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Cindy Brzostowski
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To Grieve, We Began a Book Club for Two

Our first book club discussion was a learning experience.

We started the club a few days after Adam died.

I was at my parents' house in the suburbs of Houston, my parents somewhere nearby—always just a room away then. I was thinking about all the many different ways, big and small, life was going to be different now that my brother Adam had died by suicide.

These kinds of thoughts consumed me from the moment I learned the news in February 2015 while working at my book publishing job in New York City. I wondered how Adam's passing would affect my relationships with anyone new I met. I wondered how it would affect my parents' relationship to each other. And I wondered how it would affect my dad now that he lost his best friend.

Ever since I can remember, our family split naturally into pairs: my dad and Adam, my mom and me. At the dinner table, Adam's conversations with our dad mimicked



professor-student exchanges, meandering through history and science. Adam summed it up when he once declared to Dad, “All we talk about are facts.” Meanwhile, my discussions with our mom mainly revolved around the latest happenings with our friends and celebrities (who, from my dad’s perspective, we seemed to know just as much about as our friends).

There were other subtle divisions. Like where we all sat in the car (Dad driving with Adam in the front passenger seat; Mom and me in the back) and how we walked (Dad and Adam leading the way with their long-legged strides; Mom and me trailing behind).

That week on bereavement leave at my parents’ house made me acutely aware of the shift in our balance. We felt Adam’s empty place whenever we talked, wherever we went. It was like a hunger pang. I worried that Dad would withdraw in the absence of his counterpart.

However realistic or not, this concern coalesced into a weighty rock in my chest. Maybe it was a manifestation of my urge to anchor the important relationships I had left. I couldn’t grow any closer to Adam. But I could still deepen my bond with Dad.

Almost as fast as this worry appeared, I thought of a solution. A book club. Just me and Dad. Something that would serve as a concrete connection to his remaining child, even when I was living across the country. Something that was just ours.

My dad instilled his love of reading in me and Adam from the beginning. He read us Dr. Seuss books as bedtime stories, but only after we begged him *not* to read his personal favorite, *The Big Honey Hunt* by Stan and Jan Berenstain, for the millionth time. To encourage our reading in grade school, he paid me five dollars for every *Nancy Drew* book I read, while Adam got the same for every *Three Investigators* book he finished.

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Naz Riahi

My dad instilled his love of reading in me and Adam from the beginning.



In high school, I brought up a random scene from my assigned class reading at the dinner table: a woman tying knots in her handkerchief like a noose. Dad told me not only what book it was from (*A Tale of Two Cities*), but also went on to recite the work’s final line word for word: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

alone, it is a rare, rare better test than I go to than I have ever known.

When I left for college, my parents transformed my bedroom into Dad's library to accommodate his ever-growing collection, the colorful chalk drawings I had made on the walls when I was younger now covered by bookshelves.

Keen on the book club idea, my dad admitted he appreciated the opportunity at another father-daughter project, a grown-up version of the Girl Scout activities and physics homework we once did side by side.

The rules: We'd alternate picking titles. No set deadlines. We'd discuss over the phone—necessary, given my return to New York in a couple of days. I wanted it to be flexible and stress-free. I wanted it to last.

He chose first: "Confessions" from *The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine*.

In March 2015, I read the German writer's work, jotting down notes in my brand new, blue-and-white composition book purchased at The Tenement Museum gift shop. I wanted to have something to reference during our discussions. More than that, I already had a morbid sense of how this journal would become a keepsake when my dad inevitably passed—an understanding spurred by my struggle to hold onto memories of my brother.

Our first book club discussion was a learning experience. I mentioned some new words I learned like "pleonasm" and "abjuration," but I didn't have any thoughtful opinions to offer about the dense essay—already fading from my memory. My dad seemed happy that he had read *something* by the pivotal critic of Romanticism, another check in his quest to read all the classics.

As we made our way through more books, we found a groove. We both took more detailed notes and started texting each other some thoughts as we read, giving us plenty of jumping off points for discussion during our phone calls. A trend emerged: He focused on any historical and geographical context, while I fought to bring up character development and writing style.

When we finished *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon, I read him sentence after sentence I'd scribbled down in envy of their craftsmanship. One line in particular that struck me: "We have the idea that our hearts, once broken, scar over with an indestructible tissue that prevents their ever breaking again in quite the same place . . ."

My dad, on the other hand, was overwhelmed by the number of historical references woven throughout the fiction—people and events I glossed over. As an enthusiastic researcher compelled to look up everything, he likened reading this literary feat to reading an encyclopedia.

Every now and then, light frustration bubbled to exasperated bickering. On our call about *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, one of my picks, my dad

repeated over and over how he didn't see anything "magical" about Didion's year grieving her husband's sudden death as I unsuccessfully tried to move the discussion forward.

His passionate dismissal of the book, the most relevant to our family's loss so far, surprised and confused me. Somehow missing Didion's anthropological use of the phrase "magical thinking" for her grief-induced delusions, my matter-of-fact father had been looking for some literal magical solution, some supernatural power, when it came to mourning.

His disappointment highlighted how we sought solace over Adam's death in different places. However logical and scientific he was, my dad turned to prayer and meditation to handle his pain. I, on the other hand, counted on time, as they say, to heal all wounds. I also felt strengthened by a perhaps falsely confident belief that nothing, aside from my parents' deaths, could possibly hurt me now that I had felt the piercing loss of my brother.

Dad and I *were* united in some points against Didion's experience: Our grief never let us believe our lost loved one might return to us. And while Didion looked to the past to piece together her husband's unexpected death, we had always known how a long fight with depression led to Adam's. Fully present to the painful reality of the situation, we focused on what was in front of us and what might lay ahead.

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In 2018, three years after we started our club and twenty-six books later, I quit my job and moved everything I owned into storage. First, I left to walk the Camino de Santiago for a month and a half, and then I set off with a one-way ticket to New Zealand for a year working holiday.

During all this, I picked *The Emperor of All Maladies* by Siddhartha Mukherjee—a behemoth that proved to be the exact wrong reading choice for this time in my life.

The roughly 600-page book was too big to be one of my few possessions while backpacking. With a new adventure happening almost daily, I never made enough progress before my library loan ended, and I'd have to wait weeks to borrow the eBook again.

I let our book club fall by the wayside as a whole year passed by. My dad had long finished reading the book. He was patient that, one day, I would too.

When my time in New Zealand was up in 2019, I still felt too busy to read Mukherjee's work. I began building a new life again, now in Berlin. The further I got from Adam's death, the more I pursued life. As the seasons changed, my sorrow softened, and I got swept up in making the most out of the time I had because I knew how everything could change in an instant.

My mom, watching from the sidelines, had long thought that we should just quit the club "officially."

"It lived its moment already and served its function," she texted me. "Life evolves but you can look back on it with gratitude for the purpose it served. I feel that if you two keep pushing it, it will be like a task."

I didn't see it this way. The rawness of our grief might have diminished, but how could our club complete its purpose when we would always feel the loss of Adam? For me, that would forever cement the necessity of our book club, the importance of cherishing our relationship with whatever time we had left.

In January 2020, my dad proved he felt the same. He decided that one year of waiting was enough and restarted our club on his own terms. After our family trip on an Antarctica cruise, he handed me a copy of *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* by Jules Verne, a book set close to the remote waters we had just traversed. He told me that if I wasn't going to finish my own book selection, that was up to me (I still haven't); This is what we'd be reading now.

I was glad he did it. However, that didn't prevent the slim adventure novel from languishing on my bedside table in Berlin.

I can't say why it was so hard for me to finish what I could've easily knocked out in one sitting. From the little I *had* read, it was far from the least enjoyable of his picks in my opinion (Jimmy Buffet's *Where Is Joe Merchant* was certainly a slog). Despite my mom's assessment and what my actions might've suggested, I never felt like the reading was homework. But still, week after week went by—until the Covid-19 outbreak brought death to the forefront of my mind.

As the WHO declared the situation a pandemic on March 11, Germany closed its borders on March 16, and the death toll continued to rise, I found myself returning to one very specific thought over and over again: What if my sixty-two-year-old dad gets coronavirus and it takes him before I get the chance to finish his book pick?

Since Adam's passing, I knew how, if you let them, the smallest of words left unsaid or most minor of actions untaken could haunt you in the wake of someone's passing. Again, the death that surrounded me clarified the book club in my vision. And again, it would be my defense against grief—but this time as a precaution instead of a reaction.

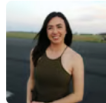
On March 19—as [the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany climbed](#)

over 10,000 and the first coronavirus-related death in my parent's county in Texas was announced—I finished *The Lighthouse at the End of the World*. Two days later, my dad and I had our discussion, with no hint of irritation, if he even had any, with me for taking so long to read it.

I mentioned how amazed I was at the level of location detail Verne included throughout his fictional story. Not as impressed by that point, my dad was quick to note how Verne was “close” but not completely correct with his geography. It was the first extended phone call we had had since the pandemic was declared, and it felt like a warm shelter in a storm of uncertainty.

My dad's latest selection, *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, is on my bedside table now. Unsurprisingly, Dad finished weeks ahead of me. With our discussion call on the horizon, I'm ready to vent about how the narrator's long-winded tangents occasionally put me off. My dad won't be able to resist bringing up the classical novel's historical framework. We'll definitely talk about how the detailed descriptions of the Italian Plague of 1630 bear a striking resemblance to the pandemic we're living in now.

We may not know what our world will look like in the weeks and months to come, but we'll always have our book club. One more book taking us through life and death—together.

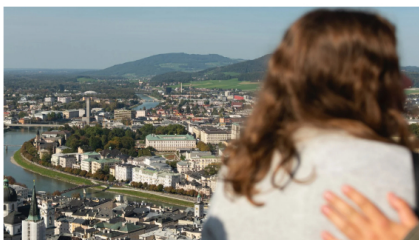


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Cindy Brzostowski is a freelance writer and editor based in Berlin. Her writing has been featured in a variety of publications, including Thrillist, Greatist, and Time Out. When not writing, reading, or eating, you can probably find her making an itinerary for her next adventure or dreaming about pizza. See more of her work at www.cindybrz.com.

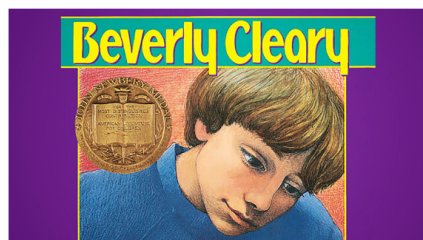
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