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Lifesaving: A Memoir



Synopsis

A new memoir from the author of the popular *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1963, when poet Barrington was 19, an event sliced her life in two: the cruise ship *Lakonia* departed Southampton, England, with her parents aboard. Three days later, north of Madeira, a fire broke out, and 131 passengers, including her parents, were left stranded without lifeboats and drowned. (Her mother had often predicted she would die at sea, yet Barrington's father had been fond of egging his wife into sailing races and other water sports.) In this accomplished memoir, Barrington recalls the three years that followed this incident, in which she fled to a small town in northern Spain; her book doubles as the lesbian coming-out story of a young woman who must resolve her truncated relationship with her parents. Flashbacks to a lonely childhood in which she couldn't connect with either parent and particularly despised her "pigheaded" father give way to a future in which Barrington is finally able to achieve a degree of resolution around her loss. And as Barrington recounts her adventures in Catalonia, where she worked as the tour guide at a busy winery, the narrative reveals the complex ways in which she began to find, and accept, herself. Throughout, her writing is superb; she evokes smalltown Spain under Franco in lush detail with solid philosophical insight into the tragedy that changed her life: "What I had gleaned from my parents' death was not that ships are dangerous, but that what you fear most is." Among the growing number of memoirs, this is a gem. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Barrington, a British poet and author, demonstrates her mastery of words in this coming-of-age story. Barrington's parents drowned as a result of a cruise ship fire when she was 19, and here she reflects on her search for her identity at a time when she was in denial of her parents' deaths. She goes to work in Spain, where her parents lived before she was born and where the family vacationed. The area and language are familiar to her, but she is enough of a foreigner that her somewhat strange behavior is excused. Barrington keeps herself so busy that she barely has the time or energy to deal with her loss. Finally, after three years, she is able to vent her emotions. She comes to realize how much she misses her parents and that she is not responsible for their deaths. What captivates the reader even more than the narrative is the wonderful prose the author employs in describing Spain and her life there. Recommended for all libraries.-Gina Kaiser, Univ. of the Sciences Lib., Philadelphia Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book made me think, and remember. The author writes succinctly, evocatively, making me see and feel everything she was going through. The memories she gave me were from my own time living in Spain, interestingly, near to where she lived, and in the same years. Before reading this book I'd say I couldn't even imagine what it must have been like for her to lose both her parents in such an horrific way, but, after reading this, I certainly felt I could empathise to an extent, due to her wonderfully descriptive writing. She told me. I felt I was at her side, as she went through all her horrors, even making me cry here and there. I watched her grow into adulthood, ever striving to come to terms with her loss, and finally finding a certain acceptance, if not peace. The title of her book is perfect, for trying to save herself from spiralling further out of control, even if she couldn't use her childhood learned lifesaving skills to save her parents. The book became a page-turner for me, to see how she did it, how she survived. Her writing has nothing superfluous in it, every word needing to be there, and beautifully chosen.

This book is a marvel...connecting each of us to our own sense of loss, even if we did not lose our parents tragically and suddenly. There is loss of parents, whether through death, or simply growing up and apart, loss of innocence, loss of youth...all is delved into with the keenest yet gentlest of inquiry and revelation. Beautifully written, for everyone to read. A solace to the soul. A place to lay your head down and just breathe into the pain and joy of being human.

I found this book to be a beautiful account of loss that is written with originality, tenderness, and

even humor. These qualities, filtered through the consciousness of Judith Barrington with her genius for astonishingly clear and honest writing, create a portrait of a girl who has lost her moorings and is trying to find a way to save herself. The memoir captures a time when "grief" was not a word anybody said publicly, certainly not in England. When she learns that her parents have died in a terrible accident at sea, Barrington escapes the emotional distance of the British in general and, in particular, her older siblings. She heads directly, though at the time unconsciously, for the place where her parents once spent their happiest times. From the moment we enter Spain, Barrington angles the light so that somehow we are under the intoxicating Spanish sun with her younger self--speeding along in her mother's MG through hilly terrain and meeting a cast of lovable, peculiar, and disturbing characters worthy of a great novel--and at the same time with her older self who is now wise enough to compassionately observe the deep suffering she was experiencing at the time. She was not one of the flower children of the 1960s on an adventure to experiment with life, but a wholly intelligent and remarkable young woman who was trying to conceal (even from herself) an aching grief beneath a wild youthful attraction to trouble, sex, and danger. She writes every line like a poet, but the overall effect is like a novel. By the end, when she recounts how she finally allowed herself to enter the reality of her parents' deaths, I cried for her both in sadness and in joy.

In this memoir, the author describes her reaction to the tragic drowning of her parents when she was 19 and sticks to this theme, even when it means jumping ahead by many years to show how she later resolved her feelings. I read it straight through almost without stopping. It's beautifully written and although it's sad, it is also funny in parts. Most of the book takes place during the three years when she lived and worked in Spain after the accident that killed her parents. This part is vivid and pulls you right into the time and place. You get the sense of a young woman trying to grow up but also letting loose with wild and reckless behavior while very lonely and sad underneath. There are great stories, some quite funny, about the people she got to know as well as subtle moments that show how bereft she felt, even though she wasn't yet ready to acknowledge the loss. This is a very true description of how we react to sudden loss, particularly when we are young. In the later parts of the book, she describes gradually coming to terms with the event and goes to visit the graves of her parents. Finally, in the last chapter, she really tackles it head on. This chapter is one of the most true and moving pieces of writing I've ever read. I also read Barrington's book, *Writing the Memoir*, which is very informative about writing true stories. *Lifesaving* is a very good example of what she teaches in *Writing the Memoir*. She really knows how to do it!

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