



Nocturne: On the Life and Death of My Brother

Helen Humphreys

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Helen Humphreys' younger brother was gone before she could come to terms with the fact that he had terminal cancer. Diagnosed with stage 4B pancreatic cancer at the age of forty-five, he died four months later, leaving behind a grieving family. Martin was an extraordinary pianist who debuted at the Royal Festival Hall in London at the age of twenty, later becoming a piano teacher and senior examiner at the Royal Conservatory of Music. The two siblings, though often living far apart, were bonded on many levels.

Now Humphreys has written a deeply felt, haunting memoir both about and for her brother. Speaking directly to him, she lays bare their secrets, their disagreements, their early childhood together, their intense though unspoken love for each other. A memoir of grief, an honest self-examination in the face of profound pain, this poetic, candid and intimate book is an offering not only to the memory of Martin but to all those who are living through the death of family and friends.

Nocturne: On the Life and Death of My Brother Details

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From Reader Review Nocturne: On the Life and Death of My Brother for online ebook

Canadian Reader says

A very moving memoir and testament to the life and untimely death (at 45 from pancreatic cancer) of author Helen Humphreys's brother, Martin, a concert pianist and composer. This is not an easy read. The sensitive observations of the world after one who is deeply loved has died remind readers of the rawness of their own grief. A painfully beautiful book.

Andy says

This is superb - one of those books you wish you hadn't read, just so that you could have the pleasure of rediscovering it.

This is a very moving, beautifully (and deceptively simply) written memoir of the author's late brother; a reflection on his life, on her sense of loss, and on the fragility of the moment. You will cry.

Highly recommended.

Kamilla says

I had the privilege of knowing Martin as a friend. It is not everyone who has a gifted writer as a sister, one who is able to pay tribute to a life in a way that moves and touches many readers who never knew him.

Erika Nerdypants says

I will read anything Humphreys writes for the sheer beauty of language she brings to the page, and this slim little memoir on grieving the death of her beloved brother is no exception. You would think a book about such a heavy subject matter would be difficult to read, but not so. Luminous, with exquisite sentences strung together to make paragraphs that leap off the page, it is written as a letter to her brother. This is not a sentimental piece of work, there is an acuteness and clarity to her grief that made for exceptional reading.

Vikki VanSickle says

This was a luminous memoir about the life and death of Helen Humphrey's brother, a virtuoso pianist who died of cancer at 45. This slight novel packs huge emotional impact and is divided into 45 sections, one for each year of Martin's life. This is the kind of book that requires silence while reading. I could not read it on the subway or waiting in line, it was something I needed to savour in my reading chair or in bed at night. It is very sad at times, but there are also moments of joy. Humphreys gives the reader glimpses of her youth and

her writing lifestyle. As always her prose is crystalline and she captures a sense of landscape and atmosphere in the fewest possible words. The book is written to and for Martin, using the second person, and at times I felt sneaky, like I was reading a private conversation between siblings. I think this speaks to the deeply personal nature of the novel/memoir.

Etienne says

Beautiful writing and a very touching book! Yes it's a memoir about the author brother death, and so it can be seen has a very personal book, but I found the experience to be very well «generalize» so it isn't anymore about her personal grief, but about grief and passing on in general, something we'll all get through somehow one day or another. It isn't a happy read but not a depressive one either, just a very well made reflexion on the matter. Big surprise and I highly recommend it!

Christine says

In this small miracle of a book, Helen shares the letters she wrote to her brother after his untimely death at 45. A classical pianist who was a young prodigy and with whom she grew up artistically, he was taken too young by cancer diagnosed too late.

This is a heartache of a book that details the indignities and unconscious cruelties visited on the grieving: the bargaining for a cheaper price when she was trying to sell her brother's car, the long delay at the MTO, the doctors' clumsy metaphors (which she sees through immediately), the detritus left behind by the dead that the living must find a way to deal with. She details the need to sleep in his sheets and wear clothing that still smelled of him, to take from his apartment small things of meaning. She revisits the early optimism and the slow progress to hopelessness, and the awful, pungent, and inexorable approach of death.

But this is also a book about a life making art, because after he died she nearly stopped writing: "I wanted to give up writing after you died, Martin. There seemed no point to it anymore. Maybe because we had grown up as artists together I felt I couldn't go on alone." And so it is also about the life of not just one artist but two: Martin was a musician and composer, Helen a writer, and they lent moral support to one another as artists growing up. They traveled together, shared hopes and dreams, let the other's existence and life choices give emotional backbone to their art.

It's a kind of luck that Helen acknowledges in various ways through the book, by affirming their bond, memories of their childhood and youth and young adulthood, and by sharing the story of these. It's courageous and open-hearted and generous, a thing of rare beauty and wisdom fashioned from the most exquisite pain. Martin lives in these pages, and the unconscionable fact of his too-early death given meaning by the way he will live on, known in some small way by readers.

Rhona says

Beautiful. Terribly sad. Incredibly written. Heartwrenching. Read it.

Betty says

A beautiful winding, nostalgic memoir of grief. Helen Humphreys' younger brother, a piano prodigy, was struck with a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. She struggles, through her poetic writing, to come to terms with his untimely death. This book is a testament to her love and gratitude for her brother Martin, she both admired and mentored.

Aban (Aby) says

This is a beautiful book; my thanks to Alexis for reviewing it. Helen Humphreys writes with great love and longing for her younger brother, Martin - a gifted pianist, who died of cancer at a young age. It was a relatively short period of time from the diagnosis to Martin's death, and it left Helen reeling. She addresses the book to Martin and interweaves accounts of his last days with reminiscences of their time together as children, teens, and adults. Her writing is elegiac and reveals Martin as a delightful, thoughtful, caring man while also revealing the loving, caring side of the author. The book is worth reading for its own sake but it might also be a comfort for people who have lost a loved one, as it expresses a universal grief.

Alexis says

I rarely give books five stars, but I think this one deserves it. This slim book is the author's poetic and beautiful reaction to her brother's death at the age of 45. There are 45 chapters in the book. Helen Humphreys details how her brother died, what has happened since, and talks about many instances of their life together. This is a raw book about grief, and the way grief can influence how a person sees the world. It is about sibling love and how life is both beautiful and terrible. I also appreciated how Helen tied art and the practice of making art into the text.

I teared up many times while reading this book. I think it is a brave and important book and anyone who has suffered a major loss will appreciate it.

Amanda Bolderston says

A moving account of Helen Humphrey's brother's life and death - encompassing his career as a pianist, her writing and their lives in the UK, Kingston, Toronto and Vancouver. She writes about the legacy of grief, that she is now "brought to my knees anytime something bad happens to a person or a creature that I love. I can't stop myself from fearing the worst, because the worst has happened."

She is always a wonderful writer and this short book is a sad and elegiac tribute as well as a vivid portrait of how losing someone close can unmoor those left behind.

Joanne says

This lovely book is not a memoir; it's a tribute to the author's late brother, and it reads like a series of small conversations with him. Near the end of the book, she explains that she decided on 45 chapters, one for each year of his life. Some are as short as a couple of lines, but all are meaningful.

Her grief is palpable throughout the book. The sense of loss, of a life cut too short by invasive cancer, is so touching that at times I cried along with her.

When she described sitting at a window, staring into the darkness unseeingly, I understood her bleakness, and ached for her.

I've read a lot of this author's works recently, and am awed by her ability to say so much in such short, concise works. This book is a gem.

Patricia Post says

This is Helen Humphreys' beautiful and simply profound memoir about the mid-life loss of her beloved brother, concert pianist Martin Humphreys.

From a grief experience most of us could only say is 'too deep for words,' this author has listened deep, created those words, and generously shared her experience in clear, honest prose. It is a remarkable, soul-enriching gift to anyone who has lost someone they love.

Brett says

I'm giving this 5 stars because a) Helen Humphreys is an excellent writer and b) how can you possibly rate someone's grief? A fascinating homage of a talented pianist who died too young (at the age of 45 from pancreatic cancer) by his sister. It doesn't get much more personal than this, folks. I applaud Humphreys for her courage in tackling such a painful subject. Her touching portrayal of a brother who obviously means the world to her moved me to tears. Each of us would be lucky, indeed, to have even one person in our life who loved us so fully and unconditionally.
