

Films and Television Programs

Movie Night at the funeral home or cemetery or in other settings allow for conversation after viewing a film or selected TV show episodes. Here are suggestions for movies and TV show episodes, with short descriptions and the topics they raise for discussion after viewing. Make sure to view these programs in advance to make sure they fit in your community's sensibilities.

To legally show films and TV shows in this manner, you need a license from the Motion Picture Licensing Corporation (www.MPLC.org). In addition, it's forbidden to charge people to watch the film. If you are working with a movie theater to show Festival films, they already have the needed permits to charge people to watch films.

Films Featuring Funerals and Funeral Directors

Bernie (2011 – PG-13, 1 hr. 44 min.) A comedy based on a true crime story, affable mortician Bernie Tiede strikes up a friendship with a wealthy widow that goes tragically wrong. Provides insights into elements of the funeral business, the many roles funeral directors play and a great conversation starter. Stars Jack Black, Shirley MacLaine and Matthew McConaughey.

Death at a Funeral (2007 – R, 1 hr. 30 min.) In this comedy, chaos ensues when a man tries to expose a dark secret regarding a recently deceased patriarch of a dysfunctional British family. Shows a funeral at home, the challenge of paying for a funeral and preparing a eulogy, and the general stress a death in the family can cause. There is also an American version of this film, made in 2010 featuring an African American family, starring Chris Rock and Martin Lawrence. Peter Dinklage is in both versions of the film. Rough language warning.

Departures (2008 – PG-13, 2 hr. 10 min.) This charming Oscar-winning Japanese film follows the journey of an unemployed cellist who takes a job preparing the dead for funerals. Shows the importance of encountering the dead, Japanese traditions for funerals and cremation, and how grief can be repressed and expressed.

Elizabethtown (2005 – PG-13, 2 hr. 3 min.) This romantic comedy with a wonderful soundtrack incorporates the similarities of weddings and funerals, the clash of cultures between people in the South and the West regarding burial and cremation and shows an ash-scattering road trip. Stars include Orlando Bloom, Kirsten Dunst and Susan Sarandon. Great music soundtrack!

Get Low (2009 – PG-13, 1hr. 43 min.) This film is based on a true story of a man who threw his own funeral party while he was still alive. Set in the 1930s, it provides a glimpse into the evolution of the funeral business and shows the elements of planning and implementing an unorthodox funeral. Stars Robert Duvall, Bill Murray and Sissy Spacek.

Grand Theft Parsons (2003 – PG-13, 1hr. 28 min.) is based on the true story of the hijacking of musician Gram Parson's body after his untimely death in 1973 from an overdose at the age of 26. His road manager Phil Kaufman steals the body to fulfill a pledge to set his spirit free in Joshua Tree National Park. Includes insights on body shipment, wills, hearses, and setting a body on fire in the desert. Stars Johnny Knoxville, Robert Forster, and Christina Applegate.

Harold and Maude (1971 – PG-13, 1 hr. 31 min.) This cult classic features Harold, a rich young man who's obsessed with death, who meets lively septuagenarian Maude at a funeral. Shows several funerals, provides food for thought on living life to the fullest and exiting on one's own terms. Stars Ruth Gordon and Bud Cort and features a great soundtrack by Cat Stevens.

Just Buried (2007 – PG-13, 1 hr. 34 min.) A young man inherits a nearly bankrupt funeral home from his estranged father and falls in love with the female mortician on staff. It's a quirky comedy that explains embalming in detail, shows how pacemakers can make a crematorium explode, and looks at other elements of running a funeral home.

The Loved One (1965 – unrated, 2 hr. 2 min.) This satire of the funeral business skewers casket sales, funeral services, pet deaths and cemeteries, embalming and more. Stars Robert Morse as a young British poet who plans a funeral for his uncle and goes to work at a Hollywood cemetery/funeral home. Liberace appears as an outrageous casket salesman.

My Girl (1991 – PG, 1 hr. 42 min.) A sweet story about a young girl growing up in a family-owned funeral home. Her mother died giving birth to her, and her father works to balance work and life. Shows funeral home operations in the 1970s, that funeral directors have lives beyond their work, and different aspects of grief. Stars Anna Chlumsky, Macaulay Culkin, Dan Aykroyd and Jamie Lee Curtis.

My Mexican Shivah (2007 – not rated, 1 hr. 38 min.) This comedy from Mexico focuses on Jewish funeral traditions, including the rituals leading up to the funeral through the seven-day mourning period after the burial. Dialogue is in Spanish and Yiddish with English subtitles.

Nora's Will (2008 – not rated, 1 hr. 32 min.) This award-winning comedy/drama from Mexico also focuses on Jewish funeral traditions related to suicide, keeping the deceased company prior to burial, scheduling around holidays, and more. Spanish with English subtitles.

The Six Wives of Henry Lefay (2009 – PG-13, 1hr. 35 min.) A comedic cautionary tale for those who don't make funeral plans or make those plans but get married multiple times. Henry Lefay's daughter tries to arrange her father's funeral while contending with all his ex-wives. Stars include Tim Allen, Elisha Cuthbert and Andie MacDowell.

Undertaking Betty (2002 – PG-13, 1 hr. 34 min.) Originally titled *Plots with a View*, this comedy focuses on a woman whose husband is cheating on her and a traditional undertaker who has been in love with her since childhood. A progressive funeral director, new to this small town in Wales, shakes things up with personalized celebrations of life, including a *Star Trek* funeral. Stars Brenda Blethyn, Alfred Molina and Christopher Walken.

TV Shows About Funerals

Want to use a video to teach and engage people to discuss death and funerals in under an hour? Try these TV show episodes for great conversation-starting content. Many are available through streaming services.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show – “Chuckles Bites The Dust” 1975 (Season 6, Episode 7, 30 minutes) Mary thinks the death of Chuckles the Clown is nothing to laugh about – until the funeral. *TV Guide* rated this the greatest TV episode of all time. While death is the primary topic, it’s very funny, and it opens the door to funeral planning conversations.

All in the Family – “Stretch Cunningham, Goodbye” 1977 (Season 7, Episode 19, 30 minutes) Archie Bunker prepares a eulogy for a work colleague and faces a surprise at the funeral. This episode can start a conversation about funerals, eulogy writing, and how much we truly know about the people in our lives.

Six Feet Under – This Emmy Award-winning series from HBO focuses on the family-run Fisher Funeral Home in Los Angeles. It ran from 2001 to 2005. Every 60-minute episode starts with a death, and the funeral arrangements that follow. It was produced with input from actual funeral directors and detailed real trends in the industry. While just about any episode would be a conversation starter, be aware that as an HBO series, there are plentiful curse words in the dialogue and sexual scenes that may be too risqué for a Before I Die Festival audience.

My top episode picks are the pilot episode, when Nate Fisher Sr. is killed in an accident and the family comes together to decide the fate of the funeral home, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” (Season 2, Episode 8) featuring a biker funeral, and “All Alone,” (Season 5, Episode 10) which features the first green burial shown on television.

The Kominsky Method – This award-winning Netflix drama/comedy series from 2018 to 2021 focuses on an aging acting coach, played by Michael Douglas, as he contends with illness, death, and eventually, estate issues. “An Agent Grieves” (Season 1, Episode 2) shows how a letter of instruction can help a grieving family plan the perfect over-the-top funeral. Be aware that curse words abound in this series, so review an episode before deciding to use this program.

Films About Medical Treatment and End-of-Life Issues

50/50 (2010 – R, 1hr. 40 min.) Inspired by a true story, this comedy centers on a 27-year-old who learns of his cancer diagnosis, and his subsequent struggle to beat the disease. Stars Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Seth Rogan as his best friend who tries to be helpful.

Checking Out (2005 – PG-13, 1 hr. 34 min.) Peter Falk is Morris Applebaum, a 90-year-old stage actor who has decided he's lived long enough and plans to die by suicide, after gathering the family for his big birthday. This comedy can prompt conversations about medical aid-in-dying and related issues.

Critical Care (1997 – R, 1hr. 47 min.) James Spader stars as a hospital resident put in the middle of a legal battle between two half-sisters on whether to pull their comatose dad's life support. Sidney Lumet directed this scathing comedy about medical care, insurance, and difficult decisions in the ICU.

The Descendants (2011 – R, 1 hr. 55 min.) George Clooney plays a husband whose wife is on life support, wrestling with issues of keeping her alive and connecting with his two daughters. Shows the importance of advance medical directives, doctor-patient communications, and helping family and friends cope with a serious medical situation.

The Doctor (1991 – PG-13, 2 hr. 2 min.) William Hurt stars as a self-centered heart surgeon who is diagnosed with throat cancer. As a patient, he becomes better able to empathize with his patients and appreciate life outside his career.

The End (1978 – R, 1 hr. 40 min.) A slapstick comedy with Burt Reynolds playing a man told by a doctor he doesn't have much longer to live. He makes multiple failed attempts at suicide and ponders life and death.

The Savages (2007 – R, 1 hr. 53 min.) Laura Linney and Philip Seymour Hoffman play adult children estranged for 20 years from their father, who has developed dementia. They struggle to discuss his medical care, advance health directives and funeral plans in this comedy-drama.

The Shootist (1976 – PG, 1 hr. 40 min.) John Wayne copes with cancer in his last film. He plays a gunfighter looking to spend his last days with a minimum of pain and a maximum of dignity. He also makes his funeral arrangements with the undertaker played by John Carradine.

Wit (2001 – PG-13, 1 hr. 39 min.) Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play directed by Mike Nichols, Emma Thompson is a cancer patient in experimental treatment for Stage Four ovarian cancer. Funny and moving, this can help discussions of wishes for medical treatment and end-of-life care.

Related Topics and Animated Films

The Bucket List (2007 – PG-13, 1 hr. 37 min.) Two very different terminally ill men head off on a road trip with a wish list of to-dos before they die. Features discussions of mortality, life and love, and cremation wishes. Stars Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman.

Coco (2017 – PG, 1 hr. 45 min.) This Oscar Award-winning animated adventure focuses on Miguel, a young aspiring musician, who's confronted with his family's ancestral ban on music and enters the Land of the Dead to find his great-great-grandfather, a legendary singer. Illustrates the rich traditions of *Dia de los Muertos* in Mexico and Central America and shares a warm message about remembering our dead.

Defending Your Life (1991 – PG, 1 hr. 52 min.) In this comedy/fantasy, at an afterlife way station resembling a major city, the lives of the recently-deceased are examined in a court-like setting. Provides a fun way to start a discussion about what might happen to us after we die. Stars Albert Brooks, Meryl Streep and Rip Torn.

Inside Out (2015 – PG, 1 hr. 35 min.) This animated comedy/adventure focuses on the emotions inside our heads and the impact they have on how we live. Follow young Riley as she is

uprooted from her Midwest life and moved to San Francisco. Her emotions – Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and Disgust – conflict on how to best navigate a new city, house, and school. Provides a profound lesson on the importance of recognizing and honoring sadness.

A Man Called Otto (2022 – PG-13, 2 hrs. 6 min.) Tom Hanks plays a grump who's given up on life following the death of his wife and retirement. He wants to die by suicide, but when a young family moves in nearby, he is drawn back into life and his world turns around.

About Gail Rubin, CT



Gail Rubin, CT, The Doyenne of Death®, is author of the award-winning books *A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die*, *Kicking the Bucket List: 100 Downsizing and Organizing Things to Do Before You Die* (Rio Grande Books), and *Hail and Farewell: Cremation Ceremonies, Templates and Tips*. She is also the coordinator of the award-winning **Before I Die New Mexico Festival** and a pioneer of the Death Cafe movement in the United States.

A doyen is a woman who's considered senior in a group who knows a lot about a particular subject. Gail is a Certified Thanatologist (a death and grief educator) and speaker who uses humor and films to get end-of-life conversations started. Her 2015 TEDx talk (<https://youtu.be/r9qR4ZiGX2Y>) focuses on the importance of starting end-of-life conversations *before* there's a death in the family. *Albuquerque Business First* named her one of their Women of Influence in 2019.

She's a member of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association, Toastmasters International and the National Speakers Association. Her motto is: "Talking about sex won't make you pregnant. Talking about funerals won't make you dead."

Gail carries a current MPLC license to legally show films to the public.

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