

**Book Review:**  
***The Many Deaths of Laila Starr***  
**by Ram V and Filipe Andrade**  
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*The Many Deaths of Laila Starr* by Ram V (author) and Filipe Andrade (illustrator). BOOM! Studios, 2022. 128 pages. ISBN: 1684158052

**T**o be or not to be? With a name like Destiny, I've pondered my whole life what it means "to be"—if fate is real, if we really have any control over the major events in our lives, if the future is set in stone. Are bad things *supposed* to happen? Equally, are good things *supposed* to happen? Or is it random—one of the few things about the human condition, like death, we cannot pin down to definite science?

Everyone thinks about these things at some point, but I feel like I came out of the womb cursed to endure puns on my name and the weight of its ambiguous meaning. So what makes a book about this human squandering special?

It is no mistake *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr* landed in my lap. In our time of pandemics, wars, and natural disasters leading to unprecedented death, this graphic novel is a comfort—a guide for grief. The narrator is the god of Life, consoling us that "...life is worthy and beautiful even if it is not always pretty." Ram V's precise storytelling and refined economy of language tells readers, in less than 130 pages, the secret to cheating death. The Wes Anderson-esque coloring of Filipe Andrade's art adds to the magic realism and soothes the reader, even when the text is melancholic.

The story begins split between two backdrops, a busy Mumbai and the corporate hell that is apparently where immortal

gods live, to introduce the main cast of characters: a pregnant woman in labor stuck in traffic; a young woman smoking a cigarette at a college party; and a blue-skinned, several-armed “girl boss”—the god of Death. Things happen in threes. A baby is born, the college girl “mysteriously” falls from a highrise window, and the god of Death is fired despite her literal eternal commitment to the company. Turns out, that baby born will grow up to invent immortality, so they need to “downsize” the whole Death department since mortals will soon stop being, well, mortal. As part of Death’s severance package for her unexpected layoff, she gets handed a brochure that explains how she will be given a mortal body for one lifetime on Earth.

I enjoy the play on corporate culture to define the matters of Life and Death, making the ordeal feel cold and clinical, like a business, further adding to the disconnect of these concepts between mortals and immortals. And it wouldn’t be a big, powerful business without some corruption. Holding a box full of her old office decor, including a sword and a Venus flytrap, Death asks the assistant of the three-headed god CEO to put her in a mortal body near where the baby was born, thinking it would be easy to kill him to revive her career—and that’s how we meet Laila Starr.

Laila Starr is the girl who fell from the window, who also happens to die at the same Mumbai hospital the “evil” baby, Darius Shah, is born. Death is reincarnated in Laila’s mortal body. Much like a Shakespearian play, Laila dies in a variety of absurd, darkly comical ways. Luckily, Death’s secret admirer, who she calls “Pranah,” is willing to bring her back to her mortal body. But each time, it takes several more years to re-animate Death into Laila’s young woman body, meaning her adversary, Darius, is getting significantly older every time she dies. It seems as if she is fated to fail.

This novel expertly plays on the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—in each chapter. For the first time, Death begins to comprehend the mortal rituals around funerals: “It’s the one thing that’s theirs. Not death itself, but what you leave behind,” a talking crow tells Laila on the shore of Walkeshwar. But, as in real life, we don’t always take wisdom seriously long after we’ve heard it. In the next chapter, Laila tells a fellow partygoer, “The point of life, my friend, is to be smoked,” before she ironically dies in a fire started from cigarette ashes. I struggled to place this quote as a stage of grief. Was it depression, a sort of resignation? Was it denial, using that phrase as a deflection? Was it a nihilistic acceptance that nothing matters in the end, a la Linkin Park style? Precisely, this is what I love most about this book. The hard definition between the stages of grief and the timeline for each are blurred. It is a realistic portrayal of grieving.

I wish I could have had the pleasure to read this when my mother unexpectedly died over a decade ago. I sought all kinds of literature as escapism, but never found a hopeful narrative about grief that felt as all-encompassing yet open-ended and raw and bittersweet as *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr*. I found myself adoring Death’s character, laughing, crying, re-reading quotes, watching her navigate through “... mortal pleasures—in food and drink and sex ... lost phone numbers, morning coffees, and ... cigarettes.” All the little things that make up life.

The text itself references the basics of literature and titles the last chapter “Poetry.” Laila, trying to figure out what to say to her frenemy Darius, buys a book of poetry at the airport for inspiration. The author of this fictional poetry book is Akur Puri, an anagram of Rupi Kaur (the famous Indian-Canadian poet who wrote *milk and honey*). Mimicking Kaur’s all low-

ercase letter style in brief, fragmented poems, this segment celebrates the comfort found in words. This is yet another example of the expert craft and attentive detail that layers the text, using parody to reference the familiar in the unfamiliar.

Off the page, is life as meticulously crafted, planned, re-worked? That is the question.

*The Many Deaths of Laila Starr* reimagines the concept of death, but, more importantly, this novel teaches and reminds you how to live. However imperfect, to *be*.

Reviewed by Destiny Pinder-Buckley