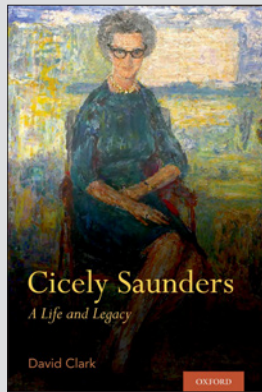


# Book Reviews



## **Cicely Saunders: A life and legacy**

David Clark

2018  
Oxford University Press  
ISBN 9780190637934

David Clark is a sociologist at Glasgow University whose book *To comfort always: A history of palliative medicine since the nineteenth century* confirms his place as the foremost historian in the field of hospice and palliative care. From 1994 until her death in 2005 he collaborated with Cicely Saunders, the fount and inspiration of hospice care, to develop an archive of source materials and interviews from which this book is the fruit.

Clark recognises the initial tension within St Christopher's Hospice between Cicely Saunder's concept of St Christopher's as a religious community (she had been a Billy Graham counsellor) and the more scientific view of those who saw it as a medical organisation. He shows how, over the years, she gradually accepted the idea that the two extremes could meet in the notion of the hospice as a 'therapeutic community' in both a psycho-social and a spiritual sense. And of course, the essential unit of such a community is the family.

Cicely herself was trained as a nurse, social worker and doctor, but not as a psychiatrist or bereavement counsellor. However, she made use of the expertise of psychiatrists while remaining wary of the profession as a whole.

To me the most valuable aspect of the book has been to discover the details of the many ways in which Cicely's whole enterprise developed over the years into what became a new speciality of medical, nursing, social and spiritual care that now influences the way in which death impacts both patients and families across the world. It is inevitable that, as long as patients are alive, they are the focus of attention from both families and staff, indeed much of the success of 'hospice' relies upon the relief of distressing physical symptoms, and for some practitioners that is all that it means. But Clark recognises that the relief of pain in cancer patients, vital though it may be, is only a small part of the engagement

between professionals, volunteers and families faced with impending death that is 'hospice'.

He makes it clear that, although Cicely's primary interest was in the care of people who were approaching their own death, we should provide care that includes the family before and, when needed, after bereavement. He quotes a letter that she wrote to me in March 1965 which explained:

... that she was interested in knowing more about how relatives could be helped at an earlier stage of the care of their relative, and also more about what could be done after a death.

So began a relationship that was to continue. In July 1967 St Christopher's Hospice opened and I joined the staff as liaison psychiatrist. In due course we set up and evaluated a means of identifying families in need of help and trained volunteers to provide the support. Research into our model of bereavement care showed evidence of benefits and was widely emulated.

Clark's painstaking research is no starry-eyed idealisation of the woman who changed the world. He provides a precise and well-argued account of this very human lady, whose parent's unhappy marriage had marred her own childhood security.

**Her steely look and assured manner masks years of vulnerability, poor self-image, and struggles with her femininity. She got into situations where the boundaries between her personal and professional life were seriously blurred... she became the unlikely pioneer of an improbable movement.**

It was her experience of caring for dying patients that gave Cicely the confidence and courage to challenge and eventually change the basic assumption of health care staff that people approaching the end of their lives were 'hopeless cases'. She inspired others to follow her lead and by so doing helped countless people to find meaning and a peaceful end to the last chapter of their lives. And in due time, she died in her own hospice, in the same way.

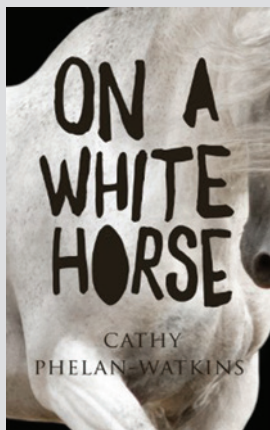
In David Clark we meet an archivist who, in addition to mining the 'vast quantity of correspondence, papers and memorabilia' that now reside in the King's College library, made use of copious interviews with Cicely carried out by his colleague Neil Small. In this respect Clark's work differs from that of Shirley DuBoulay, whose own authorised biography of Cicely Saunders first appeared in 1984. Clark

‘wanted to understand better the complex relationship between the personal and the professional aspects of Cicely’s life and to attempt to see her in a more rounded context’. In this he succeeds quite admirably.

Although I was aware of many of the personal issues that Clark reports, as a psychiatrist I was bound by my code of confidentiality not to reveal them. It says a lot for Cicely Saunders that she encouraged and contributed to this revelation. She was a good example of a ‘wounded healer’.

It is this, and much more, that makes this authoritative volume invaluable. Clark teaches us a lot about the way Cicely Saunders built up networks of friends who raised funds, organised systems, persuaded governments, carried out research and gradually spread the important messages that gave rise to a new branch of medicine - Palliative Care. ■

## Colin Murray Parkes



### **On a White Horse: A memoir of love, loss and the healing power of art**

Cathy Phelan-Watkins

2018  
Clink Street Publishing  
116 pages  
Paperback £7.99  
978-1912850044

C.S. Lewis acknowledges the debt we owe to authors for what he describes as their contribution to an ‘extension of being’. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of authors writing their memoirs, and this trend has increasingly been extended to include personal accounts of loss and bereavement. But is there still a ‘market’ for this ‘genre’? And in what ways does reading about someone else’s experience of loss and bereavement extend *my* being - either beyond my own encounters with these experiences, or beyond the experience of others that have gone before? Indeed, is there more to say?

In the case of Cathy Phelan-Watkins’ memoir I would give a resounding ‘Yes’ - especially when what she offers us is a vivid, indeed lyrically written, account - following the death of her husband - of her two creative acts of restoration and meaning making through the creation of a ‘memorialising’ white horse that is then wonderfully described to us through her second act of creation - this book.

The one-year journey she describes is set out in five parts, each of which has a name and an associated photograph that links explicitly to the stage of her ‘horse-making’, but also implicitly to the ‘meaning-making’ with which she is simultaneously engaged. However, to describe it like this underplays the expressive flow of her language and the structure of her narrative. Danny’s presence is so elusive: ‘like a slippery bar of soap’, but memories - and her fear of losing them - intervene. Like the experience of bereavement, we are taken through her ‘oscillation’, not only between grief- and restoration-focused coping, but also in and through time as she attempts to negotiate her present experience of loss, with a (sometime) eye on the future whilst, at the same time, being ‘compelled’ to reflect on memories from the past - of his illness and death, their life together, and their separate individual lives before they met.

She begins with a Prologue, dated May 2015 and enhanced with a photo of a Valentine card, with an evocative description of her intense need to locate the 23 Valentine cards that Danny sent her during their life together (the final one arriving so very poignantly after his death that had occurred the day before Valentine’s day), and she expresses, with sparse incisive language, her feeling of mounting agitation until she does. She describes herself as a person of the sea, and it is here we meet the first of her potent and expressive metaphors as she finds herself ‘adrift’, a poor ‘navigator’ of this experience of loss, then - on finding the cards - of being ‘becalmed’ again, at least for a while. From the depths of her being, she confronts the stark reality that Danny has ‘left the planet’, but she is simultaneously enveloped by a fear of forgetting him



Cathy and her white horse sculpture. © Photo: Alice Powell.