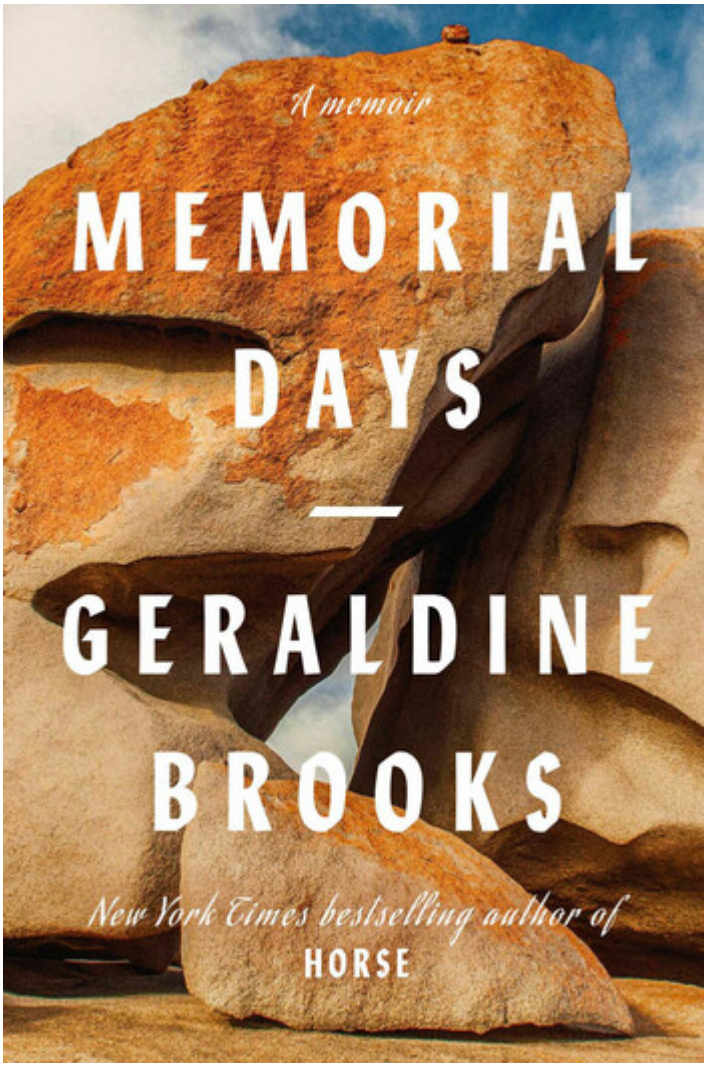
Books

Review: *Memorial Days*

By Geraldine Brooks ’83JRN (Viking).

By
Sally Lee
|
Winter 2024-25



Viking

Joan Didion once wrote that “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” We negotiate its geography without compass or map, on a journey that can take us through unexpected terrain.

For author Geraldine Brooks ’83JRN, that difficult journey began on May 27, 2019, with a phone call notifying her that her husband, Tony Horwitz ’83JRN, had collapsed and died on a Washington, DC, street. He was just sixty years old.

Horwitz and Brooks had been married for thirty-five years. They met in their first week of graduate studies at Columbia Journalism School, and Brooks still remembers their first kiss “beneath the unlovely footbridge over Amsterdam Avenue.” The couple enjoyed stellar careers as foreign correspondents for *The Wall Street Journal*, and both went on to write best-selling books. Each won a Pulitzer Prize, he for reporting, she for the novel *March*. They built a family, settled on Martha’s Vineyard, and happily agreed to “devote themselves to watching sunsets” in their dotage.

Horwitz’s sudden death obliterated that idyll, and *Memorial Days*, Brooks’s heartbreaking new memoir, is an attempt not only to process her profound loss but to reflect on our culture’s diminishing ceremony around death and dying. Sadly, Brooks discovers that the blunt phone call from the doctor who announces Horwitz’s death and then “can’t get me off the phone fast enough” will be just the “first brutality” in a broken system.

Almost immediately, Brooks is thrown into a frenzy of activity and finds herself drowning in the “cruel bureaucracy of death.” The funeral must be planned, myriad administrative tasks completed, health insurance secured. Brooks needs to “scream, weep, throw myself on the floor, rend my garments, tear my hair. But I couldn’t allow myself to do any of those things. Because I had to do so many other things.”

On top of all that, Brooks is in the middle of writing her 2022 novel *Horse*, and as she drags herself back to her writing desk to finish it, months and then years pass. Soon she realizes that she’s spending all her energy tamping down her grief. “I have come to realize that my life since Tony’s death has been one endless, exhausting performance. I have cast myself in a role: *woman being normal*.”



Randi Baird

Brooks wants to give herself time and space for reflection, and so in February 2023 she leaves for a remote, undeveloped island off the coast of Tasmania to do the real work of mourning. Here, alone in a rustic shack on a beach at the ends of the earth, she intends to “shut out the world and its demands. To remember my love and to feel the immensity of his loss.”

In *Memorial Days*, Brooks relives the trauma of her husband’s death, “slowing it down, taking it in, and suffering it in the way I needed to suffer.” The book flips between memories of Horwitz and an account of her life on the island, where the wild, dramatic landscape provides a healing backdrop for her pain.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychiatrist whose book *On Death and Dying* outlined five stages of grief, has written that “our grief is as individual as our lives.” But though grief is personal, it is meant to be shared. Mourning rituals throughout history recognize that every loss needs to be witnessed and validated.

Brooks invites the reader to serve as that witness. She eulogizes Horwitz and wants us to understand the depth of her love, but she also asks us to learn from his passing. She bemoans the institutional busywork of death that serves to distract us from the real work of mourning. She wishes our culture permitted us to wallow in our grief instead of being “averse to sad.” She encourages bereaved readers to articulate their pain, to tell and retell it, and to “take control of this essential moment in the narrative of your life.”

Even in her vulnerability, Brooks proves a generous writer. She recounts the worst moment of her life and digs deep into the ugly details of her husband’s death. She acknowledges that she will never reach the limits of her sorrow, but in *Memorial Days* her grief finds a purpose. She guides herself and the reader both to a new understanding of loss and a way to move forward.

Read more from ***Sally Lee***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >

Read more from ***Sally Lee***