

# **Death, the High Cost of Living Study Guide**

**Death, the High Cost of Living by Neil Gaiman**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Death, the High Cost of Living Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter One, Spirit of the Stairway.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Two, A Night to Remember.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter Three, The High Cost of Living.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>



# Plot Summary

Death: The High Cost of Living is a short, graphic novel that follows the character of Sexton Furnival, a sixteen-year-old boy who has decided to kill himself. After making this decision, Sexton meets Didi, a girl near his age, who claims to be Death.

Sexton Furnival has decided to kill himself, as he can find nothing in life worth living for. The boy does not seem angry about anything, more resigned to the fact that there is nothing in life that is worth effort. The only child of divorced parents Sylvia and Steve, Sexton calmly writes his goodbye until his mother sends him out so that she can clean the apartment.

Sexton heads to the city dump where he thinks quietly until he slips and is caught under a refrigerator. A girl his age helps him get free, then offers to let him come to her apartment to clean up. Introducing herself as Didi, the girl takes Sexton to her apartment, introducing him to Mrs. Robbins, the woman who operates the shop on the first floor. Mrs. Robbins tells Sexton that Didi has suffered a horrible tragedy recently, when her entire family was run down by an out-of-control car. Sexton can't get over the fact that a girl who has suffered such a tragedy so recently can seem so happy.

Sexton tells Didi that he is sorry about her family, and that they look nice in the photo she has in the apartment. Didi responds oddly, telling Sexton that the family in the photo only exists in order to make her time on earth more comfortable. Didi explains to Sexton that she is Death. Sexton reacts in anger and leaves, only to meet Mad Hettie, a strange old woman who threatens Sexton and forces him to take her to Didi. Mad Hettie wants Didi to find her heart. The old woman claims that she hid her heart so that Didi would not be able to find it, but now, after living 250 years, she is ready.

Sexton decides to stay with Didi and see what the day brings. Sexton is sullen and moody, often speaking sarcastically about the simple joys that Didi seems to find in everything. The two attend a party, where Sexton runs into a former employee of his mother's. Hazel is there in support of her lover, Foxglove, who is performing for the first time that night. A casual conversation with a man next to him sets Fox's career in motion, though Sexton is unaware of it at the time. Because he is the son of a famous entertainment lawyer in California, Sexton's opinion of the performer carries some weight.

Sexton also meets a young girl who shares the story of a 'friend' when he casually reveals that he is planning on killing himself. The girl tells the tale of her friend, who was sexually abused by her father and his friends until she could take it no longer and attempted suicide only to wake up in the hospital happy to be alive. Sexton wonders what happened to the girl and is told that she moved to the city. Sexton does not appear to notice that the girl is wearing long gloves, leading one to believe that the story is about her. Despite his apparent lack of care, Sexton takes notice. Life is not that bad just because it is boring.



At the party, Didi meets Theo, a strange young man that attends the same school as Sexton. Though Sexton tries to warn her away from Theo, Didi goes with him anyway, intent on having a good time while she is living. Arriving at an abandoned building, Didi and Sexton are lead into the basement where they come face to face with a blind man who calls himself an Eremite, or religious hermit. The blind man has been acting as a type of teacher to Theo, and has instructed the boy to bring Didi to him. Theo removes the Ankh that Didi wears and when he has second thoughts about handing it over, the blind man strikes him, cracking his skull against the wall. He then leaves, telling Sexton and Didi that he will be back.

While locked in the basement, Didi tells Sexton that once a year Death takes human form, to better understand humans and life, as well as mortality. Sexton still does not believe that Didi is Death, but her casual acceptance of the death of Theo sways him a bit.

The two are rescued by Mad Hettie and Mrs. Robbins after Hettie sees them being held captive in the tea leaves she brewed. The young couple continue their adventure, with Didi enjoying life and searching for Mad Hettie's heart.

Sexton and Didi spend a nice morning together, once again frustrating the Eremite who cannot understand why no one recognizes Death, and angry that despite having her Ankh, he has no power over Didi. The young couple head to Central Park where Didi tells Sexton that she had a nice day, then falls backwards into the fountain.

Sexton at first thinks that Didi is just being her eccentric self until the Eremite arrives, angry that Didi has escaped him again.

Sexton learns from Mrs. Robbins that Didi was born with a heart defect and has been dying her entire life. He explains to Billy that despite his earlier wish to die, he is now willing to wait for the chance to see Didi again, and is happy that Death is not just blackness, but something or someone. Leaving the nesting doll with Billy, Sexton goes out to enjoy the day.

Mad Hettie arrives and finds her heart in the nesting doll. Having missed the chance for Death again, she leaves, trying to decide where to hide her heart again. Didi speaks with unknown and unseen person, telling them that her one day on earth was worth it, having met some nice people. Didi is clearly thinking of Sexton, the boy she saved from an early death.



# Chapter One, Spirit of the Stairway

## Chapter One, Spirit of the Stairway Summary

Mad Hettie, a Haruspex, or kind of witch, waits in an alley for three girls. Dana, Joy Barlow and Prudence Mockford deliver a white dove to the old woman who has been waiting impatiently. Mad Hettie pays them, but the girls threaten her, wanting to search her bag and see if she has more money. Hettie picks up a twig and snaps it, breaking the leg of Joy. The others run, realizing that they are dealing with something not quite normal. Hettie takes the dove to the rooftop, killing it to see into the future. Hettie is waiting for someone, and is intent on not missing her this time.

Sexton Furnival, a sixteen-year-old boy, is writing a suicide note on his computer. Fed up with life, Sexton sees no reason to go on living, as life holds nothing for him. Sylvia, his mother, tells Sexton that she feels like spring cleaning despite the fact that it is July, and sends him out for the day. In the hall Sexton runs into Billy Ling, a young man in a wheelchair who is unable to communicate other than with grunts. Sexton tells him that he is going out since his mother is cleaning, but that he will see him later.

At the dump, Sexton slips and winds up under a pile of garbage. Unable to get out from under a refrigerator, Sexton calls out for help. A girl about Sexton's age helps him and offers to sew his ripped jeans, as she lives nearby. Sexton is leery, but goes with the girl who introduces herself as Didi.

At Didi's apartment, Sexton is introduced to Amelia Robbins, the woman who owns the shop downstairs. Mrs. Robbins tells Sexton that the seemingly happy girl's entire family was killed in a tragic accident a month ago. The boy wonders how someone with such tragedy in her life can get such joy out of eating the apple Didi got from Mrs. Robbins' shop. Upstairs, Sexton tells Didi that her family looked nice. Didi reacts strangely, asking Sexton if he knows her family, then seeing the picture he is holding realizes who he is talking about. Didi tells Sexton that the family in the photo exists only to make her fit into life, and that she is only three hours old. Sexton thinks that perhaps Didi is having a breakdown of some kind and suggests she see someone. Didi comments that she sees everyone at the end of life, since she is Death. Sexton tells Didi that he thought she might be different from everyone but she is as crazy as the rest and leaves.

Outside, Sexton sees an old woman and tries to avoid her. Tripping on a string, Sexton falls in front of the woman who smashes a bottle and threatens him with it. The woman, Mad Hettie, tells Sexton that he smells 'her' on him, and that she will not miss 'her' again this time. Confused, Sexton takes the woman back upstairs to Didi's apartment.

Didi, who seems to know Mad Hettie, tells the old woman to leave Sexton alone but she refuses, telling Didi that he is her bargaining chip. Mad Hettie wants Didi to find her heart. If she does not, the old woman tells Didi that she will cut off Sexton's nose, to start.



## Chapter One, Spirit of the Stairway Analysis

The story opens with Mad Hettie, a 250-year-old witch, waiting for three girls to deliver a white dove. The girls wonder if Hettie is going to eat the dove, but she responds that she is a Haruspex, which is a type of witch. When the girls get angry because they think the money they have been paid for getting the bird is not enough, Hettie snaps a twig, breaking the leg of one of the girls. Hettie is apparently very powerful, but does not wish to kill the girls. Taking the dove, Hettie kills it in order to see a vision. The vision shows Hettie the person she is looking for, and she vows not to miss 'her' again. The reader learns that the person Hettie is looking for is Didi.

The character of Sexton Furnival is introduced, a sixteen-year-old young man who is writing a suicide note. Sexton's reason for killing himself is that life is empty. The young man does not feel sad, or happy, he simply feels nothing. Sexton's parents, Sylvia and Steve, are divorced. Sylvia seems happy enough, though clueless to the fact that her son is unhappy. The resignation that Sexton feels with life is evident when his mother sends him out for the day so that she can clean the house. Sexton simply saves his suicide note on his computer and heads out. When leaving, Sexton runs into Billy Ling, a neighbor who is in a wheelchair and unable to speak. Sexton's compassion is evident when he stops to speak with Billy, treating the boy as if he were normal. Commenting that he will be back later, the reader wonders if Sexton is really intent on ending his life or simply looking for something to focus on.

Sexton meets Didi when he falls at the dump. The girl is like no one Sexton has ever met, and he has trouble following her thoughts. As Sexton can find nothing in life to be bothered with, Didi's apparent joy in all of the little things no one notices is foreign to him. His confusion is compounded when he learns from Mrs. Robbins that Didi's entire family was killed a month ago. The idea that Didi is happy at all is amazing to Sexton.

Didi reveals casually to Sexton that she is only three hours old. The boy thinks that perhaps Didi is having mental issues due to the tragedy of her family's death. Didi calmly tells Sexton that she is Death, and meets everyone at the end of life. Sexton reacts in anger, telling Didi that he was wrong about her. Having believed that the girl was nice, and someone he could be friends with, Sexton now believes that she is just crazy.

Mad Hettie arrives, finally tracking Didi to her apartment. Using Sexton to gain access to the building, Hettie threatens the boy if Didi does not help her. Didi comments that she is no one special on this day, but the old woman insists that Didi help her find her heart or she will hurt Sexton.

In the first chapter the reader learns that Didi is Death, or at least thinks she is. Sexton, who had been planning to kill himself, reacts strongly to her announcement, perhaps because being faced with death he realizes that life is indeed worth living. The character of Didi is not one what one would expect in Death, normally portrayed as a hooded, frightening figure. Instead Death is presented as a young girl, full of happiness and intent on enjoying life.



# Chapter Two, A Night to Remember

## Chapter Two, A Night to Remember Summary

Sexton recaps his day, getting kicked out of his apartment so his mother can clean, meeting Didi in a garbage dump, and getting threatened by Mad Hettie. Didi tells the old woman that she will look for her heart, but there are other things she wants to do as well. Mad Hettie tells Didi that she might have hidden her heart in an egg inside a duck, but it has been so long she cannot remember. Didi tells Mad Hettie that she can make herself at home in her apartment while she and Sexton go out.

On the street, Didi gets a hot dog from a friendly hot dog vendor who will not accept payment for the meal. Didi wonders what it is about hot dogs that make them so good. Didi wants to go to a party and wonders about finding one. Sexton lets Didi know that he does not like her, but will hang around with her because there is nothing else to do and he can't go home. Didi continues happily extolling the virtues of hot dogs and hails a cab.

Sexton comments that they don't have any idea where they are going and Didi tells him that that is just part of the human condition. No one really knows where they are headed.

Elsewhere, a blind man that calls himself an Eremite, or religious recluse, tells a young man named Theo that 'she' is getting closer. When Theo does not respond respectfully, the blind man strikes him. Taking blood from Theo's lip, the man mixes it with his own sputum in a vial. Handing the vial to Theo, the blind man tells him that when 'she' is near the vial will glow. Theo is instructed to bring the girl to the blind man, but if he cannot get the girl he needs to get the Ankh, symbol of life and the soul that she wears around her neck.

Didi and Sexton take a taxi to a club called The Undercut. Didi has befriended the cab driver, who refuses to take any money from the girl. Sexton is amazed that people keep giving her things for free. Outside the club Sexton is surprised to meet Hazel, a former chef at his mother's restaurant. Hazel is working the door as her girlfriend, Foxglove, is performing that night. The three enter the club and wait for the show.

Foxglove performs morbid songs about people that she knows who have died. A record executive wonders if the act is worth pursuing and Sexton tells him that she is. Through conversation, Sexton learns that the man works for the Xerxes label and tells the man that his father is Steve Furnival. The executive is pleased to meet Sexton and seems to take his opinion of Foxglove seriously.

While looking for Didi, Sexton runs into a young woman and casually comments about suicide because life is not worth the trouble. The girl tells Sexton a story about a friend of hers who was sexually abused by her father and a group of his friends over several



years. As the men were powerful in town, the girl had nowhere to go. Finally, having had enough, the girl locked herself away with her father's hunting knife and began cutting. Waking up in the hospital later, the tragic girl was still happy to be alive. Sexton is not sure why the girl has told him this story, and does not notice that she is wearing long gloves that cover her arms. Sexton thanks her for the story and wonders what happened to her friend. She comments that she must have moved to the city, as most people do.

Sexton sees Didi talking to Theo and pulls her aside, warning her that Theo goes to his high school and is crazy. Didi ignores Sexton's warning, and accepts Theo's invitation to a 'good time', calling to Sexton to come along. Theo is confused but Didi tells him that she is with Sexton for the night and doesn't want him to miss a good time. The three leave the club and head to a deserted building. Once inside, Theo grabs the Ankh from around Didi's neck. The Eremite arrives and tells the young man to give him the symbol. Theo refuses, considering aloud what the Ankh is worth. The blind man tells Theo he is correct, the symbol is worth a fortune, but he will get knowledge for handing it over. As Theo continues to mock the old man, the man strikes out, slamming Theo's head into a wall. The Eremite then turns to Didi and demands that she speak. Didi asks for her Ankh back and suggests the man get a doctor for Theo. Sexton wonders what is going on and the blind man tells him that he is witnessing the triumph of good over evil. The Eremite tells Didi and Sexton that there is no sense trying to escape or to call out, as no one will hear them, and that he will be back.

Didi tells Sexton to help her take care of Theo, lashing out at his seemingly uncaring comments. Didi tells Sexton that no matter how he feels about Theo he is a living person and needs care. After a short time Didi apologizes, telling Sexton that she shouldn't have brought him with her into a dangerous situation. While they talk, Theo makes a noise. Didi tells Sexton that it was a death rattle, and that Theo is dead. Sexton comments that Didi should have been with him if she is truly dead and the girl reminds him that she is there.

Sexton is hungry and Didi tells him to read some of the magazines or play with some of the toys in the room to take his mind off things, as they aren't all broken. Specifically, Didi shows Sexton a clown that stands back up when you knock it down, just as they will bounce back again. Didi knocks over the clown and it remains down, broken.

Didi tells Sexton that she feels guilty that she has not been able to help Mad Hettie. Sexton wonders how Didi can feel sorry for the crazy woman and she responds that just because someone is crazy doesn't mean they are bad. She then tells Sexton that his feeling that the Eremite will kill him is probably true, but at least she has given him a night to remember.

## Chapter Two, A Night to Remember Analysis

Sexton continues to spend time with Didi, despite the fact that he tells her he does not like her. It appears that Sexton is trying to convince himself that he does not like Didi,





when in reality he is intrigued by her. As they spend time together, Sexton notices several things about Didi. Though she claims to be Death, Didi takes great joy in the small things in life. From the taste of a hot dog to simple conversation with others, Didi makes the most out of every experience. Sexton also realizes that no one wants Didi to pay for anything, such as the hot dog or a cab ride. Commenting on it, Didi tells Sexton that it isn't hard to be nice to people, and they are usually nice in return.

Sexton is still contemplating suicide, as he calmly mentions it to a woman he meets at the nightclub. The woman tells Sexton about her 'friend', though clearly she is relating her own life story. By calmly discussing the horrors of her life, and the fact that even after having tried to kill herself she is happy to be alive, the woman gives Sexton a different perspective on life and what makes it worth living.

The reader is introduced to a blind man, an Eremite. The religious hermit has a student named Theo, a young man about the same age as Sexton. The Eremite instructs Theo to find 'the girl', clearly meaning Didi, and retrieve the Ankh from around her neck. Theo does so, leading Didi and Sexton to an abandoned building. Once retrieving the Ankh from Didi, Theo questions if the knowledge that the Eremite has promised is worth it. The blind man strikes Theo, cracking his skull against a wall, and shows no remorse for doing so. It is clear that the Ankh is important to the man, as he explains to Sexton he is witnessing the triumph of good over evil. It is unclear at this time what the man hopes to accomplish; however, he knows that Didi is death and believes that the Ankh Didi wore has some type of power.

Several other events take place, though they do not seem to have any direct effect on the storyline. Sexton and Didi meet Hazel, a former employee of Sexton's mother Sylvia, a pregnant lesbian whose partner is performing for the first time. Foxglove sings of people she knows who are dead and the message strikes Sexton. His opinion, especially because he is the son of Steve Furnival, an entertainment lawyer, carries weight.



# Chapter Three, The High Cost of Living

## Chapter Three, The High Cost of Living Summary

Mad Hettie searches Didi's apartment looking for tea, reminiscing about the Boston Tea party and all the tea that was wasted. Finding only coffee, Hettie goes to the apartment of Mrs. Robbins and asks for a cup of tea.

Didi and Sexton sit in the basement where Didi seems to be a bit absent-minded and restless. Sexton asks her if she really believes she is Death. Didi tells Sexton that one day every century, Death takes the form of a human so that she will have a better understanding of human life and mortality. When Sexton asks Didi how she knows this, she has trouble remembering. Didi seems frustrated, telling Sexton that she knew the answer earlier in the day. Glancing down, Didi realizes her Ankh is missing and Sexton tells her that the blind man took it after Theo grabbed it off her neck.

While Sexton looks for something in the room that they can use against the blind man, Didi wonders if there is really any point. Finding a Russian nesting doll, Sexton tosses it to her, commenting on the fact that when people were picking sports teams he was usually picked last because he can't throw. At last Sexton finds some marbles, and places them on the floor in front of the door. Explaining his reasoning to Didi, Sexton hopes that the Eremite is really blind and might slip on the marbles and fall, allowing them time to escape. The pair are hungry and tired, and lie down to rest, falling asleep in the basement.

Didi and Sexton are awakened when Mad Hettie enters and slips on the marbles. Mrs. Robbins follows the old woman in, telling the pair that Hettie had read in tea leaves that Didi and Sexton were being held somewhere downtown. Mrs. Robbins notices the dead boy and Sexton explains about the blind man who had taken Didi's Ankh and will be returning to kill them. Mrs. Robbins tells them that she will call the police and report the body from a pay phone once they are away from the scene. Didi tells Mrs. Robbins that she still has to look for Mad Hettie's heart since she promised. Mrs. Robbins tells Didi to stop and see her when she gets home so that they can talk. As Didi and Sexton leave, Mrs. Robbins comments that Didi will be the death of her.

Didi and Sexton stop at a diner for breakfast. Didi's good mood has returned as she sings the praises of food, declaring its superiority to other types of nourishment. When Sexton comments on her supposed knowledge, Didi reminds him that she has been living one day a century for a long time. The blind man arrives, demanding to know how Sexton and Didi escaped from the basement and they tell him they simply walked out. The owner of the diner arrives and tells the blind man that he has to leave. As he is escorted out, the blind man protests that Didi is Death but she will not triumph as he has her Ankh.



Once again Didi eats her meal for free and Sexton stops to thank the owner for his kindness. Sexton once again comments on the fact that Didi never pays for anything and she reminds him that she does pay—that everyone pays.

As Sexton and Didi leave, Sexton asks if she plans to get her Ankh back from the Eremite since he seems to believe that it has some power. Didi tells Sexton that it does have power, but not in the sense that the Eremite thinks. Outside Didi stops and buys another Ankh from a street vendor, the only thing that she has had to pay for the entire time she was with Sexton. Didi confirms that the Ankh is the most powerful thing in the world.

Didi tells Sexton that she is going to Central Park and wonders if he is going to come with her or if he is going home. Sexton tells Didi that he is going with her because otherwise he will have no idea how things will end. He also wonders how Didi will convince Mad Hettie that she has found her heart, but Didi simply tells him the old woman will know.

On the way to the park, Sexton tells Didi that he used to go to the park with his father when he was a boy, and how he would spend nights in his room wishing he knew magic so that he could repair his parents broken marriage. When Steve left for good, Sexton wished for death the first time. Even at the age of six or seven, Sexton could see no reason to live in a world with no magic.

Sexton and Didi sit on the edge of a fountain and Didi tells Sexton that she had a great time with him. When Sexton wonders how Didi could have enjoyed being held captive and stalked by the blind man, she explains that this is what life is about. There is good and bad and it all has to be experienced. Didi then stands on the edge of the fountain and falls in backwards. Sexton thinks that she is just fooling around again until the Eremite arrives, angry that Didi has escaped him again. Sexton tells the man not to hurt his friend, but the blind man laughs, telling Sexton that nothing can hurt her now. When Sexton wonders if Didi needs a doctor, the man remarks that no doctor can help her now. Taking the two pennies that Didi had given to Sexton, the man tells Sexton that two cents is the cost of a life and that he will meet Didi someday as eventually he will die too, one day.

Didi wakes and speaks to an unseen person, claiming that she has had a wonderful time living for one day but wishing it did not have to end in such a way. Didi comments that she thinks the trip was worth it. Then, smiling, she takes the hand of the unknown person.

Sexton speaks to Billy Ling, explaining events to the best of his understanding. Sexton learned from Mrs. Robbins that Didi had been born with a heart defect and has been dying her entire life. The autopsy showed that Didi was dead before she hit the water in the fountain. Sexton talks to Billy about how he used to think about death a lot, but now thinks about his life, like the time he killed his goldfish by accident and Sylvia had to explain death to him. The boy also tells Billy that he used to think about death and wishing for it quite a bit, but now thinks about living life more. Sexton tells Billy that he



almost believed Didi when she insisted she was Death, and is happy to think that Death might really be a person, someone funny and quirky instead of blackness and nothingness. Despite his wish to see Didi again, Sexton is happy to have to wait a while to meet Death again. Sylvia call Sexton in for lunch and he says goodbye to Billy, leaving the Russian nesting doll with him as no one has seen Mad Hettie since the morning she had rescued Sexton and Didi from the basement.

In the apartment, Sylvia tells Sexton that Hazel had called for him and left a message that Fox had gotten a record deal. After the baby is born, Sexton is invited to the celebration party and that there will be someone there Sexton would be happy to see. At first Sexton thinks that Hazel means the man from the record company, but Sylvia tells Sexton that Hazel mentioned someone in gloves.

In the hallway, Mad Hettie arrives and takes the nesting doll from Billy, commenting that Didi has left it for her. Inside the doll Hettie finds her heart, a gold necklace with a heart pendant on it. Hettie wonders how long Didi had the heart and prepares to hide it again as it will be a while before Didi is back again.

## Chapter Three, The High Cost of Living Analysis

Didi's explanation of her purpose on earth to Sexton makes sense to him, despite the fact that he still doubts Didi is Death. Her confusion over the situation worries him, and it is clear to the reader that her trouble remembering is directly tied to the Ankh being taken from her.

The arrival of Mad Hettie and Mrs. Robbins allows Sexton and Didi to escape from the basement they are locked in. Despite the oddness of the situation, no one really questions the fact that Hettie was able to find them by reading tea leaves. Even the body of Theo does not really garner much of a reaction, which is a bit telling. Mrs. Robbins's only thought is that the police should be called, but from a distance so that no one can tie them to the body.

Didi continues enjoying life, and seems to get her spirit back once she replaces the Ankh that she wore with one from a street vendor. Her confusion also apparently vanishes when she is once again wearing the symbol. It is clear that it is not the Ankh that hold the power the Eremite seeks, but Didi herself.

At the park, Sexton explains to Didi when he stopped caring about life, around the time of his parents separation and divorce. Didi does not comment, but instead tells Sexton that she had a good time with him, giving him the two cents that she has left after purchasing the replacement Ankh. One wonders if the two cents are symbolic of the 'two cents' that are often referred to when someone offers their opinion of a situation. Didi, claiming to be on earth for one day to experience life and mortality does not offer her 'two cents' to anyone, simply enjoys life and the small joys of every day.

Didi's death in the fountain, dying in water could also symbolize rebirth, as she 'dies' in water. Though Sexton is unaware of her conversation with the unseen person, it is clear



that Didi is referring to him when she states that she hopes the day was worth it. As Sexton tells Billy that he no longer wishes to end his life, it appears that Didi has accomplished her task, to make Sexton see that life is not all about sadness, but there is joy to be found all around you.

Didi, if she is Death is gone for another century, and Mad Hettie and the Eremite have no choice but to wait for her. Hettie does so with a resignation, not unhappy. The Eremite is angry, but knows that he has no choice but to wait unless he dies himself.



# Characters

## Didi

Didi is a teenage girl who happens to be Death. According to her explanation, Death lives in human form for one day each century so that it has a better sense of human life and mortality. Didi seems to take this to heart, intent on enjoying all of the small joys of life, from eating hot dogs, apples and bagels, to enjoying a night on the town at a party.

Wearing an Ankh around her neck and dressed in black, Didi makes friends wherever she goes, getting meals and taxi rides for free along the way. Her joy in the simple things eventually rub off on Sexton, who starts the novel intent on suicide, but ends up willing to live life and look for the good in it.

Didi lives in a apartment over a store, and Sexton learns from the woman downstairs that Didi's entire family was killed a month ago when a man drove over the curb and ran them down. The family's pictures are around the apartment, and when questioned about them Didi explains that they exist simply to make her life more plausible. Though this explanation is a bit hard to fathom, when the reader considers Didi's identity as Death, it is a bit easier to take. In order to live the life of a human, Didi needs the identity of a human to fit into the world.

At the end of her day, Didi walks through Central Park with Sexton and sits on the edge of a fountain. Content that her day was well lived and that she has altered Sexton's opinion of life, Didi falls backward into the fountain and dies. Sexton is told that Didi was born with a heart condition, and that her days were numbered. Didi, however, is with her true 'family', though unseen by the reader. Didi explains that her day was filled with joy and life, and that she has accomplished much on her one day alive in this century.

## Sexton Furnival

A sixteen-year-old boy who is planning on killing himself, Sexton lives with his mother Sylvia in New York. Sexton is not unhappy with life, and has suffered no tragedies that have made him hate life, he just finds no joy in living. After contemplating this, Sexton decides that the best thing to do is end his own life, and writes his suicide note until his mother sends him out so that she can clean the apartment.

Sexton meets Didi, who claims to be death, after he is trapped under a refrigerator at the dump. Didi turns up at the right moment and helps Sexton get free and invites him to her apartment to clean his wounds. While there, Didi casually tells Sexton that she is Death. Sexton reacts angrily, believing that Didi has something wrong with her mentally. Sexton leaves, but is forced to return by Mad Hettie. Once back in Didi's company, Sexton decides to stay with her and see what the night brings.



Though Sexton does not believe that Didi is Death, he gets a better understanding of life by being with her. While being held captive in the basement of a warehouse, he also experiences death, when Theo dies after being struck by the Eremite. Didi's casual acceptance of the boy's death puts life in some perspective for Sexton. Life is tenuous and can end quickly, so it should be cherished.

Sexton learns while with Didi that life is what you make it. Watching Didi find happiness in seemingly minor things gives Sexton a better appreciation of things he has overlooked for a long time. Though at the beginning of the novel, Sexton is a bit surly and unwilling to look at things from a positive point of view, by the end he realizes that with little effort things are never as bad as they seem.

## **Mad Hettie**

Mad Hettie is a Haruspex, or type of witch that is 250 years old. Hettie lives in London on the streets, and is considered a homeless beggar by most. At the beginning of the story, she hires three girls to find her a white dove so that she can sacrifice it and see into the future, trying to determine when Death will arrive on earth. The three girls underestimate the power of the old woman and try to rob her, but learn quickly that she is not to be messed with. Snapping a twig, Hettie breaks the leg of one of her assailants, and quickly disables another who comes at her with a knife.

After sacrificing the dove, Hettie travels to New York in order to meet Death. Hettie hid her heart one hundred years ago in order to avoid Death. Now after living to the age of 250, the old woman is ready to die, but needs her heart in order to do so. Hettie does the only thing she can think of; enlist Death, in the form of Didi, to find her heart, as she can no longer remember where it is hidden.

Though Hettie threatens Sexton with a broken bottle in order to get him to bring her to Didi, the woman does not seem to be evil. To prove this, Hettie uses her powers to find Didi and Sexton when they are locked in the basement by the Eremite, saving them from death. Hettie is willing to threaten harm in order to achieve her goals, but does not seem a threat to those who do not threaten her first.

At the end of the novel, Hettie does indeed find her heart, but it is too late, as Didi has once again passed from the earth for one hundred years. Hettie does not seem very upset by this, and simply plans on hiding her heart again, keeping it safe until Death returns. It seems that Mad Hettie and Didi have gone through this before, and likely will again, one hundred years from now, when Didi returns again.

## **Amelia Robbins**

Amelia Robbins lives downstairs from Didi, and runs the little shop on the ground floor of the building. A kind woman, Mrs. Robbins looks out for Didi, the orphaned girl that lives above her. Mrs. Robbins has no idea that Didi is Death, she only knows the story of the 'girl'. Though Didi is only on earth for a day, Mrs. Robbins claims to have known



her for her entire life. Mrs. Robbins relates to Sexton the story of the tragic death of Didi's family, and after Didi 'dies', tells him of the heart defect that Didi was born with.

Mrs. Robbins runs her store by day, and spends her evenings in her apartment, watching the home shopping channel and keeping to herself. It is on one such evening that Mrs. Robbins meets Mad Hettie when the old woman turns up looking for tea. After the witch sees Didi and Sexton are in trouble and locked up, Mrs. Robbins does not think twice about going with Hettie to help free the two teens. Finding the body of Theo in the basement with Sexton and Didi, Mrs. Robbins tells them to leave the area, as she will call the police from a pay phone and report the body.

Mrs. Robbins proves herself to be a trustworthy and honest woman, one who is concerned for her friends and takes care of her own.

## The Eremite

The Eremite, or religious hermit, is a blind man, intent on taking the Ankh that Didi wears around her neck and defeating Death. The blind man is never named in the novel. The Eremite uses Theo, a boy from Sexton's school, teaching the teen and training him in order to get to Didi.

After Theo leads Didi and Sexton to the basement, the Eremite gets his hands on the Ankh. Theo has snatched the symbol from Didi's neck, and when the boy considers keeping it rather than handing it over to his teacher, the Eremite slams him into a wall, cracking his skull. Showing no remorse at all, the blind man simply takes the Ankh, convinced that he has taken Didi's power and will be more powerful than Death.

The blind Eremite learns that the Ankh is only a symbol, replaceable as easily as buying a new one from a street vendor. Didi does so, leaving the Eremite with a useless trinket. The Eremite is foiled once again, in what is apparently an ongoing battle between himself and Death.

At the end of the novel, when Didi 'dies', the man simply moves on, intent on preparing for the battle to steal the power of Death in another one hundred years.

## Theo

A boy that goes to school with Sexton, Theo is tough and street-wise, though not smart. Training with the Eremite, Theo longs for true power, though he has no desire for wisdom, something the Eremite promises will bring him power and wealth. When Theo considers betraying the Eremite and keeping the Ankh taken from Didi, the Eremite slams him into a wall, cracking his skull. Theo dies on the floor of the basement, with only Sexton and Didi to witness his passing.





## **Sylvia**

Sexton's mother, Sylvia, is a bit flighty and clueless. Running a restaurant for a living, Sylvia tries her best but as a single mother she is somewhat lacking, leaving Sexton to raise himself for the most part. Sylvia lives in the moment, unaware that her son is even considering suicide or how close she came to losing him at all.

## **Billy Ling**

The handicapped boy who lives in Sexton's building, Billy spends his days in the hallway, watching people go by, unable to communicate with others. Despite this, Sexton stops and talks to the boy whenever he sees him, using Billy as a sounding board.

## **Hazel McNamara**

A chef who used to work for Sylvia, Hazel is a lesbian, pregnant with her first child. Hazel runs into Sexton at a club where her lover, Fox is playing for the first time.

## **Foxglove**

A singer, and the lover of Hazel, Fox performs mostly sad songs about people she knows that have died. After Sexton mentions that he likes the music to a producer that is listening, Fox gets a recording contract because Sexton is the son of a famous entertainment lawyer, Steve Furnival.

## **The Woman in the Gloves**

A girl that Sexton meets in the club who wears long gloves that cover her arms. After Sexton tells her that he is considering suicide because life is empty, she relates the story of her gang rape and the brutality she faced at the hands of her father and his friends.

## **Dana**

One of the girls that find a white dove for Mad Hettie.

## **Joy Barlow**

One of the girls who finds a white dove for Mad Hettie. Hettie breaks Joy's leg by snapping a twig after the girl threatens her with a knife.

## **Prudence Mockford**

One of the girls who finds a white dove for Mad Hettie



## Objects/Places

### New York City

The city where Sexton lives and meets Didi, the girl who claims to be Death.

### London

The city where Mad Hettie lives in England, before traveling to New York to find Didi.

### Undercut

The nightclub where Sexton and Didi see Foxglove play and where Theo finds Didi.

### XerXes

The record label that signs Foxglove after the producer meets Sexton.

### Los Angeles

The city in California where Steve Furnival, Sexton's father, lives with his girlfriend.

### Central Park

The park in New York City where Sexton and Didi sit at the fountain, and the place where Didi 'dies'.

### The Basement

The basement of the abandoned building where the Eremite holds Sexton and Didi captive.

### Ankh

The symbol that Didi wears around her neck that the Eremite says represents the power of life and death.



## **The Nesting Doll**

The doll that Sexton finds while in the basement with Didi. After Didi's death, Mad Hettie finds her heart in the doll.

## **Robbin's Grocery**

The shop that Mrs. Robbins owns on the first floor of the building she and Didi live in.

# Themes

## Death

Death is obviously a central theme in *Death: The High Cost of Living*. Sexton Furnival is a sixteen-year-old male, intent on committing suicide because he can find no reason for living. Though there is nothing overt in his life that is causing him pain, Sexton simply is unable to find a reason for life. The methodical way that Sexton writes his suicide note and simply saves it to his computer to return to later is telling, as are the graphics used in the novel. Sexton is simply resigned, and unwilling to make an effort to find joy in simple things.

Death is often depicted as depressing and laced with sadness; however, in this case, Death is portrayed as a teenage girl on earth for one day to experience life and mortality. As such, Death is depicted as something that is not frightening in the least, instead it is simply a right of passage. Even in the case of Theo, the boy killed by the Eremite, Death is simply an end, with little fanfare

After Didi 'dies', Sexton is left to think about his own wish for death at the beginning of the novel. After spending the day with the eccentric Didi, he comes to realize that death may not be the blackness and nothingness that he had imagined, but a transition to a different place. As such, the reader also contemplates whether death is simply the end of life or a journey to another.

## Friendship

The odd friendship between Didi and Sexton is central to the novel. Though they are two very different people, the two share a bond, in this case, death. Sexton begins the novel longing for the end of his life, and Didi spends her day intent on enjoying hers. Despite their opposite views, the two develop a strong friendship, able to share their feelings and wishes, as well as their pain. Sexton in particular benefits from this friendship, learning from Didi that life is to be enjoyed and lived while you have it. Didi also benefits from her time with Sexton. The girl is able to teach him that his pain does not mean his life is not worth living, but instead something to grow past. Sexton is able to see the joy in his life and is able to look forward to things rather than dread them.

Mrs. Robbins also shows what friendship is about by caring for Didi, who she believes to be an orphan after losing her family in a tragedy. Despite the oddness of the girl and the situations that she finds herself in, Mrs. Robbins does not judge Didi, but simply does what she can in order to make her life easier. By doing so, Mrs. Robbins demonstrates her caring and compassion, as well as her willingness to accept a friend for who and what they are.



## Good Vs. Evil

Ironically, Death represents Good in the short graphic novel, and Evil is represented by the Eremite, a blind religious hermit who seeks to have more power than death. Though death is usually seen as dark and scary, in this case Death is Didi, a teenage girl with a zest for life. Didi is on earth for one day each century so that she can experience life in human form and all that it involves. Didi befriends Sexton, a sixteen-year-old boy who is intent on committing suicide. As Death, Didi confronts Sexton's perceptions of his life, and makes him realize that life is worth living. In this way, Didi as Death, is a direct contradiction of what one would think she is.

The Eremite, supposedly a religious man, represents Evil in the novel. Though apparently well educated, the blind hermit lives his life only in search of ultimate power and does not care how he gets it. After taking Theo under his wing with promises of power and wealth, the Eremite uses the teen to accomplish his goals and then kills him without a second thought. The Eremite is clearly obsessed with thoughts of power and believes that he can get it from Didi by taking the Ankh she wears around her neck. He learns too late that Didi's power does not come from the medallion, but from within.

Traditionally Death is portrayed as dark and evil, while religious people are portrayed as loving and good. In this novel, the situation is clearly reversed.

# Style

## Point of View

The short novel *Death, The High Cost of Living* is written with a mix of points of view. As a graphic novel, the book consists primarily of dialogue. The characters interact with each other and their exchange is written in bubbles in each panel on the page. There are some instances where the characters are thinking, and the reader is able to 'see' their thoughts. One of the main characters, Sexton Furnival, sometimes narrates in his mind, and his thoughts are presented to the reader in a different way, so that one is aware that these thoughts are Sexton's alone.

As the story is told mainly through the dialogue of the characters as events unfold and the novel progresses, the reader is able to develop a true feeling for those involved in the storyline. Written in present tense, the reader feels as if they are watching the events unfold before them, and gets a sense of the feelings the characters experience.

## Setting

The novel has several different settings, and begins in London, England. Mad Hettie is in London, under a bridge, waiting for the arrival of the girls that will supply her with a white dove. Once Hettie has the dove and sacrifices it, she travels to New York City in order to find Didi, the girl that is Death.

In New York, several places are visited. The first location is Sexton's apartment, followed by the city dump, where he meets Didi for the first time. Following their meeting, the two travel to Didi's apartment, above Robbins' Grocery.

Sexton and Didi travel throughout the city, visiting several other places. After meeting Theo at the Undercut, a nightclub, the two are trapped in the basement of an abandon building by the Eremite who wishes to take Didi's power. Afterward they stop in a diner for breakfast and finally travel to Central Park, where Didi tells Sexton that she has enjoyed her day on earth before 'dying'.

The locations are portrayed visually for the reader by the artist's rendition of each. The different panels of illustrations give the reader a visual clue to the mood of the character by being either bright and colorful or dark and menacing. The graphic nature of the story gives one a better feel for each location visited.

## Language and Meaning

As the entire story is dialogue, whether it be between the characters or internal in the case of Sexton, the author allows the reader to experience the events as if they are a part of the novel. The reader gains insight into Sexton's thoughts when he discusses his



reasons for contemplating suicide at the beginning of the novel, as Sexton seems to spend most of his time on his own. His only communication seems to be with Billy, the boy who cannot speak, which makes Sexton comfortable sharing his thoughts. As the novel progresses, Sexton comes out of his shell and begins to express himself to Didi and others, taking part in life around him rather than watching it and waiting for something better to come along.

The characters speak in modern language as the novel takes place in current time. The two exceptions are Mad Hettie and the Eremite. Mad Hettie is a very old woman from London and her speech is clearly patterned so that her accents and the affectations of her culture are present for the reader. The Eremite, a serious and sinister character, speaks in a slightly stilted tone, reflecting the years he has studied his subject, Death.

## Structure

Death, the High Cost of Living is a graphic novel broken down into three chapters. There is a small addition at the end of the novel that deals with sexually transmitted disease and the prevention of STD's. The novel is illustrated, with anywhere from one to ten illustrations per page. The illustrations tend to be a bit dark, depicting the seriousness of the subject matter, though as the novel progresses and Sexton learns that life is worth living, the illustrations become brighter and more colorful.

The plot of the novel is simple with no subplots. Sexton Furnival is planning to kill himself, thinking that life is not worth living. He meets Didi, a girl his age, who is actually Death in mortal form for the day. After spending the day with Didi, Sexton realizes that despite the difficulties that people face in their day to day lives, life is really what you make of it. Sexton plans to live and enjoy life while he can.

The novel is short, and the plot moves along at a fairly fast pace. Because the story is illustrated, the reader feels more a part of the action than just reading it. All in all, the story is enjoyable and worth reading.





## Quotes

"What do you want it for anyway? You going to eat it or something?"

"Wash your mouth out with soap. I'm a Haruspex, I am."

Chap. One, p. 2

"It's like that, is it? Well, well, well. She had to come back sooner or later. And I'm not going to miss her this time. Am I, birdie?"

Chap. One, p. 6

"To be honest, I think love is complete bullshit. I don't think anyone ever loves anyone. I think the best people ever get is horny: horny and scared, so when they find someone who makes them horny, and they get too scared of the world outside, they stay together and call it love. "

Chap. One, p. 7

"Well, you be good to her. She's been through a lot lately. Her whole family's passed away last month. She didn't tell you about that? Some guy went up onto the sidewalk, ploughed into the crowd. Killed Didi's mom and her pop and her little sister and some guys selling cheap wristwatches from a suitcase."

Chap. One, p. 18

"Oh, that's no problem, Sexton, sooner or later, I see everyone."

"Oh..."

"Sure. At the end, anyway."

"The end of what?"

"Life."

"Give me a break. And I suppose you know what happens when you die."

"Of course I know what happens when you die, Sexton. I do. I'm Death."

Chap. One, p. 22

"I think you have potential, Theo.

But I am an Eremite. And though I have forgotten more that you would ever know if you lived for twenty lifetimes, I have never forgotten to be cautious."

Chap. Two, p. 6

"Not really. More live dull, and think, why bother, and leave a note saying goodbye."

"Hm. Do you mean that?"

"Sure."

"You really are a child. You know, ennui is insufficient reason to commit suicide."

Chap. Two, p. 14

"I was told he used to catch kittens, and put them in garbage cans, then he'd light a fire under the cans. And every girl I've ever known thought he was like, pure sex in blue jeans. I mean, how can they like a creep like that?"

Chap. Two, p. 18



"What is going on, young man? Life eternal. And true power. And the triumph of good over evil."

Chap. Two, p. 22

"Listen: One day in every century Death takes on mortal flesh, better to comprehend what the lives she takes must feel like, to taste the bitter tang of mortality: And this is the price she must pay for being the divider of the living from all that has gone before, all that must come after.

Haven't you ever heard that before?"

Chap. Three, p. 3

"There's a lot of places round here you could of bin. That's the trouble with tea leaves. They're good for the general but buggar all use for the specifics."

Chap. Three, p. 8

"No. I didn't like that. But...it's part of the whole thing. And there is a whole thing out there. And it's all part of living. The good bits and the bad bits and the dull bits and the painful bits..."

"Okay. I get the point. The whole thing. Right. Very profound."

Chap. Three, p. 16



# Topics for Discussion

Why is Sexton contemplating suicide?

Who is Didi?

What does Mad Hettie seek? Why?

Why does the Eremite want Didi's Ankh? Does the amulet provide what he seeks?

How does Didi explain the family in the photo in her apartment?

Do you think Didi is really Death? Why or why not?

What changes Sexton's mind about suicide? Why?