

Memorial Days: A Memoir

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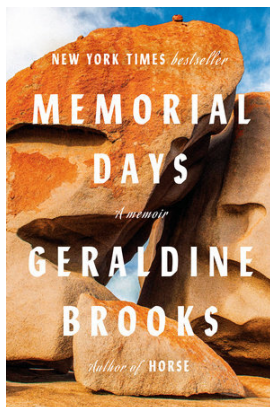
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Book Title: Memorial Days: A Memoir

Author: Geraldine Brooks

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I will begin my own memorial days. I am taking something that our culture has stopped freely giving: the right to grieve. To shut out the world and its demands. To remember my love and to feel the immensity of his loss.

(p. 8)

In her new book, Geraldine Brooks shares the agony she endured after the sudden death of her husband, Tony Horwitz, on Memorial Day in 2019. She describes her shocked reaction to his passing and details the fluctuating emotions she couldn't fully experience because of the overwhelming practical and daily matters following the loss of a loved one. His death was soon followed by a global pandemic, which, along with the exigencies of freelance writing, denied Brooks from having enough time to grieve and find closure. Four years later, she embraced a dedicated time of mourning through an intentional period of isolation on Flinders Island, Australia. She chose this location for the memories she had shared with her husband and its significance as a beacon for dreams of their future. This book resulted from that journey and will surely be added to the canon of elegiac memoirs that play an important role within the medical humanities.

I have vaulted right over denial, anger, bargaining, and depression and landed in the soft sands of acceptance.

(p. 41)

Grief and sadness have become almost taboo in Western culture, but in writing this memoir, Brooks allows readers to recognize their importance in fully completing the mourning process. Using chapters set in 2019 and 2023, she alternates between the immediate aftermath of Horwitz's death and the delayed period during which she was able to embrace it. Whether walking through the nature of her homeland, exploring periods of rediscovery through his journals, or reminiscing in silence on their lives together, Brooks was able to dwell in the despair that a busy life in North America had withheld. Two elements that make her writing so profound are her candid descriptions of her bereavement and a broader examination of the mourning process across many cultures. This included, among others, the traditions of Aboriginal peoples in her native Australia, the Islamic rituals she experienced while on assignment in Southwest Asia, and the grieving rites attendant to the Jewish identity which she and her husband embraced. Each prescribes a discrete period of intense sorrow within which to fully and formally mourn, allowing the bereaved an opportunity to find the closure and peace that might otherwise be denied them.

I have intentionally put myself back where I was on the worst day of my life. It is what I came here to do; to uncover every memory of that time and experience the full measure of the grief I had denied myself.

(p. 29)

The quality of writing in *Memorial Days* is comparable to Brooks' earlier works, many of which have enjoyed both popular and critical acclaim — including a Pulitzer Prize for *March* in 2006. Her language is raw and passionate, full of lamentation and guilt over missed signs or words left unsaid. Horwitz was also a Pulitzer-winning writer, and at the

time of his death was touring for what would be his final work, *Spying on the South*.¹ It became a New York Times bestseller and a capstone to a career of award-winning writing.

Memorial Days is a title that pairs well with other memoirs of bereavement, be it Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*, which explores the loss of Graeme Gibson, or Donald Hall's *Without*, inspired by the passing of Jane Kenyon.^{2,3} Perhaps its most fitting comparison is to Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a memoir of her grief after a cardiac event that also led to the loss of her husband, the novelist John Gregory Dunne.⁴ These similarities make Brooks' work a fitting companion to established health humanities curricula, while its chapters on grief rituals may be particularly enlightening for teachers of family medicine when instructing students about the diversity of bereavement across various cultures. Overall, it is a compelling title and a valuable read for any physician, but especially for those who regularly guide others through the grieving process.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Army, US Navy, US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

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