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April 2016

Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement

The first pages of a book by
Jeffrey Berman



The death of a spouse, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe report, is the most life-changing event that one is likely to experience. A life-changing event may not necessarily be the most devastating event: there is no hierarchy or calculus of loss, and the death of a child or parent may awaken in some people the most intense grief.

Nevertheless, most researchers believe that the death of a spouse—the person with whom one has lived for a lifetime and whom one knows (and is known by) better than anyone else—is the most life-altering event. No matter how independent one is, living with a beloved spouse for many decades is like living with the better part of one's self. Life without that other becomes unimaginable. When the unimaginable occurs, one may not wish to remain alive—that's why widowhood is so harrowing and destabilizing.

Robert C. DiGiulio, a professor of education whose wife, oldest daughter, and in-laws were killed in a car accident, agrees with Holmes and Rahe, adding that spousal loss is "more stressful than serious personal illness, separation, or divorce; being sentenced to prison; or living through the death of a parent or child" (57). The shock of widowhood is greater when the loss is sudden and unexpected. People are now living longer than decades ago, but the shock of widowhood remains.

There is no shortage of self-help books to assist widows and widowers with their grief. These books often serve a valuable if limited role—limited in that

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Auntie Lovely Says Goodbye

A short story by
Michael Janairo



Auntie Lovely turned around in the passenger seat. She aimed her large, brown-tinted sunglasses at me, her serious face adorned by a floral patterned scarf worn over her head and tied around her neck. She radiated old-Hollywood style. Especially compared to her driver, Bong Bong, a young man about my age who sported a red baseball cap with a curved visor low over his eyes as he rolled her Toyota Camry down the driveway, through the gate and onto the road.

A serious frown cut through Auntie Lovely's heavy jowls, giving her a sad-froggy face that recalled the grainy black-and-white portraits in her living room of her father (my lola's older brother) and her lolo (my great-grandfather), two serious-looking men frozen with amphibian frowns that, unfortunately, I had also seen in my own father (who was Auntie Lovely's first cousin) when he was locked in deep concentration, and which, at that very moment, I knew would one day be my own.

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Jeffrey Berman: A Bare-Bones Biography

1945 Born in New York City

August 11, 1968 Marriage to Barbara Kozinn

Labor Day, 1968 Suicide of mentor and closest friend, Len Port

1971 Ph. D. Cornell

1971-1973 Lecturer in English, Cornell

April 12, 1973 Birth of Arielle

September 1973 Began teaching at SUNY Albany

December 31, 1974 Birth of Jillian

April 5, 2004 Barbara's death from pancreatic cancer at age 57

2007 Appointed Distinguished Teaching Professor

June 10, 2011 Marriage to Julie

2012 Selected by *Princeton Review* as one of America's Top Professors

2014 Selected for Honorary Membership, American Psychoanalytic Association

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I have been so fortunate in my life, deeply fulfilled in love and work. Teaching and writing have been two of my great passions, and I have combined these passions by writing about my teaching. I have written several books about teaching, and they demonstrate how much I have learned from my students.

Life is a tragedy filled with joy, and in retrospect, I can see that much of my teaching and writing has been an effort to come to terms with the two tragedies in my life. My college teacher and mentor, Len Port, in whose class I met Barbara, committed suicide two weeks after our wedding in August 1968. His suicide has led me on a lifelong search to understand the causes and consequences of this bedeviling act, which leaves such a dark legacy—or illegacy—to relatives and friends.

My efforts to understand suicide led me to psychoanalysis, which, despite all of its imperfections, remains the best explanatory system for why people take their own lives. Barbara's death in 2004 compelled me to become a student of love and loss, bereavement, and death education, subjects which I regularly teach. I don't find these subjects morbid or depressing, nor do the students who take my courses. I remarried in June 2011, and I am so grateful to be in love again, married to a woman who adores and is adored by my two daughters and six grandchildren.

Books by Jeffrey Berman



Joseph Conrad: Writing as Rescue, Twayne, 1977. A study of the thematic importance of suicide in Conrad's writings and the ways in which he used fiction to come to terms with his own suicide attempt as a young man.

The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis, N.Y.U. Press, 1985. The first major study of the characterization of the psychoanalyst in literature and the ways in which literary writers explore in fictional or nonfictional form their own psychotherapy.



Narcissism and the Novel, N.Y.U. Press, 1990. A study of how a psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism theory illuminates several canonical nineteenth and twentieth-century British novels ranging from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.



Diaries to an English Professor: Pain and Growth in the Classroom, U. Mass Press, 1994. A study of how undergraduate students in a literature and psychoanalysis course write about their lives, and what they learn from hearing their classmates' diaries read aloud anonymously.



Surviving Literary Suicide, U. Mass. Press, 1999. A study of the portrayal of suicide in the works of four authors who later took their own lives—Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton—and two writers who wrote about suicide but did not take their own lives—Kate Chopin and William Styron. The book also examines the effects of reading “suicidal literature”—novels and poems that depict and sometimes glorify the act of suicide.



Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom, U. Mass. Press, 2001. A study of the ways in which teachers can encourage college students to write safely on a wide range of subjects often deemed too personal or too dangerous for the classroom: dealing with the loss of a beloved relative or friend, falling into depression, coping with the breakup of one's family, confronting sexual abuse, depicting a drug or alcohol problem, and encountering racial prejudice.



Empathic Teaching: Education for Life, U. Mass. Press, 2004. A study of how teaching based on understanding of the other can transform the experience of learning.



Cutting and the Pedagogy of Self-Disclosure (with Patricia Hatch Wallace), U. Mass. Press, 2007. A study of how college students write about their experience with cutting, a form of self-mutilation that is a growing problem throughout the United States.



Dying to Teach: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Learning, SUNY Press, 2007. A study of how our lives changed after Barbara found out that she had terminal cancer, including how she wrote about her illness in a cancer diary, how I cared for her throughout her illness, how my students reacted to her dying, and how I responded to her death.



Death in the Classroom: Writing About Love and Loss, SUNY Press, 2009. A study of how students confronted the literature of bereavement.

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Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C.S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion, and Calvin Trillin, U. Mass. Press, 2010. A study of spousal bereavement, the importance of caregiving, the role of writing in recovery, and the possibility of falling in love again after a devastating loss.



Dying in Character: Memoirs on the End of Life, U. Mass. Press, 2012. A study of end-of-life memoirs in which writers not only confront their own mortality but also attempt to “die in character,” affirming the values, beliefs and goals that have characterized their lives.



Death Education in the Writing Classroom, Baywood Publisher, 2012. A study of how a self-disclosing writing course is an opportunity for students to share their experiences about dying and death and increase their understanding of a subject that is seldom discussed in the classroom.



Confidentiality and Its Discontents: Dilemmas of Privacy in Psychotherapy (with Paul W. Mosher), Psychoanalytic Interventions, 2015. A study of the human stories arising from the loss of confidentiality in psychotherapy and the ways in which psychiatry and the law complement and sometimes clash with each other.

PAUL MOSHER



is a psychoanalyst who has lived and practiced in Albany for the past forty years. Jeffrey Berman and Paul Mosher have worked closely together on several projects in the past five years. Mosher is a graduate of Harvard College, Columbia Medical School, and the Columbia Psychoanalytic Institute. In the 1990s, he was chair of the Committee on Confidentiality of the American Psychoanalytic Association. He is the author of many articles.

Speaking about his collaborative relationship with Jeffrey Berman, here is what he has to say: “Our collaborative relationship is based on a kind of complementarity in which my lack of experience as a writer and Jeff’s position outside the clinical application of psychiatric and psychoanalytic practice dovetail nicely with my many years of professional experience and Jeff’s long experience and talent as a writer (not to mention his non-clinical psychoanalytic training.) In addition, Jeff seems to be fascinated by the same kinds of historical oddities that I appreciate, and both of us tend to focus on stories of the individual people involved in those odd stories more than the technicalities and legal hair splitting that can make such stories terribly boring. In our first book, on confidentiality in psychotherapy, each of us brought to the table specific experiences in that arena. For me it was my close involvement in the Jaffee v. Redmond Supreme Court case, and peripheral involvement in the Bierenbaum murder case. For Jeff, it was his actual involvement in the scandalous misstep taken by Philip Roth’s analyst in publishing material from Roth’s analysis without permission, and then being found out -- by Jeff!”

Paul Mosher is also the originator and an uncompensated founding board member of *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing* (“PEP”), a non-profit corporation co-owned by *The American Psychoanalytic Association* in the U.S. and *The Institute for Psychoanalysis* in London.

Here is how he describes his project: “You can see our web page here: <http://www.pep-web.org/> You can also read about PEP here: <http://support.pep-web.org/about-pep/> and about the people involved in PEP, including me, here: <http://support.pep-web.org/about-pep/people/> .

We provide access to the full text of 68 psychoanalytic journals since their inception (except, for many, the most recent 3 years), in multiple languages, and including almost all of the psychoanalytic literature in English. We also include full text electronic version of numerous foundational psychoanalytic books, including the Complete Standard Edition of Freud, Freud’s correspondence, etc. We also provide a home for videos relating to psychoanalysis.

PEP is a Not-for-Profit 501C-3 Public Charity Registered in the State of Delaware. Its mission is to further psychoanalytic scholarship, research and outreach through the promotion of its literature. Our database is unique in that it is providing almost the entire literature in a single field. We add a great deal of value to the actual texts by including a very high end search engine, linking within articles to other articles as they are cited, extensive glossaries of technical terms, etc.

We have a subscriber base of around 16,000 individuals and subscribers who subscribe through their professional groups, as well as about 100 major research universities around the world, including all the Ivies. By the way, SUNYA has not subscribed so far.”Our contracts with the journals and book publishers are on a non-exclusive basis. In the case of most journals, we exclude the most recent 3 years in order not to harm the journals current circulation. Some of those journals have their articles on line on the publisher’s web site as well. However, it is my impression that, when possible, people prefer to use our site because of the integrated nature of our data.

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"I must warn you about the airport," Auntie Lovely said, with gently rolling Rs undermining the sternness in her voice. "It is not like the States. People jumping, shouting. Vehicles parked any which way. Two truckloads just to say goodbye to one person. Typical Third World." She let out a weak, embarrassed laugh, and then re-adjusted the bulk of her body to face the street, still frowning. Bong Bong drove past the armed guards in the gatehouse of her subdivision and into the bustle of Manila.

The morning streets were filled with jockeying jeepneys and revving motorbikes careening from one narrow opening to the next. Exhaust fumes and street dust billowed up to the second and third stories of buildings. Figures bent before shuttered storefronts to unlock and lift metal gates. Others in loose clothes hurried down dark streets. One slow-moving jeepney with peeling white paint caked in dust, the number "42" just below its roof, was so crowded that some people stood on a rear bumper, grasping metal poles for a ride.

Auntie Lovely tapped the window with a manicured fingernail and said, "See? Where else but the Philippines?"

I thought of the crowded buses I had seen in India and Indonesia, but said, "People do what they have to do."

She tsk-tsked, sounding both dismissive and embarrassed. She didn't say anything more. The Toyota's air conditioner hummed. We passed the jeepney, and it pulled into traffic behind us, passengers seated beside open windows covered their mouths with handkerchiefs. Bong Bong remained unspeaking as he drove.

A creeping heat of embarrassment washed over me, telling me I had said something not just trite, but stupid and wrong. I often felt that way among my relatives, including my lola and lolo. Especially my lolo, or grandfather. Growing up, I was subject to his examining eyes, as he looked at my red hair and freckles, which I shared with my Irish-American mother

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as if he didn't quite understand how I — who didn't look Filipino at all — could be his grandchild, an outcome of his and his wife's decision to emigrate to America.

Auntie Lovely must've felt something similar. At least that what I thought each time she looked at me with her frog-like frown, as unsure how to size me up, or what to do with me. What she did do, for the most part, was let Bong Bong drive me around Manila, leaving me, who lacked Tagalog, with a man who lacked English and acted so self-contained that he exuded an impenetrable seriousness that left us sharing long silences between the city's tourist sites.

I did spend time with Auntie Lovely during leisurely breakfasts in her dining room. The décor — fine-lace tablecloth, high-backed Narra-wood chairs, and wood-cut bas relief Last Supper on the wall — was exactly the same at my lolo and lola's house back in the States, making it at once strange and familiar. At the first breakfast, I praised the sweet and succulent mango and papaya cut and served by Auntie Lovely's uniformed cook, Rose. Auntie Lovely replied with a touch of pride in her voice, "Of course! This is top quality!" Then, with her next words, the pride faded to something less positive. She said, "In the Philippines, we call it 'Export Quality' — the best things in the Philippines, we export."

Now, in the car, she clicked her fingernail on the window again. She pointed to a motorized tricycle that carried bunches of what looked like green bananas tied to long, wooden poles. "Look!" she said. "Those are not bananas. Those are plantains. They must be boiled or fried. It is the only way to eat them."

As we passed, I saw the trike driver's determined, pressed-together lips beneath mirrored-lens sunglasses, trying to ignore all the cars and motorbikes speeding past him.

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Soon after, Auntie Lovely said: "Look at that!"

This time, she pointed to an ox-drawn cart stacked so high with baskets — at least three-stories tall — that the driver and oxen seemed to be transporting an intricate, wood-carved home in slow motion.

"We call that a walking basket shop!" Auntie Lovely said, her excitement making her sound girlish and hinting at the liveliness she must've exuded in her teens and twenties, some sixty years before. That made me think it would've been fun to have toured Manila with her, to have known more about what her life had been like when she was a girl in Manila.

The only story from her youth that she had shared with me centered around her husband. I met him the day I arrived at his and Auntie Lovely's home, dropped off by my lolo's youngest brother, Uncle Peping, after having visited other relatives in other parts of the Philippines. Auntie Lovely's husband wore his thick black hair slicked back, and his shirts and slacks well-pressed on his thin frame. He looked dapper and precise, but frail, especially next to her well-fed girth. She hugged me; he shook my hand, and then excused himself. I didn't see him again during my three-day stay — he was usually resting — until right before I left, when he came out of his room to shake my hand again.

Auntie Lovely's story, told over another breakfast, was about meeting him. When she was twenty, she attended a fancy dress ball every single night during the holiday break between Christmas and New Year's, when the weather was the coolest and driest, and the whole county seemed to be in a celebratory mood. Each night, she met and danced with countless young men, some serious suitors and some not serious at all. It wasn't until the final ball of that season, on New Year's Eve, that she encountered the most worldly and dashing man, trim in a tuxedo and fluid on the ballroom floor. Then she said, "I was so taken with him, because he was older — ten years my senior — but now he's just old."

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I thought it funny — a bitter punch line — but the weary resignation in her voice stopped me from laughing. Now, after hearing youthful excitement in her voice, I wondered if I should've laughed. Maybe that would've signaled to her I was simpatico, even though I came from the States, was so much younger, and had never had driver or a cook, and had never been invited to a formal ball.

Auntie Lovely said, "Here is the airport."

Bong Bong maneuvered onto the airport road. Cars, trucks, motorcycles, and vans parked and double-parked and triple-parked in a jumble along the curb leading to the terminal, just as Auntie Lovely had said. On a sun-drenched sidewalk, scores of people in various groups hugged and snapped pictures as they said farewell.

Auntie Lovely gave out a heavy sigh and said, "Well," disappointed at being right.

Bong Bong slid the Toyota into a free spot along the curb. He hopped out and hurried to the other side to open Auntie Lovely's door. I grabbed my backpack from beside me and stepped into clouds of exhaust and blazing morning heat. I strapped my pack to my back and stepped closer to Auntie Lovely to say goodbye. Even with her sunglasses on, she was squinting. But not at me; past me.

I turned around. People approached from two cars, doors still open. My Uncle Peping led the way, arm in arm with his wife, Auntie Concepcion, followed by their son, Arcadio, and his wife, Isabel, and their young children Miles and Sophie, as well as another one of my lolo's brothers, Uncle Sonny and his wife, Auntie Bebe, and their daughter-in-law Maricar and her young daughter, Pauline, who was shouting, "Tio! Tio!" and running past everyone to give me a hug goodbye. Soon, I was surrounded by smiling faces and hugs and kisses and "Safe travels" from relatives I had just met during my first visit to the Philippines. The force of all their well-wishes mixed with the weight of my backpack had me teetering off balance.

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"Safe travels" from relatives I had just met during my first visit to the Philippines. The force of all their well-wishes mixed with the weight of my backpack had me teetering off balance.

Bong Bong grabbed my arm to keep me from falling. I said, "Salamat!" and saw my Auntie Lovely supporting herself on Bong Bong's other arm.

She released his arm and stepped toward me. My other relatives moved aside. She strode with lifted head, so poised —regal even — that others turned to look at her.

She said in a voice that only I could hear: "A perfect Philippine send-off; you'll always remember us." She wrapped me in one final hug, the last to say goodbye.

Michael Janairo is a former newspaper columnist and arts editor who now works as the Assistant Director for Engagement at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College.

He has a short story forthcoming in *Lontar: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, and his writing has been published in various journals and anthologies, including *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*, *Star*Line Magazine*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Kartika Review*, *Maganda Magazine*, *Walang Hiya: Literature Taking Risks Toward Liberatory Practice*, and the *Abiko Quarterly*.

He lives in upstate New York with his wife, son and dog. His family name is pronounced "ha NIGH row." He blogs at michaeljanairo.com.

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they sometimes dispense formulaic advice that fails to capture the complexity of grief and the difficulty if not impossibility of recovery. In their desire to be helpful, therapists sometimes speak about the resolution of grief, or “closure,” to which some readers may find themselves resistant. Laura A. Tanner observes, for example, that in the years following her father’s death she turned to “theories of mourning” but came away feeling “unsatisfied” (84). As Amy Katerini Prodromou observes about what she calls “memoirs of textured recovery,” “grief is not an event that we must ‘get over’ quickly, though neither must it last forever” (personal communication, August 19, 2014).

To understand the reality of bereavement and the authenticity of lived experience, one may turn to widowhood memoirs written by many of the finest writers of our age. These stories dramatize love and loss in ways that compel the reader’s sympathy and identification. Widowhood memoirs, a term synonymous with spousal loss memoirs, appeal to a large audience, particularly to an ever-widening community of mourners. These stories demonstrate that bereavement is largely a function of the personality of the bereaved and the specific nature of the relationship lost. Unless an elderly couple dies at the same time, as Ovid describes in his touching story of Baucis and Philemon, two devoted lovers who are granted their wish by the gods to die simultaneously and are transformed into trees entwined in each other’s branches, one partner will almost always predecease the other—and usually it is the widow.

Spousal deaths vary greatly, ranging from the sudden and unexpected, on the one hand, to the expected and protracted, on the other hand. But even the agonizingly slow death of a spouse is a shock, resulting in a startling shift from presence to absence of the beloved. As Virginia Blum remarked when reading an early draft of this manuscript, “the marriage plot novel might end in marriage, but long marriages end in death, one before the other. Someone is always left behind to grieve.” Widowhood memoirs avoid sugarcoating the truth but hold out the possibility of hope, not that one’s deceased spouse will magically return to life, but that life will sooner or later become meaningful again.

The Shock of Widowhood

Nowhere is the shock of sudden widowhood more apparent than in Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow’s Story*, published in 2011, which chronicles the death of her husband, Raymond Smith, on February 18, 2008, at age seventy-seven. Smith appeared to be recovering from pneumonia at the Princeton Medical Center when he developed a virulent secondary infection in his “good” lung that did not respond to medication and quickly became deadly. *A Widow’s Story* describes Oates’s forty-eight-year marriage and her panic, confusion, and despair following his death. The real shock for the reader of *A Widow’s Story* arises not from sudden spousal loss but from Oates’s almost unrecognizable self-portrait: that of a distraught, masochistic woman who cannot stop torturing herself over her husband’s death, though in no way does she deserve blame or criticism. One can certainly imagine a widow so grief stricken that she seems out of control, scarcely able to get out of bed, and yearning to die, but the image of Oates as self-blaming, self-lacerating, and self-loathing is so different from

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the one she has cultivated in her many scholarly books and articles, where she always seems composed and detached, that readers suddenly wonder whether they have been transported into one of her trademark Gothic horror stories.

Sandra M. Gilbert is an eminent feminist literary critic and poet, not a memoirist, but when her husband and fellow literary critic, Elliot Gilbert, died suddenly at the age of sixty following routine prostate surgery on February 11, 1991, she wrote a gripping memoir, *Wrongful Death* (1995), which honors his memory. Like Oates, Gilbert writes about widowhood decades before losing her husband, almost as if she is rehearsing death. Like Oates, she associates sudden widowhood with shock and horror, though she does not believe, as Oates does, that the widow “deserves” punishment. Nor does she believe, as Oates does, that the dead are betrayed by the living. Unlike Oates, Gilbert consults several “grief books” for help and finds much wisdom in reading them. Gilbert cannot “right the wrong” of her husband’s death, but she is an author who, in her need to bear witness to traumatic loss, is compelled to “write wrong” in her widowhood memoir and in her later books. Gilbert is one of the few authors of a widowhood narrative who writes extensively about being in love again, and for this reason alone her books on bereavement are significant.

Widowhood also compelled the distinguished novelist Gail Godwin to write the largely autobiographical *Evenings at Five* (2004), which memorializes her lifelong companion, the composer Robert Starer, who died on April 22, 2001, at the age of seventy-seven. Godwin’s two-volume journal, *The Making of a Writer*, casts light on her early life, including the suicides of her father and half-brother. She explores in her journal her struggle with depression, part of her paternal legacy; her two failed marriages; and her search for fulfillment in love and work. We also see her passion for writing and her development as a novelist. The two characters in *Evenings at Five*, Christina and Rudy, are based closely on Godwin and Starer. Godwin reveals little about Starer’s life before she met him, but we learn a great deal about his personal and professional lives in his two books: his memoir, *Continuo: A Life in Music*, and his only novel, *The Music Teacher*. Reading these books deepens our understanding and appreciation of *Evenings at Five*. A widowhood memoir as well as a “ghost story,” *Evenings at Five* portrays Rudy as a powerful presence in Godwin’s life; paradoxically, in some ways she is more attuned to him in death than in life.

Life can change in an instant. The sentence comes from Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), her iconic memoir about the sudden death of her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, to whom she had been married for nearly forty years. In *Companionship in Grief*, I discuss Didion’s reaction to her husband’s death, which represented, consistent with clinical theory, the most transformative event in her life up until that time. Dunne died on December 30, 2003, at the age of seventy one, but the death of their thirty-nine-year-old daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne Michael, on August 26, 2005, from acute pancreatitis may have been more cataclysmic for Didion. After completing *The Year of Magical Living*, Didion was confronted with an almost unimaginable challenge: writing about the loss of her only child. The result is a poignant companion memoir, *Blue Nights*, published in 2011. Didion has a catastrophic imagination, imagining in her novels the worst coming true, but in her case the worst did come true.

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A mother's loss of her daughter has been one of Didion's lifelong fears, appearing in her earliest novels, *Play It as It Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer*. These novels eerily foreshadow *Blue Nights*. Few readers will fail to be moved by *Blue Nights*, but the memoir raises troubling ethical questions about Didion's decision to reveal her daughter's psychiatric diagnosis as "borderline personality disorder." There are no ethical problems for a writer to reveal her own psychiatric profile, as Didion did at the beginning of her writing career in *The White Album*, but it's ethically questionable for a writer to reveal the psychiatric diagnosis of another person who would be deeply embarrassed over this self-disclosure if she were still alive. *Blue Nights* is unsettling for many reasons, and though it focuses mainly on a mother's grief over her deceased child, it reads like an end-of-life memoir, with the author waiting stoically for the end.

Unlike Oates, Gilbert, Didion, and Godwin, Kay Redfield Jamison is not a literary writer or English professor but a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University. She is also a pioneering researcher on the relationship between mood disorders and creativity. Jamison's memoir *Nothing Was the Same* (2009) honors the memory of her husband, Richard Wyatt, a physician who made important contributions to our understanding of schizophrenia. *Nothing Was the Same* is the only widowhood memoir in which we see protracted death. It's also the only memoir to portray grief as generative and transformative. Richard Wyatt developed life-threatening Hodgkin's disease in 1973, when he was thirty-three, and he was treated with chemotherapy and radiation therapy, both of which cured the cancer. But the aggressive therapy was responsible for creating two later cancers, Burkitt's lymphoma, which he developed when he was sixty, and lung cancer, to which he succumbed in 2002 at age sixty-three. Throughout *Nothing Was the Same*, Jamison expresses gratitude for her nearly twenty-year relationship with Wyatt. Her memoir emphasizes the importance of positive emotions, including gratitude; she shows how caring for a loved one is a gift that makes possible recovery after loss.

Joyce Carol Oates

A Widow's Story

Joyce Carol Oates is the most prolific major American author of the last half-century and among the least autobiographical novelists, but the appearance of two books within four years, her *Journal* and *A Widow's Story*, gives us unprecedented insight into her life. These two texts are in many ways bookends. The publication of *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates: 1973–1982* in 2007, when she was sixty-nine, reveals a young woman deeply in love with her husband and even more deeply in love with writing, her life's greatest passion. There are, to be sure, a few entries in the 509-page journal where she allows herself momentarily to imagine what life would be like without her beloved husband, but she cannot bring herself to consider this possibility. And why should she? Little on the horizon in the 1970s and 1980s seemed ominous. But when disaster struck, Oates responded in the way she knew best: by writing about it.

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A Widow's Story is longer, more detailed, and more emotionally charged than any other memoir written by a widow or widower. It's also darker in tone, mood, and characterization than any other spousal loss memoir, presenting us with a stunning taxonomy of grief. The memoir offers us a radically different view of Oates: a portrait of a woman deranged by grief and fixated on suicide. The story abounds in surprises, contradictions, ironies, and paradoxes that have captivated the public's attention in a way that is unprecedented in Oates's career. *A Widow's Story* is not a traditional memoir; only after its publication did she admit in several interviews that she based it on her journal. The journalistic form of *A Widow's Story* makes possible the use of the historical present, giving the story a dramatic intensity and spontaneity that might otherwise be impossible.

Oates's *Journal* and *A Widow's Story* offer us a unique opportunity to see the continuities and discontinuities between a major writer's early life and her "posthumous" life. Few authors have claimed a more radical split between their private and public lives than Oates. And few writers have created such an aura of invisibility in their private life while at the same time commanding so strong a public identity. This split, apparent in her early journal entries, has become more pronounced over the years. Oates asserts repeatedly that as a novelist she has no fixed identity; instead, she takes on the lives of her fictional characters. She thus regards herself, more seriously than not, as a multiple personality, a writer whose ability to imagine a myriad of male and female speakers creates a vast cast of characters. Yet despite the fact that she is a master of impersonation and compartmentalization, Oates is the same person who wrote *Journal* and *A Widow's Story*, books that have more in common than may first appear evident. Of the many intriguing characters Oates has imagined in scores of novels, none is more fascinating than the one she creates in *A Widow's Story*. Oates's self-portrait as a widow becomes even more complex when we compare it with the writer who emerges from the pages of the *Journal*.

Oates's *Journal* covers the years when she had already achieved early fame from her 1969 novel *Them*, which won the National Book Award. The *Journal* is only a small fraction of the more than 4,000 single-spaced pages (as of 2007, and growing every day) housed in the Joyce Carol Oates Archive at Syracuse University, where she did her undergraduate work. Presumably, other volumes of her *Journal* will appear, constituting one of the most comprehensive records of any major writer.

The Motives Behind Journal Writing

In the introduction, Oates points out the ironies and paradoxes of undertaking such a project. One of the reasons she keeps a journal is to preserve the past, though she rarely rereads her entries because it's "excruciating" to revisit the past. "I haven't the words to guess why" (xii), she confesses, a startling statement from someone who is seldom defeated by language. She then wonders, parenthetically—many of her most important statements are expressed in parentheses—whether the "uncensored" journal may reveal too much about herself or, alternatively, reveal a self "with which I can't

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any longer identify or, perversely, identify too strongly" (xiii). She makes no effort to conceal the risks of personal writing or her ambivalence about self-disclosure.

Oates offers other explanations for keeping a journal. "Is the keeping of a journal primarily a means of providing solace to the self, through a 'speaking' voice that is one's own voice subtly transformed? A way of dispelling loneliness, a way of comfort?" (xiii). She concludes that homesickness, which involves both "mourning and memorialization," is a powerful motive behind much literature. She recognizes a major paradox: "the more we are hurt, the more we are likely to take refuge in the imagination, and in creating a 'text' that has assimilated this hurt; perversely, if we choose to publish this text, the more likely we are to invite more hurt in the way of critical or public opprobrium" (xiii). She admits that writing a journal is the "very antithesis of writing for others." She doesn't entirely reject the idea, advanced by a "skeptic," that the writer of a journal is creating a "journal-self, like a fictitious character," but she insists that it would be impossible to maintain such a pose for several years. Like "our fingerprints and voice 'prints,' our journal-selves are distinctly our own" (xiv). The implication is that Oates's *Journal* represents her inner self, the self with which she most strongly identifies, at least during the time when she wrote a particular entry. Her views, values, and perceptions are remarkably consistent throughout the ten-year period covered by her journal, suggesting the stability of her character and identity. Her decision to use her journal entries as the basis for *A Widow's Story* highlights her desire to represent her inner, core self.

Throughout her journal, Oates is relentlessly self-analytical, questioning everything, including the process of self-interrogation. She makes a statement, then immediately qualifies it, exploring the ambiguities of both statement and counter statement. She never mentions John Keats, but she would wholeheartedly concur with his belief in negative capability: "That is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (261). Committed to both her inner and outer lives, she nevertheless realizes that the private nature of journal writing encourages a subjectivity that may fail to capture the writer's intense involvement with the world.

Oates admits, without defensiveness, that journal writing encourages narcissism. All people, she asserts on May 13, 1977, are narcissists, including the journal writer. "But the journal-keeper, unlike other people, confronts his or her narcissism daily. And—it's to be hoped—conquers it by way of laughing at it" (194). Keeping a journal is not always pleasurable, but Oates's sense of order, obligation, and curiosity compels her to keep writing regularly even when she is tempted to skip an entry. Greg Johnson's observation in his biography *Invisible Writer* has proven uncannily prescient: "One key to Joyce's intense productivity had always been her ability to continue writing even in times of exhaustion, illness, or depression" (291). It would be hard to imagine a more prophetic statement in light of *A Widow's Story*.

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Reading Oates's *Journal*, one is struck by the intelligence, fairness, and compassion of her judgments and perceptions. Her journal sometimes has a gnomic quality, as when she writes on February 28, 1980: "I oscillate between thinking I am crazy and thinking I am not crazy enough" (358). Nearly always a reliable narrator, she is less reliable when she refers repeatedly, without irony, to her "idleness," "laziness," and "unworthiness." She claims she is "inclined toward laziness" (99), "haunted by a sense of laziness or unworthiness" (171), struggling against a "profound feeling of unworthiness" (194), and "astounded" at her "laziness" (362). She contends her "true self is staggeringly indolent . . . for which I sometimes feel genuine shame, & sometimes amusement, bemusement" (454). Readers will shake their heads in disbelief, for only in terms of godlike perfection are these merciless self-accusations true. In *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*, she admits to her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book" (5), but this has been a lifelong aim about which she has been deadly serious.

For whom does Oates write her *Journal*? She never directly confronts this question, but she implies she writes mainly for herself. She feels no obligation to maintain the reader's attention. "The value of this journal for me," she writes on July 26, 1978, "is that, strictly speaking, it makes no pretensions about being 'interesting'" (264). And yet Oates also writes for posterity, for readers who will be interested in her growth and development as a writer. She may not have known, when she first began keeping a diary, that it would one day be housed in a university library, but she certainly realized this at some point, probably sooner rather than later. It is unlikely Oates would spend so much time writing her journal if she didn't imagine eventual publication. In *Where I've Been, and Where I'm Going*, she takes a dim view of the possibility of achieving biographical truth, but she makes one important qualification: "Unless the subject is a fanatic diarist, the greater part of his or her inner life will be lost, not simply to the biographer but to the very subject" (231). Oates is herself a "fanatic" diarist whose daily and weekly entries provide an indispensable account of her inner life. Writing a daily journal entry kept her anchored even during those crises when she found herself unmoored.

From **Writing Widowhood: The Landscapes of Bereavement**

by Jeffrey Berman

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A study of five major female authors who wrote memoirs of spousal loss: Joyce Carol Oates, Sandra Gilbert, Gail Godwin, Joan Didion, and Kay Redfield Jamison. Writing was for each of the authors both a solace and a lifeline, enabling them to maintain bonds with their lost loved ones while simultaneously moving on with their lives.

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