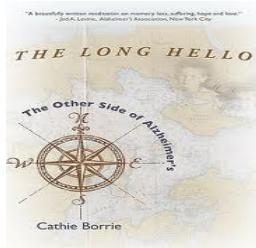


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The Long Hello, The Other Side of Alzheimer's by Cathie Borrie

October 31st, 2011 by Stephen Woodfin



Gordon Lightfoot in his song, *The Last Time Ever I Saw Your Face*, wrote: "And if time could heal the wounds, I would tear the threads away that I might bleed once more."

Such is the feeling I had at the end of *THE LONG HELLO*, the most unusual Alzheimer's book I have read. Cathie Borrie's prose is poetic, fluid, troubling.

A daughter's memoir about herself and her mother, Borrie's work, in a few short pages, filets their souls. We learn about her father, an alcoholic who forsook her, the proleptic early death of her brother, a stepfather who morphs from savior to dolt.

But for the most part, we eavesdrop on the intimate interactions between Borrie and her mother as "Mrs. B" inches her way into Alzheimer's, a seven-year journey. It is an account of complex personalities, personalities of people that life has decimated and isolated, but people who still look out to sea and sense eternity.

Perhaps the most powerful theme in the memoir is one all too common in the lives of family members who inherit the role of Alzheimer's caregivers. It is the theme of the self-absorbed parent, the parent who manages her own affairs first and those of her children second or third or fourth or not at all, who becomes the patient that the neglected child must attend. The pain and frustration of this inescapable dynamic pervades every moment of the caregiver's life as she sacrifices her own happiness for someone who sacrificed little, if anything, for her.

Much of the book consists of dialogue between Borrie and her mother, the dialogue of people who speak different languages, one Alzheimer's, the other not, but who communicate through their essences. There are also snippets of narrative like this:

"For lunch I make fruit salad and cottage cheese and one piece of whole-wheat toast. I stand at my mother's kitchen window cutting up fruit and look out at the day. It's raining. A raven watches me from his perch on the power line as the wind whisks wave tips into frothy

white manes. I try not to think about where I am and what I do all day or the things I used to do and miss most—working, studying, canoeing, movies. Men.”

THE LONG HELLO is light and shadow, funeral dirges and sambas. It is a brilliant opaque orb, a chilling but yet sensual expression of love deprived and love survived. It is a realistic account of life with a person with Alzheimer's, a surrealistic exploration of the human spirit. I highly recommend it for anyone who has or had a father, or a mother, a child or a sibling.

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