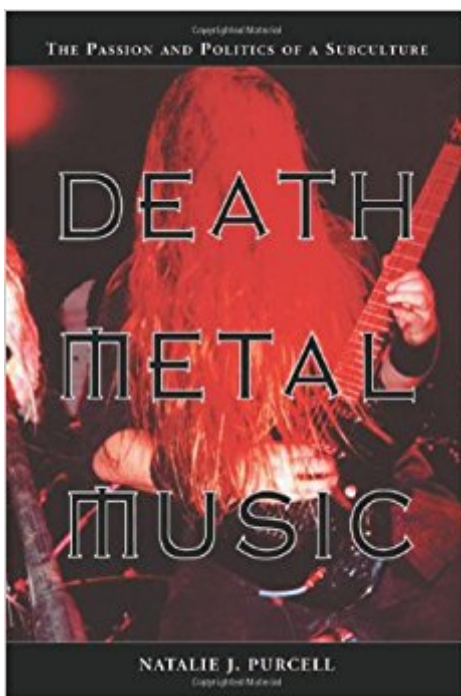


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# Death Metal Music: The Passion And Politics Of A Subculture



## Synopsis

Death Metal is among the most despised forms of violently themed entertainment. Many politicians, conservative groups and typical Americans attribute youth violence and the destruction of social values to such entertainment. The usual assumptions about the Death Metal scene and its fans have rarely been challenged. This book investigates the demographic trends, attitudes, philosophical beliefs, ethical systems, and behavioral patterns within the scene, seeking to situate death metal in the larger social order. The Death Metal community proves to be a useful microcosm for much of American subculture and lends insight into the psychological and social functions of many forbidden or illicit entertainment forms. The author's analysis, rich in interviews with rock stars, radio hosts, and average adolescent fans, provides a key to comprehending deviant tendencies in modern American culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[Purcell] is an intelligent, articulate and concerned fan, and she lets that come through. Some might argue that 'metalness' is a symptom of alienation. Purcell rightfully considers it a balm for it, a unique form of identification." --Pop Matters

Natalie J. Purcell is a professional in the nonprofit sector and a sociopolitical activist associated with the Amnesty International. She lives in San Francisco, California.

Academia has a saving grace, and that is that academics try to understand the nature of things instead of commenting on them as purely social phenomena. To most people, death metal is something wacky the kids were doing 20 years ago. They can describe its surface, like that it's loud, has lots of distortion, and has scary lyrics, but beyond that they know nothing. To them, it just happened. To academics, there's a reason why it happened.

Natalie Purcell's *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* looks at death metal through the different forces that might motivate it, including musical, social and political factors. Much of this book appears to have been written to defend death metal against the usual accusations that it causes antisocial behavior and/or might be a motivating factor in school shootings. Given how much media ink was wasted on blaming death metal and video games for school shootings in the early 2000s, this is entirely understandable. This book shows an above-average understanding of the genre, in part because Purcell was able to interview articulate and present members of the death metal scene. One thing about musicians: they know what they want their expression to sound like, but may not know how to put it into words. Thus she was very fortunate in the selection of musicians she found, including the legendary King Fowley of Deceased, to help make sense of this complex genre.

Regarding errors: I didn't find any more than in your average book on death metal. The lyrical interpretation of Death's "Altering the Future" (from *Spiritual Healing*) is difficult, especially since the song appears to endorse abortion whole-heartedly only as part of a program of eugenics. As many of us found in the 1990s, "Evil Chuck" changed his viewpoints a lot about the time that *Human* got big and he switched audiences from occult underground metal fans to more mainstream technical heavy metal fans, becoming "Urbane Chuck" who generally had nothing truly violent to express. The song "Altering the Future" mentions both abortion and unpunished criminals, advocating "Abortion, when it is needed / Execution, for those that deserve it" and ending with the following policy statement, "Life for a life should remain the rule / The innocent victim that is what's cruel / Look to the past is what we should do / When justice was done and justice was true." Myself and other Death fans spent a lot of time trying to explain away the far-right and pro-eugenics implications of this lyric, but it seems clear that during the "Evil Chuck" days, Schuldiner approved of dispatching those for whom "to exist in this world may be a mistake." However, the song is unclear in that the pre-chorus lines are "Death and life taken so easily / Right or wrong, whose choice will it be?" which seems to counter the strong advocacy in the rest of the lyrics, so it's understandable how someone who was accustomed to Urbane Chuck might find Evil Chuck's lyrics hard to understand, and opt instead for the more pleasant understanding. Purcell by virtue of when she entered the scene grew up with Urbane Chuck and probably finds Evil Chuck hard to understand, since the man who wrote the

lyrics for Human was a different fellow than the guy who penned this from Death's first album *Scream Bloody Gore* ("Mutilation"): "Staring your severed head in the face / I celebrate a [homosexual]'s death, human disgrace." Evil Chuck is just different from Urbane Chuck, who would probably find every abortion a tragedy but affirm a woman's ability to have the procedure. There is a lot about death metal that is ugly and terrifying because that is how the genre intends itself, but the fact remains that it is the one real artistic expression of the Generation X era that had legitimate outsider status and offered some criticism of society that was not already co-opted by existing political, social, religious or cultural institutions. Purcell's book digs deeply into this vital genre and comes up with some startling conclusions. I'd recommend it for anyone who has gotten past initial fascination with the surface of death metal, and wants to know why people chose to make this music instead of simply making a ton of profit churning out pop music. Death metal is not a protest genre, but it is a resistance to modern society and its illusions. Understanding that is crucial to understanding the genre, and Purcell provides a very useful guide for academic readers to get there.

'Death Metal Music: the Passion and Politics of a Subculture' is an excellent book to read while you've got some Nile, Rotten Sound or Incantation pounding & grinding in the background. It compliments the music and reminds you of what's unique and inspiring about the entire death metal genre. Natalie Purcell does a fine job of articulating what draws people to death metal music and why metal heads in general tend to be very open-minded and free-thinking individuals. Individuals are people who question the so-called "norms" of society and what they're being fed by those who are out to mass-market and profit from every trend that comes along. The profit-motive is why the more popular music genres always produce the most diluted, homogenized and quickly-forgotten music. Death Metal is one trend, or sub-trend, they can't quite get their hooks in, thus it remains raw and pure. And of course the very traits that make extreme metal unmarketable are also the traits that make it exciting and powerful and fearless. Music by free-thinking individuals for free-thinking individuals. I learn more about myself as I learn more about the music, and this book is a great compliment to that notion.

I came across this book when doing research on a metal related website (The Metal Archives) for grad school. I'm going to have to agree with some of the other reviewers here that this book leaves much to be desired. I wouldn't at all say the writing is too "dense" as some have complained (and even the author herself claimed). "Dry" would be a better adjective. It lacks an engaging narrative

writing style that would make it worth reading in it's own right. And it fails to connect with subcultural theory or cultural studies in a way that would make it worthwhile (at least to me) as a work of academic criticism. Perhaps people in the social sciences or sociology might find more of interest here? I gave it two stars instead of one, because the book can still be useful as an authority for some historical information, and because some survey results are interesting. It really is disappointing though, because there is definitely a lack of scholarly literature on the subject, and it would be nice to see someone actually to do the subculture justice. If you're looking to do academic research extreme metal subculture, the writings of Keith Kahn-Harris are probably a better place to start.

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