

# THE UNDERTAKING

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International

1 x 60 

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*“Every year I bury a couple hundred of my townspeople. Another two or three dozen I take to the crematory to be burned... I sell caskets, burial vaults, and urns for the ashes ... I am the only undertaker in this town.”* —THOMAS LYNCH

Thomas Lynch, 58, is a writer and a poet. He’s also a funeral director in a small town in central Michigan where he and his family have cared for the dead—and the living—for three generations. For the first time, Lynch agreed to allow cameras inside Lynch & Sons, giving FRONTLINE rare, behind-the-scenes access—from funeral arrangements to the embalming room—to the Lynches’ world in *The Undertaking*.

In his critically acclaimed book, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, excerpted in this film, Lynch chronicles a life spent in the presence of the dead. The Lynch family believes that the rituals of a funeral are more than mere formalities. “Funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters.

Often people come to Lynch & Sons long before a death. Anthony and Nevada Verrino, both in their early 30s, came to Thomas Lynch to talk about funeral plans for their only child, Anthony, who was born in 2004 with a rare genetic syndrome. Although baby Anthony, 24 months old, has defied expectations and come back from the brink of death several times, they know he won’t live long, and they speak with remarkable candor about his imminent death. “We still get the question, ‘Well, why isn’t he—why isn’t he eating?’” says Anthony, the baby’s father. “And my answer is, ‘Because he’s dying. You know, because he’s dying.’”

“When we’re planning ahead,” says the young mother, “it might even be in some ways a survival mechanism, because for us it gives us...steps and procedures of how to do something.” Yet the Verrinos also recognize that nothing they do will fully prepare them. “I’ve spent two years with a very sick baby...whose prognosis has never been bright,” Nevada tells FRONTLINE. “But when I sit and think about the day waking up when he’s gone, I can’t—I can’t prepare for that completely, you know.”

For Lynch and his family, their business has always been about more than just caring for the dead. “What I’ve written is that while the dead don’t care, the dead matter,” Lynch explains. “The dead matter to the living. In accompanying the dead, getting them where they need to go, we get where we need to be—to the edge of that oblivion and then returned to life with the certain knowledge that life has changed.”

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CREDITS

*Executive Producer for FRONTLINE:* David Fanning  
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A FRONTLINE co-production with Mead Street Films for WGBH/Boston

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