

Ex Libris by Joaquin Ayala, PhD.

Hello folks and welcome to a special newsletter for October, 2016! This particular article did not appear in the October newsletter as the dates were all mixed up, so this is being sent out separately and will also be available on the AAMC website under the **features** tab.

Since this is for October, a month in which many of us start to really think about magic (it is the host of the official Magic Week, after all) I thought we would delve into a book that is just as much about magic (*and* magick) as it is about spooky stuff. The book is *Life, Death & Other Card Tricks* by Dr. Robert E. Neale, who will also be featured in the November article (in case you are reading these in chronological order). Bob Neale is a magician, mentalist, origami expert, puzzler and expert topologist from Mount Clemens, Michigan. His areas of interest cover a broad and eclectic range subjects, including occult studies. Therein lies the association with this book.

Life, Death & Other Card Tricks was originally published by Hermetic Press (now defunct and previously owned by Stephen Minch) and released in 2000. It is a hardcover book with 441 pages covering 60 new (new in 2000) presentations, all using normal playing cards. The book has long been out of print after a successful single run. Copies appear on the market from time to time for well over \$150/USD, but occasionally they pop up for under \$100 and I do believe there is a PDF version now available for about \$10/USD.

The opinions on this book vary greatly and because of the content, it is not for every performer however, in my humble opinion, the presentations given to standard plots by the author in this book can teach you how to create your own unique versions for effects that you already do. Again, in my humble opinion, this is a fantastic book with some great ideas and used with the right audiences, the effects can be absolutely inspirational, disturbing, magical and memorable. Of course once you are familiar with the workings of the effects and the presentations, there is no reason that other types of cards cannot be used. For example, *The Five Gifts of Life* is a story about a man who was offered a choice of five gifts: Death, Riches, Fame, Love and Pleasure. He was told to choose wisely as only one of them is valuable. As the story progresses, he changes his mind five different times, experiencing the splendor of each gift, but also the losses associated with each of them. In the end, he learns the greatest lesson about the definition of the word, *valuable*. The handling in the book uses regular playing cards to represent each of the gifts, but you could use blank face playing cards and draw symbols on them to represent the five gifts. As a further example, Bob Neale mentions doing this effect without using any cards at all but rather, using five physical objects in place of them.

In another effect called *A Room for Death*, the story revolves around the old folk wisdom that if you are an inn or hotel with 6 rooms to let, you rent five of them only, leaving one for Death, should he show up at any time. It is said that Death prefers to room alone, and keeping a room for him will keep him away from the living in the other rooms. At one point in the story, Death makes an appearance, represented by the Ace of Spades (thought by many to be the "death

card"). You could, of course use other cards or a blank face card with a symbol or image of Death on it instead of the Ace.

Thirteen at Table is about the superstition/fear of the number 13, and it talks about the ancient belief that one should never dine at a table where there are only thirteen people seated – a number of prominent historic figures including Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused to dine at tables with only thirteen people present. The historic Hotel Savoy in London, England even maintains a statue of a black cat to serve as a fourteenth guest at a table, which they have done since the mid-1920s. The effect itself is a 6-Card Repeat type of effect using the number 13. Each time, two are discarded and yet, they reappear in the hand.

Survivor is a tale in which the magician and a spectator play the Hands of Fate, deciding who among the villagers stricken by the plague lives and who among them dies. This is a wonderful application of an old Al Baker force and it can even be used with other objects with a completely different presentation; for example, one could use a number of stickers with different baseball teams on them, eliminating all but one to see who will win the next big game (which just happens to match your prediction).

Another effect, *William Wilson* uses the short story of the same name from Edgar Allan Poe to talk about the importance of treating others with kindness. Other effects in the book use stacks to achieve the results, anywhere from a handful to a full suit. There is an interesting curiosity called *Card Dice*, which are precisely that – you are taught two different methods of folding a playing card into a 7/8-inch cube (which is the size of standard Backgammon dice), one requiring slits and the other being for purists, using no cutting and no adhesives. These can be used in many ways and even given away as a souvenir if you like. Yet another curiosity is *Death Does a Card Trick* where the deck is laid out into the image of a large skull. This is a playful story where Death (represented by the skull) finds a selected playing card. An interesting presentation for the Nick Trost Matched Picture Cards plot is given – pairs of red and black court cards are used to illustrate a tale of societal taboo. This can also play a little bit like an Oil & Water effect because not only are you matching the pairs by value, coincidentally, they also end up matching by color.

As you can see by the varied descriptions above, there is a lot of material in this book that can go in many different directions, but you can also tell that this is a book that will not suit everyone. Again, however, in my opinion, even if you do not like the content of the book, the essays and the ways that old plots are given a different sort of presentation can teach you various ways of thinking outside the box. This is an invaluable and desirable skill for any working magician, amateur or pro, to possess.

If you like storytelling effects and things that may unnerve and possibly even disturb your audience, all in the name of good fun (and hopefully, inspiring lessons to learn from), this book will fulfill your wildest dreams in that respect. 98% of the effects are quite easy to do and do not involve doing anything particularly advanced. The other 2% (maybe even less than 2%) require the ability to do a Faro Shuffle, so performers with even a nominal amount of skill can

get many different ideas from this book. It has become something of a modern classic, even with the camps divided about whether it is a great book or a horrible one. There are those that swear it is a horribly good thing and they will never sell their copy; the others say it is a horribly bad book and they will never sell their copy!

That is all for this, the most magical month of October. I hope all of you enjoy the season and get ready to delve head-first into the upcoming holiday season of 2016. Get out there, share your stories, share your ideas, spread the magic, read a good magic book and remember: Comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable! Happy Haunting!

-JMA