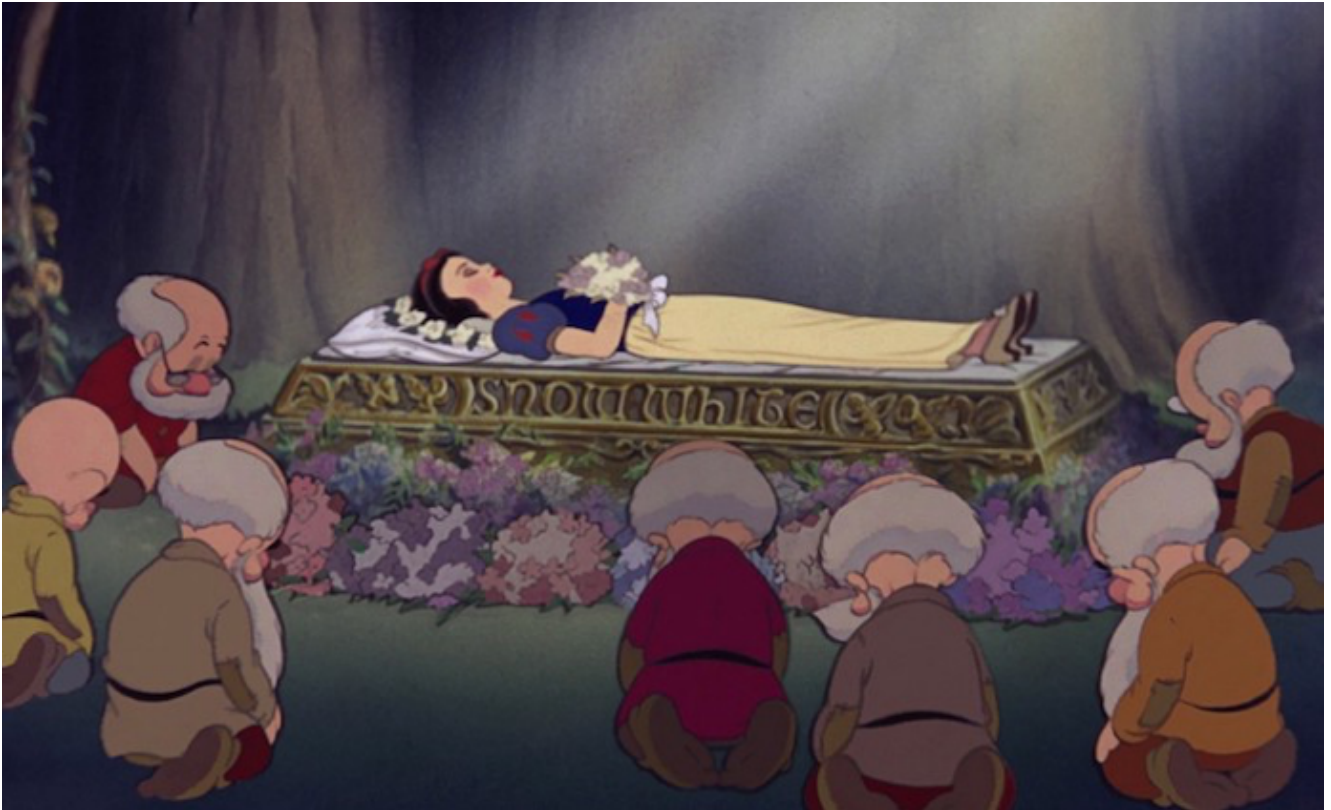
As storytellers, we should be aware of the dramatic potential of death as a narrative dynamic. We should also be cognizant of what Tasha Robinson wrote for The Dissolve, ["It's time to retire the Disney Death"](#):

Back in 1937, Walt Disney Animation launched an animated empire with Snow White And The Seven

Dwarfs, the first feature-length cel-animated movie. The company stuck fairly closely by the original fairy tale: Jealous of Snow White's beauty, the evil queen feeds her a poisoned apple that appears to kill her. The seven dwarves mourn her in a touchingly autumnal sequence, but then a kiss from the prince revives her. Death is averted, tragedy turns to triumph, everyone lives happily ever after.

*For Disney, a trope was born in that ending that's dogged the studio ever since, in films all the way up to the new [Big Hero 6](#). Like M. Night Shyamalan, taking the wrong lesson from his breakout *The Sixth Sense* and investing all his subsequent films with the same chilly, airless tone and bug-eyed performances that worked for the first story, Disney has returned to the death-mourning-resurrection-celebration ending over and over since *Snow White*, with diminishing returns. The gimmick may work beautifully within the confines of a single film: In *Frozen*, Anna's "death" from her sister's heart-freezing accidental attack, and subsequent revival because of an act of true love, is heavily foreshadowed from the beginning. It's thought-through and supported rather than arbitrary, and it's directed well enough to be a powerful moment. No one in the audience needs to believe that a Disney movie is going to end with tragedy and grief. It's enough that the characters believe it in the moment, that the story logic shows how they caused the situation they find*

themselves in, and makes a convincing (and slightly subversive) case for how they earned their escape. But taken as part of a continuum, the moment starts to look meaningless. It isn't just about Anna and Elsa, it's about all their forebears who went through the exact. Same. Story. Beats.



'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves'

The "Disney death" trope has expanded well beyond the story development borders of the Mouse House and the danger, as Robinson notes:

But that's what it's become in the Disney format, which makes end-of-film non-death feel routine, more a bit of mandatory business to be endured than an authentically powerful moment.

While death maybe an incredibly compelling narrative

element, when used poorly, it can come across as inauthentic, manipulative, and unsurprising, a cheap trick by writers and storytellers to elicit emotion in the viewer or reader.

Bottom line: Stories may tend to deal with the subject of death because they are a safe haven within which viewers or readers can process their emotions about their own or loved ones' deaths. As such, it is a powerful theme.

However, we have to be careful when using it in our stories so as not to have our death dynamics feel contrived.

Life is a miracle. We do well as writers to avoid using it in any other way than to respect the power of death as a narrative dynamic.