Get to know one of Wolf Erlbruch's most beloved books in this reading guide written by Lennart Eng, illustrator and member of the ALMA jury. *Duck, Death and the Tulip* is often described as an all-age book, because it addresses adults as well as children. The book invites you to dive into existential thinking for a while, pondering questions we all have in common. Enjoy your reading!

**About the Author**

Wolf Erlbruch is a German illustrator and children’s book author. Born in Wuppertal in 1948, Erlbruch has authored some ten books and illustrated nearly fifty titles by other authors. His breakthrough as a children’s book creator came with the publication of *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business* (1994). The book was a collaboration with the author Werner Holzwarth and continues to be released in new editions.

Erlbruch’s visual language is distinguished by graphic precision and a strong, confident sense of line. He has pushed the envelope of book illustration in new directions, making significant use of collage and experimental graphic techniques to convey narrative meaning. Erlbruch urges illustrators not to get stuck in an expressive rut. He believes creative excellence requires taking a broad interest in the world around you and incorporating it into your work. He is skeptical of pigeonholing books by age or target
audience and says he does not set out to make children’s books per se. He simply tries to be honest about his own feelings and convey them in his work.

Animals – especially bears – make frequent turns in his stories as characters and protagonists. But he looks past the easy, often clichéd metaphors that make animals into cute personifications of human traits. Erlbruch often takes on existential questions, doing so with both keenness and humor. Examples include the picture books *The Big Question* (2005) and *Duck, Death and the Tulip* (2008). But he does not instruct or moralize. He invites readers to join him in pondering questions he shares. He has said that he hopes his books can inspire dialogue between parents and children reading together.

*Duck, Death and the Tulip* has been hailed as a modern classic. It is a simple, exquisitely refined meditation on the nature of life and the omnipresence of death.

**Plot and Content**

Duck, Death and the Tulip is a picture book about dying, told through the story of Duck and her meeting with a character who introduces himself as Death.

We meet Duck first. She appears in four pictures before Death makes his entrance: first on the front cover, then in three portrait-like images before the title page. These pictures of a slightly scatterbrained duck usher us gently into the main story. In all four images Duck’s body language appears untroubled, but we can also discern a watchful quality in her, for which we will soon learn the reason.

The story begins when Duck suddenly turns her head to find a figure standing behind her. He is wearing a checkered dress, soft shoes, and a gentle smile, and introduces himself as Death. He holds a deep red tulip, which he hides, almost shyly, behind his back. Duck and Death begin a quiet dialogue whose depth of emotion is revealed in their facial expressions and body language. Slowly, Duck grasps the significance of their meeting.

In one scene Death’s own fragility is revealed when Duck invites him to swim in the pond. Death gets cold, and Duck warms him. The next morning, they sleep in. When they wake up, they continue their conversation. Duck wonders what the next life is like, but it turns
out that Death does not know either. The two climb a tree, where they have a philosophical exchange about the nature of existence: how the pond too will be gone, at least for Duck, when she dies.

A solitary black raven flies across the next page, presaging a shift in the story. Duck and Death begin to go less often to the pond. The weather turns cold, and Duck shivers in the breeze. One evening she turns to Death. “I’m cold,” she says. “Can you warm me a little?” We see wings and hands meet. Then Duck dies, and the tulip reappears. Death cares tenderly for Duck, taking her body to “the great river,” which slowly carries it away. He feels “almost a little moved.”

“But that’s life, thought Death,” the book concludes.

More about the book
Wolf Erlbruch has said that it took him ten years to finish Duck, Death and the Tulip. It is a meticulously worked-out narrative characterized by reduction and concentration. The narrative can be seen as a modern take on the medieval motif of the danse macabre, in which people of all ages and stations are finally brought face to face with death. Death is a demanding choice of subject to depict. Erlbruch has found a form that balances gravity and keenness with warmth, humor and tenderness. He uses frank language that does not sugarcoat the uncertainty surrounding death, but in conjunction with his illustrations, his candid text takes on multiple meanings.

Erlbruch skillfully captures the emotions and reactions of his characters using small shifts in facial expression and body language. Duck’s eyes, and tiny alterations in the small line that leads from the lower edge of her jaw to her neck, are used to extraordinary effect. Her body is almost comical in its perfect naiveté. In its color and shape we also see characteristics of ourselves, of the human figure.

Deciding how to portray Death seems likely to have presented the biggest challenge. Erlbruch was not ready to abandon the traditional skeleton; indeed this might have defeated his purpose. Instead, the familiar skeletal frame is given new attributes that stand in perfect contrast to its coldness and angularity. The skeleton is still discernible,
but it is wearing a warm, homely checkered dress, mittens and soft shoes. Its empty eye sockets have a pair of expressive peppercorn eyes, and its mouth is an expressive stroke that responds to the events of the story. Death’s white bones only just peek out between his shoes and the hem of his dress.

The third title character, of course, is the tulip. Death is holding the tulip when Duck sees him for the first time, and it also appears on the next few pages, as Duck and Death begin talking. Then it disappears, only to return after Duck’s death, when Death places the flower on her chest as he lowers her body into the great river.

In the first part of the book, we might interpret the tulip as something Death uses to help introduce himself to Duck. The flower softens their meeting. After Duck dies, the tulip becomes a gift or a salute that shows the respect and warmth Death feels for Duck. Looking more closely at flower symbolism, we find that dark red flowers stand for loss, and that a single flower (as opposed to two flowers or a bouquet) is associated with a personal, individual message. So, there are multiple ways of interpreting the tulip. The way it heightens and enriches the visual composition was surely also important, perhaps decisive, for Erlbruch.

In striving to focus his story on the interaction between Death and Duck, Erlbruch pares the environment to a bare minimum. Colored areas in stylized shapes form the pond, the great river, and the starry darkness above Duck’s dead body.

A few images of plants and flowers are inserted here and there, looking almost like botanical plates, and colored only in a more intense shade of the light-yellow background color. But there is nothing more. True black is used only once, when the cawing raven flies across a single page – an effective and stirring segue to the conclusion of the book.

The great river that carries Duck’s body away is a reference to an old tradition in many cultures, in which a river motif symbolizes the transition between life and death. Examples include the River Styx of classical mythology; the river encircling Tuonela, the land of the dead in the Kalevala tradition; and the “river of death” in various Biblical texts. The “river of time” is another familiar image with related associations.
Things to discuss and think about

As noted above, Erlbruch avoids making books for specific ages or groups of readers. He wants his books to speak to younger and older readers alike and to inspire conversation and reflection between children and parents. As you read Duck, Death and the Tulip consider the following:

• How does the book compare to other titles that make use of the picture book format to talk to young readers about death?
• How well does Erlbruch succeed in finding a manner of address that makes it easier to think and talk about death?

Erlbruch is not only a distinguished illustrator but also an award-winning book designer. Discuss Duck, Death and the Tulip as a “book experience.” The following questions relates to Erlbruch’s aesthetic and pictorial choices:

• Describe Erlbruch’s use of line.
• How (with what tools) does he create line?
• How would you describe the color range used in the book, and how does it affect the reading experience?
• What choices might Erlbruch have faced in creating his depictions of Duck and Death?
• How do foreground and background relate to one another?
• How is our experience of the book affected by its generous use of air/empty space?
• Images of plants and flowers are sparingly inserted into some scenes. What role do these elements play and what are their distinguishing characteristics?
• What do you make of the picture on the last page?
• How do the words and pictures relate to one another?

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