

Joy Rides through the Tunnel of Grief

Jessica Hendry Nelson

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Jessica Hendry Nelson's probing memoir-in-essays *Joy Rides through the Tunnel of Grief* grapples with divorce, childlessness, sexual orientation, and addiction.

With subjects including Nelson's origin story (wherein her mother's point-of-view is prioritized and biblical echoes are incorporated), the breakdown of her marriage, her brother's cyclical heroin use, her mother's lung cancer diagnosis, and her niece's birth, the book ascribes equal weight to bereavement and anticipatory grief. Nelson's father died following a drunken fall down stairs when she was seventeen; the addictive tendency he passed to his son was a constant source of anxiety. Nelson's brother's frequent overdoses had their family living under what her mother dubbed "the specter of death."

But ancestral legacies (a key topic here) have positive connotations in the book as well. Nelson posits that, in a mystical rather than literal way, she inherited her passion from her father. She also explores her attraction to women in a sensitive manner. Indeed, the book's central search is for communion—the experience of "onebody." Sex and death share an uneasy link in "[La Petite Mort]," while the opposite meanings of "cleave" are significant in several essays. The question of whether to become a parent simmers throughout. "Could I make art instead of children?" Nelson asks herself.

The pieces range through time and space. Some are microessays; others include letters or Nelson's brother's writings. With titles sourced from Diane Ackerman and Margaret Atwood, the frame of reference is wide. Metaphorical phrases zing: "a pith of rage," "The world splays open like a pocket mirror," and "the eclipse of his absence."

The frank, earnest autobiographical essays of *Joy Rides through the Tunnel of Grief* seek to integrate euphoric and sorrowful experiences.

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