



Guesswork: A Memoir in Essays

Martha Cooley

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Having lost eight friends in ten years, Cooley retreats to a tiny medieval village in Italy with her husband to recover from *la strage*, or "the massacre." There, in this sun-drenched paradise where bumblebees nest in the ancient cemetery and stray cats curl up on her bed, she examines what we all must confront one day, mortality: how to cope with our lost intimates and how to reckon with our own inevitable demise, yet she goes on, eating fresh fish from sea, drinking espresso, nursing both her memories and her dreams of happiness to come. Linking the essays is Cooley's escalating understanding of another, more painful death on the way—that of her ailing mother back in the States. Blind since Cooley's childhood, her mother's dry wit and refusal to be pitied leave them both stranded without a language to talk about her impending passing. But somehow, by the end, Cooley finds the words—each one graceful and wrenching.

Part memoir, part loving goodbye to an unconventional parent, *Guesswork* transforms a year in a pastoral hilltown into a fierce examination of life, death, grief, and—ultimately—release.

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Susan Merrell says

Beautiful, beautiful linked essays about loss, grief, love, and an unexpected life in a medieval Italian village. Feral cats abound.

Sera says

I wish there was a rating between 2 and 3 stars. There are books I have rated 3 stars that I loved way more than this one. Yet I feel like this book doesn't quite deserve as poor of a rating as 2 stars. Heres the thing, Cooley's writing is beautiful. But this book was the epitome of boring. I never wanted to pick it up. On break at work I would sit there and be bored before opening it and reading it. She was just reflecting on her own life's mundane events, and its not like I was able to take away any valuable insight from it. I never felt any emotion, I was just... so extremely bored. I simply did not care about what she was saying.

Andretta Schellinger says

This book was hard for me to get through. The reason is that it is very introspective and deals with how someone, really anyone deals with death. Not just your own death, impending or not, but the death of those around you. The author uses the animals that she sees and the surroundings of her time in Italy as jumping off points for specific things that she needs to understand or get through. The death of her best friend, of her husband's wife, etc are all dark clouds that she has sitting over her and it takes seeing something or witnessing an event to help break up the clouds.

The writing is beautiful, and very strong and vivid. Here is the thing, I read to escape, to escape reality, to live another life. This book made me live the deaths that I have had in my life. My Great Grandmother who I wasn't around to attend her funeral, friends and classmates that have died overseas or by their own hand, even individuals that die in my community that affect my friends. The older I get it seems that at times when I search for someone on Facebook, I see a memorial page, and that creates a cloud. "what happened?" "When?" and most importantly, "why?" Why take the young mother? Why take the marine who has a baby girl at home? Why do certain people die?

I received this book free through the Goodreads giveaway in exchange for a review.

Christine Blythe says

Won on a Giveaway!.....interesting read, and poetically written.....about Life, Death....

Lisa says

This is a beautifully written collection of essays reflecting on life and death. It is memoir in that the author ruminates on her grief for friends, many lost too young, and her parents' declining health. She seems to appreciate my favorite things in life - friends, books, cats, and Italy - so maybe I liked reading it more than other people would. But her reflections aren't morbid at all. I'll think about what she has said about living and loving well.

Clara says

In *Guesswork*, novelist and translator Martha Cooley speaks of taking a *caesura*, during which she spends a year in a small village in Italy with her husband, planning to write. The word, as a literary term, is defined as "a break, especially a sense pause, usually near the middle of a verse." For Cooley, the break is more than a sabbatical from her teaching job. It's an opportunity to retreat, recover, and examine her experience of the deaths of eight friends over the past decade, her relationship with a mother who is nearing the end of her life, and her own mortality.

But while the topic may sound melancholy or grim, Cooley's treatment isn't. She interweaves stories of Italian village life and visits to nearby places with recollections of her friends and explorations of her loving and sometimes prickly connection with her mother.

Guesswork is a reflection on topics that touch all of us, and one woman's thoughtful and graceful exploration of her journey towards understanding. It was a journey I enjoyed and appreciated being part of.

Ammar says

A lovely collection of essays about the loss that the author experienced after a string of deaths... the death of friends and family over a short period of time and how she and her husband had to move to a medieval town in Italy and live a simple life away from the hustle and bustle of the metropolis.

I enjoyed this books and enjoyed the various cats that the readers meet in those essays.

Judy says

Not surprisingly, I liked the parts of this book that described Italy and Italians. Otherwise, I was sometimes amazed that anyone published this supremely self-obsessed account of a year in one woman's life. She is mostly obsessed with grief over friends and relatives that have died young. But doesn't really provide enough context for us to emphasize or learn from her experience.

Gail Jackson says

A reverie and reflection on love, loss and the changes we all experience as we travel through life. Much food for thought and reflection.

Jane says

This memoir of a year spent in an Italian village grew on me slowly. Once I began to read it steadily rather than reading it intermittently, I fell in love with the writing and the writer. It's a meditation on loss...so many of this writer's friends have died in the past decade. And her parents are living in assisted living outside of Philadelphia. This is the same writer who filled her novel "The Archivist" with loss and poetry, mainly Eliot's poetry, in that case. In this memoir she quotes Dickinson, Whitman, Plath, her friend, Jason Shinder. So many passages to save and reread. It's a sad book, but filled with the life of this village, her mother and father, her husband, Antonio, the feral cats, the mountainside. It's a beautiful example of writing "aimlessly," of finding the point as the writing unfolds, as the life is lived.
