So, what do you do?
I am director of the Centre for Death and Society, one of the world’s only interdisciplinary research centres to study the links between death, dying and the dead body. My research focuses on the relationships between the dead body and technology, science and bioethics. My younger sister called me the Overlord of Death.

How did you end up working in this field?
I’m the son of a funeral director but that isn’t really why I do what I do. At university, I took a seminar on pre-second world war cinema and spectacle. I ended up studying late 19th-century human corpse displays (which happened quite a bit) and wondered if those bodies were embalmed. I asked my dad for his embalming textbooks and that’s when I discovered my PhD dissertation: how human technologies such as embalming, photography and even museum displays altered how the dead body appeared. I went to a conference on the subject and I knew then that I’d found my people: the Death, Dying and Dead Body People.

Can you tell us about your new book? 
Technologies of the Human Corpse is about how humans use tools and technologies to transform the dead body into something new, such as a consumer product or a museum display. I look at how the social stigma of AIDS transformed dead bodies into something terrifying, the politics of detainee deaths in Guantanamo Bay, those sorts of things.

The book is quite personal, too. Why is that?
It’s also part memoir. My younger sister Julie died on 29 July 2018 from brain cancer. She was 43. I reflect on watching her die throughout the book.

What are you working on right now?
I’m looking at all the government commissions that have studied death and dying. It’s amazing how many say that we are using technology to alter the human experience of mortality and increasingly expect the technology to always be present and available. I’ve also been reflecting on the commissions in the 1990s that looked at the AIDS pandemic. Their aim was to make sure public health systems wouldn’t fail people infected with a life-threatening virus in future. Here we are with coronavirus and all kinds of work has been done on large-scale public health support but so much of it seems forgotten or sadly shelved.

How has your field of study changed in the time you have been working in it?
Death studies as a field has more visibility now, but death has always been accessible as a subject of study. We humans keep dying; keep producing dead bodies. We keep discussing death.

If you could send a message back to yourself as a kid, what would you say?
Don’t worry about being fat (I was an overweight kid) – it will all work out in the end.

What’s the best thing you’ve read or seen in the past 12 months?
Radiolab’s podcast about Dolly Parton, Dolly Parton’s America, was phenomenal. Aniara, an existential Swedish sci-fi film, was also really good.

If you could have a conversation with any scientist, living or dead, who would it be?
The mathematician Norbert Wiener, about his work in cybernetics and what he’d think of today’s ultra-rapid computing machines.

Do you have an unexpected hobby, and if so, please will you tell us about it?
I’ve really got into weightlifting. I dropped it after my sister died but picked it back up this summer.

How useful will your skills be after the apocalypse?
I know how to handle all the dead bodies. Death wins. Death always wins.

OK, one last thing: tell us something that will blow our minds...
In grad school, I took Intro to Modern Dance and decided that I needed to start a company called Big and Tall Men Modern Dancing. I still plan on making this happen.

John Troyer is director of the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath, UK. Technologies of the Human Corpse is out in April (MIT Press)