

# What to read to a person who is dying?

A recent visitor to this site asked what they should read to someone on their deathbed.

What a great question!

Let's start with the first step: You should ask whether the sick or dying person wants you to read to them.

If your friend or family member wants you to read to them, ask them if they have any favorite book of fiction, or nonfiction, poetry, meditation, or prayers that they want you to read to them to give them comfort.

Maybe they want you to read to them out of the newspaper each day so they can know what is happening locally or nationally? My parents always started to read the local paper by turning to the obituary section to see who had died, a pattern I see repeated in many elders. My Dad hogged the crossword puzzle of the New York Times every day and finished it, each day, in blue ink. Maybe you could do a crossword puzzle together from the local paper, or splurge and get The New York Times? Just a thought.

I'm not a literary expert, but I can offer you titles of books, both nonfiction and fiction, and books of poetry I would want read out loud to me in the hope that those recommendations may help you. Hopefully my kid, Ben, is paying attention to this post! I'm counting on you to read to me during my last days, Ben!

A better guide for reading material would be a librarian at your local library, or a salesperson at your favorite bookstore where, hopefully, the staff actually read the books they are selling.

In the interim, here are some suggestions for you to consider.

**POETRY:** If your loved one wants to hear poetry and they don't have a favorite poet or book of poems I recommend you pick up Garrison Keillor's book entitled "Good Poems". This book is a collection of poems divided into different topics, such as poems about love, marriage, and loss. A few of my favorites are "Let Evening Come," a poem about letting go of this life, by Jane Kenyon; and "Lost", a poem about how we can never really be lost, by David Wagoner; in "Soaking Up Sun", you have a poem about the love shared between a grandfather and his grandson and the simple beauty of their family farm. This book may point you in the direction of poets new to you both who you might want to explore further.

**NONFICTION:** I recommend Brandon Stanton's second "Humans of New York Stories", in hard cover book form, just released this past year. This book marries pictures with short quotes from the people he photographs and interviews to give you a feeling of connection to a larger world

of human experience. The book is based on Mr. Stanton's very successful blog [humansofnewyork.com](http://humansofnewyork.com). If the person you are reading to can see pictures and loves to see and hear stories of other people, this is a great book to read together to see stories of hope, love, life and loss. One of my favorites about aging is on page 52. Mr. Stanton's photographs of children in his micro-fashion coverage are delightful, the picture and quote on page 65 is one of my all time favorites!

Another book that is fun to read is "Journeys of Simplicity" by Philip Harnden, published out of Woodstock, Vermont. I keep this book on my night table. It is a short book that is made up of lists of supplies and "stuff" that well-known explorers, authors, characters from fiction, and historic figures took with them on their journeys out into the world. It asks us with each story what it is that we need each day to get by on this earth. At the time of death, our possessions have little meaning and we can use stories like these to help us define what is important in life and at the time of death.

I would stay with books that are short in chapters or segmented in content. The recommended books above have self-contained stories in a single page so that when the listener becomes tired, you can stop reading and they have no need to remember where you were in the book the next time you visit.

FICTION: Anything that the dying person wants to hear again, or for the first time.

I recently read Kent Haruf's novel "Our Souls at Night". This is a beautiful story of aging, love, the pervasiveness of loneliness among those who are aging, and it reminds us of the precious gift we have in each new day. This book also reminds us that love requires us to have courage, at every age. This is the third novel in a trilogy, but you can read them out of order.

Another recent favorite book of mine is "The Little Paris Bookshop" by Nina George, translated from German. I did not want to put this book down while reading it. This book made me laugh and cry, I learned deep lessons about my soul, it brought me face to face with grief I thought I had let go, and it left me a better person when I was done reading it. And it's not just a book for women! In fact, the lead character is a man, the supporting characters are men, they are all grappling with intense experiences and emotions.

I hope these are helpful suggestions to get you started in your quest to find good reading material. Again, a librarian or well-read salesperson would be great people to ask to help you find good books to read.

But here is my question: Why wait until someone is on their deathbed to start reading out loud with those you love?

In my family, we would take turns reading fun poetry after dinner while still sitting at the table. The main book we used was the "Collected Poems of Robert Service", which are fun ballads of early days during the Alaska gold rush. Mr. Service's better-known poems, such as *The*

*Cremation of Sam McGee* and *The Ballad of the Ice-Worm Cocktail*, held special places at our after dinner reading fests. And yes, I did read *The Cremation of Sam McGee* to my Dad when he was hospitalized a few weeks before his death, and he loved it.

So imagine this scene: everyone puts away their cell phones, tablets, earbuds and Ipods, they get off Facebook/Tumblr/Twitter, and you turn off the television, and you come together to hear a story, a poem, or to read a book together and talk about what that book/poem/story means to each of you. You could even challenge your kids or friends to bring to the dinner table an essay or poem THEY wrote, or found in a library or on the internet, and have them read it out loud and then talk about it. I know, I'm totally dreaming here, but it's such a nice dream.

Happy reading!

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