

Meaningful Memoirs for Exploring

Given the number of new memoirs published annually, creating a list of meaningful memoirs is challenging. Moreover, given the memoirs published by small independent, regional or academic presses or self-published requires that any list be fluid.

Memoirs that have enhanced my understanding of bereavement include the following:

Barkin, Laurie. (2011). *The comfort garden: Tales from the trauma unit*. San Francisco, CA: Fresh Pond Press.

How does a psychiatric nurse have a personal life as wife and mother AND work at San Francisco General Hospital where 60 percent of nurses have been attacked or assaulted. How does one transition after a long shift? How does a caring nurse deal with the loss of a medical institution she had grown to love when new management charts a new direction that discount the contributions of a nurse? This remarkable memoir has much to say about professionals taking care of themselves in contemporary managed, or “mangled” care.

Brady, Sally Ryder. (2011). *A box of darkness: The story of a marriage*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

After you have been married to a man for forty-six years, and have four children, you assume you knew him. Brady began discovering “secrets” after her husband’s death that led her to ask: Who was *this* man? She frames a riveting question: “What do I know that I didn’t know I knew until now?” (p. 6).

Buckley, Christopher. (2009). *Losing Mum and Pup: A memoir*. New York: Twelve Press.

Within a twelve month span, writer Christopher Buckley experienced the deaths of his mother and his father, famed conservative pundit, William F. Buckley. Although an only child, the relationship of son and parents was complicated and in no way could the Buckylys be considered a “typical mom and dad.” Soon after Buckley died at his desk, bloggers begin spinning that he had suicided. Christopher learned that he had to share the ritualizing of his famous father with a wide cast, many of whom were equally famous or powerful political figures. Moreover, Christopher, at age fifty-five had to wrestle with the word *orphan* and the absence of a sibling with whom he could share his parent’s death.

Caldwell, Gail. (2010). *Let’s take the long way home: A memoir of friendship*. New York: Random House.

Two individuals daily walking their dogs initiate a friendship which evolved through many ordinary moments of life. One does not expect a younger friend to die first. Caldwell’s memoir traces the development of the friendship as well as life *after* and life “without *us*.”



Clark, Mary Higgins. (2002). *Kitchen privileges: A memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Famed romance writer Mary Higgins Clark writes about her husband's early death and her mother-in-law's death moments later at his bedside. Dual deaths rebooted memories of her father's death when Mary was a child. This book is a wonderful "door opener" for therapeutic conversation especially if the griever likes romance novels.

Clift, Eleanor. (2008). *Two weeks of life: A memoir of love, death, and politics*. New York: Basic Books.

This memoir examines the overlapping last two weeks of the author's journalist husband and Terri Schiavo. Two questions predominate: How do we handle the decisions made necessary by a person's dying? What do we do when the dying individual cannot express wishes or confirm decisions? This memoir offers insights from a reporter who covered Schiavo and simultaneously experienced her husband's dying.

Crittenden, Lindsey. (2007). *The water will hold you: A skeptic learns to pray*. New York: Harmony Books.

This memoir has two threads: the search for meaning in the faith one has formerly practiced prompted by a brother's death which led to a significant restructuring of the family. With the deaths of her elderly parents, and the ending of an intimate relationship, Crittenden becomes a single parent of an adolescent nephew.

Daily, Art, and Daily, Allison. (2008). *Out of the canyon: A true story of loss and love*. New York: Harmony Books.

Life can change in a second. After a hockey game Art Daily was driving home with his wife and family when a bolder fell and crushed their vehicle. Daily's wife was killed instantly and his two sons died in a hospital; he was untouched. How does—how can—such a bizarre act of nature change one's life? How does one begin over following such tragedy? Enter Allison, a visitor to the area, who had survived a divorce and a brother's suicide death. Out of great suffering and loss, two mourners in love create a future.

Dann, Patty. (2007). *The goldfish went on vacation. A memoir of loss (and learning to tell the truth about it)*. New York: Trumpeter Books.

This memoir offers insight into grief and survival from a wife/mother through the physical decline and death of a brilliant husband who spoke seven-languages. How do you explain death to a child and care for yourself? This memoirist chose goldfish as an analogy.

Davis, Patti. (2004). *The long goodbye*. New York: Knopf.

Ronald Reagan's one-time estranged daughter constructs a stunning memoir about her father's descent into Alzheimer's. The book focuses on how a splintered family declared



a truce to concentrate on what was best for the former president. She concludes “The only way through grief is through it. There are no shortcuts, no detours.”

Didion, Joan. (2005). *The year of magical thinking*. New York: Knopf.

Award-winning memoir on surviving the unexpected deaths of husband and only child within one calendar year. Writing was Didion’s attempt to “make sense” of the experience “that cut loose any fixed ideas I have about death, illness” and life itself. Didion learned what many grievors have learned: “Life changes fast.”

Doty, Mark. (2007). *Dog years: A memoir*. New York: HarperCollins.

Doty’s third memoir focuses on the death of a partner from AIDS and the death of Arden, the beloved dog that kept him company—and sane--during and his partner’s illness and after his death. Grief is not a wise time to take on a puppy but Doty did. This memoir examines the interaction of dogs and grieving guardians.

Goldman, Ari. (2003). *Living a year of kaddish: A memoir*. New York: Schocken.

The day after Ari’s fiftieth birthday his father dies. The son, in the Jewish tradition, must pray *kaddish* three times daily. The memoir chronicles how through this ritual a son honors both parents (his mother had died four years earlier) and how faith may provide resources to thoughtfully navigate the loss.

Goolrick, Rick. (2007). *The end of the world as we know it: Scenes from a life*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.

A profoundly disturbing memoir of a child from a prominent Southern family molested by his father and subsequently warned by his grandmother, “You must never tell or something bad will happen to our family.” Unrelenting emotional pain from an unspeakable grief triggers alcoholism and cutting episodes long after the deaths of his parents.

Gordon, Mary. (2007). *Circling my mother: A memoir*. New York: Pantheon.

In this memoir a well-known literary giant examines the life of her mother: a devout traditional Catholic, an alcoholic, a polio survivor *and* a survivor of a dysfunctional family. Gordon’s Jewish father, who died when she was seven, is also examined. Gordon’s memoir explores the meaning of the phrase, “family of origin.”

Hadas, Rachel. (2011). *Strange relation: A memoir of marriage, dementia, and poetry*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books.

Rachel Hadas, and her composer husband, George Edwards, had a wonderful life together, until he was diagnosed with early-onset dementia at age sixty-one. What proved most troubling was the loss of conversation and the shared enjoyment of each



other's creativity. Hadas grieves through poetry---her own and poems she reads differently now.

Hall, Donald. (1998). *Without: poems*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

A collection of poems chronicling the last illness and death of Jane Kenyon, Hall's wife, also a well-known poet. Hall writes out of active bereavement. The spouses shared offices which complicates his mourning when working. This memoir explores the significant role of familiar place in mourning.

Hall, Donald. (2008). *Unpacking the boxes: A memoir of a life in poetry*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

While this memoir focuses on Hall's career as a poet, the long chapter, "Grief House" offers a stunning account of the death of his wife and his role as her caregiver. Hall is remarkably vulnerable in disclosing his sexual yearnings as a widower and describes the impact of the death on their dog, Gus.

Huang, Wenguang. (2012). *The little Red Guard: A family memoir*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Huang's elderly grandmother was obsessed with death—her death. Would Chinese traditions be followed or would the Communist Party's "new" guidelines be followed. Soon her anxieties impacted every dimension of the family. Thus, Huang became the "coffin keeper." Long after his grandmother died and he had moved to America, he realized how everyone in the family had been impacted by the insistence on tradition.

Homes, A. M. (2007). *The mistress's daughter*. New York: Viking.

How does a relationship change after discovering your mother was the mistress of a famous man? After Homes becomes well-known as a writer, someone discloses her father's true identity. The father has conflicting feelings about now acknowledging his daughter. The memoir offers incredible insight into the effort to discover the identity and narrative of a relationship between her unmarried biological parents. This memoir offers no "and they all lived happily ever after" ending.

Hotchner, A.E. (2010). *Paul and me: 53 years of adventure and misadventure with my pal Paul Newman*. New York: Doubleday.

This memoir chronicles the close friendship and business partnership of writer A.E. Hotchner and the actor, Paul Newman: a relationship that lasted more than half a century until Newman's death. It explains the development of Newman's Own Salad Dressing, a prank that morphed into a major commercial venture that has raised \$300 million for charities and funded Hole in the Wall, a summer camp for children. Particularly insightful are disclosures about the grief following the death of Newman's son Scott, after a drug overdose.



Jennings, Kevin. (2006). *Mama's boy, preacher's son*. Boston: Beacon Press.

How does a sensitive child live with a conclusion that his wish for a birthday present resulted in his father's heart attack and death? In time he learns that his minister father had a pattern of marital infidelity. Then, given the baggage of grief, how does he disclose homosexual orientation. Who would have predicted that his widowed mother would become an AIDS activist?

Kamen, Paula. (2007). *Finding Iris Chang: Friendship, ambition and the loss of an extraordinary mind*. New York: Da Capo Press.

Celebrated author Iris Chang's suicide at age thirty-six left a "hole" in a lot of hearts, especially her friend Paula Kamen. In this investigative memoir, a close friend searches for answers to why brilliance and professional success could not save her friend.

Karbo, Karen. (2003). *The stuff of life: A daughter's memoir*. New York: Bloomsburg.

A brilliant memoir of a daughter navigating the last months of her father's life. She comes to discover and grapple with the reasons that she is so much like her father.

Krasnow, Iris. (2006). *I am my mother's daughter: Making peace with Mom before it's too late*. NY: Basic Books.

Krasnow's mother is a survivor of the Holocaust. A Kris, after her father's death, has to deal with her mother's coma as a consequence of an amputation of a leg. How does conflict between mother and daughter during adolescence influence an opportunity to make some sort of peace at the end of life?

Lipsental, Lee. (2012). *Enjoy every sandwich: Living each day as if it were your last*. NY: Crown Archetype.

When a young physician dedicated to helping others develops a fatal illness, how does he navigate diagnosis, illness, and treatment. How does he "receive" all the advice from medical colleagues, including his wife also a physician. He chooses to live with this future and to leave each day fully.

McCracken, Elizabeth. (2008). *An exact replication of a figment of my imagination*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Stillbirth is a common but disenfranchised grief. Many individuals assume that it happens to other people. Elizabeth McCracken found herself in rural France waiting the birth of a long-desired baby. The memoir chronicles her longings for a child, the waiting, then the discovery that the fetus had died. She chronicles the following twelve months waiting for another baby's birth. How does one wait a child's birth aware of what can go wrong in the last weeks of a pregnancy? How does one remember the first baby? In



this memoir a baby dies, a baby lives and a couple balances the reality of having two children in their hearts.

Miller, Sue. (2003). *The story of my father*. New York: Knopf.

In 1988, the novelist Sue Miller found herself in caring for her father, an Alzheimer's patient, although feeling that she was the least constitutionally suited of her siblings for such responsibility. She watched her father--a minister and brilliant professor of history--struggle as the disease took away his sense of time, history, meaning and livelihood. Miller ponders the variable nature of memory, and tries to weave a faithful narrative from the threads of a dissolving life.

Mixner, David. (2011). *At home with myself: Stories from the hills of Turkey Hollow*. New York: Magnus.

It was time for a change from the fast-paced world of politics and activism. Mixner realized he no longer could or wanted to keep up with the young. The accumulated loss of 300 of his friends to AIDS sent the memoirist into a well-earned retreat into the world of nature. This memoir offers insights from his forty years in the rough-and-tumble world of the peace movement, and the gay rights movement.

Moore, Honor. (2008). *The Bishop's daughter: A memoir*. New York: Norton.

Honor Moore, a poet, thought she "knew" her father—a prominent Episcopal bishop of New York and an activist. After his death, a former partner of her father's contacts her and thus she discovers her father's closet. The memoir examines two lives at the intersection of public and private.

Nuland, Sherwin B. (2003). *Lost in America: My life with my father*. New York: Alfred N. Knopf.

The defining experience of a Yale surgeon and prizewinning author was the death of his mother when he was eight years old *and* the extended family's conclusion that his father was incapable of caring for Sherwin. Everything changed because he was sent to live with other family members, a decision that provided the incredible educational opportunities that led to his distinguished career. How does one resume relationship with an absentee father?

Orr, Greg. (2002). *The blessing: The memoir*. San Francisco, CA: Council Oak Books.

This memoirist accidentally shot his brother while hunting. In a dysfunctional family that did not talk, Orr grieved—and continues to grieve--alone.



O'Rourke, Meghan. (2011). *The long goodbye: A memoir*. New York: Riverhead.

Unmothered may not be a word in the dictionary, according to O'Rourke, but it should be. An amazing memoir of her mother's dying at age 55 and being blindsided by the intensity of the sorrow. Moreover, her grief was complicated by marrying and divorcing in the same year.

Rice, Condoleezza. (2010). *Extraordinary, ordinary people: A memoir of family*. New York: Crown Archetype.

Before she was an accomplished diplomat, Condoleezza was an only child growing up in racially segregated Birmingham. After her best friend was killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church, her parent's committed themselves to facilitating their daughter's potential; their sacrifices provide many opportunities. How does someone in the public eye as an academic and diplomat survive the death of her mother and father?

Rieff, David. (2008). *Swimming in a sea of death: A son's memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

This investigative memoir examples the illness and death of the author's famed mother, novelist Susan Sontag. Reiff examines what it means fully to confront the death of a celebrity mother in a death-denying culture. What made his mother willing to try every possible medical treatment? How did her desire to live impact a son's bereavement?

Rosenblatt, Rodger. (2012). *Kayak morning: Reflections on love, grief, and small boats*. New York: Ecco.

Everything changed for Rosenblatt when he got the call that his 38-year-old daughter, a physician, had died suddenly, leaving a husband and three children. The Rosenblatts moved into their daughter's home to become active grandparents. Now two-and-a-half years later, Rosenblatt has written a stunning memoir about his safe place to grieve: in his kayak.

He paints incredible word mosaics from his years as a journalist as as a father. One idea that still haunts me is his idea of "swollen memories." He openly acknowledges his anger at God who could not "save" Amy.

Seel, Pierre. (1995). *I, Pierre Seel, deported homosexual: A memoir of Nazi terror*. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Basic Books.

Pierre, as an adolescent during the Nazi occupation of France, was placed on a police-maintained list of homosexuals. Eventually, he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp where he was raped, tortured, and assaulted. After liberation by the Russian Army, he tries to rebuild his life in a postwar world. He decided to abandon his silence to speak out for the 800,000 homosexuals who were put to death by the Nazis.



Selwyn, Peter A. (1998). *Surviving the fall: The personal journey of an AIDS doctor*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Decades after his father's death (when the memoirist was two), as an AIDS specialist Selwyn interacts with many IV-drug users who are going to die at a young age. In listening to their narratives, he reexamined his understanding of his father's "accidental" death. Through a vigorous search for the truth, Selwyn discovered that his father suicided.

Shriver, Mark K. (2012). *A good man: Rediscovering my father, Sargent Shriver*. New York: Henry Holt.

How does the man who founded the Peace Corp and so many of LBJ's "War on Poverty" and presidential candidate navigate Alzheimer's? And how does his politically ambitious son take on new responsibilities for a father who is different. Mark prefers "love-giver" to the common "caregiver." In the experience he learned a new appreciation for his father's Catholic faith, "I'm just doing the best I can with what God has given me," and applied it to his own life. While Sargent Shriver died, a new Mark Shriver emerged to embrace many of his father's commitments.

Silen, Jonathan G. (2006). *My father's keeper: The story of a gay son and his aging parents*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Many adult children have an anxiety: What will happen when I become the parent and my aged parent(s) become the child? Silen's relationship is complicated because he, the only son, is gay, has a partner and does not live in the same city as his parents. The memoir addresses how the partner participated in care giving and how geographic distance created demands on the son's time and energy that challenge the son's relationship.

Smith, Gordon. (2006). *Remembering Garrett: One family's battle with a child's depression*. New York: Carroll & Graf.

This memoir chronicles the grief a prominent political family with a mentally ill adolescent, Garrett who in a moment of despair, suicided. Senator Smith, blaming himself for some of his son's crisis, considered resigning his Senate seat. However, he discovers a way to create good from this tragedy: The Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act which provides federal funding for mental health care and suicide prevention for adolescents.

Spring, Janis Abrhams. (2009). *Life with pop: Lessons on caring for an aging parent*. New York: Avery.

The death of one parent, or stepparent, alters the relationship with the surviving parent, even when the adult child is a therapist. For five years, wanting a rich, meaningful life for her father, she transitioned her father into an assisted-living facility. Soon Abrhams



was wrestling with her father's eroding physical and mental decline. How does one balance one's own needs *and* a professional career with the increasing demands of her father's care?

Stepanek, Jeni, and Linder, Larry. (2009). *Messenger: The legacy of Mattie J.T. Stepanek and heartsongs*. New York: New American Library.

How does a single parent/doctoral student integrate the death of three children and manage life with a surviving child who will die from a rare medical trait she passed. Life gets interesting when her brilliant son Mattie's poetry reaches bestseller status in *The New York Times*. Every day offers some element of a medical challenge. This memoir has a great deal to say about living, rather than existing, with a terminal medical diagnosis.

Terenzio, RoseMarie. (2012). *Fairy tale interrupted: A memoir of life, love, and loss*. New York: Gallery Books.

Sometimes the dream job gets dropped in one's lap. That certainly happened to Terenzio when she became John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s "personal assistant" at *George*. There was never a dull boring day, especially during the launching of *George*. Then on July 16, 1999, it all came crashing down. Terenzio happened to be staying in John's condo that weekend because her air conditioning had gone out. Thus, she had to "clean out" and "pack up" the condo and his office. Moreover, a longtime friend had just died and seven months later her father died. How does one create a new life and grieve for a string of losses? A meaningful insightful memoir.

Trillin, Calvin. (1993). *Remembering Denny*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

Over the years, friendships change and people lose contact. One day a writer reads the newspaper obituary for an estranged friend. He gathers a group of shared friends to attend a memorial service only to discover what they did not know: the deceased, a distinguished diplomat, was gay.

Trillin, Calvin. (1996). *Messages from my father*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

This readable memoir by a distinguished author offers a particular insight into an immigrant father who nurtured keen expectations that his son "would not be like" the old man.

Trillin, Calvin. (2006). *About Alice*. New York: Random House.

Alice, Trillin's wife, had long been a presence in his published writing. How does an author—and readers--grieve such an absence? In this brief memoir, Trillin weaves a tapestry of a relationship that ended when she succumbed to heart failure as a consequence of radiation for cancer.

Wickersham, Joan. (2008). *The suicide index: Putting my father's death in order.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Wickersham asks a simple question: How does an adult child “make sense” of a father’s suicide? And survive the bureaucracy of death, police, pathologists and suicide? As she puts the death “in order” she has to deal with a mother who outlives him and unexpected financial consequences. She discovers one cannot always put a period after a suicide.

Vonnegut, Mark. (2010). *Just like someone without mental illness only more so: A memoir.* New York: Delacorte Press.

Doctors are “supposed” to be psychologically healthy. What if you are the number one pediatrician in Boston, the son of a famous author, and you have experienced your fourth psychotic breakdown? Vonnegut concludes, “None of us is entirely well, and none of us are irrecoverably sick.”

