

Small Deaths Short Guide

Small Deaths by Charles de Lint

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Contents

Small Deaths Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

Bob explains that "small deaths" are "those pivotal moments in a person's life that change it forever; a love affair gone wrong, not getting into the right post-graduate program, stealing a car on a dare and getting caught, that kind of thing. They're the moments that some people brood on forever; right now they could have the most successful marriage or career, but they can't stop thinking about the past, about what might have happened if things had gone differently." In "Small Deaths," nighttime disk jockey Zoe Brill meets Gordon Wolfe, "a serial killer of people's hopes," who says, "I'm the bringer of small deaths." In a story in which healing triumphs over evil, Zoe Brill has a dramatic confrontation with fear.

About the Author

Charles de Lint was born in Bussum, the Netherlands, on December 22, 1951.

His father, Frederick Charles Hoefsmit, was a surveyor whose work took him and his family to Canada a few months after his son was born; his mother, Gerardina Margaretha Hoefsmit-de Lint, was a school teacher.

Charles de Lint became a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1961. He says that he did not regard himself as attached to any particular place until he met Mary Ann Harris, an artist and music lover, in the mid-1970s.

She lived in Ottawa, and that is the place he chose to stay. They were married on September 15, 1980.

De Lint had a variety of clerical jobs until finding work in record stores; he was a record store manager until 1983, when new ownership moved him out. Fortunately, he sold three novels in 1983, after seven years of rejections. He had long viewed himself as a musician, with a particular love for Celtic music, but he had written poetry and stories for friends. A few sales of stories to low-circulation magazines encouraged him to devote more time to writing, and he credits his wife with giving him not only encouragement but ideas. She pressed him to write his first novel. It is to her that he credits the idea for his exploration of fantasy in modern urban settings that has resulted in some of his best work, including the stories set in the imaginary city of Newford.

In 1984, de Lint won the first annual William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His *Jack, the Giant Killer* won the 1988 Canadian SF/Fantasy Award for the novel. In 1992, the Compu Serve Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum gave him the "HOMer" Award for Best Fantasy Novel for *The Little Country*. *The Little Country* also was included in the New York Public Library's list of Best Books for the Teen Age, in 1992. The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association selected *Trader* as one of its Best Books for Young Adults in 1998.

De Lint has become the quintessential crossover author: His writings intended for grownups have found a large audience among young adults; he doubles his crossover appeal because his writings for young adults have found an appreciative audience among grownups.

Setting

"Small Deaths" takes place in the imaginary city of Newford, where the everyday world and the supernatural coexist, even mix. In Newford, anything can happen: Comic books can come to life, animals can be part human, and abstractions such as "small deaths" can take human form. The setting allows de Lint to examine tough personal and social issues in tightly wound narratives that use symbolism heavily to convey complex ideas simply. De Lint says that he has discovered that some of his readers are sure that Newford is in Canada, while others are sure it is in America. He declines to say which nation it is in, although, he says, its legal system is American.

The radio station where Zoe works is likely to have a familiar feel to young audiences because television often sets stories in such places. The homes of the characters are bright and airy and comfortable. The mall where Zoe and Hilary meet Bob seems much like any other mall—many shops, many customers, an occasional security guard. In short, the social milieu for "Small Deaths" is North American middle class, with a touch of the bohemian in Newford's Lower Crowsea.

Social Sensitivity

Although de Lint often focuses on controversial social issues, in "Small Deaths," he does not. Hilary's lesbianism is touched on, but it primarily adds complexity to her relationship with heterosexual Zoe, and it gives her a somewhat different perspective on men than Zoe has; otherwise, it is not a topic that is developed. Instead, "Small Deaths" is about self-discovery, about Zoe Brill learning about her capacity to heal.

Literary Qualities

"Small Deaths" is a wish fulfillment story: In it a character discovers that she has an extraordinary power that sets her apart from other people and to a degree makes her superior to people. This may vicariously satisfy a reader's desire to be in some way special by inviting the reader to imagine himself as the extraordinary character, in this case, Zoe. This sort of tale has long attracted young adult readers and may be found in books such as A. E. van Vogt's *Slan* (1946) and Jane Yolen's *Merlin* (1997; see separate entry). Readers of any age of audience may feel the attraction of wish fulfillment, but young people trying to establish their personal independence tend to find such stories especially satisfying.



Themes and Characters

Zoe Brill attracts strange people, especially peculiar and annoying men. She has learned how to handle them, so she thinks, until a particularly nettlesome Lothario engages her in a conversation she wants to cut short: The man who'd paused by the cafe railing to speak to Zoe this evening reminded her of a fox. He had lean, pointy features, dark eyes, the corners of his lips constantly lifted in a sly smile, hair as red as her own, if not as long. Unlike her, he had a dark complexion, as though swimming somewhere back in the gene pool of his forebears was an Italian, an Arab, or a native American. His self-assurance radiated a touch too shrill for Zoe's taste, but he seemed basically harmless.

This man is Gordon Wolfe, and he does not take kindly to Zoe brushing him off.

"I'm the bringer of small deaths," he warns.

This remark irritates Zoe: "She hated this mild anxiety he'd bestowed upon her like some spiteful parting gift."

Zoe sees herself as "Just your basic semihip girl," and she is a thoughtful, fairly open-minded person. She has her limits to what she is willing to be open-minded about, and at first the idea of a bringer of small deaths seems absurd to her. Further, she likes to think of herself as level-headed and realistic about life: "She didn't really believe in coincidence. To her mind, there was always connections; they just weren't always that easy to work out." For her, mysteries have solutions; events have causes that merely need to be found in order to show that they were not coincidences. It is this belief that may be the source of her concern over what Wolfe says to her: His coming to her must have had a cause, even though she would prefer that it had only been an accident.

Zoe's resistance to the supernatural implications of the events involving Wolfe adds to her charm as a protagonist. "I don't want this to be real," she thinks in a rational response to events that take on a dreamlike, magical quality outside of normal experience. A character who rushed into events with joy at being stalked by "a serial killer of people's hopes" would be much less credible than Zoe, who wants everything explained before she believes any of it.

Her companion in "Small Deaths" is Hilary Carlisle, who acts as a foil for Zoe. In contrast to Zoe, "Hilary was all graceful lines with tanned skin that accentuated her blue eyes and the waterfall of her long straight blonde hair." Further, Hilary is much more willing to believe Bob's incredible tale of a man who poisons other people's lives. Where Zoe offers objections, Hilary suggests finding answers. Where Zoe insists that there are no coincidences, Hilary says, "Creeps don't need reasons for what they do; that's why they're creeps," which seems to be a reasonable assessment of Bob and Gordon. In addition, Hilary is a lesbian; she carries little of the emotional confusion about men that heterosexual Zoe carries.



Bob is mostly a voice on a telephone, calling Zoe at work in the wee hours of the morning to warn her not to annoy Wolfe.

Wolfe is "a catalyst for bad luck," Bob insists—a remark that Zoe quite reasonably believes is a threat. "He's the father of fear," Bob presses, although he later says, "But I think you [Zoe] scare him." With Hilary as escort, Zoe meets Bob at a mall, and she is dismayed to see that Bob looks like Wolfe. "We [Bob and Wolfe] share the same body, except he doesn't know it," Bob explains.

Part of the mystery of Gordon/Bob is hinted at the end of "Small Deaths" when the healed figure says that he was once like Zoe, a healer. Bob may have been that positive side of Gordon Wolfe, split from Gordon Wolfe's personality when the poisonous side became dominant. Plainly, Gordon/Bob is sick, a split personality.

Bob's assessment of Zoe's appeal to unhappy people is that "where he [Wolfe] brings pain into people's lives, you heal."

This is the reason why Wolfe fears Zoe: "Zoe negates Wolfe's abilities," Bob asserts. The man who results from Zoe's healing is a strange one, not particularly thankful and quick to disappear, but perhaps a complete personality once again. Through him, Zoe learns that "She carried a responsibility now of which she'd never been aware before." This sounds very much like a "small death," a burden that forever changes Zoe's life, because she will never be able to set it aside.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do the musical references date the story? 2. Was the anticlimax satisfying? 3. Why would Zoe scare Gordon Wolfe? 4. How good a judge of character is Zoe?

How do her judgments affect her relationships to the other characters in "Small Deaths"?

5. Does Zoe suffer a "small death" during the story?

6. Why does Hilary not remember the confrontation with Bob?

7. What is it that Zoe does for Gordon/Bob?

8. Is learning of her ability to heal people a blessing or a curse for Zoe (or perhaps something else)?

9. Zoe does not believe in coincidences, and Bob does not seem to either, so how would they explain Gordon Wolfe's approaching her as he did?

10. Is Hilary's assertion "Creeps don't need reasons for what they do; that's why they're creeps" true? Is she being too dismissive of the motives of someone such as Gordon Wolfe?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. De Lint's fiction often focuses on female protagonists. How good is he at creating realistic female characters?

2. What is multiple personality syndrome?

How does it apply to Gordon/Bob? Is there any treatment as effective as Zoe's cure?

3. What cultural traditions does de Lint draw on for his portrait of Zoe's healing power? Has he modified them at all?

4. What would you expect to happen next for Zoe? How might she incorporate her knowledge of her healing ability into her life?

5. What real-life social services exist to help the sort of wounded people Zoe is said to attract? How would Gordon/ Bob be helped?

6. Science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov often argued that there are such things as coincidences. How would his arguments bolster Zoe's view of the matter?

7. What is the phenomenon of "stalking"?

What should Zoe have done if she feared that Gordon Wolfe and Bob were "stalking" her? What defenses are there against "stalkers"?

8. Zoe is a late-night disk jockey with a devoted fan following. What overnight radio shows are available in your community? Which ones have the most fans? Do any of the overnight shows offer listeners what Zoe offers?



For Further Reference

Cassada, Jackie. *Library Journal* 118, 5 (March 15, 1993): 111. Highly recommends *Dreams Underfoot*, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

De Lint, Charles, <http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl>. An exceptionally fine author's web site with information on de Lint's publications, copies of interviews, and an FAQ (frequently asked questions) section in which he answers questions about himself and his views. In the FAQ page, he says, "My own beliefs probably run more closely to an idiosyncratic form of animism, which isn't to say that I actually believe that trees, stones, wells, whathave-you actually have souls, but at the same time everything certainly seems to have a spirit of some sort, something that goes beyond what we see when we simply look at it."

———. "Interview with Charles de Lint."

Conducted by Chuck Lipsig. De Lint says, "This interview first appeared in an on-line magazine called *Sphere*, albeit in a much altered form." The present writer has not been able to find the original interview, but the version to which de Lint refers is to be found at his web site. In the interview, de Lint says, "I write in what I call a very 'organic' style of writing. In other words, I'm finding out every day what happens, the same way a reader would."

———. "An Interview with Charles de Lint."

Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine* no. 32 (Summer 1996). Conducted by Lawrence Schimel. This interview was conducted via written correspondence.

Although the interview is extensive, it remains throughout well focused on de Lint's literary work. In it, de Lint declares, "Much of what I write requires a root in the real world." A copy is available at de Lint's Internet web site.

———. "Interview with Speculative Fiction Author Charles de Lint." *The Wordsworth* 8, 4 (January 1998). Conducted by Mike Timonin. A longer version of this interview appears at de Lint's web site. De Lint advises aspiring writers: "Read a lot, and write a lot. And that's it."

Easton, Tom. *Analog Science Fiction & Fact* 113, 13 (November 1993): 167-168. Mildly positive review of *Dreams Underfoot*, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

Green, Roland. *Booklist* 89, 14 (March 15, 1993): 1301. A rave review of *Dreams Underfoot*, in which "In the House of My Enemy" appears.

Related Titles

De Lint is a prolific writer of short stories. Most of them take place in urban settings, especially fictional Newford, a place where magic mixes with modern urban life.

These stories often feature unusual people such as Zoe Brill, whose ability to heal others sets her apart. Lesbianism, touched on in "Small Deaths," is touched on elsewhere in de Lint's fiction, notably in "Bird Bones and Wood Ash" (1995), in which the main character's actions are motivated in part by the loss of a long-time lesbian lover.

As for Gordon/Bob, Newford abounds with odd characters like him, such as animals made human, fairylike people, and other figures based on folklore. Like "Small Deaths," most of de Lint's stories read like fairy tales, and like "Small Deaths," they tend to end with the main character having learned something important about herself.

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