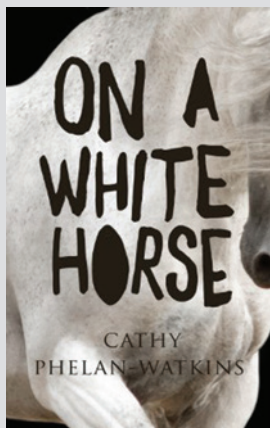


'wanted to understand better the complex relationship between the personal and the professional aspects of Cicely's life and to attempt to see her in a more rounded context'. In this he succeeds quite admirably.

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.

and so it is to art that she turns. This becomes her vehicle for coping, coherence and restoration that will help her remember and ‘do something with these feelings’. At first, it is to be an art piece using these cards - perhaps creating a holiday bag to represent the memory of their travels together - but, over time, she wants to memorialise Danny and so decides to make a ‘great, big, beautiful, monumental, heroic horse’.

Her story unfolds through the construction of the horse (which becomes a form of reconstruction of Danny and, as a process, a representation a form of self renewal) – assembling the ‘Skeleton’ (Part 1); building the ‘Muscle’ (Part 2); developing ‘Skin’ (Part 3); and rounding up the year in the Summer of 2016 with an ‘Epilogue’. She begins the ‘Skeleton’ with her search for materials, finding some carpet runners in the office of the company Danny founded (‘Danny is this you?’) which means she doesn’t have to go to B&Q (‘Thanks Danny!’). This contrasts with the way in which she recalls how, as his illness progresses, she finds herself in a new role as a ‘*rookie triage nurse*’, ending Part 1 with another sea-faring metaphor of needing to ‘batten down the hatches’ knowing ‘there was a storm approaching’.

In ‘Muscle’ we begin to see the strength of her relationship with Danny, but also her descent into the grief which she describes as a form of PTSD. She finds herself vulnerable: getting spooked easily, and with memories so easily triggered by objects, smells, sound. She describes the pain in the recollection of the minutiae of their relationship and in the regrets that are ‘too late to put something right’.

In ‘Skin’, we see glimpses of Cathy build her own ‘skin’ as she assembles the skin of the horse formed by narrative materials. She can’t bear to destroy the Valentine cards and so photocopies them in order to cover the horse. But it feels lifeless; it is not working, and she sinks, depressed until, at last, she finds a special language for her journey inscribed on different forms of paper that she will use for the skin – the medical notes, his prescriptions, her shopping lists, his hospital discharge forms, finally adding his doodles and diary additions to look like markings animals with legible/illegible words and shapes. She selects and positions these carefully: she needs the horse ‘to tell a story in such a way that it is comprehensible’. Even as she cuts them up to give them shape, she takes care to preserve them too.

At times, her descriptions gives the reader an intense experience of the changes of place (relational and

geographical), of the medical facility (that was their living room) and - most powerfully – the sense of the closed and closing world into which she and Danny are receding, even as they embrace normalcy as time runs out. It is here she expresses the difference in their journeys - that of the dying from that of those who will be left behind. His is an opportunity to put his affairs in order for ‘after’ (a word that shocks her in its use), whilst hers is the paradoxical one of denial on the one hand and a profound awareness of what lies ahead on the other – a time she describes as the ‘terminally slow metronome in my head’.

Finally, one year on, we arrive at an ‘Epilogue’. It is now summer 2016 and her project is complete and she decides to hold a garden party so that people can ‘meet the horse’. It looks striking; it has a ‘coltish energy as if it has been reined in and is now excited to be free’. She notes how some guests hold back, possibly, she muses, from getting too close to death. These days feel for her as both ‘an ending and a beginning’. She has relived ‘every twist and turn of our final year together’ before declaring that ‘a resurrection of sorts has taken place’; for whilst she is sadder, she now has an enhanced capacity for joy.

In her search for meaning, Cathy chose a white horse as emblematic of Danny, but she also discovered that the carved white horses on our landscape, such as the Uffington horse in Oxfordshire, were apparently cut out by Celtic followers of the horse goddess Epona who rode a white mare to escort souls to the land of the dead. It is not the final art piece that has mattered here, but the story of the making of the art which, amongst other things, takes space that Danny has left behind – both the physical and the temporal. It has escorted her into and out of the land of the dead. The act of thinking through this piece of art and *its* meaning locates Danny and *his* meaning together with the meaning of *her* grief. These two acts of creation (the white horse and the story of the building of the horse) have been the focus for the restoration of a very talented writer which, in turn, has extended *my* being. It has much to offer both those who have been bereaved as well as those who work alongside them. ■

Dr Elizabeth Rolls

Independent Bereavement Researcher, Psychodynamic Counsellor and EMDR practitioner. Hon Research Fellow University of Gloucestershire/Gloucestershire Counselling Service.