

# - REQUIRED - READING

Can reading about others' grief help us process our own? In this issue, [RACHEL BEANLAND](#) reviews the many memoirs of loss she read after her father's death.

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**T**HE IDEA THAT READING might be beneficial to a troubled psyche is as old as books themselves. Older, even: as the Greek historian Diodorus described it, the entrance to the royal library of King Ramses II was marked by the inscription "The House of Healing for the Soul." D.H. Lawrence wrote to Bertrand Russell about his struggles in the dark and the cure he found in literature: "One sheds one's sicknesses in books." Today, bibliotherapy has become an accepted method of treatment for depressed and grief-stricken patients.

I see now that I nursed my own grief with books.

When my fifty-seven-year-old father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2009, the doctors told us his tumor had been caught early and that, with treatment, it was possible he would grow old yet.

But a recurring backache the following winter led to the discovery of small spots sprinkled like confetti across his liver. When pancreatic cancer metastasizes to the liver, the majority of patients are dead within the year.

Neither he nor I was particularly religious. On the way to a doctor's appointment, when things were getting bad, I asked him if he ever prayed, or wanted to.

"You know, it's been so long since I prayed. I'm not even sure I'd know how," he said. "And besides, it seems a little dishonest—finding religion after all these years—like taking out an insurance policy when you know you're about to kick the bucket."

I knew what he meant.

Still, in the months after he died, I came to envy people who, in the face of hardship, found peace reciting Hail Marys, the Kaddish, and other mantras. I wished for a string of words, no matter the origin, that might help me make sense of a world without my father in it.

It was literature—not liturgy—that had always brought me comfort, so I searched for my own peace prayer in books.

I began reading grief memoirs; in the year after Dad died, I must have read a dozen of them. I thought that if I could peek in the windows of the houses grief had built, I might understand how to live inside my own.

The way Gail Caldwell describes the loss of her friend, Caroline Knapp, in *Let's Take the Long Way Home* made me feel less alone. She writes, "For months, I kept wanting to call her, half assuming I could, to tell her what her dying had meant, what her death had done to my life." I often fought the same urge.

My bookshelves sagged under the weight of memoirists' losses. No one mourns in exactly the same way, but when my mother scanned my shelves or my sisters asked what I was reading, I felt acutely aware of how differently we approached our grief. All of us are readers, but I was the only one who had become consumed by the calamities

of people I didn't know. Late at night, as my tears dried on the pages of one memoir or another, I wondered if I was doing myself more harm than good. Were my reading habits helping me heal or impeding my ability to move on?

Yet, reading Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I felt validated. "In time of trouble," she writes, "I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature.

O'Rourke recalls reading *Hamlet* in the first nights after her mother's death, searching for clues. I saw my story in hers. We had each lost a parent who was not young but not old, which had left us rudderless as young adults. O'Rourke's book, and others like it, helped me acknowledge that what I was feeling was normal. That I needn't pretend everything was fine. I, too, was looking for clues. I wanted to know

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Information was control." What I was doing—reading grief—had come naturally for Didion as well.

Claire Bidwell Smith, who lost both her parents to cancer when she was a young adult, confirms the approach in *The Rules of Inheritance*:

*I read everything from scientific texts to memoirs about loss. I found myself drawn to movies about death and to information specific to my particular parental loss. . . .*

*I couldn't help wondering if what I felt was normal. And each time I came across someone else's story, each time I found reassurance that I wasn't alone in my grief process, I relaxed a little more.*

Mourning the loss of her mother, Meghan O'Rourke echoes the sentiment in *The Long Goodbye*:

*I had been sent On Grief and Grieving and On Death and Dying and the Bible and memoirs about deaths of parents. I read nearly all of them; I was hungry for death scenes.*

how to mourn and how to heal so that eventually, I'd know how to just *be* without my father.

It was as if I was on a long trek, these grief memoirs serving as map, their authors as guide. I imagined some omnipotent writer-God—part Cheryl Strayed, part Dani Shapiro—beckoning for me to follow. "Rachel," this voice of experience said, "keep going."

The memoirs I read fell into two distinct groups—those, like O'Rourke's, in which the tragedy was on par with my own and those in which the author's loss was inarguably worse.

The second category contained books like Ann Hood's small memoir, *Comfort*, about the loss of her five-year-old daughter, Grace. I read it in a single sitting and sobbed through the entire thing. With my two young children healthy and asleep upstairs, I felt grateful I'd lost only my father.

In *Comfort*, Hood recounts a story about a rabbi who recited the twenty-third Psalm to her husband and her, reminding them they had to walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, not around it or over it or beside it. Their grief cannot be evaded or ignored.

Hood acknowledges, “Time passes and I am still not through it. Grief isn’t something you get over. You live with it. You go on with it lodged in you. Sometimes I feel like I have swallowed a pile of stones. Grief makes me heavy. It makes me slow.”

I had been under the impression that eventually, when enough time had passed, my life might begin to feel as it once had. Reading these memoirs helped

hardcover, unable to wait for it to come out in paperback.

“Why do you want to read a book like that?” my husband asked of the small black book I held close to my face in bed. The book is about the 2004 tsunami that pulled Deraniyagala’s entire family—mother, father, husband, and two young sons—into the Indian Ocean. What he meant was “Isn’t the world already a sad enough place?”

“I just do,” I said, not sure how to explain. But I knew that if Deraniyagala could take a single step, a single breath of air after such a loss, and, a decade

we absorb them, and they carve us into different, often kinder, creatures.”

After Dad died, I read grief memoirs because I wanted to know how to live without him, and the writers who shepherded me through the valley of death taught me the only thing there is to know about loss.

Of loss, Romm promises in her memoir, “If this book does land in the hands of those in the midst of a tragedy, I can tell you this: It will never leave you.”

Recently, I read a review of Marie Mutsuki Mockett’s *Where the Dead Pause and the Japanese Say Goodbye* in the *New York Times*. Mockett’s language was described as uncertain, the book aimless, but it hardly mattered to me. Mockett’s book is, in part, a story about coming to terms with her father’s death, and I needed to read only, “The book’s central subject, deferred and evaded for much of its length, is the stubborn anguish of personal grief.” I bought it with one click, and it arrived two days later, solace wrapped up in a familiar brown cardboard book mailer.

Mockett’s memoir landed on my doorstep on a busy evening. My children were clamoring for dinner, there was homework that needed to be checked, the dog was yipping to be let out. I put the book down on the kitchen counter and promised myself I’d pick it up later, when the house was quiet. But most nights that week, I fell asleep with a novel across my chest instead.

I may never read Mockett’s book. I’ve been reading more fiction lately—books that transport me to places I haven’t been, experiences I haven’t had. Still, I remain grateful to those who have written openly and in detail about their grief. In the absence of religion, it was memoir that gave me faith—not that I could survive the loss of my father, but that I could learn to live alongside it. ■

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me understand I had lost not only my father but also the person I was when my father was alive. Things were never going to go back to normal.

Robin Romm confirms this permanent loss of normalcy. In her memoir, *The Mercy Papers*, she writes, “Days go by now where I don’t wake up to an image of my mother screaming, where I simply go to the grocery store, cut onions, and sing along to whatever CD has been sitting in the stereo. Then, a few days later, I will realize time has passed without her, and it feels wild.” She continues, “I am reluctant to call this healing. I’m not sure I believe in healing. I believe that we live a million lives in our one life and that they bleed together, marble and muddy and melt.”

When Sonali Deraniyagala’s memoir *Wave* was released in 2013, I bought it in

later, write down the details of the life she’d built without her family, then I could adjust to life without my dad.

*Blue Nights*, *The End of Your Life Book Club*, *Her*, *Slow Motion*, *Truth and Beauty*, and *Unremarried Widow* are some of the other grief memoirs that found their way to my bedside table in the five years after Dad’s death.

Literary critics decry the explosion of memoir, the constant documentation of the tragedies that too commonly befall the people we love. The car crash, the drug overdose, the cancer diagnosis. When will it end? I know what they mean, these critics. Except. Except. Except.

Except that it was only memoir that could get me out of bed on a cold night. I’d tiptoe barefoot down the hall so I could find a pen to star passages like this one, by Caldwell: “I know now that we never get over great losses;