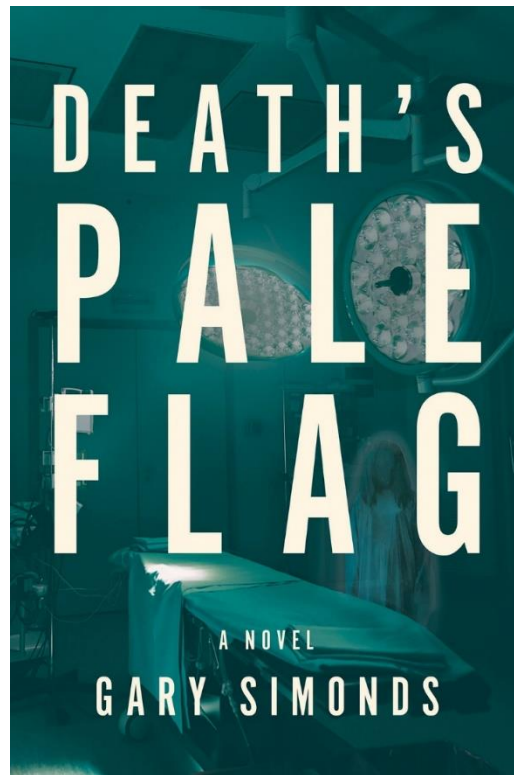


TEACHER'S GUIDE



“This book is magnificent. While weaving a fascinating paranormal mystery tale, Gary Simonds has artfully depicted the pain and poignancy (and nobility) of life in neurosurgery, both for the surgeon and his/her spouse/family. Like all good art, he engages the reader, then takes them on not just a narratively-described but an emotionally-catheted journey. . . .”

Wayne Sotile PhD, Sotile Center for Resilience

“ . . . The novel is a work of fiction—not autobiographical per se, but filled with the realities of the life of a neurosurgeon whose every decision has a profound effect on life itself. . . .Is *Death's Pale Flag* actually a cautionary tale about the mental effects on people whose professions involve life and death decisions on nearly a daily basis?”

**Cynda Johnson MD, Founding Dean and President (Retired), Dean Emerita,
Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine**

General Discussion Points:

1. Were the ghosts in this story real?
2. Do you believe in the possibility of ghosts/spirits/the undead?
3. What would the effect be on you if you believed you experienced a ghost?
4. If the ghosts are real, what is their intention?
5. What was the nature of the Kelly ghost? An angel? A demon?
6. What was more unsettling — the ghosts, the surgery scenes, or the stories behind the patient's injuries/illnesses?
7. How did the sheer volume of real life carnage, mayhem, and tragedy experienced by the patients in the novel affect you? Do you think it is a realistic reflection of what is seen as a modern medical/trauma center?
8. How did the stories of the patient's injuries and illnesses affect you? Did the manner in which they sustained their illnesses/injuries affect your response?
9. Was Ryan mentally ill?
10. Why do people become workaholics?
11. Did Ryan's Afghanistan experiences play into his later breakdown?
12. What did the appearance of a John Lennon ghost mean to you?
13. Why couldn't Ryan ease up on his work?
14. What were the scariest scenes in the novel?
15. What effect would that much exposure to death and tragedy have on you?

Discussion Points by Chapter:

Chapter 1:

1. How would it feel to operate on a dying child?
2. Do you believe in ghosts?
3. Do you ever scare yourself around your own home?

Chapter 2:

1. What do you think of Ryan's days?
2. How many hours a week should a physician work?

3. How do you function after a lost night of sleep?

Chapter 3:

1. Does the Halloween season make you think of death more than normal? Does it make you more or less sensitive to frights?

Chapter 4:

1. Why was Ryan so incensed by the fire truck driver's comment about his drinking?
2. How would you go about telling a family that their teenager had killed him/herself?
3. How real are your nightmares?

Chapter 5:

1. How hard is it to leave work at work?
2. How often do problems at home affect your work?
3. Why do you think Ryan enjoys the childish mischief night pranks?
4. What regressive activities do you enjoy?
5. How much are people changed by their work and other life circumstances?

Chapter 6:

1. What kind of intelligence is needed to be a superlative physician? Does it need to be different for a surgeon?
2. How do "book smarts" differ from "street smarts?"
3. What do you think of how Ryan handles Ernest?
4. What would it be like to speak to a large group of bereaved family members?
5. How do you think Ryan did in delivering the bad news? Was he too direct?
6. How hard would it be to separate oneself and one's concerns for one's own loved ones from the tragedies that are witnessed in the hospital?

Chapter 7:

1. What, if anything, should Ryan do about his nightmares?
2. What do you think of Ryan's level of drinking alcohol?
3. How would your sense of risk change if you were in Ryan's work?

Chapter 8:

1. What would bother you most in the care of severely ill or injured people?
2. How would it feel to look at the brain of a young person who has been decimated by injury?
3. Do you ever consider how fragile life is or how vulnerable you or your loved ones are to injury or illness?
4. What are your thoughts about how arbitrary injury, illness, and death can be?

Chapter 9:

1. Should Kelly have pursued her conversation with Reverend Ron further?
Should Reverend Ron have pursued the conversation further?
2. How often have you spooked yourself in the dark?

Chapter 10:

1. What spooks you?

Chapter 11:

1. Should Ryan have declined to care for the child?
2. What do you think of how Kelly handled Ryan's news about the surgery?
Should she have handled it differently?
3. How do you feel about the suffering and arbitrary deaths of children? Of anyone?
4. What do you think of how Kelly handled Ryan's news about the nature of the tumor and the child's prognosis?

Chapter 12:

1. What do you think of Cara's apparent nonchalance about the two brain dead trauma patients?
2. How invested should a surgeon be in his/her patients? Can they be over-invested?
3. What would it feel like to watch a child die?

Chapter 13:

1. Why won't Ryan share his experiences with Kelly? Should he?
2. How hard should/could Kelly push?
3. Do you do menial tasks to divert your attention from things that are bothering you? Is this helpful? What tasks do you choose?

Chapter 14:

1. How is your sleep hygiene?
2. Do you ever have realistic dreams as you are falling asleep? Can they be difficult to distinguish from reality?
3. Is Ryan mentally ill?

Chapter 15:

1. Do you ever miss opportunities to savor the golden moments of life? How can you make sure they don't pass you by?
2. What simple pleasures bring you the most joy?

Chapter 16:

1. What do you do with your evenings?
2. How creative are you with your free time?

Chapter 17:

1. Is Ryan a hero? Was he "brave?" What is bravery?
2. How might an experience like Ryan's affect you throughout your life?
3. If you went through something like Ryan, how would you feel about talking about it in years to come?

Chapter 18:

1. Why does Ryan frequently ask the residents what they want to do for a patient?
2. How often are serious mistakes made in the hospital care of a patient?
3. How can medical errors be minimized?

Chapter 19:

1. Should the nurse and fellow have been punished? How should they be handled?
2. What sort of bad outcome would be easier to take —one in which an identifiable error was made or one in which an error could not be identified?
3. What do you think of Ryan's inability to fully trust the other members of his care team?

Chapter 20:

1. What should Ryan do about his hallucinations?
2. What should Kelly do about her unraveling husband?

Chapter 21:

1. What do you think about Kelly's assessment of neurosurgeons' egos?
2. Should Kelly expect more commitment from Ryan? How might she address the issue?
3. What is your experience with workaholics? What would be your advice to their spouses?

Chapter 22:

1. What kind of couple are Ryan and Kelly?

Chapter 23:

1. What is your response to picturing yourself in Cara's position?
2. How sustainable is Ryan's professional lifestyle?
3. Would you try a dreamcatcher?
4. Have you gone with superstition over science at certain times? What were the circumstances?

Chapter 24:

1. How would you respond to Arianna's concerns?

Chapter 25:

1. What do you think of Ryan enjoying the attractiveness of the young woman at the game?
2. How do you think you would respond in Ryan's shoes?

Chapter 26:

1. What do you think of Ryan's "evidence" for the existence of ghosts? Was he succumbing to the power of suggestion?
2. What would the existential implications be to you if you firmly believed you had encountered a ghost?
3. Who, if anybody, would you tell about the experience? How would it impact your mental map of the world? Of life? Of death?

Chapter 27:

1. How could/should Ryan be sharing his hospital experiences with Kelly?
2. What would the impact of being around so much death have on you?

Chapter 28:

1. What would Kelly think about Ryan's ghostly experiences if he told her about them now?

Chapter 29:

1. What would you think of a partner who was behaving like Ryan? How would you handle him/her?

Chapter 30:

1. Why are people so cavalier about risk-taking?
2. Are the behaviors described in the chapter a form of child abuse?

Chapter 31:

1. How would you feel as a surgeon if so many of your patients sustained their injuries from ill-advised behaviors?
2. Does modern medicine keep people alive for too long?

Chapter 32:

1. Is the father responsible for Alex's death? How would you treat him if you had to interact with him as the treating physician?
2. How would you decompress after a weekend like the one Ryan was experiencing?

Chapter 33:

1. Why does Ryan continue to resist sharing his supernatural interactions with Kelly? Is this a male thing?
2. What are your feelings toward Ryan at this point? Do you feel frustrated or angry with him?
3. Is Ryan's medical OCD justified? Is his partner at fault? What should be the limits of a physician's duty to a patient?

Chapter 34:

1. What do you think of Matt's assessment?
2. How would you respond to being called a "serial accidental killer"?
3. How should Matt have responded to Ryan's admissions about supernatural occurrences?
4. What do you think Ryan's response will be to his discussion with Matt?

Chapter 35:

1. How would you feel being exposed to so many awful freak accidents? How vulnerable would you feel? How worried might you become for your loved ones?
2. Why do you think Cara responds to patients the way she does?
3. How challenging would it be for a physician to like and respect all their patients?
4. How does a physician's opinion of a patient affect their care of the patient?
5. How would the arbitrary nature of horrible patient outcomes affect you? How would it affect your faith?

Chapter 36:

1. Why can't Ryan separate himself from his work?

2. What do you think of how Mr. LeBlanc was handled in Ryan's absence? Was Ryan right in being so infuriated?
3. What are your thoughts on physician-assisted suicide? On euthanasia? On "accelerating" a patient's demise?
4. How should Kelly have handled the situation?

Chapter 37:

1. What do you think of Kelly's perception of what is most important to Ryan?
2. Is Kelly more angry at or worried about Ryan? What are her options?

Chapter 38:

1. How cautious about the inherent risks of life would you become in Ryan's job?
2. Is Ryan losing his mind? What should he do?

Chapter 39:

1. What do you think of Reverend Ron's assessment of Ryan's supernatural problems?
2. What do you think about Ryan's admission to how he responds to patients with bad complications?
3. What do you think of Reverend Ron's thoughts on Ryan sharing the worst components of his work life with Kelly?
4. Is ego a major driver of Ryan's problems?
5. What do you think of Reverend Ron's advice?

Chapter 40:

1. What do you think of Ryan's choice of gifts? Does it suggest anything about his current state of mind?

Chapter 41:

1. How vulnerable do you feel to terrible accidents or disease on a daily basis? How about with respect to your loved ones?
2. How do you reconcile the notion of a loving God with the arbitrary nature of tragedy?

Chapter 42:

1. How would Clarice's death affect you?
2. Why do you think Ryan was more affected by Rick and Jonathan's response to him visiting them than by Clarice's surgery or death?

Chapter 43:

1. Could Ryan's encounter with the Dark lady be a form of sleep paralysis?
2. What do you think of Kelly's response to Ryan's confession?
3. What do you think of Ryan's insistence on continuing to work in spite of what he was experiencing?
4. Do you believe Ryan can hold it together?

Chapter 44:

1. What are your thoughts on Dr. Larkin's assessment of Ryan?
2. What, if any, actions should Dr. Larkin have taken with Ryan?
3. What other options should Kelly explore?

Chapter 45:

1. What would motivate a physician to act as Dr. Woodfield did? Was Ryan's reaction to him justified? How could he have handled the situation under ideal circumstances?
2. How close is Ryan to getting fired?
3. How often do you think hospitals/healthcare systems tolerate "disruptive" physicians? Do you think the individual physician's productivity is considered?
4. How should hospitals/healthcare systems handle disruptive physicians? Nurses? How about underperforming physicians or ones with a lot of malpractice suits or patient complaints?
5. What can hospitals/healthcare systems do to assure a collaborate atmosphere for all of its providers?

Chapter 46:

1. What did you think when Ryan bolted out of the van?

Chapter 47:

1. Have you ever been fooled by the power of suggestion?
2. How plausible was Kelly's explanation to the girls?
3. What would happen if she did discuss the video with Ryan?
4. How would Ryan have handled his daughters if he was notified?

Chapter 48:

1. How do you feel about the patients who sustain terrible injuries or illnesses through their own negligence?
2. Is a physician ever justified in losing his/her temper with a patient?
3. Is Ryan a functional physician at this juncture? What stops him from taking himself out of the work rotation?

Chapter 49:

1. How would Ryan's meeting with Mia affect you?
2. How much exposure to human tragedy is too much for anyone to bear?
3. How common do you think Mia's bravery and grace is in the medical world?

Chapter 50:

1. Why is it so hard for Ryan to be open with Kelly?
2. Is there any implication to Ryan now seeing the ghosts of former patients?

Chapter 51:

1. What do you think of Reverend Ron's assessment of the lot of partners of physicians?
2. Does Ryan deserve Kelly's love?

Chapter 52:

1. What are the chances of Kelly and Ryan's marriage surviving?
2. How else might they have addressed the ski weekend?

Chapter 53:

1. What should Ryan have done when he began seeing ghosts in the hospital?
2. What do you think of him continuing to care for patients?

Chapter 54:

1. Are the ghosts real?
2. If they are real, what do they want from Ryan? Why are they stepping up their harassment of him?
3. What does the Dark Lady want Ryan to do?

Chapter 55:

1. What do you think about Kelly's assessment of the relationship between love and memory?
2. Does Kelly still love Ryan?

Chapter 56:

1. Why does the Dark Lady take on the appearance of Kelly?
2. What motivates Ryan to attack the ghosts?

Chapter 57:

1. What are your thoughts on Ryan's medical evaluation at U Penn? Was anything solved?
2. If the ghosts were real, what was the nature of the Kelly ghost? Of all the ghosts?
3. Is Ryan better?
4. What do you think of Reverend Ron seeing Ryan as an addict?
5. Should Reverend Ron be giving supernatural explanations of Ryan's experiences great consideration?
6. How will Ryan do in the future? How will his marriage fair?

Chapter 58:

1. What is your reaction to both Kelly and Ryan seeing the John Lennon look-alike? Was he a ghost? What are the implications?
2. What will happen from here?



Gary Simonds is a neurosurgeon who has treated tens of thousands of patients with devastating illnesses. He is a professor at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and the Virginia Tech School of Neuroscience. He has published three nonfiction books on burnout and psychological distress in healthcare providers and routinely writes about, and gives talk on, neuroscience, neurosurgery, medical socioeconomics, medical humanism, medical ethics, and burnout.

Gary grew up in New Jersey and in England, is an avid soccer fan, a guitar and banjo player. He lives with his wife Cindy and border collie Hamish in their log cabin in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

Death's Pale Flag is Gary's debut novel and is available in print, ebook, and audiobook.