

Writing book suppressed grief

"Memorial Days: A Memoir."

Geraldine Brooks, Viking, 2025

On Memorial Day, 2019, Geraldine Brooks finished a morning's procrastination by writing an email to Tony Horwitz, her husband, who was on a book tour in Washington, DC. Finally, she opened her computer's file of "Horse," the novel she was drafting, got to work—and the phone rang. When she answered it, the flat, tired voice of a medical resident at George Washington University Medical Center told her that Tony had collapsed on a Chevy Chase, MD, sidewalk, and despite efforts of the EMT and the hospital ER staff, he was ... dead.

Impatient with Brooks' stunned questions, the resident announced that she was at the end of her shift, added that the DC police would be calling, and hung up. Brooks wanted to "howl" in her grief, but she couldn't. There was too much to cope with immediately. In retrospect, however, she realized that the howl—the recognition of her immense loss—lurked "at the basement of [her] heart" for over three years, obscured by a Potemkin superstructure of "endless, exhausting performance." The performance ended (and the memoir began) in 2023, when she retreated to Flinders Island, off the coast of Tasmania, to find time and solitude that enabled her to grieve—not only for Tony, but for the loss of their 35 years together.

The short chapters of Brooks' memoir alternate descriptions of the hectic days and months after Tony's death, and portrayals of Brooks' solitary grieving at Flinders Island. The result skillfully juxtaposes the impossibility of mourning in the face of "brutal, broken" American bureaucratic rituals attending death, with the solitude, natural beauty, and memories that mourning necessarily requires. Thus we read of the DC doctor who, when asked where Tony's body might be stored, snaps, "How should I know?"

The next chapter deals with Brooks' arrival in the silence of Flinders Island. We read that Tony's organ donations are lost because of a telephone call gone to voice mail, then turn to a Flinders Island meditation on the mourning traditions

of various cultures. We read of joint credit cards stopped, then renewed with a (standard) widow's far smaller limit; of freelance taxes left unpaid because of an accountant's slip; of family health insurance canceled without notice; of a court case about a long-adopted son necessitated by a "change" in parents. Alternating with these bureaucratic horrors are chapters that describe wallabies grazing in the yard, spectacular sunsets, walks along the beach, and, increasingly, memories of Tony and a long and happy marriage.

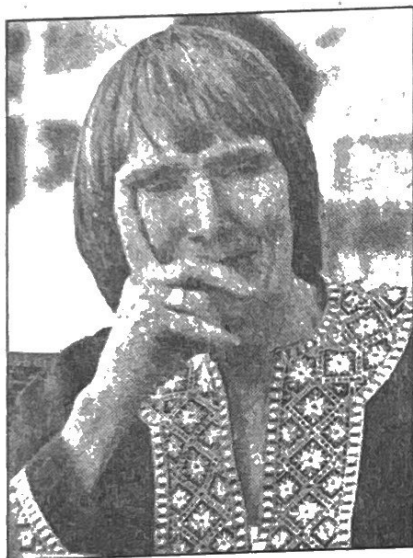
Memoirs by grieving literary widows comprise a small subgenre; Brooks mentions those by Elizabeth Alexander, Joyce Carol Oates, and Joan Didion. The book that "Memorial Days" brings

most to my mind, however, is Doris Kearns Goodwin's "An Unfinished Love Story," which, while primarily concerned with Kearns' and Goodwin's participation in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations, incidentally portrays a marriage in which research and writing are integral parts of life.

Brooks' memoir similarly touches upon the quiet love and intellectual partnership that lie behind the star-studded successes of a married literary couple. As young war reporters for the Wall Street Journal, they wrote reports jointly, earning them a single name:

Hobro. Later, their house in Martha's Vineyard reflected different literary commitments: her "sunlit study" was separate from the book-filled room in the barn to which he wore a path. But the inspiration and discipline of writing bound them together as surely as their love. Tony—witty, gregarious, larger than life, 100% immersed in all his writing projects—dedicated his last book to Brooks. About her own work, Brooks says only that "Writing fiction requires a wombat-hole immersion. You go down into that dark, narrow place where there is nothing else but you and the unspooling story."

But even though writing joined other distractions in repressing her "howl" of grief for her beloved husband, Brooks finished "Horse," her finest novel to date, before she left for Flinders Island, and dedicated it to him.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson