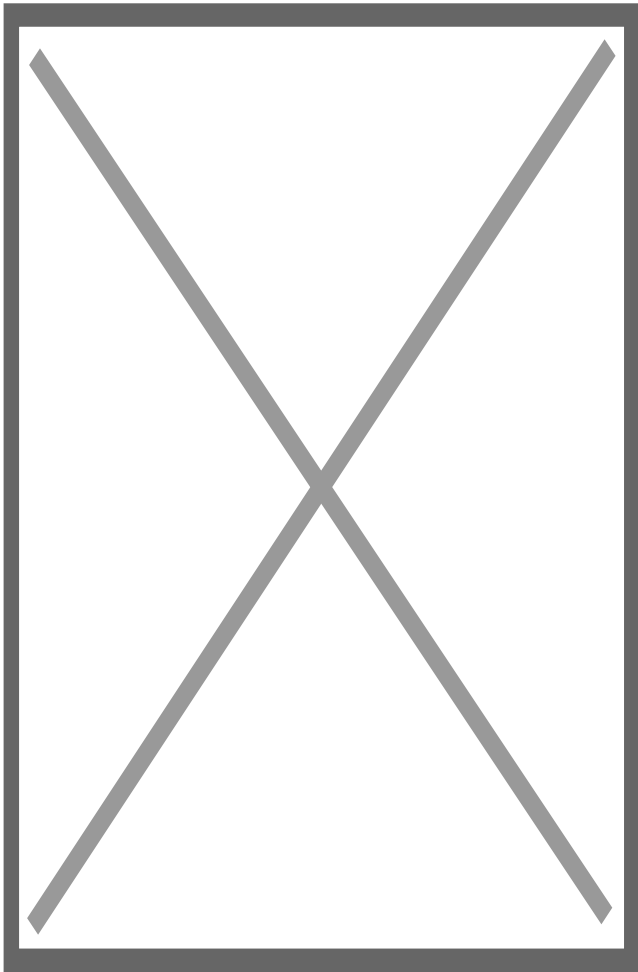


The apocalypse of dying

In a collection of short stories and theopoetic interludes, two pastors throw readers into the visceral body horror of end-of-life care.

by [Burke Gerstenschlager](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

In Review



Everyday Armageddons

Stories and Reflections on Death, Dying, God, and Waste

By Matthew Holmes and Thomas R. Gaulke

Cascade Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

When we speak in theological terms about a cataclysmic event in our lives, we might turn to the language of apocalypse, that particular kind of unveiling that manifests an overwhelming awareness of a previous hiddenness. But apocalypse is not merely an upheaval that confounds and stretches our imagination, perception, and understanding. In periods of absolute crisis, such as the end-time of a person's life, there exists the very real experience of shock in relation to the mundane and the ordinary. We cannot prepare ourselves for an apocalypse. What we imagine could be revealed is never as horrifying as what is revealed.

In this collection of fictional stories and theological prose reflections, Matthew Holmes and Thomas R. Gaulke frame the process and experience of death and dying within that signature event of apocalypse, the last battle, Armageddon. The fictional stories, which draw from their real-life experiences as pastors and chaplains (Holmes also worked as an EMT), spit us into the visceral, unrelenting body horror of end-of-life care. Each chapter, rendered in grotesque detail, is its own battle to end all battles, and the belligerents include infection, negligence, institutions, nurses, and finally, death. God is conspicuously absent. In fact, there is only one (ineffective) chaplain in the whole volume. The reader stands mutely as the uncomfortable witness.

Each story is as traumatic as the next, though some slide toward cartoonish stereotypes. A grandfather entering a deceptively perfect assisted living facility. A wealthy woman who develops a lethal bedsore. A near-comatose woman who can only cry for help. An obese, cancer-ridden mother with an amputated foot. The reader quickly realizes that bodies are very wet and painfully alive as they die, before they turn to dust. Every episode is rife with failure, not just of the human body but of human compassion and institutional competence. At times it is physically difficult not to wince and look away from the page.

Gaulke's theopoetic interludes come as welcome respites between these stories, sometimes as a kind of oblique commentary on what we've just read. He wraps a theological textile around these foundational realities of biological decay and human frailty, and it serves alternately as a tablecloth, a bandage, or a burial shroud. As welcome as these breaks in the horror are, the style is uneven. The strongest among them consider sacramentality, signification, and eschatological space, offering rich theological food for thought, sometimes even about the dynamics of food and eating itself. But some others are simply confusing or pretentious. Theopoetics strives to liberate theological ideas and discourse from their systematic confines, but how liberating is it if the writer's audience is limited to a divinity school seminar?

In fact I often found myself wondering who this book is for. Is it for the world-weary hospice chaplain who has already experienced many of the details in these stories firsthand? The avant-garde theologian who thrill-seeks borders of radical transgression in the church and the world? Out of respect for sensitive readers, it might be easier to suggest who the book is not for. That question leads me to a difficult answer, however, because the intended audience must be exactly us, the sensitive and the unsuspecting. That is the nature of apocalypse, the sudden revelation of the true, of the real that is now and ever shall be. Even as each of us resists expecting the suffering and death that inevitably comes for each of us and our loved ones, we cannot avoid the confrontation forever. Death will come.

Holmes and Gaulke are at their best when they force us to unflinchingly confront the reality of sustaining a person's humanity, individuality, and dignity in the face of the indifference of death. These intimate scenes of death and dying and the human cost inflicted by and upon caregiver, family member, and stranger are very difficult to read and digest, but the fullness of this book is an accumulation and degree of horror and sorrows rarely experienced in religious writing.

Everyday Armageddons is a stark and unyielding confrontation with the revelation of death and the horror of our greatest vulnerabilities. Not only have we forgotten how to die, Holmes and Gaulke remind us, we have forgotten how to help others die. The collection as a whole forces us to confront our collective lack of

interest—which emerges from some combination of selfishness and self-preservation—and points us toward our personal investment in those at their very end. Through the tears in our eyes and the bile in our mouths, we can't believe we are in the midst of this battle. But here we are.

Reading this book evokes helplessness. How can we, as the church, act with real care toward each other in the time of end of life? The stories and reflections demonstrate that it is less about what we believe than what we do for each other, orthopraxy over orthodoxy. The intrinsic fiber of apocalypse is an unanswering, unrelenting silence that reveals our obligation to acknowledge and respond in lamentation and care for each other. How can we be there for the dying and the dead? By being present. Even being present will reveal our limits, but it can be more than sufficient.